

Staff Training To Meet Personnel Needs of Public Welfare Agencies

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THE TURN-OVER OF PERSONNEL in State agencies shown in a survey recently completed by the Bureau of Public Assistance points up the serious impact of the war on public welfare staffs. The earlier inroads on clerical staff are now extending to the social service divisions. Field representatives, case supervisors, county directors, and workers are being attracted to opportunities in other organizations, both welfare and industrial. Vacancies thus created remain, in some instances, unfilled because qualified staff is lacking. The supervisory services have been unusually threatened by the demand for trained personnel in other agencies that expand during a period of emergency. Shortage of qualified advisory personnel is of special concern at this time, since the operation of both war-connected and established programs depends in large part on the adequacy of supervision.

Agencies awake to the problem are beginning to take action. The first and most obvious attack is already being tried in a number of places, that is, a positive, aggressive recruiting program in cooperation with merit-system councils. This approach is unquestionably sound and should be encouraged and extended. Nevertheless, since the shortage of well-prepared personnel appears to be country-wide, each agency should begin immediately to build up a reservoir of available candidates within its own organization whose training and experience particularly qualify them for supervisory positions. Much can be done toward meeting this problem if agencies will assume responsibility for consistently developing the capacity of their own employees. In so doing, however, they will want to maintain present standards of selection. Educational qualifications, for example, can scarcely be lowered without impairing administration. Qualifying experience, to be valid, should have the basic content necessary for a practical learning experience. Training programs, therefore, should consider two possi-

bilities: better use of training opportunities on the job, and extension of educational leave with pay to a larger number of promising staff in the lower grades.

In considering plans to test and develop better-qualified personnel, training must be individualized in relation to staff capacity, and every employee should have an opportunity to grow on the job. Careful and continuing evaluation of performance will give the agency an awareness of employee strengths and limitations and will serve as a basis for further planning.

The first step in intensifying training is a study, however brief, of the equipment of the present agency staff. An analysis of each worker's qualifications, including his education, prior experience, and service record with the agency, must be made. While personnel information is almost routinely recorded and systematically kept in agency files, surprisingly little use is made of such data by agency personnel responsible for training. The employee's qualifications and experience at the time he was appointed, plus his cumulative service record, are the soundest and most indispensable bases for planning development of his capacities in the interests of the agency program. Study of personnel information should be supplemented by conference with the supervisors who have current information on the employee's performance. Growth of a particular employee on the job, however, is affected by many factors other than his own capacity. The quality of his supervision, one of the chief considerations, should be borne in mind by anyone undertaking an analysis of personnel records. In planning to intensify training of potential supervisors, the agency will also wish to give consideration to the following steps:

1. Identifying the knowledge and skills needed in the job of supervisor, for planning additional individual training for outstanding employees;
2. Examining and evaluating the regular administrative and supervisory processes which should have within them important training opportunities;

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3. Utilizing opportunities that either exist already or could be created to give individual workers specific and increasingly responsible experiences.

Knowledge and Skills Needed

Analysis of the skills needed in supervisory positions is an essential step in any agency plan for developing supervisory personnel. Study of a supervisor's or county director's job shows that a considerable part of the basic skill required by a competent visitor is carried over and used more intensively in line positions of greater responsibility. It is likewise apparent that many new skills must be learned. For example, a detailed break-down of the job of case supervisor indicates that a person in such a position needs not only competence in the case worker's job but also skill in certain areas of administration and supervision.

Skill in maintaining and developing the agency's standards of service.—This area includes current knowledge of the quality of agency service through continuous review of selected case material, study of agency operations, and the like; identifying needs for new or revised policies, procedures, and services; adapting new methods of administration to the individual agency situation; and developing new methods and skills to meet changes in the agency program.

Skill in organizing work under supervision.—Another major area of the job involves planning work to be done in relation to time available; developing and utilizing administrative controls; adjusting the work of the unit to varying demands; coordinating work of different units; assigning responsibility according to capacity of staff members; and analyzing and improving routine operations.

Skill in individual and group supervision.—This area covers analyzing and selecting content for individual and group supervision; interpreting agency objectives, policies, and procedures in such a way as to increase staff understanding and competence; relating the help given through supervision to the intellectual and emotional readiness of the staff member for such help; and evaluating staff performance as a basis for continuing supervision.

Skill in interagency relationships and community planning.—The adequate supervisor must be able to initiate, develop, and maintain professional

working relationships with personnel in other agencies; to interpret the agency program to persons outside the organization; to analyze community and individual situations which reflect need for new services; and to stimulate the interest of lay and official persons who may give leadership and support to the agency and community program.

Thoughtful analysis of the requirements of each supervisory job will suggest to the agency specific and appropriate content for training purposes.¹

Since the essential task of all personnel carrying supervisory responsibility—county supervisor, county director, and field supervisor—is to help others do their job more effectively, supervisors need to have superior ability in the type of work they are supervising and to be able to transmit this technical knowledge effectively. In brief, the worker who has potentialities for a more responsible position in the organization will need the opportunity to increase his skill in all aspects of his immediate job and to work intensively in areas which require the capacity for leadership. With these primary training objectives in mind, the agency can examine current opportunities for employee development and plan additional experiences. It is recognized that the agency must rely on professional schools of social work to give the employee a considerable part of the basic equipment needed as a case worker and supervisor. Nevertheless, the agency has its own responsibility to create and use training opportunities within the organization so that staff may be helped in an actual job situation. This training undertaken by the agency, to be realistic, must be consistently based on a clear understanding of the knowledge and skill actually needed to do the job.

Examining and Evaluating Existing Training Opportunities

In examining and evaluating existing training opportunities within the organization, the agency should first consider the help given to a new employee in his first few weeks with the agency. What provision has been made to assure a positive learning experience for the new worker? The

¹ For further discussion of content of supervisory jobs in public assistance agencies, see *Supervision as an Administrative Process Contributing to Staff-Development*, Bureau Circular No. 6, Social Security Board, Bureau of Public Assistance, November 1940.

first period of work in a new job has tremendous psychological significance. It may determine the employee's relationship with the agency and condition not only his immediate performance but his future value to the organization as well. If early in this experience the new worker gains understanding of the agency's desire to give a high standard of service and is helped, through careful supervision and gradual assignment of work load, to do a thorough, skillful job, he has a real chance to develop to his fullest capacity.

In the first few months with the organization, the new worker should learn how to carry increasing responsibility for the services he administers—a responsibility to be assigned only on the basis of satisfactory performance. The old adage "sink or swim" has no place in the staff-development program of a public welfare agency with any regard for maintaining standards of service. It is equally fallacious in terms of its effect on workers when they attain positions of greater responsibility. The new worker who is handed a large case load² and given relatively little guidance is the potential county director who never learns to organize a day's work and always handles situations on an emergency basis; he can scarcely become effective as an executive because as a visitor he never learned the elementary steps in planning and organizing a service job.³

If the new worker has been well started, what can the agency do to determine his capacity and develop his ability? A primary consideration is the ability of his present supervisor. Above all else, the employee, having worked through the many hazards of the first weeks in the agency, needs a satisfactory working relationship with his supervisor. A skilled supervisor can establish such a relationship with less difficulty than one who is inexperienced or has limited technical preparation for the job. Nevertheless, many supervisors with somewhat limited capacities can be helped to an understanding of themselves and others, which is vital to a successful supervisory relationship. The minimum essential in the supervisor's equipment is that he have sufficient under-

² Throughout this statement the jobs of visitor and supervisor are frequently used for illustrative purposes. The principles suggested, however, should apply to all classes of jobs.

³ For fuller discussion of considerations involved in orientation of new personnel, see *The Orientation Period for Public Assistance Staffs as Part of a Total Staff Development Program*, Bureau Circular No. 11, Social Security Board, Bureau of Public Assistance. 1941.

standing of and skill in the visitor's job to give the necessary supervision of all important aspects of the visitor's performance. This concept does not presuppose supervisors with great strength and no limitations. It merely suggests that the adequate supervisor is one who can contribute to the all-round growth of the worker through careful help on the whole job. When supervisors present certain limitations in a particular aspect of the work, the agency has a responsibility to supplement such supervision with other developmental opportunities for the staff. Intensifying the use of consultants may be one way of meeting such difficulty; well-planned regional meetings can also help to fill the gap.

In many agencies, however, supervisors are consistently giving help which results in the worker's fairly steady progress. With some stimulation and encouragement, supervisors can extend opportunities for staff growth on a more carefully planned individualized basis so that all employees will be helped to make their maximum contribution to the agency's development.

Utilizing Specific Opportunities Within the Agency

What are the opportunities which can be utilized by the agency executive or supervisor in developing his staff to their fullest capacity? Staff meetings have definite possibilities. The employee who has already shown some ability to participate effectively in group meetings can receive progressively additional responsibilities. Presenting material at staff meeting as a basis for discussion will give the worker an opportunity to learn how to develop and present subject matter so that it will be intelligible, interesting, and useful to the whole staff. Leading a staff discussion on a subject with which the worker is thoroughly familiar will develop skill in directing an integrated and well-coordinated group discussion.

If the worker can assist in planning a total staff meeting, he will understand the factors which must be considered in such planning, e. g., continuing staff needs, administrative considerations such as clearance of current information, and the proportion of time allotted to particular subjects. Acting as chairman of the staff group responsible for planning agency staff meetings gives the worker an additional opportunity to interpret what he has learned to a small group and to develop under-

standing and acceptance of these ideas. He will also have the valuable experience of working continuously as a leader in a professional group—of learning to evaluate the strength of the individual members and to utilize these abilities in relation to the group project.

Development and use of community services offer excellent opportunities for stimulating a worker's capacity. In the normal course of his job, a worker becomes aware of community needs and the services available to meet such needs; he likewise acquires some skill in the use of these resources. An agency executive or supervisor with imagination can, through planning, make it possible for a promising worker to assume more responsibility in such areas. The worker might, for example, represent the welfare department on interagency committees which deal with subject matter in which the worker has competence. He then has an opportunity to observe and grasp more fully the functional interrelationships of the various agencies; he gains understanding and skill in working with professional staff who have different specialized interests; and he develops a greater sensitivity to community needs and the adequacy with which they are met.

Another possible activity might be the use of special assignments, such as interpreting the agency's policy or procedure to an interested lay or official person who raises general questions or seeks information not specifically related to the handling of an individual case situation. Selected assignments of this kind develop the skill of the worker in interpreting broader aspects of the program. Total considerations involved in program planning will become more familiar to him as he learns to give attention to and interpret all factors underlying the direction of particular aspects of services.

The development of policy and procedure can be utilized by the agency to help improve the worker's skill. As a part of his regular job the worker keeps the supervisor advised of the effects of the application of policy and procedure on the individual case. Through staff meetings and committee groups he can also participate in discussions of policy formulation and revision. Special assignments can be made to give him responsibility in this area. He might, for example, review the effect of policy and procedure through a planned sampling review of case records and might study other material in the

agency which shows the effects of policy and procedure. On the basis of such a review, he might organize for agency consideration the findings in relation to questions raised about current policy and procedure. Evaluation of the data might be based on a review of the experience of other agencies presented in surveys, reports, and other literature. Under the direction and with the assistance of appropriate agency personnel, he could draft tentative policy and procedure statements which are developed or adapted by local agencies, and could draft instructional material relating to application of agency policy. As a member of the agency policy committee he could prepare material at the request of the committee for use in discussing and interpreting the findings to committee members.

From such experiences the worker learns how to approach, systematically and soundly, problems which confront supervisors and directors. He is able to grasp more fully how agency objectives are implemented by appropriate policy and procedure. He deepens his understanding both of considerations basic to policy formulation and of ways in which the staff may be drawn effectively into this aspect of administration.

Special assignments for staff meetings and on committees, responsibility for policy formulation and application, and participation in interagency relationships are only a few of the possibilities which may be suggestive to the supervisor who is eager to stimulate growth of the staff on an individualized basis. Certain organizational aspects, particularly the development of administrative controls, may also offer possibilities for training. Other developmental opportunities occur in such areas as performing special case assignments, participating in community-wide studies, and planning workers' institutes. The visitor whose work is thus enriched with challenging, yet not too difficult, new experiences usually responds by handling his job with more resourcefulness and skill born of sharpened interest.

In utilizing these opportunities, the agency will, of course, want to bear in mind the worker's present classification. Special assignments would need to be within the general scope of his current job responsibility. If such safeguards are followed, no misunderstanding need arise regarding the worker's status. It should be clear to all concerned that supervisory positions will be filled

through the established method of giving full consideration to all eligible persons in order to select the best-qualified candidate.

Transfers

Much can also be done in the field of development of staff through careful selection and possible transfer when a vacancy occurs. Even transfers within the same classification can result in a positive growth experience for the employee. Too often, when a vacancy occurs, an agency administrator or personnel officer arranges a direct replacement from the register. Good public welfare administration, as well as sound personnel practice, indicates the value of reviewing the qualifications and performance of present staff members to determine when a transfer may be beneficial to both the employee and the agency. It is possible that a case worker with good potential, but somewhat limited, experience can benefit by working for an extended period in the recently vacated position, if it has within it certain training opportunities not present in the worker's current job. These opportunities would include a somewhat different pattern of community organization, either more or less complex than the community in which the worker has been operating, or supervision of a quality which would accelerate his growth on the job. Urban areas where there are more specialized jobs within the same classification can, from time to time, make more extensive use of this method. Agencies continuing to carry differentiated case loads will see the advantage of developing the worker's skill and broadening his experiences through work with different categories.

Transfers within the same classification, if wisely handled, may also make possible a more suitable initial placement for a new worker, in itself of definite value to the agency in maintaining its standards of service. The transfer will present a challenge to the experienced worker with a good service record, while the new employee can take on the simpler responsibilities formerly handled by the old employee. The possibility of assigning the new worker to a supervisor skilled in orienting and guiding new employees may also be realized if an occasional transfer is so arranged that the new person need not be placed automatically in the original vacancy, regardless of quality of supervision or degree of responsibility.

Use of Educational Leave

An analysis of personnel records, as well as identification of knowledge and skills needed by the supervisor, will point up the need for professional education for staff who can contribute to the agency's program in positions of responsibility. While it is recognized that the number of staff members to whom full-time educational leave can be given is small in any agency, consistent use of an educational-leave policy will in time provide a substantial corps of qualified staff. One Middle Western State has, over a period of 5 years, substantially improved the quality of the field staff by granting leave to two or three staff members each year. Some of these employees were members of county staffs, and as they became better equipped they were appointed to more responsible positions. Another State agency, recognizing an incipient shortage in qualified case supervisors, has initiated the practice of granting leave to carefully selected county visitors. In this way the agency can fill vacant supervisory positions as qualified staff return from schools of social work.

When promising staff members already have a substantial part of their professional education, it is frequently desirable to give them short full-time leave in order to finish their work. In other instances, it may be possible to allow a few hours a week for participation in a seminar sponsored by a nearby school of social work. Employees whose work indicates a capacity for assuming more responsibility should be helped in every way possible to obtain the professional preparation required for positions of leadership in the agency.

A number of agencies are finding it possible to continue paying full or part salary to workers on leave at school. The advantages of such a sound investment of funds have been proved as agencies have benefited by the leadership these employees have been able to give on their return. Agencies which believe they cannot yet finance such a plan can undertake an educational-leave policy which, although it does not continue the salary, does encourage the worker to go to school with assurance that the agency will have a place for him on his return. A number of private scholarships and fellowships are offered yearly by schools of social work and other organizations interested in further-

ing professional education in the field of social welfare. Employees with good service records and the required undergraduate credits should be encouraged to take advantage of these opportunities and will undoubtedly do so if they are convinced that the agency sees substantial value in a period of graduate study designed to prepare them for more effective work in the program.

At no time has it been more important for agency directors and supervisors to consider ways in which staff can serve at full capacity on the job. A war period demands effective use of all services in the community and of each individual within his own agency. Supervisors with imagination and re-

sourcefulness will see that all staff have an opportunity to contribute to the work of the agency, in whatever way they can best serve. This may be in the area of more intensive case-work service or in helping the supervisor or county director plan administrative aspects of the work. Staff are eager, responsive, and more interested in remaining on the job when their strengths are recognized, developed, and used for the benefit of a better welfare program. Aware of this fact, administrative personnel should consciously attempt to direct every aspect of the program in a way which develops the potentialities of their staff and prepares them for increasingly effective service.