

## *Changing Role of the Supervisor*

New emphasis is shifting the focus to purposes  
of the organization and the goals  
it is trying to achieve

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THE ROLE of those who supervise other Extension personnel is changing. Such changes are affecting the roles of agents and specialists and need to be understood by them as well as by Extension administrators. Even though the supervisory role may not yet be defined clearly in the position descriptions of supervisory personnel who function at the state or district level (state leaders, district agents, district supervisors, state agents, or whatever their title may be) and those who function at the county level (chairmen, coordinators, directors, senior agents, etc.) the changes are being made slowly and unquestionably.

To the author's knowledge, there has not been a definitive study to "prove" that the change exists or to measure the extent of the change which may have occurred. Therefore, evidence which suggests that the change is coming or should come in many states will be examined in this article. Even though this discussion emphasizes supervision from the state staff, it applies appropriately to supervision within the county staff.

A profession such as Extension supervision responds to two major influences: One is the changing knowledge available in the broad field as revealed in the research reports, journal articles, books, and other writings of the times; the other influence is the changing need within the specific organization. If you were to make a general study of the literature related to supervision, you would find that there was a time when the foreman or first line supervisor maintained his prestige through the right to hire and fire. Knowl-

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edge about the practice of supervision and about the behavior and reactions of human beings was limited, so the foreman was motivated primarily by his own needs and those of the organization. This describes the situation in educational undertakings as well as in industry. For example, in the school system the early concept of supervision was that teachers should be inspected and rated, but not as a form of guidance.<sup>1</sup>

A flood of research brought new understanding about human beings and about the practice of supervision. At the present time the card index under supervision in the library on most campuses would include references to "supervision as a social process," "supervision as cooperative action," "supervision as guidance," "supervision as human relations," "supervision as leadership," and "supervision as an educational process." A study of these references indicates that the attention of the supervisor has been turned to the worker as an individual. The supervisor is exhorted to use his knowledge of psychology, human behavior, sociology, and communication arts to help the worker develop to his full capacity.

#### NEW EMPHASIS IN SUPERVISION

However, there is some indication that a new emphasis is gaining attention. This is a focus upon the purposes of the organization and the goals it is trying to achieve. Margaret Williamson<sup>2</sup> makes the point that "the ultimate objective of supervision is that through more effective effort on the part of its workers, any agency's services are improved in quality and its central purposes come nearer to fulfillment." She underscores the point by stating that "growth and development of workers as persons, do not, in themselves, constitute the end to which the supervisory process is directed. . . . The primary focus, however, if the process is not to become confused, unsure, and inconsistent, must be held steadily on directing all the efforts of both the supervisor and worker to carrying out the purpose of the agency. . . ."

If one were willing to over-simplify and over-generalize, it could be said that the practice of supervision has moved through the

<sup>1</sup> William H. Burton and Leo J. Brueckner, *Supervision: A Social Process* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Modern supervision has been described as emphasizing the significance of human personality—a new service founded on research into the ways people learn and the dynamics of human relationships. See Muriel Crosby, *Supervision as Cooperative Action* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1957), pp. 10-11.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Williamson, *Supervision—New Patterns and Processes* (New York: Association Press, 1961), pp. 20-22.

stages of development. For a long time the supervisor attempted to gain production through his ability to hire and fire. His actions were determined, to a considerable extent, by the needs of the organization as he understood them. With the development of new insights into human behavior, supervisors were encouraged to focus attention upon the needs of the individual worker and to help him become adjusted, happy, and contented.<sup>4</sup> More recently a third stage of development has gained recognition as the attention of the supervisor has turned back to the goals of the organization. Recognition of the third stage does *not* require rejection of the progress made in treating individuals with dignity and understanding. Supervisors need to understand human relations, motivation, communication, psychology, human development, and group dynamics. "Practicing and teaching the principles of good human relations is of basic importance to our work," according to Nesius, "because our work is with people. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

#### *Extension Supervision*

Extension supervision, as a specific and somewhat unique role, has also changed over the years as supervisors have responded to trends in the general field and to the needs of the agency. For a long time the major discussion centered around which parts of the district supervisor's job were *administrative* and which were *supervisory*. This concern developed as Extension workers studied the distinctions made in the writings about administration and supervision in the public school system. It waned with the recognition that the so-called supervisory and administrative functions in Extension are both a responsibility of administration and that the supervisor is a part of the Director's office.<sup>6</sup>

*Impact of Change* The impact of research in human behavior and motivation has been felt in Extension as well as in industry and other organizations. District agents (or state leaders or what-

<sup>4</sup> Establishment of good human relations in any organization has been identified as dependent upon the skills of first line supervisors in dealing with human problems. See Willard E. Parker and Robert W. Kleemeier, *Human Relations in Supervision* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1951).

<sup>5</sup> Ernest J. Nesius, "The Job of the Supervisor," *Middle Management in the Cooperative Extension Service* (Madison: National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study, 1957), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> See J. B. Claar, "The Supervisor's Profile as viewed by Extension Administrators," *The Role of Cooperative Extension Supervisors* (Madison: National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study, 1960), p. 3; F. E. Rogers and Ann L. Elmsted (eds.), *Supervision in the Cooperative Extension Service* (Madison: National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study, 1957), p. 3; and Nesius and Brueckner, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-96.

ever their title) and county personnel, to a much more limited extent, have been exposed to training in counseling, to workshops in human behavior, to graduate work in psychology, sociology, and human development, and to an ever-growing body of popular literature on ways of meeting the needs of the individual employee. This has been good. Certainly, in a democracy, of all places, the dignity and worth of the individual must be recognized and opportunities provided for his maximum achievement.

However, the desire of Extension agents and specialists for maximum achievement is currently forcing a change in the role of the Extension supervisor. The impact of research and technology in agriculture and home economics is so profound that many individual Extension workers can no longer obtain maximum satisfaction or reach maximum fulfillment because the environment in which they are placed does not permit it.

Perhaps some specific examples will help make the point. Many agricultural agents are now trying to be generalists as they work with varied groups of producers who are highly trained. Home demonstration agents working with individual homemakers or groups of homemakers may find it necessary to take into account powerful forces outside the home that affect the nutrition of the family and the family's economic management. Extension specialists are frequently baffled by the organizational problem of integrating their subject matter with that of other disciplines to make a meaningful whole which can be used by the Extension audience. Extension program development is changing. At one time programs were planned community by community. Gradually, there was a shift to county-wide program development and now, in many states, some parts of the program are built on an area or regional basis. The term "institution-wide program" is heard occasionally as recognition is given to the fact that, to be effective, almost the entire Service must be represented in certain kinds of effort.

These are the circumstances which are forcing a change upon Extension supervisors and causing them to consider supervision from the point of view of Extension objectives. "The ultimate purpose of supervision," according to Rogers and Olmsted, "is to promote the objectives of the Extension program." Without forgetting the interest of the individual, supervisors must give more time to helping the Service mobilize or re-deploy its resources to obtain specific objectives. For example, in some states the supervisors have been the first to recognize the need for area agents. In other states they have pioneered in helping agents, specialists, and

<sup>1</sup> Rogers and Olmsted, *op. cit.*

research workers join forces with farmers, processors, and marketing firms to make a fresh attack on the problems of an industry. Supervisors of home demonstration agents have, in some states, led the way in helping specialists and agents work with commercial concerns serving the homemaker or the family. State 4-H Club Leaders in certain states have stirred the imagination of all Extension workers by stimulating the development or improvement of educational programs for youth outside the 4-H organization.

#### *Need for New Programs*

There are indications that some supervisors recognize that Extension's most pressing need is for programs designed to meet new situations confronting various parts of the Extension audience. The fact that the need in many instances is for programs built upon a different geographical area or a broader subject-matter base requires leadership from staff members who are not tied to geographical or subject-matter areas.

This leadership role is one which supervisors should fill. It requires that they be more than organizers or facilitators. They must have keen insight and a broad understanding of the needs of society. They must have a thorough understanding of technical agriculture or home economics subject matter and, more importantly, must be able to grasp the adjustments which are taking place and which are to come. This is a different kind of knowledge from that of the highly trained specialist. He may know exactly how to answer specific questions in his field but may be stymied by the problem of developing a program that brings his subject matter into suitable relationship with other subjects.

The leadership role requires that the supervisors take the initiative in bringing together staff resources within the university for new programs. This role will require them to seek new resources among research workers and in parts of the university not now active in Extension work. They will have the opportunity to involve as people who may not have participated in the development of Extension programs in the past. Processors, heads of large firms with diverse business activities, leaders in state-wide professional groups, and others can be challenged by the opportunity to create new programs to meet new needs.

The leadership role for supervisors will force them to discontinue some activities now considered important. This can be done, with the assistance and support of the Director, by placing more responsibilities upon county Extension agents and upon persons in staff

positions in the business office or elsewhere in the organization. For example, procedures for travel requests can be simplified, expense account procedures can be overhauled, agents can assume more responsibility for induction training and supervising assistant or associate agents, the explanation of fringe benefit programs can be streamlined and supervisors can be relieved of chores which do not make maximum use of their talents.

The new roles will require supervisors who read widely, who have frequent opportunities for professional improvement, and who are skillful in challenging others to see new opportunities in the demand for new programs. Supervisors will need to earn the active support of Extension and university administrators, but there are indications the support is forthcoming as supervisors are successful in helping Extension meet the needs of the times.

#### SUMMARY

Trends in the practice of supervision indicate that the profession has changed over the years due to the impact of new knowledge and changing situations. For example, new research about human behavior has led supervisors to focus their attention on the individual worker.

Extension supervision has responded also to the impact of the new knowledge, but now the entire Extension Service is confronted with a need for new educational programs which cut across geographical and subject-matter boundaries. Extension supervisors can help the Service respond to the need. However, their new role should not cause them to ignore the individual worker and his aspirations and reactions. The new role needs to be developed in position descriptions for the supervisory staff and to be understood by agents, specialists, and administrators. While supervisors will need the understanding and support of Extension and university administrators, it is a role which they will need to earn through their performance.

THE weakness of much committee work in which executives engage is that it is poorly planned, its purposes are not clearly conceived, its direction is casual and lacking in firmness and focus. The educational opportunity is not reached.

—from ORDWAY TEAD, *The Art of Administration* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1951), p. 202 (contributed by Edwin H. Bates, Maine).