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**BUILDING A HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAM TO ACHIEVE YOUR MISSION**  
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As a multi-tasking leader in a cultural organization, it's hard to find time to think about how best to build and manage a high performance workplace where your staff maximizes its effectiveness. Most employees tend to be overworked and stretched thin as they seek to balance limited time, technology and resources.

What more can leaders and department managers do to ensure that their teams are delivering on their mission-driven promises to the community? Actually, it isn't what they can do, but what they must do. By leveraging some simple, yet powerful, best practices in supervision, managers can build a team that is highly skilled and genuinely enthusiastic about reaching the organization's goals and objectives.

**GOOD MANAGEMENT MAXIMIZES EMPLOYEE EFFECTIVENESS**

The most important thing that a gifted staff member needs to excel in the workplace is a terrific manager. A significant study by the Gallup organization involving over a million employees in different businesses, industries, and countries revealed that "the talented employee may join a company because of its charismatic leaders, its generous benefits, or its world-class training programs, but how long that employee stays and that person's productivity are determined by the relationship with his or her immediate supervisor."

Gallup also wanted to find a way to measure high performance workplaces – those with strong outcomes in productivity, profitability, employee retention, and customer satisfaction. In a second extensive study, which included nonprofit organizations, employees identified these top items, *all related to supervision*, as a key to a strong and productive workplace. Those employees in the study who excelled at work generally said:

- *"I know what is expected of me at work."*
- *"I have the materials and equipment I need to do my job right."*
- *"I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day."*
- *"In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work."*
- *"My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person."*
- *"There is someone at work who encourages my development."*

## **A NEW MODEL OF SUPERVISION THAT CONNECTS TO MISSION**

A traditional model of supervision probably sounds a lot like this: “the act or function of overseeing (a process, workers, etc.) during execution or performance.” Another way to define this conventional method might be “to provide direction or oversight, to superintend, to manage,” and even “to ride herd on.”

However, a new model that gets at what the Gallup research revealed looks more like what Dennis Morrow of Janus Youth Programs in Portland, Oregon addresses. “Supervision is a unique interpersonal relationship designed to improve the performance of the employee in service of the mission of the organization.” This is the model of supervision that arts and culture leaders should strive for. This gets at why and how a high quality supervisory relationship can truly make a difference with greater impact in nonprofit organizations.

## **THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF GOOD SUPERVISION**

Effective supervision and creating a quality reporting relationship is not an elaborate or complex process. It requires a simple, deliberate system with the following characteristics:

### *1. Expectations are clear.*

Goals, objectives, benchmarks, and other key measures are mutually set, and both supervisor and supervisee are held accountable. Appropriate training and resources are provided throughout. Employees are also supported in finding their own ways to achieve, and perhaps even exceed, expectations. Good supervisors coach without micromanagement.

### *2. Supervision is predictable.*

A good supervisor is accessible for “in the moment” feedback; however, effective supervision is deliberate. It relies on regularly scheduled conversations to keep supervisor and employee attention to process and results.

### *3. Feedback is timely, direct, and focused on job performance.*

There is opportunity for feedback to be discussed, digested, and, depending on circumstances, even reconsidered. Feedback may lead to new performance goals and growing responsibilities, a performance improvement plan, or simply agreement that all is well and the employee should continue on the same path in meeting the needs of the position and organization.

### *4. Supervision is individualized.*

A good supervisory system treats all employees equally in terms of fairness and respect. But it is also tailored to meet each person’s needs. With a new employee, you may meet weekly for a 30-minute check-in, no matter what’s going on. With a long-term, high-achieving employee, you may meet monthly, perhaps for 15 minutes. Employees who have just been promoted or who are working on particularly stressful or complex projects may require more time and guidance.

*5. Teaching and learning are valued.*

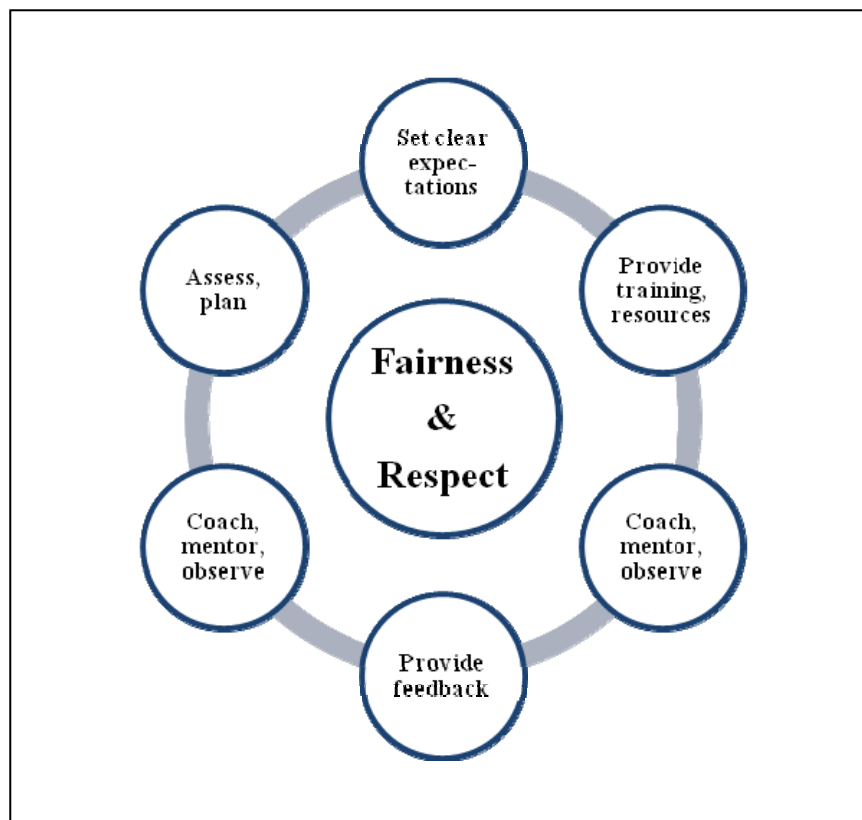
Good supervisors encourage employees to problem-solve for themselves and to gain new knowledge and skills. We often hear about learning organizations that strive for the balance of intellectual, emotional, and professional growth. The most well respected cultural institutions tend to embed this ideal into their everyday practice.

*6. Quality of supervision is more important than the quantity of supervision.*

Don't meet simply for the purpose of fulfilling some "supervisory requirement." All parties should come to the table well prepared, and use the time effectively.

Quite simply, the overarching goal in supervision is to help a staff member to be as effective and successful as possible in helping the organization to reach its objectives, and then to assess and evaluate his or her performance accordingly.

This can be illustrated visually with an adaptation of Dennis Morrow's Supervisory Loop:



**The Supervisory Loop to  
Maximize Employee Success**

While every coaching session with each employee will look a little different, and these meetings will evolve over time, one way to get started is to structure the conversation around these four simple questions:

- What's working for you?
- Where are you facing challenges in your work and your life?
- What do we want to accomplish in the next week, month, quarter, or year?
- How can I as your mentor be there to help?

### KEY TOOLS OF THE TRADE

There are a handful of key documents that make up an effective manager's toolkit. Two of the most important of those tools are quite simply the job description and the performance evaluation.

#### *Job Description*

The job description is where the organization starts setting clear expectations which are critical to good performance and effective supervision. It defines the overall purpose and responsibility of the position, and *it ties the position to the organization's mission*. It brings clarity to a role even before someone is hired to fill the job.

The job description should answer these, among other, questions:

- Why does this position exist?
- Where and how does it fit in the administrative structure of the organization?
- What are the essential functions of the job?
- What type of person would best fit both the role and the culture of the institution?
- What training, education, or other skills and expertise are needed to be most effective?

Over time, it becomes a document of "joint ownership" between the supervisor and the employee as they agree on what the job is and what needs to be done. It is an evolving document that reflects the changing needs of the organization and the development and growth of the employee.

#### *Performance Evaluations*

Managers and employees alike generally dread performance evaluations. Done fairly, respectfully, and consistently, however, an evaluation can be an important tool of effective supervision and can help build employee effectiveness. Unfortunately, too few organizations use performance evaluations constructively. A recent survey in the *Taleo Performance Management Study* found that 57% of respondents either never had a review or rated their review from neutral to not useful. Only 11% of participants reported that they received mentoring as part of the evaluation process.

Overall, a good performance evaluation will:

- Tie employee performance to the organization's mission: How has your performance helped us reach our institutional objectives?
- Teach the supervisor about the employee: What are your goals? What are your strengths? Where do you need more training or support?
- Educate the supervisor about himself as a manager: What can I do to help you succeed in your job?
- Provide opportunity for positive feedback and recognition: What have you achieved during this review period?
- Look forward: What are your plans and goals for the next review period and your overall career?

There are many different performance evaluation systems. Some organizations develop formal evaluation forms with set criteria and standards; others rely on 360° feedback; and still others ask employees to do their own self-appraisals. Key factors are that the system is implemented fairly and consistently, that employees have some input into the format by which they will be evaluated, and most importantly, that there are no big surprises in the evaluation. If supervision is provided consistently throughout the evaluation period, "mid-course" corrections can be made. Then the formal performance appraisal simply serves to summarize positives and negatives that have already been articulated.

### **THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SUPERVISION AND EXCELLENCE**

Many of us in the arts and culture world are blessed to work with bright and dedicated people who are committed to the mission, the art form, educational programs, and the service our organizations provide to our communities. These employees are responsible, consistent, and results oriented. They take pride in the quality of their work and are a gift to their supervisors.

The savvy supervisor of a high performing employee will:

- Provide minimal oversight
- Allow for high discretion
- Offer plenty of challenge and opportunity for growth and creativity
- Present honest and substantiated recognition both privately and publicly

These employees are generally pretty easy to manage. However, the Gallup researchers found that effective managers tend to spend the majority of their time with their most productive staff members. Good managers see their role as that of a "catalyst," turning talent into performance, and finding better ways to "unleash" that talent. They identify unique expectations for a star employee, help that person understand and grow his or her own strengths, and learn how they, as managers, can best ensure that he or she embraces opportunities while overcoming obstacles.

Effective managers, whether in small or large cultural organizations, are learners. By spending time with and actively supervising top-notch employees, managers learn what excellence looks like in their organizations and how to set up best practices that support good performance and a model for other employees. This is the fun, creative, and energizing work of leaders who understand that their supervisory role grows an organization's greatest talent and pushes an organization further toward achievement of its mission and goals.

### **SUPERVISION → EFFECTIVENESS → EXCELLENCE**

The supervisory relationship is far-reaching, ranging from the professional development of a single employee to an understanding of best practices for excellence in an entire organization. And, while getting started with the right systems or processes may at first be intimidating, effective supervision builds a high performance workplace, strengthening an organization and enabling it to achieve its daily goals, ongoing mission, and long-term vision.

#### ***Sources and Suggested Additional Reading:***

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