

Supervisory Expectations and Work Realities: The Great Gulf

Beginning supervisors are in for a surprise if they believe the descriptions of their work in the literature.

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SULLIVAN

Help Wanted
Individual needed to handle day-to-day maintenance of school system. Must function as communication center for information and decisions. Job involves much verbal contact with others. Individual must function in highly fragmented work day.

This fictitious advertisement describes well the work actually done by instructional supervisors although it varies greatly from the way their work is portrayed in the literature.

The literature paints a picture of what a supervisor *should* do. Suggested tasks include planning and organizing components of the instructional program; instructing, analyzing, and conferring with teachers about their performance; and perhaps evaluating.

In order to find out how similar descriptions of supervision are to the work done by supervisors, I observed and collected "through structured observation" samples of the work of system-level supervisors in a metropolitan area and analyzed 14,753 minutes of supervisory behavior.

Functional Analysis

A functional analysis of the data showed that supervisors primarily maintain the day-to-day operations of the school system—essentially functioning as managers. The supervisory work was therefore compared with managerial work using Mintzberg's (1973, 1975) 10-category framework. See Figure 1.

Ninety-eight percent of the supervisors' activities fell into the categories defined by Mintzberg. Thus, it appears

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Figure 1. Summary of Mintzberg's Ten Functional Categories of Managerial Work.

Function	Description
● Interpersonal	
Figurehead	Symbolic head; obliged to perform a number of routine duties of a legal or social nature
Leader	Responsible for the motivation and activation of subordinates, responsible for staffing, training, and associated duties
Liaison	Maintains self-developed network of outside contacts and informers who provide favors and information
● Informational	
Monitor	Seeks and receives wide variety of special information (much of it current) to develop an understanding of organization and environment; emerges as nerve center of information of the organization
Disseminator	Transmits information received from outside or from other subordinates to members of the organization; some information factual, some involving interpretation and integration of diverse value positions of organizational influencers
Spokesperson	Transmits information to outsiders on organization's or unit's plans, policies, actions, results, etc.
● Decisional	
Entrepreneur	Searches organization and its environment for opportunities and initiates "improvement projects" to bring about change; supervises design of certain projects as well
Disturbance Handler	Responsible for corrective action when organization faces important, unexpected disturbances
Resource Allocator	Responsible for the allocation of organizational resources of all kinds in effect participating in significant organizational decisions
Negotiator	Responsible for representing the unit or organization at negotiations

Adapted from Mintzberg (1973, pp. 92-93).

that these categories are an appropriate organizational scheme from which to discuss the supervisor's function in the school system.

Analysis showed high concentrations of activity in three categories: resource allocator (30 percent), monitor (19 percent), and disseminator (16 percent). These activities indicate the supervisor operates as an *insider*, one who is primarily concerned with internal operations.

There was little activity in areas requiring external contact as an official representative of the school system and little activity related to launching new ideas or involving nonroutine duties.

There was also significant activity as figurehead (10 percent), liaison (9 percent), and leader (8 percent)—all functions that involve interaction with others.

In order to show the relationships among the ten categories, Mintzberg grouped them into three clusters: *interpersonal* (functions involving other persons), *informational* (functions involving acquisition and dispersion of information), and *decisional* (functions related to the processes of decision making).

Though there were high concentrations of activity in three of the ten categories, there was a more equal distribution of activity among clusters. Interpersonal accounted for 27 percent of the activity; informational, 38 per-

cent; and decisional, 33 percent.

Indeed, 98 percent of the supervisor's work was accounted for in terms of management (some might describe it as administration!). The concentrations of activity revealed that supervisors manage internally the organization's on-going work.

A Content-Chronological Analysis

The supervisory work was also analyzed to determine how time was used (Figure 2). The major portion (61 percent) of the supervisor's time was spent in verbal communication in meetings and during informal exchanges. Data showed that the supervisor acts as an information broker and is literally a hub of communication.

Through controlling and filtering information, the supervisor maintains the day-to-day operations of the school system. The supervisor also gains power through controlling information: supervisors have little formally delegated authority in the line sense, but by controlling the communication and information flow they have power in a real sense.

Two-thirds of the time spent in verbal communication involved informal, brief face-to-face contacts with one or two individuals. Most interactions involved persons within the school system, were spent on internal matters, and lasted five minutes or less. Communication was directed to people in lateral positions; a small amount was with superordinates

Figure 2. Allocation of Time to Various Forms of Activity Aggregated Over All Subjects.

Activity	Percentage
Verbal contacts	
Informal	40
Formal	21
Desk work	18
Travel	7
Inhouse travel	3
Technical work	7
Miscellaneous	4

(9 percent), and only 14 percent of the communication was with teachers.

Supervisors initiated 62 percent of all contacts and channeled information in a way that put them in a central position. Their communication activity served four major purposes: processing information, handling resources, maintaining status, and resolving conflicts.

The direction, control, and quantity of time spent in communication indicate that the supervisor, as information broker, is a "nerve center" as described by Mintzberg (1979).

In comparison to communication, supervisors spent relatively little time on other activities. They spent 7 percent of their time on technical work (including classroom observation and inservice education) and 10 percent on travel.

In addition, work flow and time flow in general were highly fragmented. Su-

supervisors worked on a task for awhile, then turned to other tasks repeatedly throughout the work period, with few instances of completing a task during one work session.

Analysis Based on Harris

As a final way of looking at what the supervisor does, the supervisor as manager was compared to the ten task areas of supervision presented by Harris (1975) and widely accepted as a model of supervisory work (Figure 3).

Supervisors do accomplish much of what Harris prescribed in the areas of organizing for instruction; providing staff, facilities, and materials; and relating special pupil services. They also participate in curriculum development. In accomplishing these tasks, the supervisor works as a resource allocator and disturbance handler who uses his/her organizational place as a nerve center for information. In contrast to the image portrayed in the literature, however, the supervisor is not involved in long-range considerations and direct, unilateral decision making.

Although the supervisor functions in the area of public relations, as Harris recommends, his or her audience is usually not parents or community groups as

described by Harris but is internal to the system.

Two areas, inservice education and evaluating instruction, are supposed to be primary supervisory activities. However, supervisors spend so little time in these areas that they are peripheral rather than central activities.

Supervisory work is directly related to one prescribed area—orienting new staff members. The supervisor does, as Harris suggests, keep staff members informed of organizational developments.

Thus, the literature on instructional supervision provides a model of how the supervisor *should* function to improve instruction. However, in practice the supervisor appears to serve a much different purpose. There is a gulf.

Summary and Implications

From the observation and analysis of supervisory work, the following generalizations describe the function and work flow of supervision:

1. The supervisor's major purpose is maintenance of the day-to-day operations of the school system
2. The supervisor is a center of communication, serving interpersonal, informational, and decisional functions within the school system

3. Communication is highly personal; direct verbal contact with those in similar status positions within the school system takes up the major portion of work time

4. Both the supervisor's time and activities are highly fragmented.

Job descriptions for supervisory positions have traditionally echoed supervision literature. The inconsistency between the job descriptions and the work needs to be recognized and eliminated. Either job descriptions should reflect the nature of supervisory work as it is done or the work should be altered to match ways in which it could improve instruction.

Training, like job descriptions, has been based on the literature of supervision. In order to prepare individuals for the actual function and work flow of supervision, a new approach emphasizing information brokerage and resource allocation would need to be taken if this is what we wish supervisors to do. But, is this the job educators *want* to have done?

The gap between the training and the work done by supervisors points to a broader problem. In our push to consolidate school systems and centralize administrative organization, we have cre-

Figure 3. Harris' Tasks of Supervision.

Task	Description
Developing Curriculum	Designing or redesigning that which is to be taught, by whom, when, where, and in what pattern. Developing curriculum guides, establishing standards, planning instructional units, and instituting new courses are examples of this task area.
Organizing for Instruction	Making arrangements whereby pupils, staff, space, and materials are related to time and instructional objectives in coordinate and efficient ways. Grouping of students, planning class schedules, assigning spaces, allocating time for instruction, scheduling, planning events, and arranging for teaching teams are examples of the endeavors associated with this task area.
Providing Staff	Assuring the availability of instructional staff members in adequate numbers and with appropriate competencies for facilitating instruction. Recruiting, screening, selecting, assigning, and transferring staff are endeavors included in this task area.
Providing Facilities	Designing or redesigning and equipping facilities for instruction. The development of space and equipment specifications is included in this task area.
Providing Materials	Selecting and obtaining appropriate materials for use in implementing curricular designs. Previewing, evaluating, designing, and otherwise finding ways to provide appropriate materials are included in this task area.
Arranging for Inservice Education	Planning and implementing learning experiences that will improve the performance of the staff in instruction-related ways. This involves workshops, consultations, field trips, and training sessions, as well as formal education.
Orienting Staff Members	Providing staff members with basic information necessary to carry out assigned responsibilities. This includes getting new staff members acquainted with facilities, staff, and community, but it also involves keeping the staff informed of organization developments.
Relating Special Pupil Services	Arranging for careful coordination of services to children to ensure optimum support for the teaching process. This involves developing policies, assigning priorities, and defining relationships among service personnel to maximize relationships between services offered and instructional goals of the school.
Developing Public Relations	Providing for a free flow of information on matters of instruction to and from the public while securing optimum levels of involvement in the promotion of better instruction.
Evaluating Instruction	Planning, instrumenting, organizing, and implementing procedures for data gathering, analysis, and interpretation, and decision making for improvement of instruction.

(Harris, 1975, pp. 11-12)

ated a massive bureaucratic infrastructure that perpetuates itself. A middle-management cadre literally keeps the system going with information. The objectives of instruction take a back seat to the goals of keeping the system operating *as it exists*.

If we wish supervisors to serve the goals of system maintenance first and instruction second, then we should change titles, job descriptions, and training processes to conform to reality. However, if we want them to perform instructional work, then the system rather than the training for the individual must be changed. ■

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