

# The Supervisory Skill Mix

Efficient supervisors have three kinds of skills: human, managerial, and technical. While human relations and management are important, technical skills must not be neglected.

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ROBERT J. ALFONSO, GERALD FIRTH, AND RICHARD NEVILLE

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A major deterrent to full professional status of educational supervisors is an ill-defined knowledge base and lack of an agreed-upon set of professional skills. Every profession equips its members with a conceptual and intellectual base from which skills are derived and expressed in practice. The skills of instructional supervision, however, have remained remarkably undefined and random, partly because the theoretical base is so thin. Moreover, the skills that are used are generally acquired on the job, rather than during professional preparation and internship. Lortie, commenting on this condition, said:

The structure of public schooling which emerged from the nineteenth century had two major mechanisms for improving teacher performance. One was a modified principle of professionalization based upon faith in increased general and public schooling. The second was the principle of bureaucratic control wherein administrative superiors would raise performance levels by supervising teachers. We have seen that the first principle has not produced a powerful technical culture to guide teachers in their pedagogical behavior. But the second remains: Is there evidence to suggest that a technical culture of teaching resides in the supervisory arrangements in public schools?<sup>1</sup>

If Lortie's question evokes a positive response, it would be difficult to confirm from the requests made by teachers

for supervisory assistance. Teachers consistently report that their primary source of help is other teachers,<sup>2</sup> and they are critical of the amount and quality of assistance they receive from instructional leaders.<sup>3</sup> When instructional supervisors lack skills directly related to the work of classroom teachers, teachers are forced to turn elsewhere for help. Consequently, supervision is frequently seen as unrelated to the improvement of instruction. Occasional supervisory visits to classrooms merely highlight for teachers the episodic character of the supervision.

Supervisors are charged with a multitude of essential tasks. Most sweeping is

their responsibility for improving instruction. They are expected to be instructional experts, diagnosticians, curriculum developers, instructional planners, problem solvers, innovators, clinical observation specialists, and managers of the processes of teaching and learning. In addition to these critical instruction-related tasks are a variety of other school activities. Much of the literature in instructional supervision has addressed these supervisory tasks and the "role" of supervision, yet it has given too little attention to the identification and development of the skills needed to make supervision effective.

The field of instructional supervision during the last three decades has emphasized the human relations and process skills of supervisors with only passing reference to a larger repertoire that might be required. The contribution of Goldhammer, Cogan, Anderson, and others<sup>4</sup> in recent years to the development of clinical supervision is a refreshing departure from the days of admonition and description. Yet even they take a rather narrow view of where and how supervision is to be played out. No single skill or limited set of skills can make supervision effective; instructional supervision requires a wide array of behaviors, demonstrated in a highly complex, human organization, and undervalued by essential concepts and knowledge.

Although the literature on instructional supervision in recent decades has emphasized human relations, supervisors themselves have continued to engage in extensive management or quasi-administrative behavior. This is perhaps understandable, considering the extensive physical structures and management systems required to run increasingly large and complex school systems. While the focus of supervisory activity is often that of self-selection or personal preference, it may also be true that supervisors have avoided classroom contact and direct attempts to influence

instruction because they lack the skills to do so. One does what is most comfortable and where success is most likely—or where the risk of failure is least.

A continuation of management oriented supervision is no longer feasible, for the task of supervision now is to refine the process of teaching and improve the effectiveness or the results of schooling.

### Three Types of Skills

Katz identified three basic skill areas for administrators: human, technical, and conceptual.<sup>5</sup> Mann, in extending and restating Katz's work, described the three classifications of supervisory skills as human, technical, and administrative or managerial.<sup>6</sup> In particular, he emphasized the mix of these skills as the key to supervisory competence.

Mann defined *technical* skill as the specialized knowledge and ability required to perform the primary tasks inherent in a particular supervisory position, and *human relations* skill as the ability to work with people and motivate them so they will desire good performance. *Managerial* skill is the ability to make decisions and see relationships that are crucial to the organization or unit goals for which the supervisor is responsible.

The concept of the supervisory skill-mix can be applied to any organization, although there are different skill requirements at different organizational levels. Mann noted that at first-line supervisory levels, technical and human skills are of primary importance, while at higher levels the need for managerial skills is greater. He also found that the skill-mix differs depending on the stage of growth and development of an organization. In a young organization, human relations and technical skills are particularly essential, but as an organization matures, managerial skills assume increased importance. Mann further observed that technical skills are particularly crucial during periods of change.

### Examples

An example of a *human* skill is generating goal commitments. Instructional supervisors must be able to translate or interpret organizational goals in such a way as to cause teachers to be committed to them. This skill differs from that of planning for goal attainment, which is more of a managerial task. Clarifying

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Robert J. Alfonso is Vice President of Academic Affairs, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee; Gerald R. Firth is Acting Dean, College of Education, University of Georgia, Athens; and Richard F. Neville is Dean of Arts and Sciences, University of Maryland, Catonsville.

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values is another example of a human skill. Supervisors need not be expert in values clarification, but they should be able to employ some of the techniques.

An example of a *managerial* skill is needs assessment: helping teachers identify what they believe to be ideal and then collecting data about how conditions really are. Needs assessment can be a valuable contribution to a change effort and an appropriate precursor to planning, inservice, or staff development. Essentially, it is a planning tool and therefore a managerial skill.

One *technical* skill is the ability to use a classroom observation system. A wide range of observation systems are available, and a supervisor ought to be competent in several of them. The purpose of this skill is to better analyze and understand the process of instruction as it is expressed in a given context or class. It is directly related to the craft of teaching, takes place on-site, and is a clear example of a technical skill not generally found in other professions.<sup>7</sup>

The components of the supervisory skill-mix are not to be applied independently. It is the selection and application of an appropriate combination of skills that makes instructional supervision effective; the mix is of far greater importance than the individual skills. The skill-mix can be applied to a variety of professional roles, in schools as well as in other formal organizations. Within

an educational organization, some of the same skills might be found in several different roles—principal, supervisor, and curriculum director, for example—and there might even be some skills common to all. What distinguishes a professional role, however, is the particular combination of skills and the frequency with which some of them are used.

It is not surprising that supervisors use and are most effective with managerial, then human, and last, technical skills. Although supervisors tend to rely too heavily on them, managerial skills are essential; they require the ability to develop and maintain an effective and productive relationship between an individual unit (department, grade level, or school) and the larger organization. They also require a broad view and the ability to go beyond immediate demands in order to analyze comprehensive organizational developments and needs. Through managerial skills the supervisor is able to provide the conditions necessary for a teacher or staff to be effective.

Managerial tasks are so demanding, however, that they often divert the supervisor's attention from the application of other skills in the mix. Using a preponderance of managerial skills can result in supervision that is long on style but short on substance.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, human skills are a vital part of supervision. The supervisor's world requires working with and through other people—it is a world of influence and human interaction. The human aspects of an organization also are the most complex. Although human skills can be overemphasized, they are crucial. The supervisor who seeks to create an atmosphere of support and positive human relationships must be sensitive to the needs and motivation of teachers; this is basic to sound decision making and effective intervention. When people share a sense of purpose, work cooperatively, and have a supportive management system, performance and productivity are enhanced. Human skills contribute to goal attainment while enhancing the school as a human system.

While all skills in the mix are essential, technical skills, more than any others, make the role of the instructional supervisor unique. In all organizations, the closer one is to the work or production system (in education, to ac-

tual teaching), the more frequently technical skills are used. It is these skills that are addressed precisely to the teaching act and allow supervisors to intervene with targeted, helpful behavior. Supervisors need to work closely and continuously with teachers. It is essential that they possess specialized knowledge and skills, including the ability to demonstrate the skills they seek to develop in teachers. While teaching is a highly humanistic endeavor, the refinement of instruction requires supervisors who are both conceptually and technically strong.

By definition, a professional role is skill oriented. The skills should be sufficiently different, easily recognized, and clearly needed, so that the expertise of the professional role is valued and sought. The skills of a lawyer, a tax accountant, or an ophthalmologist cannot be found in the general populace. Similarly, within the school organization, the supervisory mix needs to be so well defined and demonstrated that there can be no question about the need for the role nor doubt of its effectiveness.□

<sup>1</sup>Dan C. Lortie, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 74.

<sup>2</sup>Robert J. Alfonso and Lee F. Goldsberry, "Colleagueship in Supervision," in *Supervision of Teaching*, ed. Thomas J. Sergiovanni (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1982), pp. 90-107.

<sup>3</sup>Robert J. Alfonso, Gerald R. Firth, and Richard F. Neville, *Instructional Supervision: A Behavior System* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1981), pp. 325-326.

<sup>4</sup>Robert Goldhammer, *Clinical Supervision* (New York: Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969); Morris Cogan, *Clinical Supervision* (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1973); Robert H. Anderson and Robert Krajewski, *Clinical Supervision, Special Methods for the Supervision of Teachers* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1980).

<sup>5</sup>Robert L. Katz, "The Skills of an Effective Administrator," *Harvard Business Review* 33 (1955): 33-42.

<sup>6</sup>Floyd C. Mann, "Toward an Understanding of the Leadership Role in Formal Organizations," in Dubin, *Leadership and Productivity* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965), pp. 68-103.

<sup>7</sup>A comprehensive list and discussion of human, managerial, and technical skills may be found in Robert J. Alfonso, Gerald R. Firth, and Richard F. Neville, *Instructional Supervision: A Behavior System*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1981), p. 334.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 337.

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