

# Observations of a first-year middle manager

## Thirteen tips that can save you

by Steven W. Sowards

Every year, scores of successful front-line librarians become supervisors for the first time. These new middle managers will face situations for which their past experiences offer limited guidance. Most will persevere and learn by the process of trial and error, but few of us enjoy learning from mistakes.

The following observations from a new supervisor completing his first lap around the track may spare someone else a few unnecessary missteps.

### Tips for new middle managers

#### 1 You supervise the people in your unit. You don't own them.

Congratulations, now you're a supervisor! For the first time, you'll get to tell other people in your library what you want them to do. (Don't forget too soon what it's like to be on the receiving end of an order.)

Before you commit someone else's time to a project, ask for their input; in some cases, ask for input from your unit as a whole.

Get advice; get volunteers. Your staff and colleagues are much more likely to do what you ask of them, if they know what needs to be done and why and are allowed to act on their own ideas.

#### 2 Everyone in your unit will be better at something than you are.

Many of the librarians and support staff you work with will be highly qualified and

experienced at doing their jobs. Your job is to manage them, not to outdo them. Be grateful for their skills. Why should your limitations act as a cap on what others can accomplish? Would you take your car to mechanics who worked that way? Would you take your child to a hospital run along those lines?



#### 3 Don't confuse your goals with the process of attaining them.

If organizations could solve problems simply by writing down answers, the world would be a happier place. Announcing what you hope to do isn't enough to make it happen. You'll need to identify the specific measures necessary to reach your goals, put those steps into logical order, gather resources and support, and start at the beginning.

A good manager may spend his or her whole



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tenure trying to reach final goals that were identified the first day on the job.

#### **4 Remember that procedures exist to help people be effective.**

The larger the library, the greater the necessity for procedures to ensure consistency and identify the organization's shared beliefs about the best ways to get things done. But procedures can also get in the way in some specific situations.

When the burden of following procedure is interfering with someone's ability to get the job done, consider setting the procedure aside for a while.

#### **5 Invert the table of organization: act as if employees are bosses.**

This is hardly an original thought, but it will make more sense after you become a middle manager.

Consider some stereotypical ideas about the ways in which we have to deal with "the boss": most of us expect to report frequently on what we are doing; justify what we have in mind; and ask the boss what we should do to help with getting his or her work done.

You can help your staff by doing the same kinds of things: report to them of-

ten about what you know; ask them

how you can

help them succeed

with

their

assign-

ments;

and go to

bat on their behalf to

get the computers, facilities, time, and other resources they need.

Work for your employees, not over them.

At the same time:

#### **6 Act as if bosses are employees.**

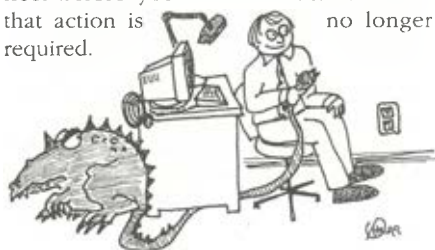
If you "work for your employees," it makes sense that your boss can work for you, too. Tell your supervisor exactly what your goals and plans are; spell out what you need from the supervisor to make your unit successful; and ask for frequent reports on what is going on in other units.

Tell your boss what worked and what didn't, what you saw in his or her actions

that you liked, and what shouldn't be done again. (Naturally, you will need to strike the right tone when you do so.) Whether you are communicating up, down, or across the table of organization, courtesy is a wise policy.

#### **7 Not every problem needs to be solved—at least not right away.**

More precisely, not every apparent problem proves to be a real one after more light falls on the situation. The real problem may reveal itself to be substantially different from the apparent problem as it first came into view. Some situations do require an immediate response, but most permit you the time to observe, to gather information, and to reflect before you act—or decide that action is no longer required.



#### **8 Sometimes doing the supervisor's job well just means not doing it badly.**

Making a decision, even if later it proves to be a mediocre response, generally is better than neglecting to act all.

Read your mail, submit your paperwork on time, go to the committee meetings you're assigned to attend, return your telephone calls and e-mail messages (even if your best answer is sometimes, "I don't know"). Other people in the organization are relying on you, or at least waiting for you. Don't hold things up.

#### **9 Doing your job well is not enough—you must also appear to do it well.**

If you and your unit want full credit for the work you do, let people in other areas know what you are doing. No one can act on the basis of your accomplishments if your work remains a secret. No one can learn from your experiences if they have never been shared. Nor will your staff have a fair shot at recognition and merit, unless their ideas and achievements are known.

## 10 Save your supervisor from being surprised, especially when the news is bad.

There are few things worse for a higher level administrator than being asked to comment on an unfamiliar situation, committee conference with the director,



or telephone call from the media. The pain you spare your boss in the short run is not enough to justify the embarrassment and indecision that could occur in the long run. Most bosses won't shoot the messenger, at least not fatally. On the other hand:

## 11 Don't be a snitch.

Feel free to tell your boss about the business of your unit. Think twice before "telling" on your fellow managers. If the situation in another unit is affecting yours, talk to your colleague and try to resolve the problem. If the solution requires authority outside your joint resources, go to your supervisor—together. No one trusts a snitch, and when the flow of information in your direction vanishes, so will your foundation for making accurate decisions.

## 12 Never put anything in writing that you couldn't live with if you found it tacked on your office door.

This goes double for e-mail communications.

After a memo, comment, or report leaves your hand or your hard drive, it takes on a life of its own. If writing has offend or embarrass your orga-



what you are the potential to harass someone nization, send a

copy to them; if you find that you would be embarrassed to do so, revise your text until you could. If what you have to say is too sensitive to pass this test, handle it verbally and say it in private.

## 13 Don't take your good employees for granted.

Much of your time will be taken up with problems: budget problems, patron problems, personnel problems. As this is going on, don't forget about the members of your staff who aren't problems, or they'll become problems while your attention is focused somewhere else.

Find out what will keep your best workers happy, productive, and in your unit. Ask them now what it would take to keep them on board—not later, when they already have an offer in hand from someone else.

## Conclusion

One thing distinguishes supervisors, especially new supervisors, from the people around them: they asked for, or were willing to accept, the responsibility that comes with taking on new duties. That task involves learning new skills, and while one is learning, mistakes are inevitable. Not everything comes out the way we might like it the first time we give it a try.

Behind every one of these observations is a story, sometimes with an unhappy ending. If new supervisors can read, watch, and learn from mistakes (their own and others'), most will make the transition successfully and enjoyably in the long-run.

## Sources

While there is extensive literature about the task of the new supervisor in business, there is relatively little in print dealing with new supervisors or middle managers in the library setting. A few sources are listed below.

- Joan Giesecke, ed. *Practical Help for New Supervisors* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1997). The third edition of this title brings together ten articles written especially for librarians. Each section has a brief bibliography pointing out relevant

(continued on page 541)

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Choice, February 1999

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The European English Messenger, Autumn 1998

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• **Justification.** It is pretty well established that the effectiveness of resources such as electronic indexes, databases, and the Internet are best taught with a hands-on approach.

We mentioned this concept in planning documents in 1994 and 1996, and by the time we advocated getting a share of state funds for the facility, this was a generally accepted concept—even with those unfamiliar with our project or the work of the library.

## Conclusion

One semester's experience of using our new library lab/electronic classroom leads us to believe we made the right decisions in building this combination facility. The fiscal problems of the past were overcome, and we have found that our in-house solutions for this modest, asymmetrical space have worked well.

Librarians and on-campus technical and facilities personnel all had more than enough experience and expertise to make this happen without a vast expenditure of monies.

## Notes

1. Anita Lowry. "The Information Arcade at the University of Iowa," *Cause-Effect* 17 (Fall 1994): 38–44.

John Vasi and Cheryl LaGuardia. "Creating a Library Electronic Classroom," *Online* 18 (September-October 1994): 75–84.

David Nutty. "Renovating for Technology: Partnerships Produce Quick Results," *College & Research Libraries News* (June 1998): 414–416.

Royal Van Horn. "Electronic Classrooms: Design and Use," *Phi Delta Kappan* 79 (November 1997): 254–255.

James Estrada. "Electronic Classroom Design: A Case Study," paper presented to the ACRL New England Chapter/Bibliographic Instruction Section, Workshop, June 12, 1998, Yale University.

2. C. William Day. "Technology for Older Schools," *American School & University* 69 (June 1997).

3. *Ibid.*

The authors would like to thank RU's Facilities managers and staff, Media Services—especially Pete Gregg, Edward Corrado, and Sharon Yang of Moore Library for their help and information on this project and paper. ■

(*Observations . . .* cont. from page 525)

sources from the world of management at large.

• Taeock Kim and Frederick Isaac. "Key Words for New Managers" (ERIC ED304143).

This paper was presented at the July 1988 meeting of the Library Administration and Management Association (LAMA) at the ALA Annual Convention. It includes a bibliography of relevant articles.

• LAMA Middle Management Discussion Group. "You'll Manage: Become a Boss . . . Best Tips" (Chicago: American Library Association, 1980) (ERIC ED322904). This publication contains comments and anecdotal material from practicing library administrators. The bibliography draws chiefly on non-library sources.

• Anne McGreer. "Reflections on My First Year as a Library Middle Manager," *Library Administration & Management* 1/4 (September 1987): 131–133. Discusses the routines, hurdles, and accomplishments of a new supervisor in the technical services unit of a large academic library.

• Linda Wainscott. "I'm in heaven now or six months in hell: How to thrive as a new department head," *Unabashed Librarian* 101 (1996): 27–28. ■

## Letter to the editor

I really like *C&RL News*, read it from cover to cover, and often think that I need to let individual authors know that they are providing a great service by sharing their ideas. Sometimes I actually relay those thoughts.

I think my note to Gregory Anderson, author of "Cyberplagiarism" in the May 1999 issue, was pretty concise, "Excellent article in *C&RL News*!"

It was a very well written article on a timely subject. I truly appreciate the time and energy my colleagues contribute in order to share these practical ideas with readers like me.—*Kathy Kaldenberg, Kaskaskia College, kathyk@kc.cc.il.us*