

1-1-2018

The Mentor: From Colleague to Supervisor

Tracy Bicknell-Holmes
Boise State University

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Tracy Bicknell-Holmes: Dean, Albertsons Library, Boise State University, ID

Keywords: librarianship, career development, mentoring, leadership, supervising

Citation: Bicknell-Holmes, T. (2018). The mentor: from colleague to supervisor. *PNLA Quarterly*, 82(3/4).

Editor's note: The Mentor column is a place for advice, storytelling, introspection, and professional growth.

I became a supervisor and department chair by accident. I had taken numerous workshops on leadership and management along the way, but I really wasn't convinced that I wanted to be a supervisor. When the opportunity presented itself and I decided to give it a try, there were some surprises along the way. For example, I hadn't really thought about how the relationships I had with colleagues would shift when my level of authority changed.

I had worked with many of the individuals in the unit for 10 years. They knew me and I didn't change as a person when I became a department chair. Our unit had gone through three department chairs and two interims during the 10 years preceding, and I was lucky that everyone was relatively happy with the leadership change. Yet change is the key word in that sentence.

The first time I realized that I had left the colleague/friend zone was that I stopped hearing news on the grapevine. I no longer heard the chatter of who was doing what with whom and it didn't feel appropriate to encourage gossip around me. Yet, I felt out of touch with the social reality of my unit, and a little sad that I found myself on the outside edge of the group because of my position.

The first time I had to handle a serious performance problem with an individual who had been a close friend was tough. My job was to do what was best for the institution, but I liked the person and trusted them. I knew the friendship was truly over and I had transitioned completely to the side of supervisor when my trust was abused and disciplinary action was the only option remaining.

Whether you work toward becoming a supervisor or the opportunity comes upon you, if you are promoted from within you will find yourself supervising people you consider colleagues and friends. Making the transition from colleague to supervisor can be a challenge under the best of circumstances. Here are some things I wish I'd considered. Some I've only recently discovered and others I still struggle with:

- **Consider the situation.** Are you becoming a supervisor under good conditions? Are you following a beloved supervisor with a long history? Are you following someone who left under not-so-great conditions? What do you know of the politics in your unit? Who do you need as an ally? Who are the people in the unit with influence?
- **You are the supervisor.** You are no longer a peer. You are the individual who mentors, coaches and evaluates those in your unit. Sit down one-on-one with each individual and talk honestly about how you both feel about making the transition. Set boundaries. What expectations do you have

for each other? What issues might arise? Is there anyone in the unit who might resent the fact that you got the job? Get these issues out in the open and discuss how you will handle them. Make sure unit members understand what is expected of you by *your* supervisor.

- **Words carry weight.** What you say is interpreted differently based on your title. Try to remain professional at all times. Avoid venting or sharing gossip in front of employees. I still struggle with the boundary between being authentic and holding my tongue when I'm frustrated.
- **Friendships.** Be aware of your friendships and your opinions of your former colleagues. Try not to let previous relationships influence your decisions. Work hard to treat each individual fairly and with respect. Feel free to continue socializing with your former friends, but realize that having you there may stifle some of the conversations they want to have.
- **Who do you know?** Consider spending extra time getting to know the individuals in your unit that you know least. Are there individuals in your unit you find a challenge? If you can find a way to work well with them, it will make you a better supervisor for everyone.
- **I don't want to know that!** You will find out personal things about people that you *never* wanted to know. Sometimes these things will color how you view that person and you may struggle with separating your personal knowledge of someone with the work the individual does. Focus on what is important for the work and the job the individual is doing.
- **Who does what?** Clearly delineate the roles of each member of your team. If roles are well established you just need to know each. If not, spend some time thinking through what is important for you to do as team leader and what each member of the team has the authority and decision making power to accomplish. I recently learned just how critical it is to spend time on this.
- **Goals and objectives:** Does your unit have clear goals and objectives? Does everyone one know what they are? Are responsibilities and action steps clearly spelled out? If not, this is an area that needs focus.
- **Find a new Peer Group.** This may be one of the most important lessons I learned as a supervisor. You need people at your level to talk to, with whom you can problem solve and strategize. Don't be shy in seeking them out.

If you're interested in learning more about the transition from colleague to supervisor, search the internet. There are lots of articles with tips and recommendations and lots of variation in what is recommended. Some might resonate more with you than others. Many are valid even if you are taking a supervisory position at a new institution. And remember, you're only human. You too can make mistakes and learn from them!