“Entertaining another way to think about Supervision”

Supervisor Principles and Philosophies*
University of Michigan
Residence Education

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"Many of the familiar principles of Quality Management amount to an elaboration of this simple truth: an innovative, healthy organization requires that we work WITH people rather than do things TO them." Alfie Kohn

The quote above allows us to think seriously about what it means to be a supervisor in Residence Education at the University of Michigan. Though simple sounding and logical, I’m not convinced that we always act in ways that affirm an ability to work with people rather than do things to them. For many of us, “being the boss” has lured us into a sense of “power and control” that entices us into thinking that we are more important than the folks that we serve. This largely unintentional way of being creates an environment where we believe we can “help and motivate” our supervisees by giving them things where they will be “stretched” and that the only way to grow is to provide very “high expectations” and hold people accountable if they don’t meet these expectations. I think there is another way to think about this…

As supervisors in Residence Education most of our time is spent supervising very bright, self-motivated and passionate students who genuinely care about doing a “great job.” There is ample research evidence (and anecdotal personal realities that comes from thinking about how we like to be supervised) that shows that supervisors “cannot motivate others.” Motivation is the desire someone has to do something. Though you can’t motivate others, organizations can do a great deal to foster conditions that bring out the best opportunities for people to be motivated. It’s crucial that our organization helps enable employees to find meaning in their work. Meaning is the only true intrinsic motivator. Meaning leads to joy.

In order to create an environment of joy and intrinsic motivation, I propose the following thoughts/assumptions/practices regarding supervision in our work in RESED (if you have feedback/challenges/thoughts about these, I’d love to hear them):

1. Student staff members accepted their position because they wanted to make a difference and be a leader who assists their fellow students (see their essays and interviews and past behavior to prove that this is true for the vast majority of folks working in Resed.)

2. Staff members have some kind of passion for doing this work (they like to help people, like doing activities, see how this fits to their future goals, etc.)
3. As a supervisor, your role is to create an environment for student staff members where they can flourish and follow their passions.

4. Your role is to be an educator, guide, coach, assistant who asks many more questions versus providing statements or tasks to complete (allowing staff member to reach the conclusion of what else needs done is much more powerful than simply telling the staff member to do something.)

5. If the only role of a supervisor is to check up on supervisees, it’s not a very attractive job—we hope supervisors will see themselves as more than just a boss but someone who has a relationship with a person in order to help them grow, learn and improve.

6. We provide supervisees with multiple ways to meet the goals of Resed (e.g. CDM/SJ/Restorative Justice, etc.). Everyone doesn’t and shouldn’t have to do the work exactly the same way because they serve different people and issues in their communities.

7. The work of accomplishing building inclusive communities lies with the student staff members and the students they work with. The work of the supervisor is to guide, help, redirect, educate, provide skill training, question and coach the supervisee in fulfilling the goals/passions they set for themselves.

8. The supervisor’s work is to build the staff community by following and role modeling for staff and making transparent that this is what you are doing.

9. The supervisor’s role is to help assure that student staff member connects their goals of developing community and that the staff member sees it as reasonable and attainable.

10. The supervisor will do everything possible help the supervisee succeed and accomplish their goals (or may ask questions to push the supervisee to raise their own expectations.)

11. If the supervisee does not meet plans they’ve set for themselves (e.g. 2 week plan that is not completed or done for a 1:1 or they haven’t created a purpose for the time they spend in the community center), then there are 2 issues for the supervisor to consider…
   a. The supervisee has lost their passion for the work and we need to try and assist in getting it back OR we need to coach them to find the passion they have for some other work
   b. We have to look in the mirror at ourselves to see how we might be contributing to the issue and if there are specific skills the supervisee needs to learn or attain and we involve them in this process
12. As a supervisor/leader we can also create a compelling vision together with our staff. People need to understand how their work connects to the organization as a whole. This requires an investment in people and relationships—it is the work we are doing in creating positive, inclusive communities in the residence halls.

13. Supervisors can give staff freedom and choices in their work. Supervisors need to understand the power of giving people trust and freedom in doing their work. This means finding ways to be more fluid and less structured, allowing people, as much as possible, to choose work that aligns with their individual interests and strengths. Part of this shift is establishing practices and writing policies that give the staff the right to independently exercise discretion and judgment.

14. Supervisors can offer people challenges. Many people yearn for and thrive on having challenge in their work. This can be provided by offering staff more responsibility and the opportunity to learn new skills, lead or develop initiatives in the hall or grow in other ways. Providing new challenges is not a quick fix for everyone, however. Some people are content to do a good job without novel challenges, just knowing they contribute to student learning or growth in the halls. These differences in individual outlook obviously point to the need for employees to be self-reflective and choose what works best for them.

15. Involving people more in decisions (or at minimum create advisory boards with some decision making authority) also provides interesting work and motivation. Despite the continued hype over the importance of money and recognition, more people are motivated if their ideas were heard and they have opportunities to apply them.

16. Create a climate of people working together. In so many ways, conventional organizations emphasize the individual—individual goals and appraisals are examples of this. Instead, foster ways for people to work together, to share meaning, and connect with one another. This “connected” community is not achieved through team-building alone, but requires a fundamental shift in how we supervise/lead. The focus must shift away from blaming individuals for poor outcomes to seeking to understand the causes, systems, and processes that drive performance. This is best achieved when employees collaboratively work together to solve performance issues confronting our organization and develop “authentic communities” that we can model for the students who live with us.

*This document focuses primarily on supervising students, as resident staff members, but is easily adaptable to full-time staff who work in Resed as well. ☺