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The Role of the Supervisor

In all cases, research projects undertaken by individuals or as part of a group are designed to provide enhanced student learning. However, what is to be learned will differ with each project. Learning outcomes for an undergraduate research project might be to better understand how to collect industry information or develop a research proposal, to conduct self-directed learning on a research topic of interest, or to understand how an organization applies theory. Depending on the type of project, these goals could equally apply to some MBA or other graduate research projects. However, there may be higher-order learning outcomes, such as advancing a body of knowledge, that are more often associated with a PhD dissertation, which is not the focus of this text.

You may not have previously undertaken a research project similar to the one presently being completed. In some research projects, you will require extensive one-on-one assistance from your teacher/lecturer/professor in his or her capacity as your academic supervisor. This chapter will examine this supervisory role from your perspective. That is, while the academic wants you to learn as much as possible from the research process, you will want to get as much assistance as possible, or at least as much as you require.

The problem with a supervisor–student relationship is that, like all service encounters, it varies depending on a number of factors, and the expected outcomes may also affect how much assistance is provided. Your supervisor’s individuality will determine how he or she likes to operate within this relationship, and, of course, your own personal characteristics will affect the relationship as well (Mead, Campbell, & Milan, 1999). Thus, many of the issues dealing with groups discussed in the next chapter, Chapter 4, will also be applicable to dealing with your supervisor. Understanding the supervisor’s potential role, expectations, and method of operation will allow you to work with him or her in the most effective fashion and, hopefully, bring about the best learning outcome.

Understanding Your Supervisor

Given that each supervisor is different, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to describe all supervisors’ styles. In fact, it is highly likely that one supervisor
will deal with different students in different ways, depending on the student’s level of understanding of the task, as well as the student’s perceived motivation. For example, some supervisors tend to spend more time with students, or groups of students, who appear to be really interested in their project. In these cases, the academic is consulted so regularly that he or she may almost seem to become a group member, and both the students and the supervisor learn from the process (Elton & Pope, 1989). In other cases, a supervisor may be likely to give more assistance to students who are having difficulties but can demonstrate that they have tried to understand the issues causing these difficulties. Alternatively, students who simply ask for help but who have clearly not attempted to solve the problem themselves may be less likely to receive in-depth assistance from a supervisor.

Unfortunately, supervisors are not experts on every theoretical issue, but they will, one hopes, be more than happy to help students on any research topic. However, they will most likely get more involved in projects that cover an issue of interest to them or topics that are something they have expertise in. For example, if a student asks a professor to act as his or her honors supervisor, the academic might decline or grudgingly accept if he or she only has passing interest in the student’s topic. In this case, the supervisor’s limited knowledge in the area might mean he or she will not be able to provide as much detailed theoretical advice as the student may need. Even after discussions to refocus the topic, the student might be better off with a supervisor who is more interested in the student’s area of study, and thus the students’ learning outcome would possibly be increased.

Academics do not attempt to discriminate against one student or another, but like all people, rather tend to be more “interested” in students who have demonstrated that they are willing to put in the effort or are examining topics of particular interest to the supervisor. Unfortunately, students who expect a supervisor to guide their every step, and who have no desire to actively participate in the learning process, will usually receive less supervisory input. A supervisor is not the giver of knowledge or solver of all problems. In reality, students and supervisor are working together to solve a common problem (Elton & Pope, 1989). This does not mean that the supervisor is working simply to help you to complete a research project, but to ensure that you, the student, learn as much as possible from the project and process. Later in this chapter, issues relating to selecting a supervisor will be discussed, which does need to be taken into consideration if you have the chance to choose a supervisor.

What Is the Role of a Supervisor?

Your supervisor can play many roles in relation to your research project. In many cases, these roles are integrated or overlap, although in some cases they may be separate. Below are five of the key roles that supervisors can fulfill.
Information Source

As we mentioned earlier, your supervisor ideally has a range of research experiences that can be referred to and that will assist you in the completion of your project. On the most basic level, your supervisor will be able to tell you where you can find information for your topic, or at least give you some direction as to where you might obtain relevant information. This role is not restricted to your formal supervisor. Other individuals, such as librarians, might also be able to guide you to useful information sources. As will be discussed in Chapter 7, there are many types of information. We hope that your supervisor will be able to steer you in the direction of recent or seminal works in the area. Your supervisor may also be able to identify industry information sources.

You need to be careful in relying too heavily on your supervisor as your sole information source. First, overdependence, if allowed by the supervisor, prevents you from learning as much as you could from the project (Kam, 1997). Second, it will potentially influence how your supervisor deals with you in later stages of the project; that is, if your supervisor believes he or she helped you too much in the early stage of the research, he or she may be hesitant to provide more important help later. Last, supervisors might believe that you are not making an appropriate effort and thus, once again, be less likely to assist you at more critical phases of the assignment. Using supervisors as a source of information is valuable, but overreliance on them may ultimately harm you more than it may help.

Sounding Board

Often, one of the most important roles of a supervisor is to act as a “sounding board,” that is, someone whom you can bounce ideas off and who focuses your thinking. In many cases, you will not have extensive experience with undertaking research, whereas your supervisor will probably have this experience. As such, they act as guides of sorts. Using the term “guide” might be a bit misleading, as in many cases supervisors attempt to keep you on track and thus prevent you from losing focus.

This guiding role is important in a number of areas. When selecting a topic, your supervisor will hopefully be able to help you decide if the topic is too broad or narrow. Supervisors may suggest that you look at your problem/issue from another perspective, which may allow you to focus your topic. For example, one group of students wanted to look at why people give gifts; after directing them to do some reading and discussing their goals, it was decided to redefine the topic into the following: Why do young males, 18 to 25, give Valentine’s Day presents?

Your supervisor will be able to assist you in shaping the scope of the work, as well as, defining the critical issues that will be examined in detail. Once again, he or she may do this by having you undertake additional reading
and then discussing issues with you. In other cases, your supervisor may play the “devil’s advocate,” whereby he or she asks tricky questions that force you to rethink issues or clarify your thinking on a topic.

**Educator**

Though undertaking a research project is a learning process, much of your learning comes from your efforts in the research process or the efforts of other group members. There is also a role for your supervisor to act more directly in bringing about your learning. This frequently takes place in one of two ways. First, your supervisor may explain difficult material. In some cases, he or she may ask you to read more material on the topic. However, if it is clear that you need assistance, your supervisor will frequently work through the material with you. In some cases, your problems might relate to understanding theory; for example, you may not understand why variables should be related in a given way. Your problem might relate to dealing with analytical issues (i.e., how do you undertake an analysis or what does the analysis mean)? Alternatively, your supervisor might assist you with understanding the implications of research, especially when there are contradictory or counterintuitive results.

Second, your supervisor might facilitate learning through formalized classes. For example, in some cases projects are embedded within a course and, students work through their project as part of the class (Polonsky & Waller, 1998). In this way, examples are drawn from various students to teach the class about aspects of the research process. This latter approach is usually integrated into the research project process.

**Motivator**

Your supervisor will ideally also take on a role as motivator and keep you progressing through your project. This is often the most difficult role, especially if you lose interest in the project. If you lose interest, it is very difficult for your supervisor to reinvigorate you. One approach that he or she might try is to have you work through the importance of the project. If you can see the “real” benefits, or unique aspects, of your project, you sometimes can gain a renewed interest.

Ensuring that you keep on track can be difficult, as it is not something that your supervisor can control—it is usually up to you. There are several ways that your supervisor may keep you motivated. One way is through establishing a timetable for the project and then reviewing it at regular meetings. This approach at least lets you identify if you are falling behind and can encourage you to put in extra energy if you start falling behind the planned schedule. However, in some cases it will be clear to both you and the supervisor that the initial schedule was overly optimistic, and if this is the case,
you may need to revisit the research proposal and modify activities to be more realistic. In all our years supervising student projects, there has never been a student or group in this situation that has not been able to refocus the work and achieve a reasonable outcome.

Depending on the type of project, your supervisor might ask you to keep a journal identifying the major developments, obstacles, and learning outcomes (Yeatman, 1995). This type of tool is used both to facilitate learning and to keep you motivated. With a journal, it is often easy to see how much progress has been made, and thus see how you are progressing. If you experience numerous problems, it might seem to suggest that you are not progressing, which might be traced through your learning journal. This learning journal process is often focused more on learning about the research process than on the topic being researched. Dealing with problems is an important part of the process.

Evaluator

In many cases, your supervisor will also be responsible, or partly responsible, for evaluating your research, that is, giving you a grade. From a supervisor's perspective, this is often the most difficult part of the process, as supervisors frequently get so involved that they feel they are part of the research. In some cases, though, research projects are also evaluated by others not involved in the process, i.e., independent examiners who may be within or external to your university. Independent examiners are usually used only for more substantial pieces of research, such as honors or masters' theses.

In thinking about those who evaluate your project, supervisor or independent examiner, it is important for you to clearly understand the specific criteria that they will use. As with all issues, this will vary based on the objectives of the project. For example, how important is the learning process associated with the project? If this issue is important, then you will most likely be evaluated using some measure of your progression through the process, such as the evaluation of reflective journals or peer assessment if you are working in groups. If the objective is to better understand business practices, then one of the assessment components might be the implication for practice. In some cases, you may even have an industry supervisor who evaluates this aspect. In other cases, the issue might simply be how well you actually answered your research question. (This is, in fact, different from advancing the body of knowledge, which is beyond the scope of most undergraduate or even MBA research projects.) When supervisors evaluate research projects, they should make sure that students actually tie material back to their questions and do what they said they would do.

The critical issue is to ensure that you clearly understand the criteria on which you will be evaluated as well as how this will be assessed. This understanding will at least allow you to be aware of what aspects or issues are most important.
Selecting a Supervisor

Depending on the project, you may have the opportunity to select your supervisor. Choosing a supervisor who is right for you is critical, as he or she will be assisting you with the research process and have substantial input into the project. There are a number of issues that you need to consider when selecting a supervisor. In many cases, one supervisor may have several of the “skills” you require, but it may be rare to find someone who has all these characteristics (Kam, 1997). Picking the right supervisor for you is the critical factor, and thus a good supervisor for one person is not necessarily a good supervisor for another (Hammick & Acker, 1998).

Topic Expert

You may want to identify a supervisor who has expertise in the topic being researched. The benefit of your supervisor having knowledge in your topic area is that you will be able to get strong direction from your supervisor and he or she will be able to discuss issues specific to your topic in detail (i.e., act as a sounding board). Your supervisor will also be able to undertake the role of a teacher if there are complex issues that you are unsure of.

Methodology Expert

Some academics are exceptionally strong in designing research projects or have skills in specific analytical techniques. Therefore, if you believe that this is an area where you will need extensive assistance, you may wish to try to find a supervisor whose strengths lie in this area. While such a supervisor is indeed useful, selecting such a person means that you already have an idea as to what you wish to examine and thus have spent substantial time developing a broad topic and research question. Past experience suggests that most undergraduate and MBA students undertaking research projects do not have the experience with research to be able to develop their ideas completely alone. So, looking for a supervisor with methodological expertise might be something that is more appropriately emphasized when undertaking very advanced research projects.

Process Expertise

In some cases, supervisors have a very structured approach to supervising students, which ensures that students complete their project within the time constraints (Beer, 1995). For example, one of our colleagues has very structured processes for supervising higher degree research students. His structure ensures that students complete their research on time and usually have few
changes required by examiners. It should be noted that a set process does not necessarily work for every student, as each of you is different. Thus, looking for a process-focused supervisor assumes that you are willing to work to their process.

**Motivational Expertise**

In some cases, having a structured process, as just mentioned, can keep you motivated, as there are clear targets to be achieved that allow you to reach the finish line. Some supervisors may be able to keep you motivated with your project using these targets. In other cases, the supervisor gets excited about his or her student’s work, which tends to excite the student as well (Elton & Pope, 1989). Some supervisors may put in a structured meeting process that keeps you on track, although you might not be excited about the work (Beer, 1995). Not everyone works well with such supervisors, especially if you like a lot of freedom and flexibility. Thus, as will be suggested in Chapter 4, your personality will have an impact on the type of supervisor that is best for you.

**Types of Supervisors**

As was discussed earlier, supervisors fulfill several different roles as well as have different types of expertise. Though in most cases you will have one academic supervisor who is a member of staff, this is not always the case. Two other types of supervisor situations will now be discussed, business supervisors and multiple supervisors, both of which may have unique challenges.

**Business Supervisors**

If you have an applied industry research project, you may have a supervisor for your research who is based in the organization you are examining (Polonsky & Waller, 1998). Such supervisors can be extremely valuable, as they are usually experts in their business and have a strong understanding of the complexities associated with their business and thus the issues associated with your project. They may also have access to extensive information about the business, which might not normally be accessible without their assistance (e.g., confidential, historical, or “not documented” information).

There are various potential problems that can arise with business supervisors. One of the main problems is that they sometimes forget that you are undertaking the project as part of your degree, and they see the project as “free consulting” designed to assist them. In this situation, business supervisors sometimes try to redirect the project away from your original focus.
They might have very strong views, which could make them less open to objective results. In this situation, they may not agree with anything that is inconsistent with their view of the organization.

In other situations, industry supervisors may want the answer yesterday and do not understand why your research needs to take so long to complete. They may not understand the educational purpose of the project process. To address this problem, it might be possible to give them something based on preliminary work as you progress with the main parts of the project. Though this is beneficial, it does frequently require additional time and energy, which may distract you from your research goals. It is critical that you do not alienate your business supervisor, as his or her support (i.e., access to information) is often critical to the completion of the project.

Another problem is that in some cases, business supervisors do not fully understand the implications of academic theory. In these cases, they may not understand why you are doing something a given way. In some cases, business supervisors may not even have academic degrees. For example, one group of students had a business supervisor who wanted them to look at why people don’t consume a snack food he produced, namely, beef jerky. What the students felt was appropriate was a positioning study of this snack food verses others. Though this examined the core problem, they discovered that consumers in this market did not perceive beef jerky to be a snack food, and they suggested a shift in the organization’s activities. The business supervisor simply wanted to know how to get people to eat beef jerky, and thus, the results were not as helpful as he had anticipated, especially given that he did not want to change his focus.

Another potential problem comes from the fact that business supervisors’ expectations of how involved they will be in the process may vary. In some cases they don’t understand or want to take on all the required supervisory roles. In some cases, they simply let you proceed as you see fit, and though this independence is exhilarating, it can be a problem if you need to actively engage the business supervisor as you would any other supervisor. When this problem happens, it often is because the business supervisor feels that the project is taking up too much of his or her time. On the other hand, a supervisor may want to be actively involved in every step of the project. This is not problematic if you and the business supervisor clearly understand where the project is heading. However, if the business supervisor has somewhat different views, his or her involvement may slow down the process. For example, one student undertaking an honors degree was looking at focusing her project on one organization. When she showed her business supervisor her survey, he asked if an additional section could be added looking at a tangential issue. While including the section would not be problematic, there was an expectation that the student would also evaluate this tangential information for the organization, and thus take her attention away from focusing on her research project.
Multiple Supervisors

In many ways, having multiple supervisors is an ideal situation, especially if you have a team of supervisors who have expertise in different areas. In this case, the supervisors complement one another and thus increase the likelihood that you will maximize your learning outcomes, as well as undertake a solid research project. For example, having a business supervisor with industry expertise who is complemented by an academic supervisor with theoretical expertise will provide a strong basis for the project. However, the situation of having multiple supervisors usually does not occur in most undergraduate or graduate research projects.

The biggest problem with multiple supervisors arises when you receive conflicting advice or information. This can arise when the supervisors are looking at your research from different points of view, which might suggest that your research question and objectives are not clear to all those involved. The bigger problem arises when you have supervisors who disagree on an issue or have different philosophical approaches to a topic. This type of problem is, unfortunately, extremely difficult for you to address, especially when one supervisor tells you that you are wrong for following another supervisor’s advice. If this problem arises, it is essential that you have the supervisors discuss the matter directly rather than undertaking a debate through you. This type of conflict is often difficult for a student to deal with, and it might be possible to involve an independent person to assist in solving the conflict. The main concern is that you do not want their disagreements to negatively affect on your progress. This can easily happen if you are being directed in two different ways.

In dealing with “disagreements” between yourself and your supervisor(s), it is important to remember that the research is yours, but the various parties have a vested interest in the project as well. Ideally, if you are able to clearly put forward a point of view and defend it, logic will prevail; unfortunately, this is not always the case, and you may need to bring in an independent person, which is usually less than ideal (see Chapter 4). If you believe that what you are doing or need to do is more appropriate than what is suggested by a supervisor, you should be able to put forward a coherent argument based on evidence (often the literature). Though it might seem that you should not have to justify yourself to your supervisors, this process will enable you to justify your approach within the report and thus convince those evaluating the work as well. Therefore, it is a valuable activity and adds to the research process.

Ground Rules and Expectations

Most of what has been discussed in this chapter is about clearly establishing the ground rules and expectations of both you and your supervisor. Many
universities have a code of practice relating to the supervising of students, but these frequently don’t deal with the day-to-day operation of the student–supervisor relationship. Because of this, it is essential that you not only know what each of you expects from the other, but you should also ensure that you at least discuss how you believe the relationship should operate. If you each have different expectations, conflict will arise (Connell, 1985). For example, what are the roles that you want your supervisor to fill, and what do they expect from you? As was mentioned earlier, if your supervisor expects you to undertake your project following his or her process, but you want a more flexible approach, there will most likely be problems in the relationship. This means that you either selected the wrong supervisor or you did not clearly establish how you wanted the relationship to work.

Some supervisors design contracts with their students that clearly specify the roles and responsibilities of both parties. We do not suggest that this is the best way to manage a student–supervisor relationship, but it does ensure that the roles are clearly defined.

One of the biggest problems for you will be deciding what to do if your supervisor is not fulfilling the role you anticipated he or she would fill. There are several ways to deal with this issue. First and foremost, it is essential that you discuss this with your supervisor early on. At times, students have complained that there have been problems with their supervisor that have gone on for months. These often could have been easily addressed if the issues were discussed earlier rather than later. Unfortunately, discussing problems associated with how you are being supervised is often difficult, especially for students who usually feel that they have minimal power in the relationship.

After repeated attempts to rectify the situation with the supervisor, you should talk to an independent academic to see if he or she can assist. Many students will do this, instead of discussing the issue with their supervisor. Though other academics are usually more than happy to help, you do need to be proactive and try to address the matter yourself.

In all cases, one of the most important things to remember is that you need to try to be as calm and objective as possible. In most cases, problems happen as the result of a misunderstanding on the part of you and/or your supervisor. The sooner these misunderstandings are clarified, the better it is for the process. It is important that you remember that your supervisor is human as well, and a range of factors might affect how he or she interacts with you on a given day, just as they might affect how you interact with your supervisor.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed a range of issues associated with the role of your supervisor. One of the themes that was discussed was that you need to have some idea of what you expect from the student–supervisor relationship, as
there are many roles, skills, and requirements that could be anticipated by either party. The more experienced you are with research, the better able you will be to define what you are looking for. Each research project might require a different set of supervisory needs, and thus there is no one ideal supervisor.

Given that both you and your supervisor are human, it is essential that there is communication early on in the research process to explain each party’s expectations of the other. Without such discussion, it is easy for you or your supervisor to incorrectly understand what you expect and what he or she expects. Once this has been clarified, your supervisor will be able to provide you with the most appropriate guidance, and therefore your learning will, hopefully, be maximized.

References
