

The Nature of Supervision: Health Care and Everywhere

As we are born to work, so others are born to watch over us while we are working.
—Oliver Goldsmith

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- Explore likely reasons for a supervisor's tendency to emphasize one side of the dual supervisory role at the expense of the other side.
- Introduce the overall responsibilities of healthcare management in general.
- Establish the nature of healthcare supervision as a strongly people-oriented process unavoidably concerned with day-to-day problems.
- Address supervision as a potential first step on a career ladder or career track in healthcare management.

FOR CONSIDERATION: PAID TO MAKE DECISIONS?

Sandra Dolan, a registered nurse with 11 years of management experience, was hired as nursing supervisor of the emergency division of Community Hospital. Her style was to gain insight into how to manage a given operation by putting herself into the action and becoming immersed in the work. However, she quickly learned that her active involvement in hands-on work drew reactions from staff that ranged from surprise to resentment. She soon learned that her predecessor, who had been in the position for several years, had been referred to as "The Friendly Ghost"—friendly because she was usually just that, and ghost because she was seen rarely and then only fleetingly. Despite the legacy of "The Ghost," Sandra provided a constant management presence and seemed determined to remain deeply involved in the work of the department. She also was determined to improve the level of professionalism in the department, a quality that had struck her from the first as decidedly lacking. In a short time, Sandra had moved to reinstate a long-ignored dress code, eliminate personal telephone calls during working hours except for emergencies, curb chronic tardiness by some staff members, bar food and drink and reading materials from work areas, and halt the practice of changing scheduled days of work after the time limit allowed by the policy or trading days with each other without her permission. Sandra found her efforts frustrated at every turn. As she said to her immediate superior, "I can't understand their reaction. All I've done is insist that a few rules be followed, rules that have been there all along, yet the bitterness and lack of support—and even resentment—are so strong I could slice them.

I'm getting all-out resistance from a few people I would still have to describe as good, professional nurses at heart."

Sandra's boss, the director of nursing, said, "Do you suppose you may be pushing too hard, hitting them with one surprise after another without knowing how they feel and without asking for their cooperation?"

"That's possible," answered Sandra, "but now I'm committed on several fronts and I can't back down on any of them without looking bad."

"Don't think of this as a competition or a test of will. It may be necessary for you to back down temporarily in some areas, or at least hold a few of your ideas for later. It may not hurt to involve a few of your staff members in looking at the apparent needs of the department."

With a touch of impatience in her voice Sandra said, "Oh, I've heard all this stuff about participative management. That may be the way for some, but that's never been my style. I'm paid to make decisions, so I make them—I don't try to avoid responsibility by encouraging employees to make my decisions."

Instructions

BORN TO WORK OR WATCH?

We often create problems for ourselves by behaving as though Oliver Goldsmith was, in fact, correct when he made the statement quoted at the start of the chapter. Perhaps we can safely assume a bit of cynicism or resignation in Goldsmith's words, but certainly those of us who work for others (as opposed to working for ourselves) are occasionally inclined to agree. Regardless of some appearances to the contrary, however, no one is "born" either to work or to oversee the work of others.

Also, by separating working and watching, Goldsmith's words convey the impression that overseeing is not to be considered work. Unfortunately, many people nurture the feeling that managing or supervising is not real work. We usually find, however, that people who hold this belief are not and have never been supervisors.

Although we cannot say that someone is born to work or born to supervise, we can, however, suggest that supervision is an activity for which a person can exhibit a talent. Many people are called on to become supervisors because they have exhibited talent for certain kinds of work—usually the same kinds of work they are asked to supervise. However, talent for doing manual, technical, or professional work is no guarantee of the presence of talent for supervision. Although the supervisory and nonsupervisory work may both be closely related to the same human activity, doing one well does not guarantee that the other will be done equally well. If you consider the occupations of cook and kitchen supervisor, for instance, you will find that the two are closely related positions, but that it is not necessarily true that the talented cook will automatically be a talented kitchen supervisor.

THE DUAL NATURE OF THE SUPERVISOR'S ROLE

Of necessity most first-line supervisors in healthcare organizations function in the dual capacities of worker and supervisor, filling the two roles identified as *functional specialist* and *management generalist*.

The functional specialist is the worker responsible for doing the basic work of the department. The registered nurse, the laboratory or imaging technologist, the therapeutic dietitian, the physical therapist, the maintenance mechanic, the accountant, and many others are required to perform hands-on tasks involved in delivering patient care or supporting the delivery of care. Almost everyone in the organization is or has been a functional specialist of some kind. In any given department, the specialist is ordinarily concerned with some function that is unique or very nearly unique to that department.

The management generalist, on the other hand, is concerned with activities that are common to many departments and to most situations in which someone must guide and direct the work of others. Regardless of whether the manager began as a nurse, technologist, accountant, mechanic, or whatever, running a department requires the manager to be concerned with staffing, scheduling, personnel management, budgeting, and other activities that apply to many departments.

The employee who has no supervisory responsibility is a pure functional specialist. Only in some instances, however, is the manager a pure management generalist. Certainly there are few if any management generalists among first-line supervisors. Generally, the smaller the organization or department, the more likely is the supervisor to be both worker and manager. The supervisor of a four-person maintenance department will probably be a maintenance mechanic and jack-of-several-trades as well. The manager of a three- or four-person health information management department is likely to spend considerable time on nonmanagerial tasks. The head nurse in a 30-bed medical unit may spend more time providing hands-on patient care than performing managerial duties. Only in the highest levels of management are we likely to find pure management generalists.

The first-line supervisor, then, is both worker and manager and needs to willingly accept this dual role. However, this acceptance alone is not enough, for sometimes wearing these "two hats" is fully as difficult as trying to wear two real hats at the same time.

A natural leaning toward one of the supervisor's two roles is encouraged by the nature of management itself. Management is not nearly as well defined in its own right as are many working specialties. When considering specialties such as nursing, accounting, and engineering, we are able to categorize these rather neatly according to certain characteristics. We associate each with an expected amount of education and training and perhaps the awarding of a diploma, degree, or license. For instance, a registered nurse may be fairly well defined as someone who has successfully completed a certain number of years of higher education, received a diploma or degree, and passed a licensing examination. Especially among the professions, specialties are well defined in this manner. Even in nonprofessional occupations we can find a considerable degree of definition through simple instruction, on-the-job training, and experience.

Management as a separate field, however, defies the kind of definition just described for working specialists. Although a few people trained as so-called management generalists may be identified in the middle and upper levels, in management's lower levels there are no sound criteria for defining "manager" without instantly raising the question, "Manager of what?"

Thus, we are not especially well prepared to think of management as a legitimate field in its own right, an occupation requiring a certain amount of skill, education, and training. We are not willing to accept management as a profession because it is not readily definable and is not restricted by specific qualifications. Since one requires no particular background to enter the practice of management, many people are inclined to believe that anyone can manage.

We readily recognize that to be a manager one must manage something. This prompts us to consider the individual's functional specialty. It also leads to another consideration: *Who is best qualified to supervise the work of the department?* Should this be the role of the functional specialist or the management generalist? Is it more important for the supervisor to be knowledgeable of all aspects of the department's work, or should the supervisor's strengths lie in the general functions of management?

After brief consideration we might reasonably conclude that the first-line supervisor should be proficient in both management and a specific functional specialty. Indeed, it is usually the individual who becomes well rounded in both areas of activity who makes the more effective supervisor.

Concerning the "For Consideration" related at the beginning of the chapter, one might be tempted to start listing apparent shortcomings of Sandra's management style. First, however, it is only fair to state that Sandra may be demonstrating some degree of balance between being "both a professional nurse and a manager of nurses." Sandra appears to wear both of her hats as necessary, attempting to manage and also joining in the performance of the hands-on work (as most first-line nurse managers do). This may be disconcerting at first to some of the staff—Sandra's predecessor apparently did not help out as Sandra does—but they will become accustomed to it. It may well be that in the eyes of at least some of the staff the most positive facet of Sandra's behavior is her willingness to pitch in and work with them when that extra pair of hands is needed.

THE PETER PRINCIPLE REVISITED

Essentially all first-line supervisors have worked as functional specialists. Although it is true that some people begin their working careers as supervisors, this usually occurs in natural "two-hat" situations in which the person enters a small department as both a supervisor and a worker. Usually, however, a person is offered a supervisory position because of past performance in some specialty. Ordinarily it is the better workers who become supervisors. However, the fact that a person is a good worker does not guarantee that this same person will be a good supervisor. It is precisely this dilemma that Laurence J. Peter was concerned with in *The Peter Principle*.¹ Peter's tongue-in-cheek but nevertheless serious commentary contains a great deal of truth. In brief, his "principle" states that "In a hierarchy, every person tends to rise to his level of incompetence."^{1p.26} Recognizing that it is the good worker who is

singled out for promotion, Peter reasons that the outstanding worker at any level is likely to be promoted to the next level in the hierarchy. This process may continue until the individual reaches a level where performance is mediocre at best. Here all promotions stop and the person is left, perhaps until retirement, a notch above the level of proven capability for good work. The best workers do not necessarily become the best supervisors. Although promoting outstanding employees will continue to make more sense than promoting mediocre performers, this practice will not guarantee the creation of effective supervisors.

Much of the problem lies in the widespread individual and organizational attitude toward management that suggests "anyone can do it." Some confident individuals step into supervisory positions assuming that all they need to do is begin making decisions and giving orders. Likewise, higher managers promote workers and then go about their business believing they have created supervisors by simply conferring titles.

The supervisor's hedge against arriving at a level of incompetence is management development. Whether pursued in the organization or outside, through organizational programs or by individual effort, formally or informally, the supervisor must learn much about the hat of the management generalist before it fits as well as the hat of the functional specialist. Most people enter their functional specialties sufficiently well trained to do the jobs for which they have been hired. However, most workers who become supervisors do so with little or no preparation. Management then becomes a sink-or-swim proposition. A few catch on and perform remarkably well after a short period of time. A few sink rapidly. Many generate enough motion to enable them to stay afloat but then continue spending most of their energy simply keeping their heads above water.

The player-to-coach transition in the world of professional sports offers an appropriate analogy to the worker-to-supervisor transition. Most successful coaches gained experience as players at some level in the sports they coach. However, only a few outstanding coaches were star performers in their playing days; most were solid, dependable team players who did not stand out as "stars." Knowing how to play the game well is not enough. The differences between working and supervising are as fundamental as the differences between doing and teaching and are as great as the essential difference between following and leading.

THE WORKING TRAP

The working trap poses a hazard to every supervisor whose job includes the performance of both managerial and nonmanagerial duties. Much of the reason why any person is titled and paid as a manager is to see that a certain amount of work gets done through the efforts of other people. This requires the supervisor to primarily be a member of management. Any person charged with the responsibility for directing the activities of others is a manager and must firmly believe this is so.

It is all too easy for the supervisor to feel and behave more as a worker than as a manager. This is understandable when half or more of the supervisor's duties may be nonmanagerial to begin with. However, this leads to a state of