

Authentic Supervision Reconciles the Irreconcilables

Supervisors will be effective if their behavior with teachers is based not on what they think others expect of them, but on their own genuine wants and needs.

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The concept of "authenticity" has emerged periodically in the educational literature since Halpin's (1966) identification of authentic or genuine behavior as a variable closely associated with an open climate in educational organizations. In open-climate schools the behavior of teachers and principals seems purposeful and real, Halpin suggests, while in closed-climate schools behavior tends to be overly determined by role and appears almost ritualistic.

Most recently, leader authenticity has been defined as involving three aspects of behavior:

- accepting responsibility for one's actions, outcomes, and mistakes
- being nonmanipulative of subordinates
- demonstrating an expression of self over role (Henderson and Hoy, 1982).

This article presents a strategy derived from Gestalt psychology that may be useful to supervisors who wish to improve their authenticity, particularly the expression of self over role.

Supervisors report that they experience the most satisfaction from their work when they are able to help teachers solve problems encountered in teaching. For example, a supervisor friend of ours told us about her experience with a first-grade teacher who asked for help. The teacher was distressed by classroom management problems that she feared would affect her end-of-year ratings by

her principal. Her anxiety about the ratings hindered her efforts to manage her class, which further increased her anxiety.

The supervisor observed her class and made some simple suggestions ("Lower your voice. Attend to one thing at a time."), which the teacher tried and found effective. The supervisor related with delight the teacher's expressions of appreciation after a day that had gone smoothly as a result of these suggestions.

Unfortunately, supervisors also report that they don't very often have the chance to experience the lift that comes from helping a teacher with a real problem. There are obvious reasons for this, such as the fact that supervisors are often responsible for so many teachers that making the rounds to visit each teacher once a year consumes most of their time. Paperwork is another thief that steals time from working with teachers. The conditions that hamper supervisors in their work make it all the more imperative that supervisors improve the quality of their interactions with teachers.

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Half of Reality

For some time the practice of supervision has focused on ways of observing, reporting, and interpreting behavior of teachers and students. The teaching act has been broken down into component parts, and the parts analyzed for their effect on learning. Progress has been made through this approach, and it remains the best way we know for helping teachers accomplish what they want to do in the classroom. Yet, as beneficial as this objective, analytical approach to supervision may be, it represents only half of reality. The whole of experience, or Gestalt, includes the internal worlds of teachers and supervisors, feelings as well as facts.

Most supervision texts include strategies for the supervisor to use in dealing with teachers' feelings, such as acknowledging, paraphrasing, and reflecting—techniques borrowed from the work of psychologist Carl Rogers, who recommends a client-centered approach to therapy. While fine and good, these techniques overlook an important dimension of the teacher-supervisor relationship, namely, the feelings of the supervisor, which are the key to authenticity. We believe that the work of Fritz Perls (1978) and other Gestalt psychologists can provide useful insights and tools for dealing with this neglected, though important, area.

Gestalt psychologists believe that to improve the quality of our personal and professional relationships (by being more authentic), it is necessary to become more aware of and responsive to our own psychological needs. The conceptual framework developed by the Gestalt school of psychology may be useful for helping supervisors and teachers develop more effective interpersonal skills. Many of the terms used in the material that follows are borrowed from Herman and Korenich (1977). Although their book, *Authentic Management*, is written specifically for managers, it has suitable applications to education.

According to Gestalt psychology, we all rely on a process called homeostasis, or self-regulation, for maintaining our equilibrium when interacting with the environment. When the homeostatic process functions properly, our sensory systems orient us to the environment, letting us know what we need and want at any particular moment. Alternately, our motor systems enable us to manipu-

late the environment in such a way that we satisfy appropriate needs, thereby restoring balance.

If the homeostatic process is in some way disturbed, however, either because we are unable to sense our dominant needs or are unable to manipulate the environment in order to satisfy them, our behavior will be disorganized and ineffective. This homeostatic process can be disturbed when the environment overwhelmingly impinges on our internal worlds. A major contributor to such disturbances, according to Herman and Korenich, is the introjection of "shoulds," or the swallowing whole of undigested values, attitudes, opinions, feelings, and behaviors, as opposed to selecting and gradually assimilating them or examining them to determine whether they fit comfortably with what we already believe and do. A supervisor who accepts the attitudes and beliefs of others uncritically, for example, will experience some degree of mental conflict arising from the opposing expectations that others have for the role of supervisor. When these introjects contradict one another, the individual may experience internal conflict severe enough to prevent effective action.

A supervisor "should" attend carefully to paperwork in the office, for instance, and the supervisor "should" observe as many teachers in the field as possible. Time constraints make the adequate performance of both responsibilities problematic. The typical and ineffective manner of dealing with the dilemma is to do one while feeling terribly guilty about not doing the other.

Research and prevailing opinions on effective supervisory behavior can themselves be sources of conflicting "shoulds." A supervisor who is shy or introspective may try at considerable mental cost to appear convivial and outgoing, in response to a prevailing notion of effective supervisory behavior. Similarly, a talkative, dominant individual, advised that effective supervision requires a less active style, may try to conform to this "should" even though it contradicts his or her natural inclination. While some successful supervisors are gregarious, others, though equally successful, are quiet and introspective. What successful supervisors share in common, we suggest, is authenticity, not a particular style or pattern of behavior.

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Immobilizing “Shoulds”

A pair of immobilizing “shoulds” seems to arise for the supervisor, as a more specific example, from Blumberg’s findings that teachers believe they acquire greater insight from and generally evaluate more positively those supervisors who exhibit *both* direct and indirect behaviors:

Teachers seemed to be saying that the more their supervisor came across in an indirect manner the more they were able to get insight into themselves, both into their teacher role and as a person. . . . It appeared that the way in which the supervisor could be most helpful on this level of operation was to combine a relatively heavy emphasis on direct behavior with . . . indirect behavior. . . . This finding suggests that hearing about oneself is probably most productive not only when the supervisor (or other helping agent) questions, listens, and reflects back what he hears, but also when he does a bit of telling, gives feedback (Blumberg, 1980, p. 67).

While this makes great sense, in practice the supervisor is left uncertain about which behavior, direct or indirect, is most appropriate for a particular situation.

The central immobilizing pair of “shoulds” supervisors face in their interactions with teachers, however, originate with the conflicting role demands of being both helper and evaluator. We agree with Blumberg’s (1980) advice that it is the supervisor’s responsibility to acknowledge the existence of these conflicting “shoulds,” to deal with his or her own “feeling about having to perform the dual function” (p. 170), and to honestly confront the teacher with the reality of the situation, *before* discussing such things as what type of data will be collected during the observation, how, and when. What is obviously needed is some method by which the supervisor can first resolve the conflict in his or her own mind.

Our purpose in this article is not simply to warn educators against introjecting “shoulds”; to do so would be to commit the sin we are railing against. Rather, we wish to present a perspective that may enable supervisors to recognize and deal with the internal conflicts caused by irreconcilable “shoulds.” This, we believe, will be a useful step in helping supervisors to purposefully choose what they want to do, how they want to do it, and to recognize the ways by which they may be unnecessarily preventing themselves from getting what they want.

Establishing Contact with Teachers

Authentic interaction between two people is characterized by a quality Herman and Korenich call contact. In order for contact to occur, they say, each individual must first establish and maintain contact with his or her personal feelings, needs, and wants, and be willing to make these known. When contact exists the conversation between people is usually characterized by liveliness, excitement, and presentness. Lack of contact is evident when the topic of conversation is other people or past and future events. People often avoid contact with one another, according to Herman and Korenich, by engaging in intellectualizing and self-neutralization when they are uncomfortable acknowledging and expressing their own feelings and desires.

Much of the talk between supervisor and teacher can be classified as intellectualizing. Supervisors are aware that teachers do not welcome direct criticism of their teaching, yet they feel constrained out of a sense of duty to inform teachers about obvious flaws in their methods. Intellectualizing provides a convenient escape from this dilemma. Descriptions of problem areas may be

couched in abstract philosophical statements or obscured with technical jargon, which diminishes the likelihood that a teacher will get defensive, but increases the chances that the teacher will fail to understand exactly what the supervisor is criticizing.

Contact, it seems, can also be avoided by simply being oblique. Many supervisors, for example, find it difficult to tell a teacher that he or she made a mistake during a lesson. Whether the mistake involves mispronouncing or misspelling a word, applying a geometric theorem, or explaining a chemical formula makes little difference. The dilemma arises from the supervisor’s conflicting “shoulds.” The supervisor “should” call the teacher’s attention to the error so that it won’t be repeated; the supervisor “should” also be supportive and nonjudgmental. This can be embarrassing for the supervisor, and may result in a vague message. Some supervisors tell us that they make it a point to use a mispronounced word correctly in their conversation with the teacher during the post-conference, hoping that the teacher will note the discrepancy and make the correction. Whether that happens is open to question, since many words in English have various pronunciations and a teacher may consider the supervisor’s pronunciation an acceptable alternative. It’s also possible that the teacher considers the supervisor’s pronunciation wrong, but refrains from correcting him or her out of politeness. Or, the teacher simply might not notice.

Another way of avoiding contact is with the device called self-neutralization, which Herman and Korenich define as diluting one’s message in an effort to appear considerate, supportive, or objective. Supervisors hedge criticism, in this case, with ready-made excuses. The supervisor might note that students did not seem to be motivated by a lesson, for instance, and then immediately add something like, “of course it’s always difficult to hold students’ interest on a Monday morning.” Supervisors who dilute their messages to teachers in this way can come across as unclear, and they leave teachers confused about how concerned they really ought to be about the problem and whether or not they are supposed to correct it.

A common variation is to counter each criticism of a teacher’s perform-

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ance with a positive feature of the lesson. While this practice may ease the teacher’s discomfort, the teacher may also fail to grasp the significance of his or her shortcomings. The impression may be generated that, all things considered, the lesson was pretty well balanced, when the supervisor actually wanted to convey serious misgivings.

The point is not that supervisors ought to be inconsiderate or unsupportive in their dealings with teachers, or that they should discard objectivity. Rather, we are suggesting that being overly concerned about these issues (introjects relating to how effective supervisors “should” behave) can actually interfere with communication. Too much indirectness can result in a loss of clarity. Being direct is not only clearer, it is also frequently more humane.

Models of supervision typically assume that the teacher and supervisor are making contact with each other, that both teacher and supervisor are already operating in the here and now. Most assume also that supervisors are closely in touch with their own feelings. Too often, we believe, teachers and supervisors do or say what they think they *should* do or say rather than what really needs to be done or said. The teacher, for example, says what he or she believes the supervisor thinks “should” be said during a conference, or teaches the way he or she believes the supervisor thinks teaching “should” be done. Or,

both teacher and supervisor may try to behave consistently with an abstract conception (introject) of how people in their respective roles “should” behave.

There are no hard and fast rules governing exchanges between teachers and supervisors. These exchanges, however, will be more effective if they are authentic. A first step in becoming aware of one’s authentic feelings, needs, and wants is to recognize the “shoulds” that prevent real contact. The following strategy is an adaptation of a technique originated by Herman and Korenich (1977). Although we present these steps for supervisors to use in developing more authentic contact with teachers, teachers can also use them to establish more authentic contact with their students and others:

1. Identify and list the most important “shoulds” about your job as supervisor (such as, a supervisor “should” work with individual teachers, “should” involve teachers in decision making, “should” not overstep bounds by dealing with issues that are the principal’s province, and so on).

2. Describe what you would do if you could follow your natural inclination, if you didn’t have that “should.” This can be something that you would like to do.

3. Decide, as honestly as you can, where each of the “shoulds” originates, whether from your own superordinate, an inservice workshop, a textbook, your parents, or school policy. Ask yourself to what extent each “should” is a real constraint, and to what extent it is self-imposed. Ask yourself, also, what specifically would happen if you failed to observe that “should.”

4. (This may be most difficult at first.) Identify what is in it for you to keep things as they are instead of doing things differently. Finally, try to determine exactly *how you prevent yourself* from doing those things that you really want to do.

This strategy for identifying your “shoulds” and your “wants” only begins to establish contact with others. Authentic contact requires a constant, purposeful shuttling of one’s attention between the internal world of one’s own feelings and the external environment, which includes the feelings of others as well as objective facts. Contact can best be facilitated by asking three questions:

What am I doing right now? What am I feeling right now? What do I really want right now from this situation?

As long as contact is maintained, supervisors are prepared to accept responsibility for what they say, including the risk of offending or angering others. This does not mean running roughshod over the feelings of others or discarding empathy. Rather, authentic supervisors respect feelings to such an extent they consider their own feelings as being as important as the teachers’. While authentic supervisors are more than willing to attend to teachers’ feelings, they are unwilling to entirely compromise their own feelings in the process.

In summary, we propose that schools as organizations are sometimes less effective than they might be because of breakdowns in homeostatic processes among the people involved. Individual teachers, supervisors, and administrators can become more authentic if they clearly identify and successfully satisfy their own needs and wants with respect to others in the school. This can be accomplished by increasing their awareness of what is happening “right now” both internally and externally, and then acting in an honest way that gets them what they want or need for that situation, and encouraging others to do the same. □

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