

LAI D BACK OR ON HIS BACK: An Ineffective Way to Supervise

STEPHEN B. FISHER AND BARRY C. JENTZ

I had been in the district a year as Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction when we began the process of replacing our Director of Pupil Personnel Services. The person in this position had reported to the Superintendent of Schools. Now, the new Director of Special Services was to report to me. Before I began supervising the new Director, I reflected on a previous and unpleasant experience of supervising a subordinate.

I recalled an assistant principal I hired in a large junior high school in another district. He was young, bright, and talented, with a series of successful jobs behind him. My new assistant was excited about his first administrative position and I was sure I'd enjoy working with him.

He lasted one painful year. His failure was due in part to my ineffec-

tive approach to supervision, an approach I now call "laid back or on his back."

When I was "laid back," my behavior was based on two assumptions:

Maximize his freedom—I hired a competent and capable individual to serve as assistant principal, therefore I should leave him alone to develop his style and solve problems. Even though I knew the system—the shortcuts for decision making, which staff members needed to be involved in which tasks—I withheld this information in order not to prejudice him with my point of view.

I'm here if he needs me—I assured my assistant my door was open should he need to talk over any difficulties. I gave this assurance blind to the obvious implication: "If you can't hack it, come see me."

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The year started and my assistant began to define problems and work with staff members. Predictably, he ran into difficulties and came to me. When he walked in my door and announced he was having trouble, I switched from being "laid back" to being "on his back." I got out a yellow legal pad and pumped him for information about the problem. Using his information and my knowledge of the system, I diagnosed and solved his problem.

The two assumptions underlying my "on his back" approach were:

I'll solve the problem—After first saying, "It's all up to you," I then took back full responsibility for the problem. I simply used him as a source of input into my problem-solving process and when I had a solution, I gave it to him to carry out. I taught him what a good problem solver I was.

Rescue the subordinate—By solving problems for him I thought I was rescuing my assistant from difficulties. Now I see I was robbing him of the opportunity to develop the skills necessary in his job.

This pattern of supervision contributed to the failure of my assistant and left him, as he put it when he quit, increasingly "unsure of myself." In the end he felt undermined, abandoned, and used. These feelings were legitimate and appropriate for my "Now I trust you/Now I don't" supervision.

This vignette from my administrative history sobered me as I looked at the prospect of supervising a new Director of Special Services. I did not want to recreate the same scenario with Nat, the new Director, so I planned three sets of supervisory meetings. The first set was to take place in the spring prior to Nat's assuming his job on July 1. The second set of meetings would occur in the summer, the third set in the fall.

Supervision Meetings Before Nat Starts Job

Nat arrived for our first meeting flushed with the joy of being chosen for the new position. We laughed as we reflected on the massive interview process he conquered. Nat's enthusiasm led him to talk immediately about solving problems.

"I can hardly wait to get to work

on those new resource rooms the interviewing committee kept talking about," he said with relish.

My silent reaction was purely "laid back." "He's new, let him work it out on his own. I can always bail him out later."

At the same time, I knew there were traps for Nat. Ironically, the worst trap he could fall into was that of attempting to solve never-ending discrete problems before systematically inquiring into the nature of the system, analyzing the scope of his job, and setting priorities.

The supervision sessions we had before Nat came aboard focused on the conflict between his desire to jump in to solve problems and my request that he systematically plan his entry. At the end of these sessions we had a written summer entry plan:

1. Schedule a meeting with his predecessor to review the history of the position, his predecessor's point of view on the position, and unfinished business needing Nat's attention.

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2. Schedule a meeting with his secretary to explore her activities and responsibilities.

3. Plan interviews with the Committee on the Handicapped, for which Nat was responsible, to talk about the committee's history, decide which summer meetings he would participate in, and clarify his role in those meetings. He was to review his plans with me prior to implementation.

4. Participate in a summer administrative workshop. I wanted Nat to attend a supervision skills workshop with the district's administrative group. I hoped this activity would allow him to meet the principals and central office staff in a relaxed, infor-

mal summer activity.

5. Schedule meetings with his staff. I directed Nat to develop questions to ask each group as he began to meet with them. In this way, the first meeting with staff could be a group interview.

6. Develop and schedule individual meetings with principals. I asked him to develop a set of questions to circulate to the principals before meeting with them. These interviews, held during the summer, would provide Nat with the background of his position, the principals' point of view on Special Services, and an informal opportunity to get to know them.

7. Design a sequence of activities for the first two months of the school year.

Summer Supervision Meetings

During July and August Nat and I met four times. By the end of our fourth meeting, we had developed specific activities which were to be completed during September and Oc-

tober; they made up his fall entry plan:

1. A review with me of his summer meeting with his predecessor and his secretary.

2. A review with me of the schedule of meetings he intended to hold with each group he would be responsible for as Director of Special Services.

3. A second series of interviews with the principals in which Nat would feed back the information he collected from them in the summer.

4. A plan to visit each school in the district for one-half day to observe special education classes, visit regular classes, and talk with teachers.

5. A memo to be published on the first day of school giving Nat's schedule for two months including the dates he would visit each school and an invitation to the staff to help him list priorities for his first year's work.

6. A list of priorities for his work after the first two months.

7. A plan to make these priorities public, including a presentation to the Board of Education in early November reviewing the activities undertaken by Nat in his entry program.

8. A weekly meeting for two hours during the first two months of school when Nat and I would analyze the data he obtained during his entry program.

Supervision During the Year

The school year began smoothly as Nat carried out his entry activities in the district. We met weekly to review and analyze the data he gathered. In these meetings I tried to provide methods of jointly organizing and analyzing data rather than my solving Nat's problems for him. For example, Nat told me that each group who reported to him wanted to meet with him regularly during the school year. He was excited by these requests and wanted to honor all of them.

I got out the school calendar and asked Nat to schedule regular meetings with all these groups. We did this by listing each group, the day of the week they would meet with him, and the length of time the meeting would take. As we blocked out the time for October, November, and December, we discovered that most of his working day would be taken up by these meetings. He was torn. His desire to meet regularly with the staff was strong and yet, as he looked at the problems he wanted to solve and the issues he wanted to be involved in, there wasn't time to do everything.

As we examined the data this charting activity produced, we found that meetings with these groups would also necessitate substitute time for people with classroom or building level responsibilities. This finding argued against the meetings, but did not give us a way to determine which groups he should meet with regularly.

At this point I suggested a second methodology for producing data we could analyze together. I asked Nat to list his priorities for his first year, and we asked ourselves which groups were crucial to addressing those pri-

orities. He and I were then able to divide the groups into three categories: Those groups that would be scheduled to meet with him throughout the year; those that would be scheduled "as needed," for work on a pressing problem; and those that would not meet during the school year.

Once we had thought out our stance regarding these groups, it became Nat's responsibility to explain to them his decision on the meetings. He was able to go back to each group and be clear about his priorities and their participation in those priorities.

In a subsequent meeting, Nat commented to me, "I now understand why this entry plan was so important. I'd have scheduled meetings with each group, never realizing there wouldn't be time left for the other work I was hired to do."

My New Approach to Supervision

My approach to supervising Nat contrasted with my previous "laid back/ on his back" style in several ways:

Structure. My meetings with Nat were scheduled and planned well in advance. These meetings were defined from the beginning as reflective

and analytic, rather than specifically problem solving.

Getting good data. I designed a structure for Nat's entrance into the school district that allowed him to get information before he had to make decisions or act on issues. This entry program allowed him to look at the relationship between the parts of the school district and the whole district, specifically the relationship of building principals to central office and the predictable authority issues of the Director of Special Services. My work with Nat was designed to put to use rather than withhold my knowledge of the organization.

Collaborative inquiry. My regular meetings with Nat were designed for mutual sense-making of the data he collected. Instead of jumping in to rescue Nat by solving his problems, I provided methodologies for joint analysis and planning.

As Nat and I reviewed how we worked together, he commented on the way we analyzed data and searched for answers to problems: "I used to see someone who had solutions as someone who 'makes magic.' Now it's a joint effort and that's terrific." ■

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