Managing, Supervising, Advising and Mentoring: Each Requires a Unique Hat for the Professional

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One of my all-time favorite children's books is *A Giraffe and a Half* by Shel Silverstein. The text itself, a poem, is whimsical and terrific, the drawings are wonderful and the overall story just makes me smile. But beyond that, it serves as a good metaphor for my life—and perhaps yours, too—as a student affairs professional. There have been plenty of times when I started my day with just a giraffe—me. Then, by mid-afternoon I was a giraffe and a half and by 3 pm, there was a rose on my nose, a bee on my knee, a snake and a dragon.... if you're familiar with this book, you certainly get the idea. We can all picture ourselves as that giraffe on a bicycle, wearing all kinds of ridiculous clothing and carrying musical instruments, trying not to teeter over because we are so top heavy.

How do we really explain what we do as campus activities/student affairs professionals? Telling someone about the programming board we advise, the younger staff member we mentor, or the concerts we help plan, execute and attend until 3 am doesn't really do justice to the depth, breadth or importance of our work. Plus, we just sound crazy! As professionals, we know, accept, and, maybe, even enjoy the fact that most of our job responsibilities fall into the "other duties as assigned" category and that we wear many hats on a daily, sometimes hourly basis. Yet, it is not often that we actually talk about these hats or give them labels to help us further define them.

To help me sort through the various roles I play, I have taken an analogy that we all use—wearing many hats—and put a new twist on it. When I think about our roles as professionals, I see four distinct, yet interconnected roles: advising, managing, mentoring and supervising. Each comes with its own hat: the construction hard hat, the clown hat, the wizard's hat and the captain's hat.
No Professional Is an Island

In the busy-ness of our work, it can be easy to fall into the isolation trap and think only of ourselves and our own styles or needs as professionals. However, to be effective, we must remember that relationships with others are inherent in all of the roles we play and the hats we wear. We do not work in isolation. We advise and work with student clubs and organizations; we manage various tasks, responsibilities and projects; we mentor students and are mentored by others; we supervise staff and are supervised. Everything we do involves other people or teams of people. This highlights the importance of dialogue and communication in our work. We cannot operate in isolation from each other as colleagues or from our students. When you are thinking of which hat you need to wear, remember that others can see your hat and will have their own thoughts and ideas about what that hat means.

Advise (v.) Offer advice, to counsel; recommend, suggest; inform, notify

Advising—Wearing the Hard Hat

In their book Advising Student Groups and Organizations, Dunkel and Schuh (1998) list the various roles of an advisor: mentor, supervisor, teacher, leader and follower. It is interesting that in a handbook about advising, the definition of an advisor includes so many other roles and responsibilities. This fact highlights the nebulous nature of our work with students and why it makes sense that we often suffer from role confusion or overload. As student affairs professionals, we truly are called to wear multiple hats and sometimes, all at once!

When I think of myself as an advisor, I picture myself wearing a hard hat, much like a construction worker or miner would wear. It is usually hard, plastic, protective, and if you are really lucky, bright yellow. A hard hat is the perfect advisor companion; it is versatile and functional, just like us advisors.

In our roles as advisors, we are often called upon to be mentors and supervisors, as well. There are some subtle differences, however. The relationship between student and advisor is established in a more formal way than that between a mentor and a mentee. One is usually assigned as an advisor because of the nature of his/her position or title within the office or department. Mentoring relationships tend to be more informal (unless you are part of a formalized mentoring program where you are assigned to a mentee for a designated period of time), and are usually initiated by the person wishing to be mentored.

In some cases, the student leaders with whom you are working are in paid leadership positions; thus, in addition to advising the students and the organization, you also supervise those students. In this case, the students are ultimately accountable to you (or your department/office) and in turn, you are responsible for providing feedback and evaluation of their performance.

Because advising can entail so many of the other roles we play, it can also be a draining part of our lives as professionals. There are late-night and weekend commitments, meetings to attend, one-on-ones to conduct, etc., etc. This is where the protective aspect of the hard hat comes in. Sometimes, we have to just dig in and prepare for the long haul and be on the lookout for falling rocks or other hazards along the way.

A hard hat is also useful when you have to “go to bat” for your students, as in a situation in which you know that a future program or event could be potentially controversial or perhaps not be well-attended, but you know how committed the students are to it and how passionately they feel about the event itself. As advisors, we sometimes have to sit back and let a situation play itself out, yet be prepared for the after-shocks. Having protective head gear in these situations is a definite bonus!

A hard hat is also useful for its durability. It can sustain a lot of wear but still be functional and purposeful. As advisors, we know the cyclical nature of our work and can predict the peaks and valleys that will inevitably occur throughout the academic year. During these times, it is most beneficial to have a hard hat at your disposal. It helps survive the long hours, late nights and (un)predictable crises that are par for the course in campus activities and programming. I have found the hard hat to be especially helpful during the craziness and long hours of opening week activities and again in April when “spring fling” and other end-of-the-year festivities abound.

The yellow aspect of the hat relates to the visibility and responsibility we have as advisors and professionals. We offer advice and sometimes play devil’s advocate; we are role models and leaders, cheerleaders and challengers. There are times when we need to be out in front, surveying the landscape for potential pitfalls. And there are other times when we need to model the way with our words, actions, choices and decisions. It is hard to miss a bright yellow hat during these times.
The Importance of Environmental Scanning

If your hard hat has a light on the front of it, now would be a good time to turn it on. Not only is it crucial for advisors to understand when and how they are advising, it is also important to be adept at environmental scanning. Just as no two students are the same, every organization we advise will be different from the last, and each campus will have its own quirks and nuances. There are two things you can do to help navigate these differences.

First, know yourself. Being aware of the unique gifts, talents, skills and experiences you bring to your position will help you discern what role you need to play and when. It will also help the students you work with better understand and appreciate what you can offer the organization and how you can help them.

Second, know the environment and its students. A programming board at a smaller, liberal arts institution will have different expectations of an advisor than the same organization at a larger, public university. Some students want an advisor to be very involved; others will expect more distance. Expectations can also differ depending on how the organization is structured and the makeup of the group itself. Are the members paid or volunteers? Are they nominated from within the organization or by a campus-wide election? The advising needs of an organization and individual student leaders will vary within and across institutions. Being aware of these differences and tailoring your approach will help you be the most effective advisor possible.

Man-age (v.) to direct the affairs or interests of; direct or conduct business affairs

Manager (n.) One who controls resources and expenses

Managing—Wearing the Clown Hat

Not enough attention or credit is given to managers or the process of managing in student affairs. Too often we think about managing as maintaining the status quo or an average everyday task no one wants to do, yet one we all know is necessary. While there is some maintenance involved in managing, the role of manager is much more involved and complex than just coasting along. In reality, managers are talented jugglers who simultaneously pursue multiple projects and balance varied and sometimes conflicting priorities. An appropriate hat for the student affairs manager is a multi-colored crown hat complete with bells and a big pom-pom on top. Managers are much like the clowns at a circus who run around carrying those really tall sticks, balancing and spinning plates on top. Unfortunately, not much is known about the art of managing in student affairs. Sandeen (1991) suggests that to maintain good practice as managers we should:

- Study the environment;
- Create clear objectives;
- Recognize and reward;
- Assess regularly;
- Encourage teamwork;
- Demand excellence; and
- Demonstrate compassion.

This is certainly worthy advice, but the actions he mentions also relate to advising and supervising. So, what are the subtle differences between an advisor and a manager, or between a manager and a supervisor?

In the business sector, there is abundant literature about effective management and management techniques. Perhaps, as a profession, we should take our cues from the business community and increase conversation about these issues. Effective management is a learned skill, one that each of us will need at some point in our careers, especially if we move into more upper-level administrative positions where the supervisory and managerial responsibilities become more vast and more complex. More research should be done around this issue so we can learn how to keep those plates spinning without letting one of them fall and break.

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Just Say Know!
Mentor (n.) A wise and trusted counselor or teacher

Mentoring—Wearing the Wizard Hat

Thanks to the recent popularity of the Harry Potter books and movies (I am a fan, myself), most of us are familiar with the character of Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of the Hogwarts school. Although a bit cliché, he does represent everything that is beneficial and special about a mentoring relationship. The analogy of the wizard hat works here, as well. I picture mentors wearing big, floppy, wizard’s hats, purple ones with silver moons and gold stars. Dumbledore never tells Harry or any of his students what to do or imposes his own views and opinions on them. Rather, he observes from the wings, always in the background, yet he is available when needed. His words are wise, carefully chosen, well-timed and spoken with a caring, concerned heart. Mentors are like that, too. They are a prominent part of our lives, yet not an imposing one. They cheer us on from backstage, applauding when appropriate, cheering when we are discouraged and listening with an attentive ear when we need help or advice.

Like Harry, I, too, have the great fortune of having a professional mentor. She is an amazing woman, professional, supervisor, advisor, mother and friend to all of the people in her life. She is someone whom I actually met in college, when she advised a student programming group of which I was a part. I then worked in the same office the next year as a graduate assistant and she became my direct supervisor. We have been in contact ever since then. Not all mentoring relationships need to start out this way. A mentor does not have to be a person with whom you have worked; it is not a formalized relationship mandated by structure or position, like advising or supervising. Rather, a relationship between mentor and mentee evolves over time and takes many shapes and sizes, depending on the wants and needs of those involved.

Another benefit of a mentoring relationship is that it can be as informal or formal as you both want. It does not have to involve constant, one-on-one meetings, although it can take that form if it works for you and your mentor or you and your mentee. In a mentoring relationship there are no set guidelines about when you need to meet, what you should discuss, or what the objectives and outcomes of those meetings need to be. You and your mentor will figure out what works for you. My mentor lives in Boston, so it is not really practical for me to meet with her once a month, although that would be wonderful. We talk on the phone or communicate through e-mail. It is casual, comfortable and safe.

My relationship with my mentor has been ongoing for the last eight years. Throughout my career, she has been an invaluable source of advice, trusted counselor and experience. She, like so many mentors, has “been there and done that” and managed to survive it all, too. I have called her when I was in transition or job searching; faced with a difficult choice at work; deciding where I should apply for graduate school; negotiating maternity leave plans, etc. The list goes on and on. Through it all, she has never judged or scolded, but, like Dumbledore, offered wise words and stories from her experience. She has helped me navigate my own way, with the added benefit of the learning gleaned from her mistakes and successes.

The fact that my relationship with my mentor is easy should not downplay its value or significance to my life; quite the opposite. Her wisdom has been an invaluable resource to me as I have carved out my own career during the past six years. The research of Twale and Jelinek (1996) highlights this point. They found that the emotional ties between mentee and mentor are mutually beneficial and supportive and deeply regarded.

They also found that those who have mentors are more likely to serve as mentors to others and career student affairs professionals were more likely to mentor and to mentor entry level professionals. As professionals, we should be aware of this and be willing to make ourselves available as mentors to those who are entering the field.

Supervise (v.) To have the charge and direction of

Supervisor (n.) One who supervises

Supervising—Wearing the Captain’s and First Mate’s Hats

Like advising, supervising does not have always a clear dividing line. As supervisors, we also often serve as advisors, managers or mentors. For example, in my first professional position, I supervised a residence hall staff of 11 students. Some of those same students were also part of a departmental organization I advised. In addition, I formed close professional and personal bonds with some of those staff and our relationship evolved into a mentoring one. This situation is not unique. I am sure all of us have had similar experiences or currently serve in positions that call upon us to wear many hats at once.

One distinguishing feature between supervision and the other three hats is the level of accountability that exists in a supervisory relationship. As an employ-
ee, you report to and are accountable to your supervisor, who in turn is accountable to their supervisor and so on. Eventually, we are all accountable to the college or university. As such, we are required to honor and advance the various goals and mission of the institution where we work.

Another critical aspect that separates supervision from our other roles is evaluation. In a supervisory relationship, the supervisor is responsible for providing a formal evaluation of the staff member's performance. This is usually done on a yearly basis, around the time of the individual's hire date, or near the end of the fiscal year. It is important to distinguish between evaluation and feedback. An evaluation is a formal process, completed on an official university form that becomes part of the employee's permanent files. Evaluations are often used to determine salary increases and promotions. Evaluations should not contain any surprises, but should serve as a summary of the employee's performance over the course of the entire year. Feedback is a process, an informal conversation that happens on a more consistent basis and can be positive or critical in nature.

Winston and Creamer (1997) suggest that effective supervision is a shared process that promotes the accomplishment of institutional goals and advances the personal and professional development of staff.

Inherent in the supervisory relationship is mutuality. As supervisors we are responsible to our supervisees. We must act with integrity and fairness, clearly articulate our own and the department/university's goals and values, and establish mutually agreeable expectations for the work that is to be done and how it should be accomplished. Conversely, as those being supervised, we have equal responsibility for and ownership of the relationship. As supervisees, we must articulate our own goals for the job/position, what we hope to gain from the experience, how we like to receive feedback, etc.

Consequently, I think of the supervisory relationship as having two hats. The supervisor wears the captain’s hat, since they chart the course and steer the ship. An integral component, though, is the first mate, or the individual being supervised. You cannot have one without the other and both of them serve vital roles on the ship to keep it sailing smoothly.
Remember that we're all in this together.

Remember that you are not alone. Speak with trusted colleagues and other professionals about your experiences. Chances are they have experienced the same problems or issues and can speak from experience about how to handle them. Share your own strategies and tips for how to balance the multiple roles you play. Talk with students and ask them what they want, need, and expect from you as their advisor, manager, mentor, or supervisor. The mutuality of our roles can contribute to our confusion, but it also provides the most rewards.

Increase the conversation around these issues.

In student affairs/activities work, we all know we wear multiple hats, but we rarely give these hats labels. The process of naming our various roles and functions can help make our nebulous job descriptions more tangible and manageable. Having clear labels or identifiers provides some perspective about the many hats we wear on a daily basis, what they are, and how to manage them.

Introduce graduate students in preparation programs to these ideas, early and often.

One of our responsibilities as advisors, managers, mentors, and supervisors is to prepare the next generation of professionals. By exposing graduate students early and often to the various professional roles that exist, we will provide them with a more accurate picture of what they will be facing when they take their first professional positions and then advance further in the field. Rather than couching the complexity (and the rewards) of our positions in the “other duties as assigned” category, we should show students the multiple hats they will eventually wear and help them gain tangible skills and experience in actually wearing them.

Enhance self-awareness through reading and reflection.

Get familiar with the literature. For example, Advising Student Groups and Organizations by Dunkel and Schuh (1998) is a good, basic reference piece that highlights some of the responsibilities of an advisor. The book even has case study examples, sample agendas, constitutions, and handouts.

Cuiiet’s article, “Program Development and Advising,” which can be found in Student Services: A Handbook for the Profession (1996), is another solid piece. The more educated you are, the easier it will be to identify each of the hats you wear. Take the time to step back from your position(s) to identify which hat you wear and when. What are your strengths in each area? Where might you need further development in order to be more effective?

And finally, embrace the gray.

As our professional roles continue to blend, merge, and evolve, so will the requirement that we maintain our professional flexibility and keep our repertoire of skills current. We must learn to drift between our varied roles quickly and seamlessly. There will be times when we are called to serve all four roles at once and others when we can wear our hats separately and with distinct style. Having many hats in our closet to pull out when we need them is an asset to us as professionals, especially when we are riding on that bicycle with roses on our noses, bees on our knees …

References


About the Author

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