

Everything I Learned *Not* to Do, I Learned From My Supervisor

Emily Mitch | NC State University | @emitch72

Dan Fail | Former Campus-Based Professional Turned Speaker | @danfail

Our favorite class in graduate school was effective supervision skills. Oh that's right, this subject isn't taught. Which means we all learn about supervision techniques and tactics the hard way. Trial by error (or trial by fire) are our only methods to learn how to supervise, which most would argue isn't always the most effective learning strategy. Through the trial period, some learn what to do as a supervisor, and some learn what not to do ...

In order to really showcase this concept, we decided to give an authentic view of the ups and downs of a relationship between a former supervisor/supervisee. Enjoy these knowledge nuggets as we jump back and forth between perspectives and lessons learned!

Different People = Different Personalities

Dan Fail (DF): When I stepped into my role as director (nearly a decade after graduate school), supervising multiple staff members, I thought the best way to supervise was to treat everyone the same. Nope, this was totally wrong. If we want people to bring their full selves to work and be authentic, then they will bring their personalities too, and you simply can't supervise everyone the same. Everyone has different needs and wants in supervision. Asking them what those are, with regular check-ins, is an important part of helping them feel heard, so they can bring their authentic selves to the office.

Emily Mitch (EM): This concept is something I've come to value extremely after working with Dan, and I have come to look for in other supervisors. For one of the first times in a role, I felt comfortable to be myself, and I was able to bring my full self to work each and every day. This, in turn, allowed me to do my best work with my students. I was able to show them that professional doesn't just mean a "suit and tie." It meant I could be honest with them, show my emotions, and also check in with them about their needs for me as their advisor. Through this role modeling, I hoped I could encourage them to be open and authentic as well.

Being in Charge = Being in Power (Whether You Like it or Not)

DF: I consider myself a very open and honest person — folks can tell if I'm in a good or bad mood. And, morning meetings should never start until I've had my coffee. However, being open and honest in the moment can lead to some knee-jerk reactions. There were several times I would provide thoughts in the moment that weren't productive or would

derail a meeting. While I might have seen myself adding to the brainstorming session or giving my thoughts on an issue (sometimes a little too frankly), the staff would take pause or even retract in the moment. This was because of the unspoken power dynamics at play. Even though I wanted to be honest and open with the team, I was still the director and their boss. Not many people have the skill set to have critical conversations with their supervisors in staff or one-on-one meetings. I needed to give them the space and timing to open up with those conversations.

There were also times when, as a director, high-level conversations or decisions were being made above my paygrade which I would need to communicate to the staff. While being open and honest with staff sounds easy, sometimes being too open and too honest about how decisions were being made would frustrate the team. This would lead to a need to spend more time venting and processing our thoughts before getting back to work.

EM: The open sharing and frank conversation definitely has its pros and cons. I would get frustrated at times because I felt the oversharing was without purpose. In my role as an assistant director, I couldn't make university-wide or culture changes ... what was the point of sharing that with me?! I felt like I was emotionally over-investing in something I had no control over the outcome. However, this communication style also forced me to develop my own voice and raise concerns, even with the power dynamics that were always present. I learned how to respectfully disagree with my supervisor, which wasn't a skill set I had or used previously.

Giving Feedback = Receiving Feedback

DF: If we, as supervisors, expect our staff to grow, then we have to give ongoing feedback, not just during performance reviews. But, in order to be better supervisors, we also need to be open to receiving feedback as well. The hardest meeting I remember with my staff was when I asked what I could do to be a better supervisor. While they framed their thoughts and comments well, they did not hold back. That was hard to listen to, but if I expected my staff to grow into their roles, then I needed to grow into mine too.

EM: A common piece of feedback I receive from supervisors is I am more comfortable with confrontation than the average staff member. While many see this as a negative thing, and something I should suppress, Dan embraced that trait and *listened*. Don't get me wrong, he struggled with this at first, and it was incredibly uncomfortable for me to

tell him that he wasn't meeting my needs or expectations as a supervisor or team member. However, it was through those tough conversations we were able to grow and develop as a team, and we accomplished our best work. Brene Brown has an "engaged feedback checklist" I now live by, and it has transformed the difficult conversations of giving and receiving feedback (Brown, 2018). I recognize this may be challenging due to the hierarchies (either structured or unwritten) at different institutions, but being open to feedback (on both ends) will open up dialogue and allow new pathways for teams to succeed.

Safety Net = Cool Things

DF: If we expect our staff to try new things, they need to feel like their job isn't on the line. If Maslow had anything right, it was that people need to feel safe first and foremost. I tried to push staff to try new things and think outside the box — however if a project failed, would they think I would hold this over them in a performance review? Did it mean they didn't meet expectations for their job? How do we create a sense of job security and safety so our staff can truly own their positions, but take risks as well?

EM: Creativity is often encouraged in the workplace, but when you have a supervisor who hasn't built up enough trust in the relationship, or if you're not sure you can fully trust them, the encouragement to "try new things" can feel like a set-up for eventual failure. Supervisors who create environments where supervisees can be brave, rather than cautiously adventurous, will allow employees to flourish and take ownership over projects, rather than feel micromanaged with a little bit of wiggle room.

Students = Sixth Sense

DF: Students are smart — they have a sixth sense for fear. So when our staff wasn't on the same page or wasn't getting along, *they knew*. There were times when students would try to "put the parents against each other" by having a conversation with one staff member and not getting the result they hoped for, and then meeting with another staff member. Or my favorite: they'd go straight to the director (or even the director's supervisor) to complain and hope to get a different result. If the staff is (or isn't) communicating and on the same philosophical page, the students know.

EM: I've found being on the same page and communicating effectively as a staff team makes a world of difference, and the students can see right through any façade you put up to attempt to convince them otherwise. Perfection isn't the expectation here, but students can sense a trend if there is a consistent lapse in communication or support, or

if they are receiving different information from different staff members. High-quality student support means being on the same page and asking good questions to ensure confidence in what is happening.

Apple Time = Work Time

DF: My fondest memories with some of my staff stem from what we dubbed “Apple Time.” These were random times in the week where the three of us would grab an apple, sit in our common areas outside of our offices, and talk shop, chat about life, and laugh (a lot). I’d posit the time we spent eating an apple once or twice a week was more productive for getting work done, bringing about awesome ideas, and uniting us as a team, more than any organized staff meeting or retreat ever would.

EM: Honestly, this was the most valuable and impactful form of staff development I’ve ever experienced. Through this informal time, we were able to get to truly know each other, brainstorm and develop new ideas for the office and community, and get to know our students on a deeper level when they were there as well. Yes, we all have a million things to accomplish during any given day, but taking 20 (sometimes 60) minutes a day to build trust with each other allowed us to hit our work even harder and with more intentionality and enthusiasm.

Time = Respect

DF: There were times I would tell staff members I didn’t want to see them until noon the next day because I knew they were working until late at night. How often do we, as supervisors, truly respect the amount of work our staff puts in after hours? At the time, the institution we worked at had the expectation our FSL office was open from 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m., regardless of time worked in the evenings. I took it upon myself to open the office as often as possible, so that those who attended council meetings or events after business hours didn’t have to be there and could have a reasonable night’s sleep before doing it all over again. Sometimes the greatest gift we can give our staff is the gift of time.

EM: As an entry level professional, I was tasked with advising all three governing councils at the institution, which inherently meant many nighttime meetings. As much as I felt a need to “prove myself” as a new staff member and be back at work less than 10 hours from the last time I was there, I was reminded (and sometimes required when I didn’t listen) to take time for myself and not come into work until later in the day. This

was the biggest blessing I never knew I needed, as it allowed me to have some semblance of balance in an otherwise demanding environment.

In higher education, there is immense pressure to make change and create new systems impacting our students. In order to make that happen, we need to make sure we, as supervisors, are creating environments where employees can be happy and bring their full authentic selves to work. More than anything else, supervisees leave their jobs because of poor management or supervision. This constant turnover of employees comes at a cost to our work environments and, ultimately, the students we work with (Goler, Gale, Harrington, & Grant, 2018). Rather than the classic “trial and error” method of supervision, let’s start asking our supervisees what they need, while also challenging our supervisees to be open and honest in their expectations.

In the world of fraternity/sorority life, our communities can flourish or flounder based on how effective their staff teams are. No team is perfect; teams are made up of complex people bringing a plethora of dynamics into the mix. Great supervisors embrace this dynamic in order to bring out the strengths of individual members, while pushing the collective team limits in order to grow and succeed.

Emily Mitch currently serves as the Assistant Director of Fraternity & Sorority Life at North Carolina State University, where she advises the Panhellenic Association, National Pan-Hellenic Council, and works on community development initiatives. A proud Wisconsin native, Emily attended the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse for her undergraduate studies, where she joined Alpha Phi International Fraternity. After graduation, Emily attended Bowling Green State University for her Master’s in College Student Personnel. Outside of her work, Emily volunteers with Alpha Phi as a chapter advisor for UNC-Chapel Hill, a Emerging Leaders Institute facilitator, and a Foundation scholarship reader. Emily also volunteers with Tri Delta Fraternity as a Body Image 3D facilitator, and for AFA as the co-editor of Essentials. When not working or volunteering, you can find her playing ice hockey with her women’s hockey team or snuggling up with her cat and a good book.

Dan Faill worked in FSL communities for over a decade before becoming a full time professional speaker in 2018. Dan was a Founding Father of his chapter of Theta Chi Fraternity at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, and he traveled as a Leadership and Education Consultant after receiving his B.A. degree. After traveling, he attended the University of the

Pacific receiving his M.A. degree, and then worked in higher education at the University of the Pacific, Loyola Marymount University, Elon University and UCLA, serving as the fraternity/sorority advisor in most of those capacities. Dan is now a full time professional speaker, coach, and facilitator with CAMPUSPEAK, and he serves as Director of Coaching & Consulting with LaunchPoint. He served on the AFA Foundation board of directors for two years, and he currently serves as a Critical Conversations facilitator for Pi Beta Phi Fraternity for Women. He enjoys whatever free time he has spending it with his two children who also live in Los Angeles. He's also a lover of pop culture and nerdy things, especially the Marvel Cinematic Universe. And he still makes time for Apple Time with former staff members.

References

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