

Dimensions of Supervision

Researchers from the University of Georgia found that “a love and like of people” is among the vital ingredients for supervisory excellence.

The consuming national interest in improving education makes the need to identify elements of outstanding supervisory practice more pressing than ever. An ASCD-sponsored research project attempted to do just that during the 1988–89 school year. This article describes the study, which yielded 12 dimensions of outstanding supervision, gleaned from the literature of the past 15 years and verified by expert practicing supervisors.

Using methods of content analysis, a team of 14 advanced doctoral students and faculty from the University of Georgia¹ reviewed supervision textbooks and research literature. We identified specific references to the knowledge, attitudes, and skills associated with effective practice in various leadership positions, including superintendent, associate and assistant superintendent, district-level generalist and specialist, principal, assistant principal, school-based supervisor, team leader, department chairperson, peer coach, and mentor teacher.

From this review, we compiled a list of more than 300 specific examples of knowledge, attitudes, and skills alleged to contribute to instructional improvement or professional growth. As a rule of thumb, we had to find any specific example in at least two sources in order to include it on the

list. We excluded administrative functions such as facilities management, student discipline, and personnel evaluation.

Then the research team sorted and resorted these examples into categories on the basis of content. Eventually, from this classification effort, the following 12 dimensions of supervisory practice emerged:

1. Communication: ensuring open and clear communication among individuals and groups throughout the organization;
2. Staff Development: developing and facilitating meaningful opportunities for professional growth;
3. Instructional Program: supporting and coordinating efforts to improve the instructional program;
4. Planning and Change: initiating and implementing collaboratively developed strategies for continuous improvement;
5. Motivating and Organizing: helping people to develop a shared vision and achieve collective aims;
6. Observation and Conferencing: providing feedback to teachers based on classroom observation;
7. Curriculum: coordinating and integrating the process of curriculum development and implementation;
8. Problem Solving and Decision Making: using a variety of strategies to

clarify and analyze problems and to make decisions;

9. Service to Teachers: providing materials, resources, and assistance to support teaching and learning;

10. Personal Development: recognizing and reflecting upon one's personal and professional beliefs, abilities, and actions;

11. Community Relations: establishing and maintaining open and productive relations between the school and its community;

12. Research and Program Evaluation: encouraging experimentation and assessing outcomes.

Since the 12 dimensions represent duties of instructional leaders at all levels of the organization, they are not the sole responsibility of any single individual or position. Of course, any one position (e.g., superintendent, principal, lead teacher, department chairperson) requires close attention to the performance of certain supervisory functions and less attention to others.

Verifying the Twelve Dimensions

During the second phase of the study, the researchers secured nominations of outstanding supervisors from four national professional groups with special expertise and interest in supervision and from exemplary teachers from two

national teacher associations.² Questionnaires designed to verify the importance of the 12 dimensions were mailed to a national sample of 1,629 individuals. On these questionnaires, the supervisors provided demographic information about themselves and indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that each of the 12 dimensions of practice was important to supervision in general. The participants circled one of four possible responses: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, D = Disagree, and SD = Strongly Disagree. Sixty-six percent of the sample (n=1,075) returned their questionnaires, with a good representation of the various positions at both school and district levels (see fig. 1).

The respondents' perceptions of the importance of the 12 dimensions of supervisory practice are summarized in Figure 2. The dimensions were clearly verified, with more than 50 percent of respondents choosing "Strongly Agree" with respect to the importance of each dimension. Rank-

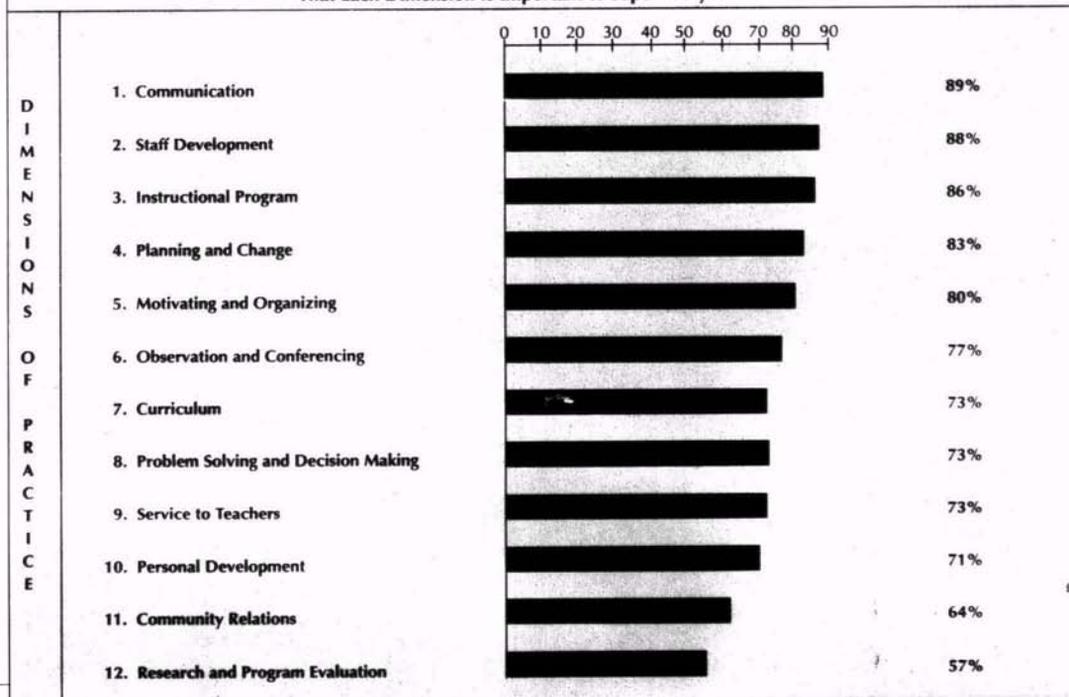
ing the dimensions suggests that, although all 12 dimensions were verified as important, certain ones were perceived as more important than others. Communications, staff development, and the instructional program, for example, were rated somewhat more important to supervisory practice than community relations or research and program evaluation.

Next the research team conducted a second survey to verify the relevance of the more than 300 specific statements of knowledge, attitudes, and skills from which we had derived the 12 dimensions of supervisory practice. The second round of questionnaires were mailed to 987 of the original sample of practitioners who had on the first survey indicated their willingness to respond. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement that each specific statement was relevant to the effective enactment of the dimension under which it was listed.

Fig. 1. Characteristics of Respondents to the First Survey (n=1,075)

<i>Level</i>	
Elementary	25%
Middle/Junior High	18%
High School	25%
District Office	32%
<i>Number of Years' Experience in Current Position</i>	
Mean	7.6 years
Median	5 years
Mode	3 years
Range	1-37 years
<i>Type of School or District</i>	
Rural	21%
Suburban	48%
Urban	30%
<i>Highest Degree Earned</i>	
Bachelors	5%
Masters	45%
Specialists	19%
Doctorate	31%
<i>Sex</i>	
Female	48%
Male	52%

Fig. 2. Percent of Outstanding Practitioners Who "Strongly Agree" That Each Dimension Is Important to Supervisory Practice:



The response rate of the second survey was 68 percent (n=672). The characteristics of these respondents differed little from the original sample, and all levels of supervisory positions were again well represented. The specific statements verified as relevant to the communication dimension, for example, with a "Strongly Agree" rating greater than 50 percent or a mean score higher than 3.5, are presented in Figure 3.

Fig. 3. Knowledge, Attitudes, and Skills Relevant to Effective Communication

Knowledge

- Knowledge of conflict resolution strategies
- Knowledge of relationships within groups
- Knowledge of relationships among groups
- Knowledge of human relations theory

Attitudes

- Encouraging mutual trust
- Open and approachable
- Collegial
- Committed to open channels of communication
- Responsive to concerns and aspirations of others
- Accepting of diverse viewpoints

Skills

- Using and interpreting nonverbal communication
- Speaking clearly
- Communicating effectively with different audiences
- Writing clearly and concisely
- Managing conflict
- Listening attentively
- Creating opportunities for professional dialogue

The practitioners also identified the knowledge, attitudes, and skills considered relevant to the remaining 11 dimensions of supervisory practice. The limitation of space, however, makes it impossible to present them all here. (See note at end of article.)

To further verify the dimensions of practice and the knowledge, attitudes, and skills associated with each, the team conducted a series of telephone interviews. Twelve participants were randomly selected (one from each leadership position), and each participant was asked to respond to one or both of the following questions:

- What knowledge, attitudes, or skills do you think are most important to effective supervisory practice?

- If you were planning a staff development program that would train people to be effective supervisors, what knowledge, attitudes, or skills would you want to include?

The telephone interviews further confirmed the importance of the 12 dimensions. No new knowledge or skills were identified, but the respondents did elaborate on the relevance of certain attitudes to effective supervisory practice.

One clear theme emerging from the interview data was the respondents' strong belief in the importance of human relations. A superintendent observed, for example, that a key to supervisor effectiveness is a "love and like of people." A leader should take time to know something about each individual in the organization, he said, because it is important to be able to communicate with people on a personal as well as a professional basis.

Another participant said an instructional leader should "want people to be happy in their work, to feel good about what they are doing, and to feel that what they are doing is making a difference." A supervisor should be willing to give other people credit for success, he suggested, and be more of a "cheerleader" than a "scorekeeper."

Optimistic attitudes like these are sometimes dismissed as naive, but the research team found such views expressed by outstanding supervisors at all levels with remarkable consistency. The supervisors were realistic—they recognized a need to maintain standards—but they also emphasized that there is "no one best way to teach, no pattern or process that is better than all others." A subject area specialist, for example, emphasized the importance of being "receptive to idiosyncratic teaching and encouraging to teachers who want to try new approaches."

In summary, these outstanding supervisors expressed attitudes that suggest supervision is a very person-oriented activity. It requires knowledge and skills, to be sure, but the human element is paramount. As one practitioner asserted, "You always have to

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remember that people are more important than things."

How We Can Use Our Findings

This study has taken an important step toward defining the discipline of supervision at the national level; its findings have powerful implications for research, training, and practice. We are undertaking further analysis to identify the knowledge, attitudes, and skills most pertinent to the effective performance of each specific position included in the survey. An interesting question we will consider is whether effective practice by content area specialists requires additional knowledge and skills related to subject matter.

The 12 dimensions and the knowledge, attitudes, and skills which they comprise may be useful to states or school districts for assessing needs and planning training programs for supervisors. Colleges and universities might also use these dimensions to guide the content and directions of their preparation programs for supervisors and administrators.

Finally, instructional leaders may find the dimensions useful for reviewing policies and programs in their schools and districts to ensure that all elements of effective supervisory practice are in place. And instructional leaders may also use them for assessing and planning their own professional development. □

¹The following faculty of the University of Georgia Curriculum and Supervision depart-

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ment served as members of the Project Advisory Committee: Theresa M. Bey, Ray E. Bruce, Mary F. Compton, Gerald R. Firth, Edith E. Grimsley. Doctoral students and practicing supervisors who were members of the committee include Letty Carr, Barbara Duke, Mary Guerke, Patricia Heitmuller, James Kahrs, Sheila Kahrs, Lewis McAfee, Rebecca Smith, and Hannah Tostensen.

²Supervisor nominators included 65 members of the Council of Professors of Instructional Supervision, 180 members of the Supervision Network of ASCD, 100 members of the Instructional Supervision Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association, and 100 members of the Presidents and Executive Secretaries of ASCD Affiliates. Fifty outstanding teachers from the National Education Association and fifty from the American Federation of Teachers also served as nominators.

Editor's note: Copies of the full report, "Identification of Supervisory Proficiencies Project," are available from ASCD for \$15. To order, contact Lynn Klingler in the Member Relations Department at (703) 549-9110, ext. 226.

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