How To Get The Most Out Of Your Supervisor

By Jeff Ewing, Executive Assistant to the President and Director of New Student Orientation at Arcadia University

If you check any dictionary, you will generally find the word "supervisor" defined as "one who supervises" or someone who is responsible for the performance of an activity or job or for the correct behavior or safety of a person. This definition indeed applies to most situations involving an employer-employee relationship. However, it is, in my opinion, a definition that misses the core of what supervision is at any level, especially when talking about resident assistants and other student staff. A good supervisor is one who coaches, encourages, teaches and challenges. There are many articles available to help supervisors do their jobs. The focus of this article is on the person being supervised.

Many students come to college with work experience, often in the service industry. They have been supervised primarily in the way it is defined above. Therefore, your expectations of your supervisor in your current position may be low. If this is true, you will not have the most meaningful experience possible and you will not give your supervisor the opportunity to help you develop new skills. It is your responsibility to make the most of this relationship while you are in your position. What is it you can do?

Meet Effectively

Most individuals meet with their supervisors on a regular basis, both individually and in groups. Take advantage of these meetings to learn from your supervisor. Don't let meetings turn into times when you only report what is happening on your floor to your supervisor. Develop your own agenda of items you would like to discuss and explore with someone who has more experience in the field. If a situation on your floor is challenging you, take this opportunity to examine it from all angles. If there are skills that you would like to develop, ask for opportunities to do so. Find out what you are doing right and what you can improve. These concepts are explored more fully in the next few paragraphs but they will not happen if you do not go into your meetings intent on making them more useful to you.

Solicit Feedback

There are some individuals who thrive on feedback, who are genuinely open to it and who willingly ask for it. Then there are the rest of us. If you are in the former category, work to change this aspect of yourself. Soliciting and accepting feedback is a skill that will help you in any line of work and is well worth the time you spend developing it. It can be difficult to get good feedback because most people only want to tell you what you are doing right. You need to set up a relationship with your supervisor that enables him or her to feel comfortable sharing the good and the bad. Tell them at the beginning of your working relationship that you value their honest reports of your performance. Ask when you meet with them what you are doing well so you can continue to do it and, more importantly, what areas you can improve in. None

of us are perfect and all of us have areas in which we can improve. You may have to really push your supervisor on this topic. Few of us are purposefully taught how to supervise and how to give feedback. Supervisors learn through experience, both as a supervisor and as one who is supervised. You may work for someone who has never had the opportunity to receive constructive and honest feedback. It will take time to develop the comfort necessary to do this but it will be invaluable to both of you.

Be Receptive to Feedback

If you are not open and receptive to honest feedback, then there is no reason to ask for it. It is not easy to hear that there are areas in which you need to improve. However, you will develop as a person and as an employee, no matter what you ultimately do in life, if you can learn to be open to constructive feedback. How do you do this? You need to put your ego aside for a little while. You need to understand that being the perfect RA is not only difficult, it is impossible. You need to believe that by accepting the feedback and acting upon it, you will be better than you were. When discussing your performance with your supervisor, be open to what he or she says. Show through your reactions that you are not offended or upset by the feedback. More importantly, show through your **actions** that you have listened and are incorporating the feedback into your day-to-day work life. Nothing will encourage open communication with your supervisor more than when you tell him or her how you implemented their observations into your performance. You then have the opportunity to fine tune your skills, learn what does and doesn't work for you and to further discuss the issues.

Ask for New Challenges

You are an RA for many reasons. Some are focused outward (opportunity to help other students, service to the college/university, etc.) and some are focused inward (salary, single room, leadership position for your resume). I am long past evaluating the relative values of these reasons. It is sufficient, in my opinion, that you have applied and been accepted for the position and therefore you have made a commitment to perform the job the best you can. I hope that additionally you will take the opportunity to use the position to prepare yourself for your own future by developing new skills. Given all of this, you will need to be your own advocate for building these skills. So, if you know that there is an area in which you lack experience, ask for the opportunity to get that experience. Professionals and para-professionals in residence life tend to have more to do than time permits. If you see a task that would enable you to develop new expertise, and it would also alleviate your supervisor of one thing to do, ask for it. Then do your best to do it well and to learn what you can from accomplishing it. This is how all of us learn and progress in our chosen fields.

Challenge Your Supervisor

"Challenge" is one of those words that some people assume is negative. It is certainly not intended that way here. I encourage you to ask your supervisor for what you need to do your job. While not necessarily a relationship between equals, this should be a relationship where discussion is encouraged and one in which both parties are actively engaged in problem solving. You should be willing and able to ask for the rationale behind policies and decisions, in a non-threatening way. How else can you explain, and sometimes defend them, to your residents? You need to ask for honest and constructive feedback. The development of an ongoing professional development plan for you and the rest of the staff is a reasonable expectation and one that you should pursue if it doesn't exist. Finally, if your supervisor is hoping to continue to move up through the residence life and student affairs profession, he or she should appreciate the opportunity to hone and strengthen their own skills in these areas. As RAs, you have a legitimate expectation of receiving supervision that will enable you to perform your job and you should advocate for it. Just to make sure you don't finish this section without understanding a key point, I want to emphasize that your approach to addressing questions and issues to your supervisor should not be based on emotions but on facts. You want to focus on what you have experienced and on how to best help you do your job; you are not the spokesperson for the entire RA staff.

Best Case Scenario

I think that the best one can hope for in this relationship is that when you are done with your position you view your supervisor as a mentor. A good supervisor will work with you to accomplish the requirements of your position. This is often enough. However, a great supervisor, one who becomes a mentor, sees your strengths, and helps you use them to your advantage, and sees your weaknesses, and helps you develop strategies to address them. He or she will not just give you the solution to a difficult situation but will coach you through it in a way that enables you to become a better problem solver. You will receive encouragement when you need it in order to remain motivated and acknowledgement when you have done something well, whether you need it or not. You will learn as much from this person as you may in some classes though the focus will be more internal and related to skill development and personal style.

The World Is Not Perfect

What I have conveniently ignored throughout most of this article is that not every supervisor is ready to provide the kind of supervision that is described above. Hopefully, most will be open to learning along with you. You should challenge your supervisor to provide you with the supervision you deserve. You may have to do this tactfully as he or she may see this as criticism. It shouldn't be. The ultimate goal is to have a program that is well run and benefits the students in your area. By working together, you and your supervisor have the opportunity to grow together and to develop new areas of expertise that will help you as you both progress. We sometimes get so caught up in how something affects us as individuals that we forget about the

other person in the equation. If you can work together to address any concerns that you have with your supervisor, you will both benefit.

Final Thoughts

The suggestions outlined in this article are just that, suggestions. Not every concept will work for everyone. When engaged in any relationship, supervisory or otherwise, it is always paramount to remember that you are dealing with individuals with different personalities and experiences. Investing time in developing an open relationship will enable you to more easily implement those suggestions you choose to pursue. I hope that you find the effort worthwhile. You will find that the choice to take a risk and ask for a supervisor's support and help will usually bring you more benefits than you expect. The strategies you choose to use to improve your performance in, and satisfaction with, the RA position will benefit not only you but also your supervisor and institution.