

# *Mentoring and Supervising Library Staff in a Theological Library*

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**N**EW AND EMERGING LIBRARY LEADERS, AS WELL AS THOSE WHO START A new theological library, often wonder what it takes to manage library personnel effectively and equitably. Whether a library director manages multiple employees or just one, supervising and mentoring library staff with different personality types, learning goals, and professional needs are not easy tasks. Particularly in a theological library setting where financial and human resources are limited and yet high performance and productivity are demanded, motivating library workers to achieve the organization's goals and fulfill their own potential can be quite challenging. How is it possible to develop and implement a model of library management that empowers both organizational growth and individual growth? This question has been central to the author, who has directed the Styberg Library

of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary since 2012. Based on her nine-year library management experience, the author in this chapter aims to present a relational and inclusive model of staff supervision and mentoring. While one model that has grown in a specific context cannot be universally applied to all settings, the author hopes that the model and practices represented here provide emerging and new library leaders with some insights and guidelines.

To give a brief description of the author's institution—Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, with a long history of 168 years, is a freestanding United Methodist seminary located on the campus of Northwestern University in the north suburbs of Chicago. The Styberg Library serves mainly the students, faculty, staff, and alumni of Garrett but, as an affiliate of Northwestern's library system, it also provides services to the Northwestern community as well as local clergy and researchers. Committed to serving everyone professionally, hospitably, and equitably in a welcoming environment, the Styberg Library aspires to advance the educational mission of Garrett by expanding access, enhancing the teaching and learning process, empowering research, and facilitating collaboration. The library is largely organized into four areas: collection development and acquisitions, cataloging and metadata, access and public services, and library instruction and technology. There are currently four full-time professional librarians, including the director, and one full-time paraprofessional staff. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the library had an additional workforce—fourteen or fifteen graduate students working ten hours weekly in a variety of roles—which would be most likely reinstated in a post-pandemic era. The library director reports to the vice president for academic affairs.

A relational-inclusive model of staff supervision and mentoring is currently limited to full-time library staff while it can be applied to student workers. Focusing on an organic relationship between organizational growth and individual growth, this model identifies five key guiding principles such as: 1) clear and open communication, 2) professional development and growth, 3) fairness and reciprocity, 4) hospitable and inclusive space, and 5) teamwork and shared responsibility. These values have emerged inductively from concrete processes and experiences, and each will be briefly discussed in the next section. In order for the readers to understand how each principle can be material-

ized in actual practices, the author will illustrate some examples which have been implemented in the Styberg Library.

*A Relational-Inclusive Model of Staff Supervision and Mentoring  
— Five Guiding Principles and Practices*

Influenced by transformational leadership theory, which James MacGregor Burns initially introduced in 1978 (Burns 1978) and Bernard Bass later expanded (Bass and Riggio 2006), the author calls her model of staff supervision and mentoring a relational-inclusive model. Similar to the theory of transformational leadership, this model focuses on providing a clear vision and goals for the library, offering individualized support and mentoring to each staff, and fostering creativity and innovative thinking. In order to empower individuals and facilitate positive changes in the library, the relational-inclusive model especially emphasizes the significance of creating and nurturing an open and inclusive space among library staff. This model is composed of five primary guiding principles, which are organically interconnected to one another and helpful in carrying out the model practically.

First, *clear and open communication*. The author begins with two questions here. What is communication and why is it important? According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, communication has two meanings: 1) a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior; 2) personal rapport (Merriam-Webster Dictionary n.d.). Communication is important, since it can promote or impede the cognitive understanding or relational quality between people. Oftentimes, people in the leadership position think of communication as giving a command or delivering a message unilaterally. Closed, unilateral, and unclear communication causes confusion, powerlessness, and compartmentalization among individuals and within the group. On the contrary, open, bilateral, and clear communication encourages understanding, agency, and connection. Genuine and mutual communication enables listening with care and speaking with clarity so that individual staff members can experience a relational-inclusive culture within their team.

Regular weekly and monthly meetings are practices that the author's library has established to advance open and qualita-

tive communication among staff. At first, Monday weekly meetings, thirty minutes long, started as a way to communicate to one another what would happen in the library in general and in each person's area in particular. Monthly meetings, sixty to ninety minutes long, were also scheduled to discuss a variety of library-related agendas in more detail and depth. The initial purpose of these meetings was to ensure that the tasks and projects meet deadlines and to share information for collaboration and support. Gradually, these meetings have also become a space to connect and engage with one another by sharing personal stories of joy and sadness. The entire team would celebrate any individual person's achievements or happy news together. When a staff person lost their family member, other staff members would step up to comfort the grieving person and offer assistance to cover their chat shift or other duties. Clear and open communication cultivates a community of trust and collegiality.

Second, *professional development and growth*. As indicated in the introduction, a relational-inclusive model emphasizes an organic relationship between institutional growth and individual growth. Traditionally, librarians have been considered as gatekeepers of informational resources or maintainers of the status quo. In a relational-inclusive model, however, librarians perceive themselves as lifelong learners, community builders, and change makers. Their ongoing development and maturation, in this view, is key to advancing the mission of the library as well as fulfilling their own potential and goals. To be more specific, professional development and growth may be equated with attending a professional conference, presenting a paper, or taking a profession-related course. From the author's perspective, professional development and growth is quintessentially a relational concept, which is enabled by mutual attention and interest between two individuals—a supervisor-mentor and a staff-mentee. Professional growth does not happen in an isolated, privatized setting; rather, it takes place in the mutual space where a mentee shares goals and aspirations, and a mentor listens and responds with care.

To approach staff management and development from the perspective of a relational-inclusive model, the author's library launched a cyclical mentoring system that involves a goal conference, individual consultations, and performance reviews. At the beginning of each fiscal year (early July), a library director

and an individual staff member meet to discuss individual goals that have already been identified by the staff. They also discuss the staff's timelines and action plans as well as the library priorities. The staff finalizes the goals based on the conversation with the supervisor. Throughout the year, the staff schedules individual consultations with the supervisor once or twice per month to discuss the progress or challenges, and the supervisor offers a listening ear and constructive feedback or needed support. A performance review, which is usually scheduled in late spring or early summer, depending on the seminary's schedule, focuses mainly on the staff person's growth and development while also celebrating the successful completion of tasks and projects. When a goal is not accomplished due to an unexpected situation, it will be carried over to the next year's list of goals.

Third, *fairness and reciprocity*. Concepts of fairness and reciprocity are interrelated and critical in actualizing a relational-inclusive model. While the notion of fairness can be interpreted in several different ways, the author, in the context of library management, defines it as equal treatment of individuals. Fairness refers to just and impartial treatment of people without prejudice or discrimination based on their identity, background, rank, or other social factors. The principle of fairness does not exclude the fact that there are differences in positions, roles, and responsibilities within the library. Yet, it affirms that each member of the group is treated justly, their voices are given equal respect, and opportunities for development are offered fairly. In this situation, fairness proliferates reciprocity within the group. The idea of reciprocity refers to the practice of interchanging mutual respect and equal treatment for one another. Fairness and equitable treatment are expected reciprocally between individuals or groups.

Then, how can the principle of fairness and reciprocity be embodied in a concrete situation? While fairness and reciprocity can be experienced in supervisory relationships or group interactions, they can also be demonstrated in the written documents such as a library staff handbook. The handbook is often considered as a way of setting and enforcing rules and policies, but it can also be utilized as a means of conveying such relational and communal values as fairness and reciprocity. The Styberg Library's handbook indicates that all library staff members are fairly provided one development hour per week during their

work hours. How they use their development hour is an individual's choice. They sometimes decide to attend a webinar, audit a seminary course, or read a journal article. The handbook also states that each staff person is provided an equal amount of professional development funding. While the amount varies year by year, it communicates that each member's professional needs matter and receive equal attention.

Fourth, *hospitable and inclusive space*. How one creates and nourishes a hospitable and inclusive space within the library team is fundamental to actualizing a relational-inclusive model. Many contemporary libraries are aware of the diversity among the populations they serve and try to develop a service model that recognizes the differences and represents inclusivity for their communities. Library workers are expected to serve as joyful agents of welcome and friendliness while providing a safe and hospitable space to all users. Interestingly enough, it is not much emphasized that library staff also need to experience the power of a hospitable and inclusive space themselves and be nurtured in that space. A hospitable and inclusive space enables individuals to explore and express their ideas and feelings freely and openly, without worry or anxiety. It also helps them foster mutual recognition and acceptance despite their differences. Building such a space does not happen automatically or overnight; it takes some intentional efforts.

While hospitality and inclusivity can be practiced in all sorts of daily relational encounters and group interactions, strategically devised activities can contribute to further solidifying the germinating culture of hospitality. Among multiple activities that the author's library has conducted are annual retreats, staff birthday parties, and end-of-semester staff appreciation breakfasts. Particularly, annual library retreats take place for a day typically in mid-summer. Each year, the theme for a retreat varies, yet such items—visioning and strategic planning process, discovering self and others, picnic or field trip—are usually included. At the most recent retreat, library staff had an opportunity to take Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) personality tests and share their findings, which helped to understand one another better. The library team also took a field trip to a local museum and archives, which opened an opportunity not only to learn the local history but also to simply enjoy themselves in accompaniment with others.

Last, *teamwork and shared responsibility*. Building a mutual relationship and an inclusive space within the library leads to teamwork and shared responsibility. If the preceding four principles focus more on the process, the final principle of teamwork and shared responsibility demonstrates the outcome. As one can imagine, teamwork and shared responsibility cannot be expected in a circumstance where open and clear communication is not practiced, individual growth and development is not encouraged; fair treatment and reciprocity is not experienced, and a hospitable and inclusive space is not built. Only when those four principles are in operation, library team members can finally start participating in teamwork and sharing responsibilities for the common good, even if it means having to learn new skills, covering someone else's shifts, or reorganizing normal work schedules. The principle of teamwork and shared responsibility becomes truly critical, especially in crisis or unprecedented situations.

For instance, during the pandemic which started in March 2020, the Styberg Library had to confront and respond to unseen challenges and barriers, just like most other libraries around the globe. Three months after the complete shutdown of the campus, library staff were allowed to go back to the library so that they could provide its user community with limited physical services such as curbside pickup, scanning, and ILL. While the library had developed clear guidelines and procedures for safety and workflows before resuming those limited services, it was still an uncomfortable and fearful situation. It also meant that they all had to perform circulation duties when working in the library every other week, regardless of their normal responsibilities. What the library team has embodied and represented for the past few months is the spirit of teamwork and shared responsibility. For the collective good of the library and its community, they readjusted their work schedules and reorganized their priorities and workflows willingly. With an outstanding and faithful service to users, the library is now perceived as the symbolic center of the seminary by many.

## Conclusion

Above, the author illustrated a relational-inclusive model as an effective and equitable model of staff supervision and mentoring. With a purpose to accomplish organizational goals and, at the same time, fulfill individual potential, the author emphasized a relational-inclusive model as critical to fostering agency and creativity as well as to facilitating positive changes within the library. The author also presented five key guiding principles—open and clear communication, professional development and growth, fairness and reciprocity, hospitable and inclusive space, and teamwork and shared responsibility—as tools to carry out a relational-inclusive model in concrete situations. A few practices that have been developed and implemented in the author’s library context were suggested as examples.

As the author mentioned previously, this relational-inclusive model and its five guiding principles have been identified and re-defined in a specific library context through observations and reflections. They also went through modifications as a response to constant changes from the internal and external environments. Some principles and practices may be relevant to some libraries while others may not. It is the author’s hope that the readers can critically appropriate some of the ideas presented here in their specific situations.

## Works Cited

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