

The Mentor: Hindsight

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

“I wish that I knew what I know now, when I was younger“
Ooh La La, the Faces, 1973

As I look back over nearly 25 years managing and supervising people in libraries, there are a lot of little things that I've learned that weren't obvious to me when I was in my 30s. This knowledge doesn't exactly make the job easier, but it can ease the weight of it and make it easier to recover from mistakes, embarrassing moments, and tough decisions. These are some of the things that I wish I knew then that I know now.

Fair and equal are not the same thing. I once had an hour long discussion with a group of individuals on what it means to treat people “fairly”. Some thought fairness meant treating everyone exactly the same. Others felt strongly that doing that was unfair, because each individual and situation is different. Sometimes treating all individuals exactly the same perpetuates unfairness built into our institutions, practices, and policies. Know your values and be able to back up your decisions with a rationale that maintains your integrity.

Active listening is hard! Listening well and understanding what someone means requires more than simply hearing speech sounds and translating them into words and sentences. Even if two people speak the same language, the same word could mean something very different to each as in the previous example of what it means to treat people “fairly”. Yet listening is critical to doing your job well, and for managers/supervisors, the onus is on you to make sure you understand, even if your supervisee doesn't seem to reciprocate. Active listening requires focus, paraphrasing, and asking questions to make sure you understand. For most of us it takes lots of practice and numerous failures along the way.

Creating shared meaning: How many job announcements have you seen that say “excellent communication skills” required? Sounds simple, yet what does that mean? The ultimate goal is creating shared meaning, which can be challenging for two people who have different perspectives, different backgrounds, and different communication styles. Supervisors have the added challenge of working through difficult situations with those they supervise. There is *always* room for improvement, so take advantage of every opportunity to learn new techniques and practice them. My latest workshop in January 2019, was *Crucial Conversations*, offered by the Idaho Department of Human Resources and based on the book by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan and Switzler. There's a great section on recognizing when you're stuck and how to get unstuck.

It's never too late to own it! It's never too late to admit that something didn't go quite right or that something is bothering you. Admitting mistakes will earn you respect, and help make amends if there is need for them. I became acutely aware of this once when I had a frustrating conversation with a col-

league that ended badly. On my drive home that day, I realized that I hadn't listened well enough to understand why s/he was so upset. The next day I went back to the individual and admitted that I wasn't sure that I really understood what s/he was trying to say. We talked again and I gave her my full attention with much better results for both of us.

Owning it isn't just about making apologies. It is also about building and maintaining relationships, building trust, and maintaining your integrity. Your integrity is the only thing other people can't take away from you. It is tough to admit you made a mistake and face down embarrassment, but it is also empowering. Practicing on small issues builds your skill and comfort so you'll be ready for the really big ones.

You can't make it work for everyone. I used to think everyone had a place in an organization, even under performers. If you could just find a niche that plays to a person's strengths, they could excel. Unfortunately, as supervisors we have to balance empathy for an individual with holding them accountable. If an individual's performance is negatively impacting the team, it needs to be addressed. There's only so much you as a supervisor can do to accommodate preferences and encourage engagement. If an individual can't or won't do what is required of them to complete the work successfully they may not be in the right job for them.

Consensus isn't always possible. I'd like to think I'm a consensus builder. It is much easier to move initiatives ahead if everyone on a team is enthusiastically in support of a project. However, consensus isn't always possible. Sometimes you have to move ahead even if some individuals aren't ready. How important is the issue at hand? If you think it is critical, what is the likelihood that it will be successful even with the skeptics that remain? Occasionally, you'll run into an influential person or an individual in a key position that isn't in favor of the change. You feel progress in this area is critical, but you can't move forward without them. It may be time for a heart to heart conversation. What is the number one concern that is holding them back from support? Can you address that concern? What would it take for them to be on board? Sometimes the answers to these questions are surprising and easily overcome, or a compromise can be reached that gets you unstuck.

Have you heard of **managing up**? In a future column, a colleague of mine will address this skill and the role it can play in your success. If your supervisor is from another career field or has a very different communication style, it can be critical to working well with her/him.

Sources:

Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., & Switzler, Al. (2012). *Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high* (2nd ed.) New York, NY: McGraw Hill.