To Market, to Market

The Supervisory Skills and Managerial Competencies Most Valued by New Library Supervisors

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This article is based upon survey data presented at the LAMA Education Committee program "Are You Preparing for Your Next Job?" held at the 2005 ALA Annual Conference in Chicago.

ALA-accredited schools of library and information science produce several thousand new librarians yearly, and many of these graduates are assigned supervisory responsibilities relatively early in their careers. Most have responsibility for facilitating the work of others, preparing budgets, planning and evaluating programs, making staffing decisions, and maintaining the safety and security of assets that include funds, related property, and library buildings. Others find themselves in leadership roles that require interfacing with other organizations, mobilizing community support, and representing their organizations to their users and supporters.

Experience suggests that the approach of these librarians to their supervisory duties and the success of their efforts will have a strong influence on their job satisfaction, the productivity and job satisfaction of those whom they supervise, and the quality of services their organizations provide.[1] Yet there is little recent information that focuses on the knowledge and behaviors that new supervisors associate with successful supervision in library settings or the resources and training experiences that currently facilitate their transition.

The data reported here reflect an initial effort to remedy this situation through an informal study undertaken by the LAMA Education Committee that focused on the following four research questions:

1. What types of positions are typically held by new supervisors in public and academic libraries?
2. What types of knowledge, skills, and characteristics seem to be required for a successful transition to supervisory duties?
3. What types of education and training have proved to be most useful to relatively new supervisors?
4. What plans for further career development are typical?

Methods

Sample

For the committee's purposes, new supervisors were defined as graduates of MLIS programs who worked in either an academic or public library, supervising either professional or nonprofessional employees in their own or other departments, and had been working in a supervisory capacity for less than five years. Volunteer participants were solicited at the 2003 ALA Annual Conference and through contacts with local organizations known to LAMA Education Committee members over a one-year period following the conference. These activities produced a group of thirty-nine participants interested in and qualified for the study.

Data Collection

The committee drew up its questions based upon the theoretical perspective that assumes that certain types of *capital* are needed in order for work to be performed.[2] In the physical sense, these may include buildings, financial resources, technologies, and transport equipment. In human terms, they often are described as *competencies* that reflect the knowledge, skills, and characteristics required for successful performance. Twenty-two competencies were selected from a model originally presented at a LAMA Human Resources Section Staff Development Committee meeting held in New Orleans in 1999 for the purposes of this study. They have since been included in the ALA 2001 publication *Staff Development: A Practical Guide.*[3]

Within this model, eight are characterized as the *basic foundations* of effective professional performance. Another eight are associated with *first-level supervision,* and another six are associated with *midlevel performance.* The five competencies associated with executive performance in the model were rejected as less likely to be typical of those associated with early supervisory experiences. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships developed within this model.

Based on the exploratory objectives of the study, the geographic dispersion of the participants, and the travel restrictions encountered by many of the study volunteers, a semi-structured telephone interview that included a structured survey was considered the most appropriate approach for data collection. The interview protocol was developed by the authors of this paper for the LAMA Education Committee. It began with a series of open-ended

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questions focusing on the background of the participants, their current duties, the problems and issues they typically encountered, and the most critical issues and challenges that have come with the job.

Following the completion of these questions, a portion of the twenty-two competencies described above was read twice to each participant. The first time, the participants were asked to rate the importance of each of the competencies to their success as a supervisor using a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 indicating "minor importance" and 5 indicating "great importance." The second time, they were asked to indicate the extent that their professional MLIS training figured in the development of these competencies. This procedure was repeated three times, resulting in consideration of all of the competencies. A final question asked participants to indicate any other types of experience and training that figured significantly in the development of these competencies.

In the last phase of the interview, the participants were asked to indicate whether or not specific topics that committee members associated with supervisory activity had been included in their MLIS coursework and proved to be currently helpful. The interview concluded with questions focusing on the most helpful aspects of their MLIS programs and plans for future professional development.

LAMA Education Committee members conducted the interviews, with assistance from a graduate student from the University of South Carolina. The participants' remarks and responses to the surveys were manually transcribed.

Results

Types of Positions Typically Held by the Survey Participants

The participants described their general responsibilities as everything from overseeing the operation of a branch library, reference services, circulation, and collection development to "running the whole show." Strategic planning and "creating a vision" for the library also figured in their comments. The authorities to whom the participants reported varied by type of library and supervisory position. They included boards of trustees, academic deans, senior vice presidents, deans of libraries, county boards of supervisors, and department heads. The extent of their supervisory responsibilities varied. Thirty-three percent indicated they had up to three people directly reporting to them. Forty-six percent had between four and ten people directly reporting to them, and 18 percent had more than ten people reporting to them.

Responses concerning their supervisory responsibilities typically focused on planning, hiring, training, scheduling and assigning tasks, and evaluating performance. Outreach activities, budgeting, policy development, staff development, motivating and coaching employees, and sus-
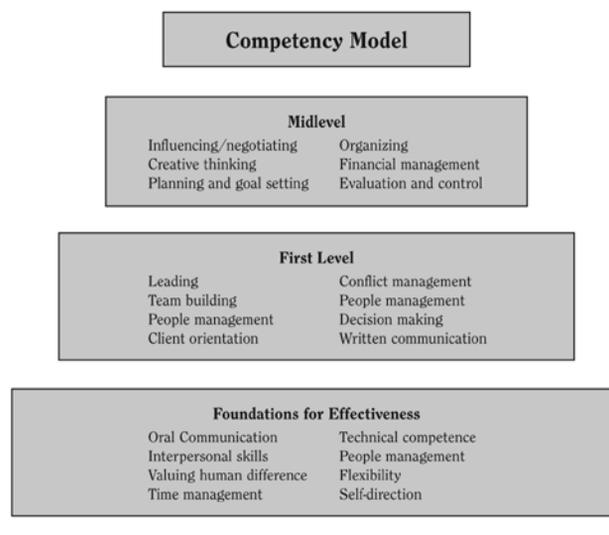

Figure 1. Competency Model

taining morale figured similarly in their descriptions. There were also indications that new supervisors are moving quickly into substantially responsible positions. "Library director" or "executive director" dominated the list of titles held by the study participants. There was also good representation from branch managers, public services librarians, and various positions in the technical services area.

Representative Responses of Survey Participants: Supervisory Responsibilities

"Total management of library, community relations, personnel management, supervise, financial management, programming, outreach, public relations, and marketing."

"Manage librarians who work in Web development office, train new librarians, project management, and computer programming."

"Supervise five employees, maintain collection, payroll, strategic growth, and training. Final decision-maker."

"Assign the work, train employees, assist with hiring, annual reviews, and day-to-day questions."

"Interview, hire, terminate, train, and handle disciplinary situations."

"Make sure employees know what they are doing, schedule, deal with any interpersonal relationships or issues that come up, hire, fire, HR issues, and training."

"Schedule, annual performance reports, probationary reports, and disciplinary actions."

"Encourage and empower. Develop personnel skills and abilities, make sure things get done."

Knowledge, Skills, and Characteristics Required for a Successful Transition to Supervisory Duties

When the participants were asked to describe the two or three most critical problems encountered as they matured into supervisors, the following topics were high on their list:

- Time management
- Supervising with no formal training other than on the job
- Having the credibility and confidence to supervise
- Directing subordinates who are older and have more library work experience
- Responsibility without authority
- Lack of experience

The responses from the structured survey question provided a more detailed viewpoint. The participants were close to unanimous on the importance of problem solving, planning and goal setting, oral communication, decision-making, interpersonal skills, customer service, and leadership skills. A lesser degree of agreement was found on competencies related to flexibility, technical competence, and financial management. Table 1 summarizes these responses.

Types of Education and Training That Have Proved Most Useful

MLIS Coursework

The participants were mixed in their assessment of the contribution that their MLIS coursework had made to the development of the competencies in question, and the relationship that they described was generally not very strong. Overall, technical competency was scored highest—an occurrence that agrees with recent research indicating the important role that information technology and technical courses currently play in MLIS curricula.[4] The relatively high score associated with written communication will come as no surprise to graduates whose work assignments involved written submissions. Table 2 summarizes these responses.

The relationship between the competency perceptions and perceptions of the extent to which MLIS training contributed to their development is illustrated in figure 2.

Upon inspection, it appears that there is little relationship between the two variables and the position of the skill or behavior in the competency model. Figure 3 illustrates this relationship. Statistical analysis supports this conclusion.

The highest MLIS value, technical competence, falls within the *basic foundations* knowledge, skills, and characteristics. The next two highest values, written communication and customer service, fall within *first-level supervision,* while three other relatively high values, creative thinking, planning and goal setting, and organizing, fall within *midlevel performance.*

The open-ended questions concerning the aspects of their MLIS coursework that were proving most useful and additions that might result in improvements consistently elicited requests for more hands-on, real-life scenarios and training. MLIS courses relating to technology, reference services, technical processing, and collection development were valued, but almost all the participants

Table 1: Number of Respondents Who Scored Each Competency with a 4 or 5 (N=39)

Problem solving	39	Creative thinking	34
Planning and goal setting	39	Valuing human difference	33
Oral communication	38	Conflict management	33
Decision making	38	People management	33
Interpersonal Skills	37	Influencing/negotiating	33
Leading	37	Team building	32
Client/customer service	36	Written communication	32
Self direction	35	Evaluation and control	30
Organizing	35	Flexibility	22
Time management	34	Technical competence	22
Self awareness	34	Financial management	20

Table 2: Number of Respondents Who Scored MLIS Preparation with a 4 or 5 (N=39)

Technical competence	24	Evaluation and control	8
Written communication	21	Oral communication	7
Client/customer service	18	Time management	7
Valuing human difference	16	Decision making	7
Organizing	13	People management	5
Leading	12	Flexibility	4
Team building	11	Interpersonal skills	4
Creative thinking	11	Conflict management	4
Self direction	10	Financial management	3
Planning and goal setting	10	Self awareness	2
Problem solving	9	Influencing/negotiating	2

indicated that they needed less theory and more specific nuts-and-bolts lessons in areas such as finance, labor law, goal setting, fundraising, and working with the media. Internships, case studies, and almost any other experience that provided real-time problem solving were repeatedly requested.

When given the list of nine specific tasks and topics that committee members associated with supervisory activity, some participants could not specifically recall whether they were included in their MLIS coursework. The others were generally split in their opinions, with most indicating that the subjects were not included. Opinions on whether the topics should be included also varied with no particular relationship to recollections. Table 3 presents these responses.

Representative Responses of Survey Participants: MLIS Coursework

"A management class that doesn't just teach theoretical and broad information. It needs to be applicable to real
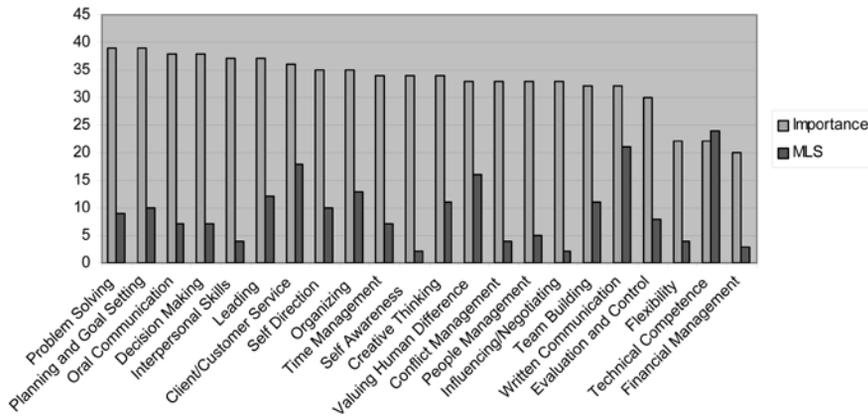
Figure 2. Perceptions Concerning the Supervisory Competencies and MLIS Courses (N=39)
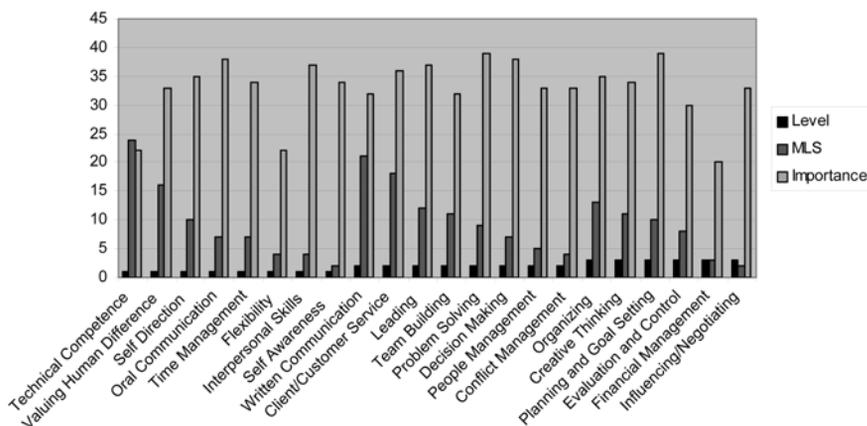

Figure 3. The Relationship between Competency Perceptions and MLIS Coursework by Level (N=39)

life . . . Also a class on library politics and the organizational power structure."

"The technology information needs to be kept updated since it's an integral part of our work. We need management and marketing information. . . . We need management case studies."

"Library school students should spend at least a semester working in a library . . . They should have opportunities to be a librarian, shadow a librarian, and do an internship, practicum, or assistantship to gain experience."

"Everything I learned, I used. However, the focus of the course work is too theoretical."

"Two most influential classes. A management class where students were given a scenario, i.e., a position they had to fill and how to fill it. A public libraries class—working with people and outside influences."

Non-MLIS Education and Training

When asked to identify other types of training and experience that have contributed to the development of their *basic foundations* knowledge, skills, and characteristics, previous job experience was by far the most frequently

mentioned, with nearly three quarters of the participants providing this answer. Training provided within their parent organizations, by their state library, and through organizational memberships, conference attendance, and committee work was also frequently mentioned. Mentoring programs, while mentioned by only a small number of participants, were considered extremely valuable.

Previous job experience played a frequent but less prominent role in comments concerning *first-level supervision* knowledge, skills, and characteristics. Mentoring was again valued highly by a small number of participants. Professional reading was cited frequently, as were state library and professional institutes, and workshops that focused on customer service, dealing with different people, conducting effective meetings, conflict management, and project management. Comments on *midlevel supervision* skills were substantially different, with the majority of the respondents referring to either personal experiences or formal graduate education activities. The following are representative of the participants' responses at each of the three levels.

Representative Responses of Survey Participants: Basic Foundations

"Background in counseling and skills in understanding other people's perspectives."

"Five years of experience as a paraprofessional were very important."

"Interpersonal skills from previous job experience."

"ALA mentoring program was very helpful."

"Technical training by the state library."

Representative Responses of Survey Participants: First-level Supervision

"Workshops on customer service and leadership."

"Conferences, professional development, ongoing learning."

"PLA programs, discussions with colleagues, county and state workshops."

"Good job experiences and fantastic mentors."

Representative Responses of Survey Participants: Midlevel Supervision

"Life skills and years of experience."

"MLS coursework helped with creative thinking."

"Cultural background, traveled a lot and lived in different countries."

"Group work in library school."

"A university class in marketing."

"My MBA coursework played a huge role in developing my skills in this area."

Plans for Additional Professional Development

A large majority of the participants is interested in improving their skills and furthering their professional and supervisory development. Many plan to move upward in their own or another library system. Most are looking for growth opportunities in upper management.

Almost all plan to attend professional conferences and take advantage of ALA and state library training. Networking and mentoring programs are also important to these participants, as well as getting involved in library association committees. Some plan to take additional MLIS classes. Others are considering another master's degree, such as an MPA or MBA, or are considering a Ph.D. program. Only a very small percentage of the participants were unsure about staying in supervisory and management positions.

Representative Responses of Survey Participants: Plans for the Future

"Continue to grow and develop as a librarian."

"Move up in the public library system."

"Move up to administration."

"Continue to be a director and plan to move into larger libraries/communities."

"Seek out and attend outside training opportunities."

"Attend workshops as the opportunity arises."

"Attend a leadership institute."

"Attend LAMA institutes that cover communication issues are particularly useful."

"Attend ALA conferences, and continue professional reading."

"Continue my education to get a Ph.D., but it is cost prohibitive at this time."

"Get another master's degree, perhaps in public administration and a director's job."

"More education, especially a degree in public administration."

ALA and the New Supervisor

The participants suggested several ways that ALA could ease and enhance their path to success. They want to see more opportunities to identify and engage mentors, more affordable local and regional conferences, and continued publication of materials, books, and other resources for supervisors and managers. The participants also encouraged ALA to work with MLIS faculty on the development of guidelines and recommendations for management courses. They want to see practical applications, and they particularly want more affordable learning opportunities.

Table 3. The Number of Participants Whose MLIS Courses Included These Topics and the Number Who Indicated that These Topics Should be Included (N=39)

Topics	Included	Not Included	Should Be Included
Federal labor regulations	4	25	7
Dispute resolution	10	17	14
Equal opportunity issues	11	18	7
Sexual harassment issues	11	18	9
Evaluating other professionals	12	17	13
Interviewing skills	19	13	9
Writing a job description	5	23	17
Building design	14	15	10
Disaster planning	17	15	10

Representative Responses of Survey Participants: Suggestions for ALA

"Provide networking opportunities—someone to call on, to talk to, to combat the isolation many small library supervisors face. I recently attended a LAMA institute and felt that one of the most valuable aspects of the experience was sitting with other managers/supervisors at lunch and talking."

"Offer training programs during the conference, not just preconference due to cost."

"There is a strong need for mentoring and this is particularly important for smaller academic environments and community colleges."

"The most valuable experiences are regional experiences. I would like to see regional institutes that are more affordable. ALA Annual and Midwinter conferences are too big and impersonal for me to get much out of them. The regional conferences such as LAMA institutes and ACRL conferences are prohibitively expensive. I have very little professional travel money and a registration fee of $350 takes 50 percent of my entire fund and leaves little for airline tickets, hotel costs, etc."

"Offer preconferences that deal with skill sets designed for new supervisors rather than experienced directors and administrators. Provide opportunities to network with other supervisors. Create a mentoring program."

"More frequent and less expensive programs on leadership, financial management, influencing and negotiating."

"Make it cheaper for me to attend an event."

Discussion

The responses of these participants give credence to suppositions that MLIS graduates are gaining significant

amounts of responsibility within a relatively short period after graduation. Whether supervising technical staff or professional colleagues, these new supervisors were responsible for establishing policies and procedures, fiscal management, and an array of duties that included in many cases "doing it all."

The data also suggest that, like other adult learners, the participants are gaining competence and knowledge from a variety of experiences and sources. As a group, these sources can be conceptualized as a three-part model similar to the one illustrated in figure 4.

The importance of prior life experience to their success in supervisory positions is given significant attention in their remarks; and several of the characteristics most highly valued by the study participants, such as self-awareness, interpersonal skills, leadership ability, and flexibility, reflect these hidden reserves. To some extent they also speak to social and organizational maturity.

The role of the second element in the model, professional graduate education, is also clear. Although the shape and direction of these programs continue to be debated among both leaders and scholars within the library and information studies field, it is possible to find general agreement that the MLIS, like other professional degrees, aims to prepare students for good, well-paying careers that will benefit both them and their communities.[5] Since the programs must also meet the standards of graduate-level education, they do so with curricula designed to provide the conceptual bases for reflective practice, the professional interpretation of prior personal experience, and the vocabulary and schema that underlie subsequent career development activities. While not directly described as strongly related to the knowledge, skills, and characteristics that these participants valued most in their current situation, the language and concepts of MLIS study implicitly support these supervisors' interests in the same way that graduate study in law and medicine precede continuing education in these professions.[6] The relatively large number of participants who have reached the director level within a short time period was generally found in small to midsized libraries. The speed with which they have risen to these positions suggests that MLS coursework, when combined with other learning and professional experiences, provides a firm foundation for practice.

The participants' keen interest in continuing education activities, such as state library programs and LAMA Institutes, appears to build upon both of these foundations. Their responses suggest that they, like many others, see a strong relationship between training, performance, and advancement.[7] While the strength of this relationship may be tempered by factors such as trainability and market forces, it is a rational supposition and lies relatively direct within the control of the typical professional. Research that relates participation in adult learning experiences to formal educational attainment provides further support
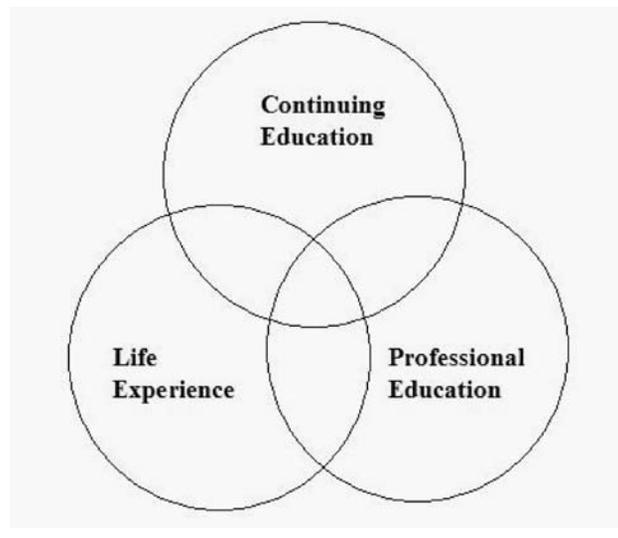

Figure 4. Professional Development Model

for a general conclusion: as many current managers retire, there will be a growing demand and need for post-MLIS training opportunities that provide affordable, hands-on, decision-based experiences that facilitate the transition to new supervisory positions.[8]

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