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Action Research Report
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The Process and Relationship of Supervision

For the past year, I have been an Assistant Resident Director (ARD) here at UMass. As an ARD, I am a live-in graduate student working in the Department of Residence Life. There are several components to my job.

One component is that I serve as an active and visible residence hall staff member. I serve as a part of a senior staff that includes another ARD, a Residence Director and myself. We oversee 19 Resident Assistants (RA), 1 Cluster Office Manager (COM), and 1 Community Development Assistant (CDA). These three positions – RA, COM, CDA – are held by undergraduate students who can be anywhere between their sophomore and senior year. I directly supervise 6 RAs and the COM. Two of the RAs that I directly supervise live on a Special Interest Residence Floor or SIRP. Their floors are considered Wellness Floors. Those residents are committed to a lifestyle free of alcohol and drugs.

In addition to each of us supervising 7 staff members, we are also assigned a specific area of our cluster to supervise. When I began my job in September, I was assigned to oversee the Cluster Office. This means that I am responsible for the keys to over 200 rooms, for all mail and packages that we receive, and any maintenance and operation concerns that our staff deals with on a daily basis.

Another facet of my job is to serve as a judicial conference administrator and to enforce housing policies. Each week I spend part of my office time in conferences with students that have been documented for violating a policy. These policies range from noise violations to underage alcohol consumption, candle violations to suspected illegal drug use.

The last feature that I will mention is my participation in a laundry list of meetings. Each week I have cluster staff meetings, senior staff meetings, supervision meetings, office hours and student meetings.

In the beginning of September, I was offered a position as an ARD here at UMass. There was a position vacated and since I had previously applied, the Department of Residence Life offered it to me. What this meant was that I was entering a cluster staff that had already been established and trained. I missed both my own ARD training as well as the training that the RAs had. Due to my late arrival, I gradually took over certain responsibilities as I was trained for them. This process caused a bit of a disruption to the staff because I was not always able to answer certain questions or provide specific support if I had not yet been trained. It is possible that this confusion also made me unsure of how my actions were received.

Eric Chen and Bianca Bernstein (2000), in their work with supervision in Counselor Development, feel that an area that needs further investigation is recognizing supervision as both a relationship and a process. I found that when working with RAs, supervision is certainly a process, but it is also about maintaining a working professional relationship with the staff. Chen and Bernstein cite several supervision models that highlight the initial negotiation of expectations and the building of a trusting foundation as a critical juncture in the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee (Chen & Bernstein, 2000). I feel that in missing the beginning of the year I missed out on this exact opportunity. One change that will occur next year is that I will be able to have that intentional time with the students I work with to determine those expectations together.

During the initial phase of this relationship, supervisees, regardless of their training levels, seek support and assurance from their supervisors, which reduces ambiguity about the supervisory process (Chen & Bernstein, 2000). Perhaps wanting to seem more knowledgeable about specific tasks or procedures, I was unable to support the staff and simply tried to address concerns before staff members felt that they needed assistance. This, according to Chen & Bernstein, may have increased the ambiguity in my role as a senior staff member.

With this in mind, every senior staff member is evaluated in October. Even though I had only been a part of the staff for a little over a month, I was still offered the opportunity to receive feedback on my performance thus far. A majority of the feedback was positive. The following are several statements taken from the compilation of all the feedback I received: “Alexis is solid in every area of management and development of cluster.” “As my one-on-one advisor, Alexis has been able to help me keep calm and focused by answering my questions and consistently checking in on my well being.” “Alexis is extremely empathetic with the role of the RAs.”

I also received negative feedback. While it was not a majority of the feedback, I focused on the theme of the comments as an area for improvement. Of the evaluations that all the 21 staff members made of me last semester, the following statements spawned the focus of my action research project:

“[Alexis] manages effectively, but seems to take charge too frequently before the situations have been properly assessed.” “She needs to delegate better.” “She can be too strict and it makes it hard to inform her of things.”

Eight researchers, through a grant from University of California, Davis counseling center completed a research study that specifically examined negative supervisory events and the effects that they had on supervision. These researchers used Stoltenberg’s 1981 developmental

model focusing on “supervisee level of development as expressed by supervisee dependency and the impact of the supervisory environment” (Ramos – Sanchez, Esnil, Goodwin, Touster, Wright, Ratanasiripong, & Rodolfa, 2002). There are four levels that range from an emerging supervisee who is heavily dependent upon their supervisor to a mastery level characterized by independence. Ramos – Sanchez et al. stress the importance of a supervisor recognizing where the staff members are along this continuum and adjusting their behaviors to meet the needs of the supervisees.

While I supervised 21 staff members, they all existed at different places along the spectrum of dependency. In my work, I needed to recognize that certain staff may have demanded less effort on my part, but that did not mean that they did not feel comfortable asking for help. It may have meant that they simply required less assistance because of their previous experiences.

With those evaluation statements in mind, I decided to examine my supervision style.

First, I had to ask myself how I could use these comment on my supervisory style to develop *new* ways of helping my staff without prematurely solving problems for them? Second, in what ways do I encourage and challenge my staff to act independently and in what ways do I disable them by doing the work for them?

My three research questions were:

1. What are the actions that I perform as an Assistant Resident Director that hinder staff members from learning?
2. What are the actions that I perform that assist my staff in becoming active learners?
3. What can I do to create an environment that facilitates RAs becoming independent, responsible members of their own community?

Within the scope of my department, I can see this research as an integral aspect of what could become a training session for RDs and ARDs in the fall. As we participate in ongoing training throughout the year, my study could be the springboard for other Residence Life staff to examine

their own supervisory behaviors. Since each senior staff member directly supervises resident assistants, I feel that my study could be the basis for further investigation.

As a member of the Residence Life department, I intend to keep this job as long as I am enrolled at this University. Since that could be several years, I felt that this study could only serve to enhance my practice. It also has provided me with the research opportunities that I am seeking in my coursework. Critical to my development as a student and as a staff member, studying my own behaviors was both humbling and enlightening.

In order to do this I needed to generate data that examined the difference between my actions and the perception of those actions as seen by the staff. "In this interpersonal context, the supervisor is viewed primarily as a source of persuasive messages--an influence agent--and the trainee is the recipient of these messages. As recipient, however, the trainee is not the passive target of the supervisor's influence, but rather an active, selective processor of information" (Clairborn & Etringer, 1995). My actions as a supervisor have a direct effect on Resident Assistant learning and performance. Through my actions, I gave the impression that the RAs were passive participants in the supervisory relationship.

Part of what I felt was important for this research to come to fruition, was to examine existing research on supervisory styles and how particular interactions can have either positive or negative effects on the supervisees. The literature in education around supervision predominately address issues of student-teacher supervision. I did not feel that this was the most appropriate source for information on the supervisory relationship that I was studying. One, working as a supervisor for 21 staff members creates a different dynamic than that of an individual student-teacher. Also, student teachers will have their supervising practitioner with them in the room to guide them even when the supervisor is not present. As I am working with these RAs, there will be many times, after initially being trained, that they will be acting independent of my supervision. I needed to

look at a different supervision setting to help me flesh out my objectives more. Fortunately, I found some support in the literature on the supervision for counselor development. This literature was very helpful throughout the research and especially when I began to consider the next steps I can take.

As I said before, this is part of the work I am constantly doing, so it fit into the structure of my situation very well. I wanted to survey all the staff to begin with. Then, I intended to build some of the studies into my regular supervision meetings by adding taped interview components to our discussions. I wanted to use my weekly meetings with my supervisor, the RD, to expand some of the ideas I explored through a staff survey. Before I even began the actual act of collecting research from my RAs, I participated in a photo voice project. Taking my job and presenting it to my colleagues through photographs provided me with a unique opportunity.

Throughout the photo voice project, I continually thought about how I could tell my life in pictures. What photographs would tell someone else about what my life looks like to me everyday? Stepping back from the routine, I found that while my job is partially wrapped up in paperwork and keys and meetings, the most important part of my job is my students. Even though I had to take pictures of the logistics, they became small in comparison to the students. Whether supervising Resident Assistants or meeting with residents, I am constantly working to make their lives easier or better. As the photo voice project progressed, I found that while the pictures of the technical side of my job were important, the photographs of my staff were the ones that brought meaning to what I do. I found that I could not tell the story of what it means to be an Assistant Resident Director without telling the stories of my staff. I felt proud sharing these photographs with my colleagues. It reinforced my focus on staff development. When I was taking the photographs, I was able to explain to my staff what the purpose was behind them. It gave me the opportunity to talk with some staff members that I do not normally work with. Immediately, I

began to see how this action research project was beneficial to me; I was beginning a dialogue with my staff. The true goal was to improve the way that I supervise in order to improve the way that my staff views their jobs and their relationship with me. The photo voice project only served to reinforce my goals, through a very different lens.

After the photo voice project was completed, I decided that my next step should be to find out how my staff this semester felt I was performing as supervisor.

Hopefully, through the relationships that I have built over the last 9 months and in allowing them the opportunity not to participate, I could be able to count on them for honesty. The best I can do is to trust in them that their responses were helping me to better support their efforts and making both of our jobs more productive.

Seeing that their feedback first came in the form of a written evaluation, I felt that it would be appropriate to begin my second attempt at collecting data with a staff survey. This survey consisted of two parts. Part 1 had 15 statements that they could rate on a five-point scale (Strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree). Part 2 consisted of 4 short answer responses at the end of the survey. Before conducting the survey, I gave a sample copy to 4 people – my advisor and the professor for this course, my RD, one of my RAs, and a friend. They each gave separate feedback on the nature and wording of the questions. On Monday, April 25, at the beginning of our all-staff meetings, I gave the survey out to all 19 RAs, the COM (who I also supervise) and our CDA. Staff members were allowed as much time as they needed to fill out the survey.

After getting all the surveys back, I compiled the data. The most important fact from Part 1, or at least the component that stood out the most for me, was the lack of truly negative feedback. I had

anticipated that staff members would have had more constructive criticism to give me. Overall, I felt that the surveys were positive in examining how I am performing this semester as a supervisor. For example, statement 14 read “Alexis gives me room to try out new ideas.” Of the 21 staff members who responded, 8 chose “strongly agree,” 10 chose “agree,” and 3 chose “neutral.” One of the main areas that I was focusing on for improvement is encouraging staff to take ownership over and autonomy in their work. The responses to this question made me think that I am helping my staff to create a space to explore different aspects of their jobs. Statements 12 and 13 dealt with how staff members felt when I gave them constructive feedback. My constructive feedback was another area that I had received negative feedback on first semester. For both of the statements on this survey, the responses indicated that the majority of the staff members responded positively to the feedback that I gave them. Statement 12 read “I respond positively to the verbal constructive feedback Alexis gives me.” 7 staff members said “strongly agree,” 9 staff members chose “agree,” and 5 selected “neutral.” While 5 staff members felt neutral about this question, none of the RAs felt negatively or strongly negative about the feedback that I gave them. In the short answer responses, it seemed that some staff members were neutral about the feedback because they have not gotten feedback from me. This is possible because I do not directly supervise all 21 staff members.

Of all the data, I felt that the short answer responses were the most telling. In this section, I asked for staff members to give examples of positive and negative interactions that they had had with me. There were far more examples of positive interactions than of negative interactions. This evidence, for me, seemed to indicate that I am doing a better job at creating situations where I am able to interact positively with staff members. Also, when I did need to provide constructive criticism, it was not an incident that stood out in the RA’s mind as a “negative” incident. Several examples of the positive interactions that staff members recounted were: “Alexis is always positive in all interactions – she’s a good supervisor and maintains a positive atmosphere” and “I

made a mistake when filling out a key card and Alexis kindly pointed out my mistakes. She was very polite and helpful.” This second statement is in direct contrast to first semester feedback that I received. One statement a staff member made in October was “She can be too strict and it makes it hard to inform her of things.” Seeing these two contrasting statements from my staff made me believe that I have made strides in attempting to change the verbal language that I use when addressing areas of concern that staff members present.

In asking for negative incidents, staff members predominately answered “none” or that “I cannot think of one.” Some staff members wrote responses that were not very helpful in exploring specific areas that I could improve. One example is a staff member who wrote “This one time...she told me what I was doing wrong.” Of the few responses that I received that I could use to better my practice, one was “I once saw Alexis using verbal communication to let a staff member know that s/he was doing poorly. I think that this could have been delivered in private.” While I did not remember that incident, I am very conscious of when and where I deliver feedback to my staff – especially criticism.

My intention was to use this feedback in two ways. One, to generate some of the topics that I would have explored in greater detail in individual supervision meetings with 7 staff members. I planed on taking detailed notes in some of those meetings and using them as evidence of my current practice and its progress throughout the rest of the semester. I also intended on having my supervisor examine the survey results and the notes from my one-on-one conversations. She would then work with me in our weekly meetings to help interpret the information I received. I would have also liked to survey the entire staff once more at the conclusion of the semester. Due to time constraints I was not able to conduct individual interviews with the 7 staff members. I did, however, get valuable feedback when working with the RD on the survey responses.

First, I showed her the data that I had gathered through the survey. Then I asked for her interpretation. She immediately stated that it seemed “very positive.” In comparison to last semester, it seemed that I was “doing a better job of talking to staff.” She expressed an interest in exploring with individual staff members why it seemed that there was a lot less criticism of how I am performing as a supervisor this semester in comparison to last semester. I also expressed feelings of encouragement that I may be moving in the right direction by demonstrating an interest in how the RAs value my performance. We spent 30 minutes discussing the survey. Overall, she felt that, while the data did not provide me with a great deal of opportunities for growth – due to lack of constructive criticism – that it was still very encouraging to hear the explicit support for my supervisory actions this semester.

This research is not complete. With more time, I would have liked to have expanded on the questions raised with the RD. I think that it is important for me to learn more about how my actions changed or how the RA’s perception of my actions were changed in order to have them view my behaviors in a more positive, constructive light. Even without that, I think that I have learned a great deal about myself through the research I started. The initial feedback caused me to look closer at my actions as supervisor. Continually attempting to modify my behavior as a supervisor will allow my staff to grow independently of my direction.

This research has helped me get a better understanding of how my actions have a direct effect on my ability to support my staff as both learners and funds of knowledge. I realized that there might be a wider audience that could benefit from my research. Supervising staff members takes dedication and care. Without the proper amount of supervision and support, our cluster would not function and would cause a great deal of problems for the students that live in our buildings. Each staff needs to be taught certain skills and procedures, but another part of training is allowing them to learn from experience. Investing my energy into this project demonstrated to me my

commitment to becoming a better practitioner and created a stronger working relationship between my staff and myself.

The feedback I received first semester was indicative of my inability to recognize when staff members were able to complete their job without my assistance. By stepping in when I was not needed, I created several negative interactions that could have had lasting effects on my ability to sustain a positive supervisory relationship with those staff. Some of those encounters came off very negatively. The UC – Davis study revealed that “harsh criticism and judgmental attitudes can have serious consequences for [supervisee] development” (Ramos – Sanchez et al., 2002). This is not how I want to start out next year.

Ramos – Sanchez et al. suggest “Supervisors are also encouraged to explore the trainee's goals for supervision and to clarify their own expectations for the supervisee's performance.” This is something I intend to do next year. Learning from this experience, I think it will be beneficial to me and to our staff.

I will continue to work towards a place where my staff can explore and find their own way in developing the right answers when it comes to their jobs as resident assistants. I am continually seeking to find a place where I feel comfortable allowing my staff the room to find their own answers and the ability to be there if they ask for help.

Bibliography

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