

What qualities do great supervisors have in common?

The following responses are available on AALLNET only. For the responses published in the December 2009 issue of *AALL Spectrum*, please see the issue in its entirety.

“As a law library director for 28 years, I would first note that supervisors at different levels often have different qualities that make them great in the roles they play. With that said, I believe that great directors at large organizations have the following qualities: (1) A great director listens to staff, to superiors and stakeholders, and to those they serve. (2) A great director understands clearly the mission of the organization, relates that mission to others, and inculcates the values of that mission and the organization in staff members. (3) With respect to staff, a great director keeps them informed about the organization, and always enunciates the decision mechanism to be used when informing them, e.g., the decision has already been made; the director has a plan but seeks input; the director has no plan or several options and seeks input; the director seeks a consensus of staff that she/he will follow if it does not conflict with outside factors; or the staff will make the decision (by consensus or by vote). (4) A great director says thanks and gives kudos to both special accomplishments and well-done routine work. (5) A great director takes the heat and does not pass the buck.

“Great mid-level supervisors have the first four qualities mentioned above plus this: A great supervisor knows when to pass the problem to the boss and when to handle it herself/himself.”

Charles Dyer, consultant and retired public law library director in Bellingham, Washington

“Great supervisors should not just be people who can manage their staff well. Important as that is, there’s more to it. Great supervisors are innovators. They cooperate. They transform ideas. Great supervisors see the big picture and run with it, adding their own innovative ideas to the mix. Cooperating with those at all levels on the totem pole allows them to transform these innovations into a reality. Removing a sense of hierarchy puts everyone at ease and allows the creative juices to flow. Speaking for myself, why would I want to proactively help someone achieve their goal

if I don’t feel connected to the product or the person? It should be a learning experience for all but no one wins if there’s a snob in the room. A great supervisor knows how to make it fun without forgoing any professionalism.”

Jeffrey Nelson, library assistant at Groom Law Group in Washington, D.C.

“Thinking back over the years about the great supervisors I’ve had or have now, I found they shared these qualities which set them apart from the others. Great supervisors: often manage equally great staff; are often supervised by superb managers; are leaders who possess self-confidence and a desire to supervise; have undergone training to manage and communicate effectively; set clear goals and demand the highest level of performance from themselves and their staff, then provide the means and encouragement for staff to excel and develop; provide an atmosphere where growth takes place, where they and their staff are encouraged to collaborate and bring forth new ideas—and are not afraid to make mistakes; take the time to get to know the work each one performs (a recipe for showing respect); gracefully make themselves available for questions from their staff (and see the time as well-spent); know the importance of really listening to their staff and dealing constructively with their concerns; and champion change (especially when it’s difficult).”

Diane Fichter, head of acquisitions services unit at the University of Michigan Law Library in Ann Arbor

member to member

“Great supervisors share three main qualities. First, great supervisors are great communicators; they take time to listen and to clearly communicate with all stakeholders, even when agendas may conflict. Second, great supervisors are generous; they share their time and team wins, while taking accountability for failures. Finally, great supervisors are able to laugh; they maintain a sense of equanimity.”

Lisa Junghahn, research librarian at Harvard Law School Library in Cambridge

“Great supervisors give staff their *undivided* attention when engaged in discourse.”

Andrea Rabbia, technical services librarian at the Syracuse University College of Law H. Douglas Barclay Law Library in Syracuse, New York

“They listen, they support without taking over, they advocate, they appreciate, and they acknowledge their staff. They don’t sugar-coat things. When you screw up, they don’t ignore it, but they don’t overreact. They don’t control, they guide. They place their trust in you, and give you the tools to succeed.

“I had an absolutely wonderful supervisor in one of my past positions whom I’ll call Ms. R. Ms. R was given the job of supervising the library as part of an administrative shuffle. She was not a librarian and she asked a lot of questions so that she could understand how libraries functioned and what our role was and could be at the firm where we worked. Ms. R saw her role as one of advocate for the library to upper management. She promoted our work, used her connections within the firm to open dialogue between departments, and greatly raised our status with the administrative C-level people. Ms. R took care to always give us credit for the work that we did.

“When she took over our supervision, there were a number of projects that were stalled because we needed the assistance of other departments, such as IT, and we were a low priority. She was able to advocate for us to get the projects to a higher level, and introduced me to the people who were able to get things done (they were not always the people in charge). She allowed me to be a much more effective manager, and to eventually take over firm-wide

management of the library. At that point, she was a great support to me, helping me to strategize and think through situations without telling me how to handle situations. Working with Ms. R helped me to become a better supervisor, a better manager, and a better person.”

Catherine Hardy, library services manager at Hanson Bridgett LLP in San Francisco

- “1. A robust sense of humor
2. A vision that they are able to articulate and persuade others to share and work toward.
3. Are die-hard fans of the Michigan Wolverines.”

Patricia Orr, manager of library services at Dykema in Detroit

“‘Please.’ ‘Thank You.’ ‘That was a great job you did on...’”

Mark Mackler, supervising librarian at the California Department of Justice in San Francisco

“A great supervisor has: clear vision; passion; compassion; integrity; in-depth knowledge of their profession and industry; values the contribution of each person on the team; personal growth for themselves and the their team; and last but not less—faith.”

Terri Lawrence, director of library and information resources at Winstead PC in Dallas

“The best supervisors are those whose main goal is to help make their employees the most successful they can be in their organization. Using a ‘one size does not fit all’ for training and communication is another plus. Learning to recognize the unique learning styles of employees and adapt training and teaching to those styles is another one. Being the kind of person that employees like and setting an example as a ‘can do’ person gives a department a sense that they can accomplish anything.”

Alison Ewing, reference librarian at the Arizona State University Sandra Day O’Connor College of Law Ross-Blakley Law Library in Tempe

All great supervisors have the ability to make each individual feel they are a valued member of the team. Encouraging each individual to strive for excellence leads to a team of excellence and the supervisor is then recognized for their great leadership ability. It's a cycle that works for the whole team.

Deborah Maglione, senior reference librarian for knowledge services at Howrey LLP in San Francisco

“Good supervisors are patient, slow to anger, supportive, and organized with good communication skills. Better supervisors have all of the above plus a sense of humor. The best supervisors have all of the above plus vision and the ability to bring out the best in their staff and work within the organization to bring the vision to fruition.

“Staff with a great supervisor will call him/her ‘firm but fair.’”

MaryAnn Keeling, law librarian at the Department of Human Services Customs and Border Protection in Washington, D.C.

member to member