

## Teaching a New Dog Old Tricks: Supervising Veteran Staff as an Early Career Librarian

Autumn Faulkner

### Abstract

In my second year as a new catalog librarian, I was given management of a team of five seasoned copy catalogers, all with decades of experience. Such reporting relationships are increasingly common in libraries. This article discusses challenges and strategies for any early career professional librarian supervising veteran support staff, including emotionally intelligent responses to natural awkwardness or resentment, the development of decisiveness while acknowledging gaps in learning and experience, balancing respect for conventions with pursuit of growth, and making incremental shifts in established culture to prepare for evolutions in job roles and responsibilities.

### Introduction

Whether you work in an academic or public library (or another type of library altogether), you will be familiar with the management model of a librarian supervising paraprofessional staff. There are many factors that support this arrangement, but in general the assumption is that since librarians hold advanced degrees, they can more fairly be expected to assume the extra responsibility of supervision; additionally, librarians are connected to peer networks and professional organizations, which keep them more in tune with developments in the field and therefore capable of guiding policy and procedure.

But does this assumption still hold true when a relatively inexperienced librarian is supervising paraprofessional staff of long tenure? Can that new librarian truly be an adequate manager, and can the veteran employees truly accept that leadership? These are the

questions I asked myself when I was given management of staff members who had been in their positions at least since I was in high school. The answers to those questions, barring any extraordinary resentment or conflict, is yes—a newer librarian can find ways to serve a team of veteran staff despite gaps in experience, at least based on my own findings.

In March of 2012, when I was fresh out of library school with hardly any true library experience under my belt, the Michigan State University Libraries graciously hired me as a half-time paraprofessional cataloger. My work in those first few months involved a lot of training and some basic practice, and then gradual expansion into more complicated work. In June of 2012, I applied internally for a catalog librarian posting and was hired, officially becoming a tenure-track librarian at that point. My responsibilities began to include some project management work (i.e., coordinating cataloging of various special groups of materials) and music cataloging. Our unit also completed a migration from Millennium to Sierra, as well as training in and implementation of RDA.

All of this is to say that, when my transition to a supervisory position occurred in February of 2014, my experience had moderate breadth, but not much depth. Much of my first two years had been spent in grasping the basics—of authority work (which is only minimally covered in library schools), of local tech services workflows, of the special quirks of music cataloging, of managing vendor contract cataloging, of Innovative's Millennium system and then their Sierra system, of RDA. I still felt very much like a beginner in most areas of my work; every day still felt like practice, rather than comfortable routine.

Such was my level of ability when I took over management of five copy cataloging staff members, all of whom had at least a decade of cataloging experience at the MSU Libraries, and some of whom had been working in their positions since I was a baby! My concerns about this disparity of experience can be imagined. And though I had gained some brief managerial experience in a previous student services position at a university, I did not feel it was of

substantial assistance in my new role given the widely different nature of library work.

The observations, examples, and recommendations that follow are drawn directly from my own attempts to process the natural awkwardness and inherent challenges of supervising veteran staff as a new librarian. Though there is plenty of literature concerning good management techniques, no formal guidance is available to those who find themselves in this situation, so ultimately I am offering my own personal views on best practices. My hope is that even if my practical approaches aren't fully relevant to others, I can at least provide a little reassurance of the "me too" variety to other new managers of experienced staff, and normalize some of the issues we often face but rarely discuss.

### **Literature review**

Although there are numerous articles and books available for those seeking managerial skills in a library setting, little has been written to address the concerns of early-career librarians managing late-career paraprofessionals—even though the literature does contain hints that this state of affairs is not uncommon. In the 2010 article "Considerations for Managing an Increasingly Intergenerational Workforce in Libraries," Munde examines the prevalence of library workforces which are concentrated on two ends of the spectrum: Baby Boomers approaching retirement and recent LIS graduates. The study focuses primarily on librarians and does not directly address paraprofessional staff, and while the author suggests strategies for productive communication and interaction within such an intergenerational workforce, she offers no specific recommendations for supervisors dealing with this issue.

Rooney comes closer to the mark in "The Current State of Middle Management Preparation, Training, and Development in Academic Libraries" (2010), which contains survey data concerning supervisors and their levels of preparedness for their responsibilities. Among other things, Rooney's findings indicated that on average, librarians in middle management

supervise 4.6 paraprofessional employees, and that a need exists for better training for these librarians. Though it is not explicitly stated as a finding, comments from some individual librarians who completed Rooney's survey hinted at a general reluctance to assume managerial or administrative duties that interfere with what those librarians view as their true duties. We can infer from this (and corroborate with our own collective anecdotal evidence) that in many libraries, supervisory responsibilities are often assigned to librarians based on the needs of the institution, rather than on the interest or willingness of those librarians to become middle managers. But again, while Rooney's data supports the existence of situations where underprepared middle managers might have to manage veteran staff, no solutions are offered for that particular problem.

Trotta's 2006 book *Supervising staff: a how-to-do-it manual for librarians* does tackle some issues that new managers face and offers much practical in-depth advice. James's, Shamchuk's, and Koch's 2015 article "Changing Roles of Librarians and Library Technicians" would also be of service to new managers hoping to create a fulfilling work environment for their library paraprofessionals. But while each work looks at the needs of support staff in relation to their supervisors, neither work addresses the particular issues which might arise for a new librarian supervising veteran staff.

In short, there are resources from which helpful information can be gleaned, even if they are not specific in addressing the situation outlined in this article. I offer my own more particular observations about taking on supervision of experienced support staff as a supplement to existing and future management literature. For librarians in this situation seeking some quick, intensive assistance beyond what this article can offer, I recommend two books from the broader field of leadership development: *Working with Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman (2000) and *Crucial Conversations* by Kerry Patterson and Joseph Grenny (2011).

## Managing your team

### Establishing trust

The first task upon assuming your new role is to establish trust with your supervisees. Consider the sense of upheaval and anxiety they will also experience during the transition; all of us have had negative experiences with managers at some point in our lives, and every change in management leads us to worry about the new person stepping in. If your employees don't know you very well, they will have natural concerns about what kind of impact you will have on their lives. If this concern shows, avoid taking it personally. You are an unknown quantity—especially so because you have so much less experience than they have.

To allay initial anxiety, use your first interactions with your staff to show your willingness to learn from them and your commitment to supporting their work. Start from the assumption that your veteran employees know more than you, both in terms of institutional memory and the nitty-gritty details of the work that managers do not have to handle every day; it is easier to acknowledge this disparity from the beginning without defensiveness. By doing so, you are not indicating incompetence—after all, there are things you bring to the table too. But there will be ample time for you to introduce your own skills and ideas, once you have demonstrated respect for the work already being done by your team. Here are three ways to do this:

(1) *Ask questions about the workflows each person handles.* Collect a lot of information and don't offer comments yet on methods and techniques currently in use; take some time to get the full picture. Use these conversations to simultaneously acknowledge your staff's expertise and your own intention to learn first and act later. This will reassure anyone who may be anxious about a new and ill-informed manager swooping in to change or criticize the way things have been handled. As a side benefit, mapping out the logistical work of your unit will reduce your own anxiety about managing your new responsibilities. You will

become more conversant in the concerns and culture of the group, and better equipped to approach future planning and decisions.

(2) *Answer questions honestly and promptly.* In the beginning, your staff will ask you questions you don't have the answers to. When this happens, tell them you don't know. As most of us have heard from leadership books or seminars, it is disingenuous and dangerous to do otherwise. The insecurity you may feel in your new position will prompt you to always appear confident and knowledgeable; but again, it is not an indication of incompetence to acknowledge your lack of experience in some areas. You can demonstrate your abilities in a different way by energetically finding the answers your employees need, overcoming any obstacles encountered, and building your own knowledge and expertise as you go. "I don't know but I'll find out" should be your constant refrain. If you are responsive and quick in following up to questions, you make it clear that you take your staff's concerns seriously, you are a consistent and dependable person, and you are invested in their success. Establishing all of these realities for your team is crucial. Of course, you will never be able to respond promptly or completely to every single question that comes your way, but no one can reasonably expect you to bat a thousand. If your staff sees you are doing your best, that is all that matters.

(3) *Encourage questions, suggestions, and further learning.* Depending on the work style of the last manager in your position, you may be inheriting a staff who has not been encouraged to share their input or develop their interests. I think this is especially true of technical services work, where routine is king and experimentation has historically been a major no-no. So make it clear from the beginning that you welcome their curiosity and their feedback. A good exercise in creating two-way dialogue is to identify areas where workflows aren't documented, and ask for an employee's help in getting procedures written down. This will provide opportunities for you to show your respect for their existing knowledge gained in

the trenches, your own receptiveness to their input, and your openness to possible changes or expansion of skill and responsibility where desired.

#### Build confidence through change management

If at all possible, avoid making changes within your unit until you have adequately established trust and reciprocity. You will encounter some natural skepticism and resistance when any change is proposed, and as a new supervisor of a team who knows its business much better than you (at least initially), it will be difficult to weather this with confidence unless you have already laid the necessary groundwork.

Let us assume that you have done so, and it is time to start addressing the proactive aspects of your responsibilities. These will almost always involve change of some sort. Some changes can be anticipated well in advance, especially if you are a savvy manager in your area and you are paying attention to national and local trends. But the unfortunate reality is that we will not often get much time to prepare our staff for major transitions. The best you can do is count on some change occurring, sooner or later—whether in the shape of special projects, sudden crises, or transitions to a new physical or technological environment. Regardless of the particulars of these always vague but ever-impending future events, you can prepare your team by using small, incremental shifts to help them build resilience, agility, and confidence in your managerial abilities.

A caveat: This does not at all mean making change for change's sake. Rather, it means taking time to get to know and trust your team, and then finding the right balance between continuity and continued growth. Obviously, it is not the right choice to remain a slave to convention or comfort. As managers, we are stewards of the library's collective time and resources, which can both be needlessly wasted by outdated procedures or systems. But those of us with a passion for improvement bordering on perfectionism (you know who you are) should also take time to weigh the benefit of a change with the anxiety that can result

from disrupting existing workflows. Sometimes it may be best to let certain cogs of the machine keep clinking away, even if they rattle a bit.

Once you have considered these points and carefully identified some areas that would benefit from small, productive changes, proceed confidently. This is the area where you can bring your own skills to bear. You may not have the years of experience your staff possess, but you do have the advantages of fresh perspective, the collective wisdom of larger peer and professional networks, and an understanding of the ever-evolving best practices of your field. It is crucial that as you implement a change, you distill that information for your staff in ways that are relatable to their work; for instance, in encouraging my copy catalogers to employ new RDA terms and MARC fields, I explain exactly how these changes will lead to better indexing and access in library catalog systems, and how crucial that work will continue to be for our patrons, especially as collections increasingly become electronic and patrons depend heavily on connections between catalog records to discover related resources.

It is also crucial to keep good documentation of procedures and update that documentation accordingly. If you make iterative changes and just periodically alert your staff by email, instead of providing them with a static set of instructions to reference, you will be taxing their memory and their patience pretty heavily! Maintaining documentation is also a good way to continue inviting feedback and discussion of procedures; if one of your employees notices something incorrect or out of date on paper, a conversation about that work is much more likely to happen than if no written evidence of that discrepancy exists.

In short, good communication is key to creating a culture of agility. Tell your staff why you think a change is necessary; show them you have been thoughtful about the costs and the advantages. Further legitimize your changes with plenty of solid documentation, which also gives your employees a consistent and permanent framework for implementing those changes. Remain open to comments, questions, and feedback. In this way, you will be laying



upon that foundation of initial trust another layer of empowerment and confidence, counteracting your own lack of experience and any natural concerns your staff may have about your ability to lead.

## Managing yourself

### Reduce anxiety

If you are like me, you are too quick to identify your shortcomings and too slow to recognize your strengths. And if you already have this tendency, becoming an early-career supervisor of veteran staff will only make it worse. The gaps in your knowledge will seem glaring and the questions you ask will seem embarrassingly basic. You will wonder if you have made a huge mistake accepting responsibilities which you aren't actually capable of fulfilling. Never fear—this is a normal response to a challenging situation. Here are my recommendations for easing those first few panicky weeks:

(1) *Acknowledge what you bring to the table.* As mentioned, your degree in librarianship and your membership in the larger professional community is an important advantage and at least one of the reasons you have this job. And perhaps you also have the kinds of soft skills that are so crucial in management: emotional intelligence, tact, empathy. There is more to being a good manager than just being knowledgeable about the details of the work (though these will continue to be important, so eventually you will need to fill in those gaps in your learning). You may not have the same weight of experience your staff have accumulated, but you are positioned to take a high-level view of the work, the field, the trends, and the overarching purpose your team serves. You are there not only to give support for present-day work but to plan for the future—and your work as a librarian has already given you the framework to do that.

(2) *Boost your confidence through accomplishing familiar tasks.* You will inevitably feel

overwhelmed by all of the things you don't know during the first weeks in your new job. Reduce the cloud of bewilderment by handling tasks that you're comfortable with and that give you a sense of accomplishment. These may be cleaning out your email inbox, responding to a difficult patron question, or creating a high-quality catalog record for an artists' book. Exercise your existing skills and remind yourself of all the ways you are competent and knowledgeable; then remind yourself that there was a time you were still learning those skills too.

(3) *Have patience.* Although you will feel pressure (usually self-imposed) to learn as quickly as possible and present a knowledgeable demeanor to your staff, there will be inevitable mistakes and moments of uncertainty. Expect these in advance and be forgiving of yourself, instead of setting unattainable goals. Embrace the reality of your trial-by-fire situation!

(4) *Make a plan.* As inveterate list-writers can attest, there is nothing so effective for reducing anxiety as getting everything down on paper. Instead of repeatedly fretting about possible slip-ups or areas of weakness, take some time to identify the ways you feel you need to improve so you can adequately perform your new job. Once you have made a list of these, note the concerns which only time will resolve (for instance, only years of cataloging will give me the same deep memory for MARC and AACR2 as my copy catalogers), and forget them. For the remaining items on your list, make some concrete plans for learning. Find an article or a webinar that will help you improve. Think of a colleague who can give you advice. Ask your own supervisor for suggestions. Once your worries are out of your head, on paper, and mapped to possible solutions, you'll feel some measure of control over your anxiety.

(5) *Educate yourself.* If some of the gaps in your knowledge are significant enough, you will benefit from some formal training. At Michigan State University, our human resources department offered a 12-week course for new supervisors that covered both the specific administrative aspects of supervising unionized staff as well as general guidance on topics

like setting expectations, evaluating performance, and having difficult conversations. This was all immensely helpful and comforting. I learned some valuable approaches and I also realized that I already had some of the skills necessary to be a supervisor.

#### Develop decisiveness

Being given responsibility for an experienced group of staff is an exercise in balance. Your team is probably going to be able to run itself, at least in terms of daily routine and longstanding procedures. You may have a lurking doubt about your legitimacy and feel you are not qualified to make decisions about a team you have just joined, and whose members have so much more experience than you. This is a natural gut-level reaction, but it's ultimately a disservice to the employees you are supervising. Dithering or avoiding an issue will damage your relationship with your staff, who count on you to assume ultimate responsibility and who will begin to view you as unreliable if you aren't able to give decisive responses.

As discussed previously, this does not mean pretending to know things you don't. Instead, it means making it clear when you don't have an answer, and actively finding one. Even if you don't know something, you can be decisive about not knowing it! You can also be decisive immediately about low-level tasks like scheduling meetings, ordering supplies, relaying information, approving leave requests, etc. Build up from there as you settle into your new responsibilities and learn what kinds of higher-level decisions your team needs from you.

Once you have established enough trust and communication with your team to contemplate these bigger decisions, do not let the fear of risk or failure deter you. Again, expect to make mistakes and plan in advance to learn from them. When you do make a mistake, be ready to reconsider or reverse your decision. Changing your mind on occasion does not show inconsistency; it just demonstrates that your decisions are for the benefit of the team, and not a prop to your own vanity or insecurity.

After all, it's important to remember that this is the whole reason you make the big

bucks, as it were—while your employees may have more years of work under their belts, they are not expected to put themselves on the line by making judgment calls or directing resources or changing workflows. That is your contribution to the team, and if you hesitate because of a misplaced sense of inadequacy or a fear of making mistakes, ultimately you are not pulling your weight.

### Manage your time

Of all the challenges I encountered, the disappearance of my time caused me the most stress. I had not anticipated how much of day would get eaten up with the kinds of small administrative tasks that managers must handle. Answering questions, answering emails, attending meetings, making decisions (large and small)—suddenly the day is over and you feel you haven't actually accomplished anything. I don't have a pat strategy to assist with this problem, which doesn't ever truly go away. But I can attest that it is worst in the first few months, when the new demands on your attention are compounded by your own lack of experience and your attempts to navigate an unfamiliar environment.

Additionally, it's a good idea to adjust your perspective about the use of your time. Logistical, administrative work like answering emails or attending meetings is by its nature invisible, and this can lead to the feeling that you have made no measurable progress at the end of the day. But all such work should still be viewed as progress; you have contributed to the operation of your team by taking some small step toward ensuring its present and future productivity, or you have by some small word or action demonstrated again your investment in the success of your employees. These things must be done every single day or your team will ultimately pay the price.

Instead of regretting this invisible work, reduce your anxiety about your disappearing time by training your brain to give weight and importance to these aspects of your daily routine. Pause at the end of the day to reflect on the long-term outcome of the messages you

sent and the questions you answered and the discussions you had at meetings; keep the big picture in view and remember to discuss this kind of work in your yearly evaluation from a high-level perspective. It's important to give yourself credit on paper for all the administrative maintenance you have done—both as an act of self-validation and as advocacy for the work of your team as a whole.

And again, give yourself time to adjust to this new rhythm. Once you become more comfortable with responding to questions and making decisions, these tasks will eat up less and less time, and you will learn how to accommodate them more efficiently in your daily routine.

## Conclusion

After I had been a supervisor for about seven months, I sat down with one of my staff for the yearly review required by the university. We discussed her work, the slight changes in responsibility that had occurred over the year, and our plans for the upcoming year. Finally, I asked her if there was anything I could do better as a supervisor.

"Well," she said, "I don't think so. I'm really proud of you. You've done good in the new job."—sounding for all the world like a pleased parent!

Her maternal remark initially made me chuckle, but after some reflection, it's become one of the most meaningful pieces of feedback I've received. I'm still realizing how much she told me in those few words.

Clearly, the age difference wasn't only uppermost in my own mind. Her words reminded me again what kind of anxiety the unit probably experienced at the beginning of our journey together. Even the most sanguine of persons must feel *some* slight apprehension upon learning their new boss is young enough to be their kid (in most cases).

However, although I had been convinced that my lack of experience and a good deal

of personal anxiety had been glaringly obvious to all my staff, I had apparently managed to demonstrate enough trust in their work and enough decisiveness in appropriate areas to resolve whatever concerns she may have had.

But most importantly, her words taught me that I had been thinking about the whole situation from the wrong angle, and that there was no need to eventually reach a point where the gap in age and experience had no part in how my employees viewed me. Rather, she showed me that she had embraced that difference, and she was living comfortably with some seemingly opposing truths that I still hadn't recognized could coexist: that although I had started behind the eight ball and had plenty more to learn, I was nevertheless trustworthy and competent; that she could both take guidance from me when she needed it, and give it when my own experience fell short; and that she could take parental pride in my progress while simultaneously taking direction from me.

It was this initially casual and ultimately meaningful moment that calmed most of my remaining anxiety. On an intellectual level, of course, I had gone through all of the pep talks and reassurances detailed above, many times over. But most of us are like Alice, and it's difficult to take the good advice we give ourselves. My staff member's generous words are what did the trick in the end.

That's why I wanted to share them here. For those of you who find yourself in the same situation I did, do not despair. Her remark is proof that as long as you approach supervision of veteran staff with respect and patience, there is every reason to believe that any initial awkwardness or resentment will not be permanent obstacles to success—either yours or theirs.

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**Autumn Faulkner ([Autumn@msu.edu](mailto:Autumn@msu.edu)) is Assistant Head of Cataloging and Metadata Services, Michigan State University Libraries**

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