Chapter 15

Mentoring and Supervision?
Or, Mentoring versus Supervision?

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ABSTRACT

Supportive mentors and supervisors are vital components in the career success of new librarians. The mentor relationship is generally in addition to the more formalized relationship between the new librarian and her or his supervisor. These are, inherently, two separate roles. These disparate roles, however, do intersect. When each role is taken up by a different individual, there is a possibility that there may be some tension or anxiety on the part of the supervisor regarding the mentor's influence. When the roles of mentor and supervisor combine in one person the mentor-protégé relationship may conflict with supervisory obligations. In this chapter, this potential tension and anxiety between the roles of mentor and supervisor is explored. The roles of both mentor and supervisor are pivotal in the development of new professionals. A closer examination of how these roles intersect and influence each other will provide insight into how these relationships come together and shape professional careers.

INTRODUCTION

Current literature directed towards new librarians focuses on a variety of different methods that they can employ to help them learn about and assimilate in their new working environment or their new profession. Rachel Singer Gordon, for example, devotes an entire chapter in *The Nextgen Librar-*

ian's Survival Guide to "dealing with dinosaurs" and users who think the new librarian is still a student (Gordon, 2006, p. 69-73). In *The Librarian's Career Guidebook* (2004), a variety of authors recommend that new librarians do everything from dressing the part (wearing shirts with collars and avoiding wrinkled clothes), to actively pursuing professional development opportunities. Recent research into the experiences of new librarians indicates that workplace politics and culture, say-

ing "no", and conflict management are some of the most difficult things for new professionals to learn (Oud, 2008). Typically, these are not issues that are part of any library education program; rather they become part of the socialization into the profession, continuing on after formal training is completed. As many workplaces fail to address these issues directly, it becomes the responsibility of individuals to discover means to develop their own skills.

A recurring, but often under-discussed, strategy helping new professionals adjust to their new workplace and its associated expectations, is mentoring. Mentors can be invaluable in the life of a new professional. MLIS (Masters of Library and Information Studies) programs undertake to teach new librarians the ins and outs of reference work, cataloging, systems, and even management basics, but they cannot prepare all students for the varieties of organizational culture they will encounter. So, while new professionals enter the workplace with the technical and theoretical tools they need to be good librarians, they might benefit from some experienced direction to help turn them into competent professionals.

The mentor relationship is generally in addition to the more formalized relationship between the new librarian and his or her supervisor. These are, inherently, two separate roles. A mentor acts as teacher, adviser, guide, role model, advocate, and cheerleader for the protégé; whereas supervisors are more concerned with the day-to-day activities and tasks that the new professional performs. In addition to this, supervisors also have legal, administrative, moral and ethical obligations to the organization they work for, adding a dimension to the supervisor-employee relationship that does not exist in the mentor-protégé relationship. Supervisors and mentors not only have different accountabilities (the supervisor is accountable to the organization, while the mentor is accountable to the mentor-protégé relationship): they also serve different purposes. For example, a mentor-protégé relationship helps develop the protégé's career

in a way that is best for the protégé, whereas the supervisor must treat the goals of the organization as paramount.

These disparate roles, however, do intersect. When each role is taken up by a different individual, there is a possibility that there may be some tension or anxiety on the part of the supervisor regarding the mentor's influence. When the roles of mentor and supervisor combine in one person, when the new professional's supervisor also becomes his or her mentor, the mentor-protégé relationship may conflict with supervisory obligations. This potentially creates a different kind of tension and anxiety – a role dissonance.

In this chapter, we will explore the issue of potential tension and anxiety between the roles of mentor and supervisor. What are the implications of these tensions for the new professional? How may the roles of mentor and supervisor connect to help or hinder the career development of the new librarian? Can these tensions be resolved to the benefit of all? The roles of both mentor and supervisor are pivotal in the development of new professionals. A closer examination of how these roles intersect and influence each other will provide insight into how these relationships come together and shape professional careers.

What is the Difference between Being a Supervisor and Being a Mentor?

The roles of supervisor and mentor frequently overlap within an organization; uncertainty can result when the responsibilities are not articulated clearly or when roles overlap. Many supervisors also consider themselves to be mentors, a situation which has the potential to benefit the protégé, but also can create confusion and hurt feelings. Due to the possibility of mixed messages being offered or received, it is essential for both partners in a supervisor-mentor relationship to understand clearly which role is being enacted during in any situation.

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