Chapter 15

Mentoring and Supervision?
Or, Mentoring versus Supervision?

Deborah Hicks
University of Alberta, Canada

Jeanette Buckingham
University of Alberta, Canada

Margaret Law
University of Alberta, Canada

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 Librarian’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-
Mentoring and Supervision?

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 activi-
ties 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 dimen-
sion 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 indi-
vidual, 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 obliga-
tions. 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 situa-
tion 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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