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# Supervision of the Libraries in a School System

Arabelle Fedora

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It is ironic that I was asked to speak about things I wish I had known as a new supervisor. In 1980, for a course assignment, I wrote a proposal for research on the most important tasks for the new supervisor to perform the first year. Unfortunately, I never conducted that research as it was proposed. At the time I wrote the proposal, I had completed my third year as a supervisor but had not forgotten the feeling of being overwhelmed that first year.

After agreeing to do this talk, I began to scribble little notes as I remembered incidents and impressions from my first year. I sorted these thoughts into two groups, 1) "unexpectations" of the job, or, things I did not anticipate, and 2) coping strategies.

Before I begin, let me issue my disclaimers. I must say that I have yet to learn much about being effective in this job. One of the pleasures of the position is that there are endless opportunities for professional growth. Furthermore, I have only worked in large school districts, so my remarks may not be pertinent to smaller ones. Finally, I don't always practice what I preach—some suggestions are easier said than done!

## Unexpectations

### *Different Set of Rewards*

The rewards of being a district-level library supervisor are different from those of being a school librarian. Every day as an elementary school librarian I relished lots of rewarding moments helping students. Children are wonderful boosters because they are so open and expressive about their feelings. The "warm fuzzy" moments as a supervisor are present—getting a budget increase, helping a librarian solve a problem, thwarting a censorship effort, seeing the construction of a new library—but these rewards are less obvious at first and may be slower in coming.

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Arabelle Fedora, Coordinator of Media Services, Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, made this presentation at the supervisory workshop sponsored by the Round Table on the Status of Women in Librarianship in May 1985.

### *Overwhelming Number of Responsibilities*

Most school librarians are "It." They run one-person shows of acquisitions, technical services, reference, bibliographic instruction, AV, not to mention hospitality manager and back-up custodian. Similarly, the supervisor is bombarded with hundreds of tasks and must sort out which are the most important to do first. I found it more difficult than expected to keep the substantive program planning and development ahead of paper shuffling and telephone ringing.

### *Administrators' Knowledge of Libraries*

Prepare to encounter incredible ignorance of libraries! I expected to have to explain library services to community groups, including school board members, but I did not anticipate that the level of awareness would be quite so low among some of my central office coworkers. You know the remarks—"I've always thought it would be nice to be a librarian and do nothing but work with books all day." At the district level you get these:

From a teacher—"It must be nice not to have to deal with students all day." (Little does this person know what it can be like to work with adults all day, some days.)

From a principal—"She's a great librarian; we only lost five books last year."

From an assistant superintendent—"If we had centralized processing, we wouldn't need any clerical help in the libraries."

### *Murphy's Law*

On any given day it is safe to expect Murphy's Law to take over. Have in mind what you want to accomplish each day, but don't be surprised if a string of events comes up out of the blue to alter your plans. I learned to be wary whenever I thought I might be able to clear my desk. The next phone call would be from a librarian distraught over a censorship problem or from the boss requesting a major report in an hour, or both!

I quickly learned to expect something to go wrong every time I conducted a workshop. Examples are snow, equipment failure, and lost handouts.

I now know to expect a surprise resignation during the first week of school when all the great people I interviewed have signed contracts elsewhere.

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### *Politics*

Political gamesmanship is more of a sport to some people in a school district than it is a constructive method of achieving progress for an educational program. I did not expect the number of administrators whose style was so manipulative and covert. Most, however, are truly dedicated to the education of children. Learning to recognize each is difficult for the new supervisor, because appearances are not always what they seem to be.

### *Quality of Library Programs*

The first year was a shock to my professional idealism and naiveté. I never dreamed that the few weak library programs would be quite as inadequate as they were. The burden of disappointment in some of my coworkers was considerable, at times. I felt as if I was knocking myself out trying to be an advocate for libraries for the sake of some people who were not in the least bit dedicated to librarianship. Even though these librarians were certainly the minority, some days I believed my energy was being drained trying to improve a few programs, leaving little time for those people who would appreciate and benefit more from my efforts. Migraines are common!

### *On the Positive Side . . .*

Having listed some of the challenges of the job which I did not expect to find, let me hasten to emphasize that the thrills of being a supervisor are significant. I have the pleasure of association with many top-notch librarians. I also work with numerous supportive administrators who are catalysts for my efforts. It is a wonderful feeling to know that my work can potentially benefit all of the students in an entire school system and can improve the quality of worklife for all of the librarians.

### *Coping Strategies*

#### *Different Set of Rewards*

Progress itself becomes rewarding even if a final goal has not yet been met. Learn to appreciate small steps as victories. Be delighted,

for example, when a person who has been defensive and resistant to suggestions calls and asks for your help.

Setting goals for each year (and for each day, week, month) provides a mechanism for rewarding work. Accomplishing a goal is very self-satisfying.

It will not be long before you can look back on your job and see progress. The warm relationships you will build with many people also become rewarding in themselves.

### *Overwhelming Number of Responsibilities*

Since so many of my thoughts fit into this category, I shall simply list them. I learned many of these strategies from Gertrude Coward, who was the director of libraries in Charlotte-Mecklenburg for thirty years. Working in her office for three years served as a valuable apprenticeship.

1. Get to know the people your first year. Concentrate not only on names and faces, but learn something personal about each. Look for everyone's strengths. "People" means everybody—librarians, library clerks and volunteers, principals, teachers, school secretaries, other administrators, all other central office employees, etc.

The first week on the job is not too soon to introduce yourself to other central office personnel, such as personnel directors, purchasing agent, building and maintenance directors, as well as the obvious curriculum supervisors. Stop by their offices to say hello. You may wish to ask for an appointment for a longer visit to express your philosophy and interest in working together. Getting started on a friendly basis can make life easier when differences of opinion arise later over specific issues.

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Be visible in the schools. When people find you familiar they are more inclined to call.

At the beginning of the school year, spend lots of time with new librarians, both "new" as librarians and "new" to the system. Helping them get started on the right foot will pay off many times over.

2. Gertrude's advice on establishing credibility was to get the *things* people want first. Fortunately, there is a honeymoon period for a new supervisor, during which reasonable requests are fulfilled. Other administrators expect you to

make changes and hate to say "no" to the new person. The first year I was able to get an increase in the budget that the elementary principals and librarians had requested for years. From then on I had their cooperation on more significant program changes.

3. Tend to glaring problems right away, but don't be afraid to take the first year to get the lay of the land and to evaluate. Building relationships with people will pave the way for changes you will want to make later.

4. Ask the librarians what they think are the needs. During the first meeting I asked small groups of librarians to identify issues (especially policies) in need of attention and staff development needs. The lists generated kept me busy for quite some time!

5. Listen to the librarians when they offer advice. This is a simplistic statement, but one I've thought much about, because I have learned plenty about supervision from the people I supervise. I believe people want the new boss to be effective, having had several new bosses myself. I want him or her to be successful, respected, and influential, because that effectiveness will bring good things eventually to libraries. So when I see weaknesses in my boss's performance, I wish I could candidly suggest changes. Thus, it stands to reason that the people I supervise would like to advise me from time to time. The challenge is twofold—to make people feel comfortable and free to express themselves, and to take any criticism as well-intended and constructive.

6. Keeping people informed from the very beginning of your tenure eliminates much wasteful worrying and misunderstanding. Rumors abound in school systems about decisions which are pending. There are those who try to keep secrets and a shroud of mystery around discussions (which leak out eventually anyway) in a feeble attempt to exercise control and power. The result is generally a lack of support. If a matter must be kept a secret from the librarians, explain why. In time they will learn that you can be trusted to keep them posted.

7. When in doubt about how to handle a personnel issue, perhaps the toughest for a new supervisor, the Golden Rule applies. Think, "How would I feel if . . . ?"

8. Work hard on time management principles. A good secretary is wonderful and can often identify time-savers for you. Whenever possible, go straight to a school in the morning rather than to the office, where you may get stuck for the rest of the day. Delegate whatever you can.

9. When facing a tough decision, consult all

of the appropriate people, including your peers in other school systems. *Always* ask what's best for the education of students. Holding all deliberations up to that standard has helped me many times to make a decision and to stand by that decision.

#### *Administrators' Knowledge of Libraries*

Confronting ignorance of libraries is a constant marketing job. The offensive is better than defensive. Take your boss to visit good programs. Point out what you want him or her to see, or he or she may miss what is obvious to you. Try to view this part of your job as a challenge with big payoff potential, not as a chore. Give benefit of the doubt, assuming that the administrators are interested in having strong programs but are simply unaware of the key ingredients.

Use students, teachers, and parents as advocates for you, e.g. speaking to the school

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board about how important libraries are to them. Get to know the system's PTA Council.

Think of the parallels to the public relations that must be carried out by the building-level librarians. They must volunteer their services, speak up, reach out to users. The same is true for the supervisor. For example, offer to assist other supervisors with curriculum revision projects.

Keep your eyes open at all times for facts and figures to help make your points. Collect them as an ongoing task, so that you will not have to scramble or get caught without when you need them on short notice. Comparison to other districts can be effective.

#### *Murphy's Law*

It really is important to plan ahead to minimize the chance of things going wrong. For example, print any handouts you will need for a meeting as far ahead as you can.

Trying to anticipate changes that are likely to occur in a school system will enable you to begin planning. By keeping my ear to the ground, so to speak, I can buy precious lead time to get my thoughts together *before* I am asked to do so by my boss.



## Politics

Being aware of the politics in a school system is critical for survival. The danger, I think, is in getting so caught up in politicking that you forget how to deal with people in an honest, straightforward manner.

It is also important to try to stay neutral if you find yourself in an environment of cliques. A woman who was about to retire after many years in our system warned me not to "hitch my wagon" to a particular "star," because she predicted that he was going to "fall." She was right.

The school system grapevine is more like kudzu. Much inaccurate information circulates. If you hear a rumor that disturbs you because of its potential impact on libraries, go as high as necessary for verification. Don't lose time stewing about what you heard; check the rumor out. Also

be careful what you say to whom. Confidences are violated more than you realize.

## Quality of Media Programs

When you feel depressed, treat yourself to an R&R visit. Go to one of your best schools, help some students with whatever activity is taking place, and enjoy watching a wonderful librarian at work.

Tell yourself that tomorrow *will* come, that the particular task at hand *will* get done, and that someday you'll look back and marvel that you got past this particular hump.

## Above all . . .

Keep your sense of humor! Much of what occurs in the supervisor's job is funny, if you can stand back and view the situation a bit objectively.

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