The Talent We Nourish: A Word for Supervisors

John J. Koehn and George A. Goens

"Perceptions of the supervisor toward people, organizations, and his or her own role will determine whether or not new trends and tools will influence the fertile soil necessary for talent to grow and flourish."



". . . We shall have only the kinds of talent we nourish, only the kinds of talent we want and expect." [1]—John W. Gardner

Supervisors have the opportunity and responsibility to nourish the talent that will maximize learning experiences for children. Crucial to the development of talent in teachers are supervisors' perceptions of people, organizations, and their own roles. In fact, the nature of the supervisory program is dependent upon these perceptions.

Supervisors' perceptions of people, organizations, and their own roles vary considerably. If supervisors could be placed on an imaginary continuum of supervisory perceptions, the traditional inspection-based view of supervision would be on one end and the emergent, analysis-based, growth model on the other. Where supervisors "stand" on the continuum is influenced by their perceptions of the people they supervise and their own roles in the school organization.

In the following conversation, two fictitious supervisors, Mr. X and Ms. Y, reveal differing perceptions toward their supervisory responsibilities, the school organization, and teachers. From listening to the conversation, the current state of supervision and some emerging trends may be identified. Let's eavesdrop on them. . . .

Mr. X: Boy, what a day! Things in this business aren't getting any easier. It's getting tougher to keep track of what teachers are doing in the classroom. Supervision isn't getting any easier either—finding time is tough!

Ms. Y: I can't disagree with you there. Supervision does take time—no doubt about it. But it's time well spent if teachers are to continue to learn and be motivated.

Mr. X: I don't know about you, but as far as I'm concerned supervision is making sure everyone is getting the job done. I've been hired by the Board of Education to ensure teacher accountability and to check on teacher competence. Not much else really matters. Running a "tight" ship and keeping teachers producing is where it's at! The goals of supervision have always been

[1] John W. Gardner. *Excellence: Can We Be Equal & Excellent Too.* New York City: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1961.

the same. Some of the new techniques are just fads, they come and go. In education, I really believe that if you stand still long enough everything will catch up to you. The goals of supervision are really simple: evaluate the teaching staff, make sure organizational objectives are reached, and keep people working to their maximum.

Ms. Y: Supervision sure is necessary, but I don't think it's all that simple. The growth of people should be the main aim of the supervisory program. To help teachers grow, a supervisor needs to understand and analyze instruction, establish a helping supportive environment, and be aware of the needs of people in their work. I really think that helping individuals grow—continue to learn—will have a reciprocal effect on the total organization.

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Mr. X: Growth? I only care about my teachers doing their jobs. In-service provides growth! Supervision should help us know that people are earning their pay and that the kids are being taught effectively.

Ms. Y: I see. But I have trouble with your type of supervision. I suppose it is because of how you view people. I believe that teachers take positions in local school systems intending to do a good job of teaching. They truly want to grow professionally. Furthermore, people have integrity and will work toward the objectives of a school system if they are committed to them. I don't think people are rivers that seek the course of least resistance. They are creative, have imagination, and seek responsibility. Nurturing responsibility, tapping creativity and imagination, and providing an environment where people can develop a commitment to the school's objectives is what supervision is all about.

Mr. X: Boy, are you naïve about people. I really think that people need to be controlled in order for them to get the work for the organization completed. You know people fight change—look at all the research on change and how to bring it about. The average person, and that includes teachers, will try to find a comfortable niche in the organization and will work only as hard as his or her supervisor demands. Sure, I think there are creative people, but generally the average person needs some very close direction and control on the job. That is our role as supervisors—to provide the necessary direction and control so that our kids can learn through competent instruction.

Ms. Y: I'm certainly in favor of schools doing a good job and, as a supervisor, I believe that my approach can be effective in bringing about quality education. But I don't think my primary role is to control people or to direct them at all times. Teachers are professionals who have needs. My job as a supervisor is to help teachers meet their professional needs so that they can become more competent. The organization benefits and its goals are met through teachers examining and evaluating their professional needs, behavior, and effectiveness. My job is to help teachers analyze what they are doing with kids. Analyze. That's much different from controlling and appraising.

Mr. X: That's pretty idealistic stuff. I've got teachers who aren't *interested* in analyzing. I'm hired to evaluate teachers—it's as simple as that! By evaluate, I mean make value judgments as to whether the teacher is doing the job or not. People who say that teachers do not perceive supervisors as evaluators are just kidding themselves. That is the role of the supervisor—to evaluate, to make judgments, and to offer suggestions for improvement.

Ms. Y: You don't make people more effective through arbitrary value judgments. Too often such value judgments are based on "gut" feelings rather than evidence. People don't really change behavior when they are threatened. If people are to change behaviors that are not effective in the classroom, then they have to "own" the results. People will only "own" the results if they share in their development. Helping teachers look at their behavior—methods, techniques, interactions—is

my main role. By doing so, ineffective behavior can be sorted out and eliminated with behavior-bringing results maintained. When that happens, teachers grow and become more effective.

Mr. X: Utopia! That all sounds fine, but we work in large bureaucracies. Let's face the facts. Schools are bureaucracies that have hierarchies, roles, and lines of authority. I am in an authority position within the school. Individual needs are fine. But the only needs that must prevail are the organization's needs. My school exists for the benefit of the students within it—not the needs of teachers or adults. I believe in dealing with what *is*. And what is, is the fact that my superior expects that I meet the objectives of the school district. My job as a supervisor is to make sure those objectives are met.

Ms. Y: I don't know about you, but I'm not talking about working in an automobile plant or some other assembly line operation. A school should be a vibrant, creative place. The job of the supervisor is to mesh the needs of the professional (teacher) with the needs and expectations of the school district. That's how to build organizational commitment! Sure, schools are bureaucracies, but they don't have to be rigid, unresponsive, or inhumane places or sweatshops. Professional organizations have lines of authority, but these lines must be flexible to incorporate some shared decision-making and input from the people working within it. The relationship between supervisor and teacher does not always have to be one of superordinate and subordinate. It could be a relationship based on helping, with mutual respect, support, and understanding.

Mr. X: Yes, but the minute I assume my role as a supervisor, I'm an authority figure. You just can't escape that fact. My position places certain responsibilities on me to ensure that things happen in my building. Sometimes teachers don't have to like what they're doing, they just have to do it! It becomes impossible to please everyone all the time when you're in a position of authority. After all, teachers themselves are authority figures to their students and to people in the community. It's not unreasonable for the teacher to recognize that they also are responsible to an authority. It's just pure idealism to believe that teachers can see a supervisor as a "helper." There is going to be a certain amount of threat anytime a supervisor sets foot in a teacher's classroom. There's just no way around that. Frankly, the threat of evaluation can shape up people who are doing marginal or lousy jobs. If the threat of evaluation was not there, I don't believe some teachers would ever change their ways.

Ms. Y: Boy, it sounds as if you would like to call all of the shots.

Mr. X: Well, I am hired to make decisions. There isn't time to get a consensus about what a supervisor should or should not do with teachers. Some people advocate having pre-conferences with teachers *before* actual supervision begins in the classroom. Well, how long does it take to tell the teacher you're coming into his or her classroom? Besides, pre-conferences and some of those other "clinical" gimmicks just will not work in a public school. They may be fine for the university, but they take too much time and involve too much "game playing" for large public schools. Teachers' unions even see them as "games."

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Ms. Y: Hey, that's the basic difference between us. Do you feel that because of your position as a supervisor you automatically have power and influence over people? My authority as a supervisor will come only from competence and skill. If I am a capable supervisor who can provide sound analyses and observations to teachers based upon their identified needs, then I will become significant to that person. I'm looking for an expertise-based identity, not one based on the fact that I was appointed to a supervisory position. Being a "significant other" as a supervisor will help me apply analysis-based techniques. Supervisory methods such as using verbal and nonverbal interaction techniques and conferencing skills that make for meaningful pre- and post-conferences are very important. Understanding the com-

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ponents of the instructional process and having the skills to collect meaningful data separate the grownups from the youngsters in supervision.

Mr. X: I feel the best technique the supervisor can use is getting into a person's classroom and watching what's going on. Interaction analyses, peer supervision, self-analyses, and all the data gathering you mentioned is too theoretical. I don't think teachers will understand it, nor do they expect it. I think what teachers are looking for are good honest opinions about what's going on in their classroom. If I find a teacher who isn't cutting the mustard, I feel my evaluation should be made known at contract time.

Ms. Y: Supervisors just can't plop into a person's classroom willy-nilly. If you go through a systematic process for supervision including pre-conference, data collection and analysis, and post-conference, the whole supervisory process becomes more productive. Supervision should be data-based not opinion-based. I think supervision can be more objective than it has been in the past. Collecting data agreed to by the teacher and supervisor can have an impact on changing behavior if it needs changing. It also can maintain those methods, techniques, or interactions that are very productive. Without gathering data, how do you know if anything is productive in a teacher's classroom? I'm afraid that without data your opinions will not carry much weight with the teacher.

Mr. X: Well, the only thing we seem to agree on is that supervision is important.

Ms. Y: Yeah, I guess that's right.. But remember, times have changed! If supervision is to have any impact on what happens in schools, we also have to change as supervisors. There are new techniques and methods available to supervisors beyond the old inspection-based model, as I had hoped you would have heard in our discussion. It takes time, hard work, and a strong commitment to keep up to date.

Mr. X: As I said earlier, a lot of the basics just don't change, and one of the basics is the need for a supervisor to evaluate the teachers' performance. It has always existed in the schools and always will. One of these days, you'll be calling my methods or techniques a new trend in supervision.

New trends? New techniques? Instruments and processes for the supervision of teachers have been and are being developed and implemented. The use of these new supervisory tools in stimulating and nourishing talent is dependent upon supervisors. The perceptions of supervisors toward their own roles will determine whether or not new trends and tools will provide the fertile soil necessary for talent to grow and flourish. Supervisory trends and tools will only nourish the behavior we, as supervisors, desire and expect.



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