Supervising the 'hired hands', Un-supervising the 'professionals'

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If an outdoor professional is at the same time "a hired hand" and "master of one's fate", how does an organization manage this paradox? How is it possible to 'supervise' the 'hired hand', yet 'un-supervise' to allow flexibility and judgment?

"Hired hand" and "master of one's fate"

Professionalism, writes Robert Kegan in his book *In Over Our Heads* (1998), can be expressed as *serving simultaneously in the position of "hired hand" and "master of one's fate"*.

This definition works well for our purposes, in that it captures the paradox inherent in guiding adventure trips or leading outdoor education. In essence, Kegan argues a 'professional' reaches a certain point of realization and maturity where these two opposing ideas can be balanced: working for someone else and doing as instructed ("hired hand") and at the same time following one's own ethical guidelines and doing what an individual believes to be right ("master of one's fate"). This, he implies, is not a 'rules versus judgment' argument, but a 'rules *and* judgment' argument.

Hite (2000), in explaining this concept for the outdoor industry, wrote:

In this job the employer requires me to go out on a mountain ridge with clients, yet fully expects me to gauge the situation on the fly and improvise measures to both ensure safety and provide a very high quality service. If I cannot understand that I am at once an employee and yet also a free agent who incorporates in his judgment the essence of the job, I am going to be quite confused by the essentially unsupervised aspects of outdoor guiding.

Further, Kegan (1998) writes:

It may well be that the capacity… to hold onto two different conceptions of power and authority within one work relationship is a capacity people would want to associate with their concept of 'professionalism'. (p. 158)

What is relevant for this paper is not the definition of 'professionalism', but instead the "two different conceptions of power and authority". Accepting that one of those authorities is the individual's ethics and judgment (master of one's fate), the other power is that of the organization, that which hired and directs the 'professional'. How, then, is it possible to 'supervise' the 'hired hand', yet 'un-supervise' the professional to allow flexibility and judgment? How is the balance between rules and judgment established, maintained, and monitored?

Hired hands and professionals: supervision expectations

Marsick and Watkins (1990) identify three channels of learning for and in the workplace: (figure 1)

Learning / training	Defined by:	For example:
Formal	Structured schooling or training	Outdoor Recreation Degree, WFR
Informal	Self directed, career or skill related	Skill development, expeditions, reading manuals, practicing
Incidental	Unplanned lessons	Solving challenging problems, co-instructing with peers

Figure 1: Learning opportunities in the workplace (Marsick and Watkins, 1990)

The first two of these learning opportunities, formal and informal training, could be considered 'paths' to becoming an outdoor professional. For example, the Outdoor Recreation Degree graduate (formal training) who goes on to work for an outdoor education centre; or conversely the self taught sea kayaker (informal training) who goes on to become a guide, based on their experience and skill. The third learning opportunity, incidental learning, is woven into the first two, but is more importantly a vital learning tool that stands on its own once an individual is established in the workplace.

The graduate and the sea kayaker will have fundamentally different supervision expectations based on their path into the industry. Formal training is based on a traditional academic model, which mandates individual study based on research and 'expert' opinion. Success is measured by the ability to excel within specified parameters. On the other hand, informal learning is pursued at the discretion of the individual, in any or many directions, and is based on trial and error (figure 2).

Learning / training	Learning characterized by:	Overheard saying:	Risk tolerance influenced by:	Supervision expectations
Formal	Autonomy / isolation	"We're in this together, but I'm on my own."	Expert opinion	Parameters
Informal	Personal directed	"I'm on my own."	Trial and error	Minimal interference
Incidental	Collaboration	"We're in this together."	Peers	Collaboration

Figure 2: Key characteristics of each learning path

This paper contends that within broad stereotypes, the individual's training shapes their supervision expectations. Just as every individual has a preferred learning style, so they will have a preferred supervision style, one that will be based, at least in part, on their experience in gaining professional skills. Those from a formal background prefer supervision based on parameters and clear expectations indicating successful completion (much like the environment in which they were trained). Informal, self directed learners expect minimal interference from a supervisor, and an opportunity to set individual goals and create room for trail and error experimentation (as they learned).

Supervision models by default

The above argument implies, then, that there must be different supervision models.

First, the scope of the term 'supervisor' for this argument's sake is useful, although not specific. Lead guide, trip leader, or head instructor could be considered a 'front line' supervisor, directly overseeing other staff in the delivery of the product. Program managers, coordinators, or directors could also be supervisors, perhaps at a level removed from the clientele and at a more macro level compared to the trip leader. The emphasis of this paper concerns the management level of supervision, with some application to field supervisors.

In the outdoor industry, the delivery level supervisors and the management level supervisors almost exclusively come from the field, having worked their way up the ranks from field staff to course leader to program manager (an exception to this rule could be an academic based program where supervisors come from other management areas with perhaps little direct knowledge of the product being delivered). This offers several advantages – the supervisor knows the staff, clientele, environment, trip / course outcomes, progression and procedures – but at the same time offers one major drawback: *supervisors promoted from the field*

rarely have the necessary skills to effectively manage staff. With the promotion often comes minimal training, maximum challenge, and higher risk of burn out.

While this is not the forum to inventory the requisite skills for effective supervision, without thorough training in the new role the new supervisor will, by default, either supervise others in the way they prefer to be supervised (based partly on their formal/informal path and expectations), or supervise in a hierarchical and directive fashion. Either of these options may or may not work, depending on the background and expectations of the staff being supervised.

Supervising based on the supervised

Supervisors need to know and adapt to meet different expectations of the staff they are supervising. Supervising staff is all about the staff, and helping them be successful at the task at hand. The supervisor, therefore, is only an enabler, who relates the parameters or expectations to the individuals who will fulfill the task. For newer staff, this is typically a more directive approach than would be taken with an experienced individual, making allowance for the discussion above.

Supervisors need to continue to adapt to maturing staff. Regardless of the 'path' into the industry, experience inevitably leads to incidental learning opportunities (Marsick and Watkins, 1990), with long time staff relying heavily on incidental learning to progress in their skill development (figure 3). An example of this would be degree program graduate (position 1 in figure 3) who relies heavily on their formal training when they start their work in the field. As their experience grows and time passes, informal and incidental learning are incorporated into their judgment base and their formal training takes on a less prominent role in their decision making (position 2 in figure 3). Supervisors need to be aware of this transfer, and adapt their supervising to a more collegial style, that is working with the individual, rather than telling them what to do (refer to figure 2) (Marsick and Watkins, 1999).
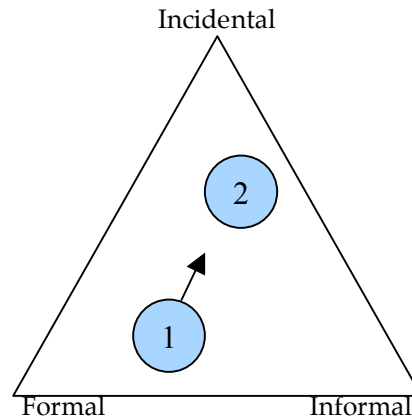
Figure 3: individuals move towards more emphasis on Incidental learning as their experience grows

Supervisors can play a key role in the professional development of staff by facilitating this transition towards incidental learning. Teschner and Wolter (1990) outline five benefits of this learning to the outdoor organization, which revolve around personal growth, which may be "intrinsically more important to staff than pay and other benefits", less risk of burn out, and a higher functioning organization. The writers assert "If we want our programs to achieve the highest level possible, we must constantly act to ensure that our staff achieves their highest levels."

Does there need to be a supervisor? Prove it.

This is perhaps the most valuable question an organization can ask itself. Why, exactly, does there need to be some 'higher' level of authority than the front line guides? The answer will likely include some or all of the following:

□   to ensure consistency in meeting organizational outcomes

□   to ensure client satisfaction

□   to ensure risk management procedures are adhered to

□   to coordinate multiple logistical elements required for delivery

□   for professional development of staff

Prioritize the above list from most to least important, and the solution to 'supervising' the 'hired hand' and 'un-supervising' the professional starts to take shape. Clearly, the highest organizational (and supervisor's) priorities are the ones that require the most attention, direction and supervision. If risk management is the key role of the supervisor, then it is appropriate to dictate to staff how risk management should be dealt with (supervising the hired hand). However, if this aspect is secondary to consistency in meeting organizational outcomes, then large areas of risk management should be left to the judgment of the trained and experienced guide (master of one's fate), while more direction is offered in ensuring consistency.

Within the reasonable assumption of staff adequately trained for their role and certain 'guidelines' being in place that all staff must follow (i.e. standard procedures regarding consistency, client satisfaction, and risk management), an implicit assumption is made that not all areas of a guided trip or outdoor education can be supervised from an administrative point of view. Indeed, what is the purpose of the organization? In matters dealing with this core value, all staff could be considered 'hired hands', whose purpose is to deliver that value to the client. In the surrounding matters (such as perhaps logistics or risk management), staff must be considered professionals. Sorting through the hyperbole of mission statements and asking "But what do we *really* do?" may offer some assistance in defining this core value, and hence the supervisor's key role.

The trip leader, then, plays the role of intermediary, and that individual's experience and familiarity with the program is trusted to fill the unsupervised gaps – letting the professionals do their thing.

Re-thinking the supervision tools of the outdoor professional

Omitting the discussion of effective supervision and leadership in the field (well covered by other authors, and rightly so as it is worthy of great attention from an organizational point of view), and considering instead the administrative supervisor's role, some 'standard' supervision tools are utilized to shape what goes on in the field: logbooks or trip reports, pre and post trip briefings, client feedback forms, and staff manuals, among others. Any and all of these may have their place within the organization; however their effectiveness as a supervision tool may be overly optimistic (figure 4).

The emphasis of any supervision tool should complement the organization's and supervisor's priorities. Ideally, the organization's training is so thorough and procedures so seamless, that supervision becomes a formality to ensure the system is working.

Supervision tool	Intended use	Realistic application	Appropriate for:	Does not:
Logbook / trip report	Documentation, opportunity to reflect	Not kept diligently, rushed	Factual documentation	Address 'why?' or promise reflection
Pre-trip briefing	Set goals, relate expectations	Same	All applications	Ensure follow through
Post trip debrief	Evaluate goals, critique decisions	'Incriminating' information omitted by staff	Discussion of events and decisions, sharing views	Relate complexity of situation, relate discussion to action
Client feedback	Ensure quality of delivery	Client view overly positive or negative, depending on personal experience	Understanding client perspective	Provide realistic perspective on staff performance
Field visits	Ensure expectations being met, guidelines followed	Staff 'on best behaviour'	Client relations, program development	Ensure follow through
Staff meetings	Share information	Generic, non-targeted information w/o personal context	Delivering information quickly	Ensure personal reflection or ensure follow through

Figure 4: Administrative supervision tools for not-in-the-field supervisors

Conclusion

In staff management, Watters (1990) writes "finding the right people is not the problem. Rather, the challenge… is dealing with the over-enthusiastic and eventually over-worked employee." Motivating the staff is typically not the issue; motivating them to do things a certain way, follow certain guidelines, and meet certain outcomes sometimes is.

Effective supervision becomes a balance between knowing and adapting to the individual's supervision expectations (which changes over time) and meeting organizational priorities. Any two individuals will be treated differently. Any supervision tools must be thought out as to how they meet established priorities and apply to the individual. Staff can be considered hired hands regarding key organizational values, and treated as professionals to fill in the gaps using their training and judgment.

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