



Supervisors
and the Power of Help

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It is unfortunate that training in the psychology of helping is not generally included as part of a supervisor's preparation. Helping skills are taken for granted because helping itself is perceived as a basically simple, straightforward act. It is not. It is complex, difficult to perform, fraught with pitfalls concealed by popular misconceptions about its true nature.

Supervisors Have Helping Power

The most fundamental misconception about helping is that it is an "offering" or "gift"—the supervisor gives it, the teacher accepts it. A more appropriate way to conceptualize it is not as a service to be given, but as a power to be exercised. If helping is seen as an act of power, supervisors need to understand they are power people.

Teachers agree to receive instructional or management help from the supervisor when they have insufficient power to help themselves. The supervisor is identified as one who possesses the power of understanding needed, as an expert with special knowledge to give. In general, perceived potency of the supervisor's helpful understanding increases in proportion to the urgency of the teacher's need for assistance. Thus a teacher, desperate in his or her inability to instruct and control some slow-learning, fast-acting students, implores the supervisor: "Give me something — anything — that will work!" The teacher wants a magical solution and ascribes magical helping powers to the supervisor. Of course, when the supervisor fails to meet these unrealistic expectations, the teacher is disappointed, even angry, and may complain to a colleague: "Supervisors are no help."

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At times supervisors are caught between two unfair estimates of their helping power: either a teacher dismisses them in advance for possessing too little power to merit accepting their assistance, or the teacher petitions them for more help than they can realistically provide. And the supervisor is reviled on both counts.

Occasionally supervisors, uncomfortable in this "expert" or "specialist" role, will try to disclaim it: "I can't tell you anything you can't figure out for yourself." This is a mistake. To deny special helping power is to undercut the teacher's motivation for accepting supervisory assistance. What supervisors must do is clarify their helping power so that a teacher's expectations are realistic and appropriate.

The helping powers of supervisors are many. They possess special information about the school system, about instructional and management strategies that can strengthen the teacher's capacity to cope with classroom problems. They control access to material and referral resources the teacher may need. They have the indirect power to influence how the administration perceives and responds to a teacher's classroom difficulties. And finally, they have direct power of decision over the demands they make of and the responses they give to the teacher.

Conflicts of Helping Agendas

These powers can create an immediate problem for the supervisor when the helping power the teacher wants to receive (for example, referral of a difficult student out of class into a special program) conflicts with the help the supervisor wants to give (for example, alternative methods for meeting the student's needs in class). At this point a number of difficult encounters may occur. The teacher may try emotional manipulation by

expressing fear, anger, suffering, or helplessness to pressure the supervisor into giving the kind of help the teacher wants. If, despite this emotional onslaught, the supervisor holds fast, the teacher may resist by actively or passively refusing to accept the supervisor's suggestions. Or, if the teacher is really determined, he or she may bypass the supervisor, either seeking help from a different source or by invoking the influence of the principal to pressure the supervisor into submission.

Caught in this conflict of helping agendas, the supervisor does have some room to negotiate. The supervisor can help conditionally: "I will agree to process a referral on this student on condition that first you try the alternative approaches to see if they will help." Or the supervisor can compromise: "I will agree to refer the student out of your room for part of the day if you will agree to try some different strategies while the student is with you."

Helping is Cooperative

Helping is *never* a unilateral act. While the supervisor does have the power to give help, the teacher always has the power to receive or refuse that assistance. To gain the teacher's cooperation the supervisor must be willing to negotiate. Helping, in fact, is usually a negotiated settlement between help giver and help receiver, each side applying conditions and agreeing to compromise as they build a contract both can accept. In the helping relationship, supervisors are not the only party with power. The teacher has power—when the teacher refuses to cooperate, the supervisor is helpless to help.

Both success and failure of any helping relationship are the joint responsibility of help giver and help receiver. For the supervisor this means: do not take sole credit for your helping successes, or sole blame for your helping failures. Accept the sometimes unpleasant fact that to be of use, you must necessarily agree to "be used." Supervisors must clearly understand their own powers as helpers and those of the teachers they serve so that the inevitable pressures

To help teachers solve their problems,
supervisors must first deal with problems
inherent in the helping relationship.

"two professionals can lay out a cooperative action plan for a particular problem."

of resistance and manipulation can be dealt with effectively.

The Threat of Accepting Help

Teachers resist a supervisor's assistance not only because it may conflict with the "help" they want, but for a more fundamental reason. For teachers (as for any client) to seek or accept help is to admit they have insufficient power to help themselves. This declaration can be threatening. Beginning teachers may see this admission as placing their new job in jeopardy. Experienced teachers, particularly if they have created an image of self-sufficiency and strength, may not want to appear weak or unable to cope with problems.

Supervisors need to give permission to teachers to admit helplessness in the face of a problem. Even this assurance, however, may be insufficient to overcome another source of teacher resistance: distrust of the supervisor's helping power. The teacher is in a vulnerable position. His or her well-being is at risk because the power to help is also, always, the power to hurt.

We have all had the experience of seeking help (for a health or relationship problem, for consumer assistance or repair) only to find ourselves worse off than we were to start. Help is risky to receive. When supervisors err in the help they give, the teacher pays for it (though supervisors may also damage their helping reputations). When a parent conference, recommended by a supervisor, backfires and angry parents complain to the board about their child's "incompetent teacher," that teacher may view the supervisor with something less than gratitude. Helpers must realize they cannot be successful 100 percent of the time. While they cannot escape this reality, they can take steps to reduce the likelihood of hurting those they are trying to help.

Helping Responsibilities of the Supervisor

Supervisors can assume two helping responsibilities to deal with this problem. First, they can take predictive responsibility for the help they give teachers. Since changes or solutions substitute new problems and payoffs

for the old, it is useful for the supervisor to *predict* for the teacher what the possible new problems may be. Then, the teacher will be somewhat prepared if things go awry, will not be totally surprised by a negative turn of events, and will not feel betrayed by the supervisor. More important, the supervisor gives the teacher a chance to weigh the difficulties of the present situation against those inherent in a changed one. Thus if two teachers are considering teaming as a vehicle for better meeting the individual needs of children they now separately instruct, the supervisor should suggest the range of shared decisions that would have to be made in the new arrangement and the consequent conflicts they might then have to deal with.

Second, supervisors can take a follow-up responsibility. Any time a helping prescription requires a teacher to make a major change, the supervisor needs to commit follow-up assistance should difficulties arise. While there is no escape from occasionally doing harm in the course of delivering help, the likelihood and extent of damage can be reduced.

Contractual Difficulty

The most serious risk in accepting help, and thus the most serious resistance, occurs when a teacher is placed in contractual difficulty due to a poor performance evaluation by a principal. Too late, the supervisor is called in to help the teacher overcome deficiencies, creating a problematic situation for the teacher. The more help he or she accepts, the more in need of help (thus incapable) he or she appears, and the more such "help" can be accumulated as evidence of incompetence. This evidence and the supervisor's testimony may even be invoked at termination proceedings to justify the teacher's dismissal. To avoid this jeopardy from help, the teacher resists it and by doing so prompts the supervisor to report that the teacher is unwilling to be helped.

To deliver help in this particularly difficult situation the supervisor must (1) Negotiate an assessment of the problem which both teacher and principal can accept; (2) Specify in

terms of identifiable behaviors a limited number of changes the teacher needs to make; (3) Establish a schedule of assistance and behavior change that is realistic in terms of time, energy, and growth capacity of the teacher; (4) Establish a clear criterion for completing the change which ultimately will signify that the teacher is no longer in contractual jeopardy.

The power to help a teacher keep or lose a job is the supervisor's most serious helping responsibility but it is not the most problematic one. That is reserved for the fundamental power dilemma at the root of all helping.

Helping Too Much

Unfortunately, by its nature help can work in opposition to its purpose. It can become a power trade-off: when you give help, you can take power; when you accept help, you can give up power. How does this happen? The teacher, by turning to the supervisor for help, turns away from reliance on personal power. The greater the dependency on the helper, the more power that helper takes in the relationship, the more power the teacher gives up.

A dilemma arises when a supervisor wants to give sufficient assistance to the teacher, but does not want to undermine the teacher's capacity for self-help. If help is given, the supervisor never knows whether the teacher, without external assistance, could mobilize sufficient internal resources to solve the problem. For this reason, it is usually better for the supervisor to be over-cautious rather than over-generous.

Today most school systems employ special helping personnel. This has the beneficial effect of extending supportive services to many who are unable to meet the basic instructional demands of school life. However, problems arise when people believe that "the more help the better." When multiple problems besiege a person—be it student or teacher—what is often recommended is a megadose of help. Most supervisors, for example, have seen some elementary child (physically impaired, withdrawn, and low achieving)

whose "case" is assigned to several special helpers over the course of a single school day—a speech therapist, a counselor, a resource teacher, a reading specialist, and the child's regular homeroom teacher whose opportunity to give the child direct instruction is diminished in proportion to the amount of special help being given. Teachers with multiple performance difficulties are also often encumbered with multiple helpers. When so many helping resources are focused at one time upon any single individual, the person may suffer a dependency backlash—an actual decrease in the capacity to care responsibly for himself or herself.

When a supervisor arranges assistance for a multiple problem student or teacher, he or she has a responsibility to limit the number of concurrent helpers (two is ample) with whom that person will work.

Maintaining the Power to Help

A final problem of helping is maintaining one's own power to help. I have come to believe that those helpers who "burn out" fastest are those who receive inadequate positive reinforcement from their clients (or teachers). In the extreme this is the helper who confesses: "I'm tired of my clients, I'm fed up with my job, I've lost respect for myself."

Helping requires an investment of energy in relation to the client. The helper needs a return on this investment, specifically in three forms of positive reinforcement: to be liked by the client, to have the client make some effort on his or her own behalf, and to have the client exhibit some progress in response to the helper's efforts to assist. Ask helpers how they feel about those clients who continually frustrate them on all three counts, and you will generally elicit statements of dislike, even open anger.

Now consider a supervisor who is routinely assigned to work with teachers who have serious and longstanding problems in classroom instruction and management. Some of these teachers will defensively dislike the supervisor for observing them in their difficulty and resent any suggestions for improvement; they may re-

fuse to cooperate with the supervisor, insisting that it is the students who must change and not themselves. Their steadfast resistance with no sign of progress despite the long hours and enormous amount of helping energy the supervisor has invested can demotivate and demoralize the helping spirit. Just the thought of visiting one more time with "that teacher" becomes a source of dread.

Preventing Helper Burnout

Supervisors can employ a number of strategies to reduce the likelihood of helper burnout: (1) When working with a high resistant teacher, moderate your expectations for positive reinforcement so that you will neither be surprised nor disappointed by negative responses; (2) Do not take resistance personally; simply because a teacher rejects your efforts is no reason for you to reject yourself; (3) Make an active effort to diversify your teacher caseload so that you also work with teachers who are responsive to the assistance you give and thus return to you some of the positive reinforcement you need; (4) If you find yourself burning out on a given teacher, disengage from that relationship for awhile and seek the support of a colleague who can give you perspective and encouragement for reengaging with that teacher in a more positively caring way; (5) Establish support connections with other staff through which you may exchange positive responses to your work. The moral here is simple: build sufficient positive return into your job so that you may preserve your caring and prevent burnout.

Helping is a highly demanding act; it necessitates committing energy and making complicated judgments. It is imperative that supervisors exert sufficient power on their own behalf to obtain adequate positive return from their work. This reinforcement supports their commitment and sense of potency as helpers. This is not simply a need for supervisory survival; it is a necessity. Reinforcement nourishes power. Helping is an act of power. Without reinforcement, power is lost; and without power there is no help. ■

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