The Intersectionality of Supervision & Area Specialization
Anthony C. Morman, Esq. | Albany State University | @MrMorman_Esq

Higher education is replete with individuals who are not only experts in their particular areas of expertise but who also encourage personal and professional growth. One area that is crucial to management within higher education is the supervision skillsets of its managers. Colleges and universities are intentional, and rightfully so, when it comes to establishing the experience and qualifications that they desire in candidates when posting a job announcement.

When deciding who to interview and ultimately who to hire, most institutions take measured steps to ensure the chosen candidate has the desired mix of experience and expertise while also ensuring the candidate is a good fit with the university culture. I would not venture to believe that one would hire an attorney or a doctor only to dictate to that area specialist the method of the service in which they provide or the manner in which they provide it. Even more so, the contributions that are lost when an area specialist is excluded from the decision-making process is tantamount to professional negligence; especially when the area specialist’s experience and expertise was the basis for which he or she was hired in the first place. However, colleges and universities, and their student populations by correlation, would be greatly enhanced with additional investment of resources into providing quality training to personnel with management and supervisory authority.

The ability to provide quality supervision is a learned skill, not an innate one. Without question, the quality and manner in which supervision is provided will establish a culture within an office; a culture that will reverberate beyond the confines of the office walls in which it is provided. While certainly different people have different leadership styles, and therefore different modes of supervision, within the context of higher education stakeholders must remain cognizant of the externalities at play as a result of a culture established indirectly from poor supervision.

It is difficult to believe that higher educational professionals’ endeavor to lead with the intent to utilize supervisory methods that are deleterious to the persons in which they supervise. However, it is understandable that the pressures and responsibility of a supervisor’s duties can be one of many reasons that would lead a supervisor to “short change” or disregard the suggestions of the “area specialist” or even providing so much as common professional courtesy to consult with the “area specialist” before decisions affecting that area are made. None the less, the disconnect between the intent of the supervisory modes and the way in which they are executed by supervisors and received by those being supervised can be substantial; but should not be neglected or considered negligible.
Colleges and universities are wise enough to acknowledge, at least in theory, that no one person can be a jack of all trades when it comes to the diverse segments of professional staff necessary to offer a quality and enriching student experience. To disregard the input and suggestions from individuals with documented expertise in the subject area for which they were hired, can be received as a lack of trust or worse a lack of faith in that person’s ability to execute the job responsibilities. This can be the case whether the lack of inclusiveness in decision making is the result of a manager’s intent or negligence; however, enhancement of the supervisory skills of all managers in higher education should never be underestimated.

The good news is that this skillset can be enhanced with little corrective actions. While supervision is a component of any managers job responsibilities, institutions should be careful not to neglect supervisory training ... for all of its managers. There are a number of simple methods that can be employed to address the issue without diluting the value of or respect for the persons that were hired with unique qualifications in the specific areas.

Chief among good managers is the ability to develop and execute strategic planning in addition to the ability to train and develop a team that displays mutual trust for one another. Some simple methods of addressing this problem include:

(1) provide a clear and mission centric vision that team members can reference when guiding their decision making;
(2) instead of instructing a subordinate on what to do about a problem, a supervisor can engage the supervisee on how they would approach the problem, conference on the differences between the two, and reach a consensus as to the best way to approach a problem;
(3) transparent leadership that places a premium on accountability while also embracing the concept of grace;
(4) utilize emotional intelligence in the decision-making processes;
(5) be amenable to receiving critical feedback from team members without invalidating their feedback simply because of its critical nature; and
(6) be amenable to changing one’s leadership style if that is what is best for the team.

These few steps provide managers with methods that can be easily deployed and that are more inclusive of the opinions, experience, and expertise of area specialists while also preventing managers from unconsciously subjugating experts in the area to the basement of irrelevancy.
In conclusion, it is imperative that institutions be just as vigilant in ensuring managers have the necessary management skills for the positions that they have as they are with the new hires that they chose to employ. Maybe institutions should consider allowing employees submit an evaluation or survey of the person to whom they are supervised by. Understandably, this idea may not be granted much traction out of fear that these evaluations or surveys may become retaliatory for poor reviews of the supervisor and maybe so, but when has having both points of view ever been less beneficial to evaluating an office culture than having just one? However, as clear as institutions are with the minimum qualifications of potential new hires, they should also place a similar premium on the continuous development of managers across campus. In fact, to be negligent with a commitment to ongoing professional development of managers can moot the diligence that is placed on the pre-employment screening and qualifications of new hires; and ultimately the students end up bearing the heaviest burden.

---

Anthony C. Morman, Esq. currently serves as the coordinator for Greek life and diversity engagement at Albany State University. In this role, he directly manages the National Pan-Hellenic Council as well as the members of the Council of Independent Organizations. Mr. Morman is also responsible for finding creative ways to engage the many diverse segments of the university student population. He has a bachelor’s degree in political science and a minor in international affairs from Albany State University. He also has a Juris Doctorate degree from Florida Coastal School of Law where he graduated as a Pro Bono Honors Graduate and with a Certificate of Advanced Legal Research and Drafting. Mr. Morman is currently focused on acquiring a second doctoral degree; a Doctorate of Education in educational leadership. Mr. Morman has a passion for football, aviation, and dogs. GO RAMS!! (Albany State University and Los Angeles!)