

8. Unspoken Realities of Becoming a New Supervisor

James Freeman and Toné Reyes

Becoming a supervisor reshapes your focus, your relationships, and your daily rhythm. There's a lot that goes unsaid about that transition. Navigating inherent uncertainty with awareness and intention can set the stage for your new influence and growth.

When Maya arrived for her first day as a supervisor, she could hardly stop smiling. The office felt different. It was the same building but a new seat at the table. She'd worked hard for this, earned it through dedication and consistency. Her team congratulated her with a small bouquet and a few teasing comments about joining management and now being “one of them”.

By noon, the glow had faded. Her email inbox had doubled overnight. A few days later she realized she was now juggling three mobile phones. One each for personal, program and on-call. Payroll wanted a report she didn't know existed. The next day one staff member was late and hadn't called in, another stopped by in tears, and her new manager had already added her to four recurring meetings. By the end of the week, she was staying late to catch up on paperwork she didn't understand.

She still cared deeply about the work. About the kids, the families, the mission, but everything that once gave her energy now felt one step removed. She wondered quietly: “Was this a promotion or a trade-off I didn't see coming?”

For many new supervisors, the moment of celebration quickly gives way to disorientation. The shift from practitioner to supervisor changes more than responsibilities. It begins to reshape your sense of identity and place within the organization. What no one says out loud is that this distance between where you were and where you're going can feel overwhelming at first and sometimes even lonely.

Some aspects of supervision can only be understood from the inside. The role asks you to see the work through a wider lens, one that includes people, systems and the unseen pressures between them. What you discover there will test your assumptions and deepen your perspective.

Identity and Role Shift

Many of us have formed a certain identity working in direct care. The role was defined by what you did and how well you did it. Transitioning to the role of a new supervisor changes some of that perspective. What once gave you a sense of purpose (e.g., being involved in the moment-to-moment care, solving problems directly) evolves into guiding others to do the same. It is a process of learning who you are in a new context and what kind of leader you want to become (Petriglieri & Peshkam, 2022) and can involve a period of testing and redefining of self over time (Ibarra, 2023). There's a lot in this shift that people don't talk about, such as the inner doubt, the loss of familiar anchors, and the search for a new kind of meaning in the work.

- *You will lose some of what once grounded you.* Your new role may involve losing some of the immediacy of seeing impact. You'll have to find new meaning in supporting others who now do that work, recognizing that influence can be just as impactful as your direct care role.
- *Your success now depends on how others perform.* You will be consistently engaged in coaching and mentoring those on your team. Your effectiveness will be reflected in your team's growth, not your personal output.
- *You will have to define what kind of leader you intend to be.* Your leadership style is your choice. You've likely had both positive and negative examples from prior supervisors. Now you get to shape your own approach with self-awareness, not imitation.
- *You will see the organization differently. And it won't always be flattering.* Stepping behind the curtain can reveal inconsistencies and inequities. Staying hopeful for change while learning the present reality requires seeing the system clearly without letting it harden you.

This transition reshapes how you see your work and where you find meaning in it. This shift is part of the evolution from individual achievement to collective effectiveness (Northouse, 2021). The grounding you once found in direct service is combined with something different yet no less significant. It's the steady influence of helping others grow and carry the work forward.

Relational Dynamics and Role Boundaries

Becoming a new supervisor reshapes relationships. You're now part of multiple circles at once, including the team you lead, the peers you collaborate with and the leaders who oversee your work. Your ability to adapt depends less on your new positional power and more on the quality of relationships and conversations you shape (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Each relationship comes with its own expectations, power dynamics, and boundaries that must be continually balanced.

- *Relationships you once relied on will change.* You may find yourself in the awkward position of supervising former peers or long-time co-workers, possibly even someone who wanted the position you are now in. Some will distance themselves. Others will test boundaries. The friendships that remain will need to be redefined with mutual respect and understanding.
- *You will likely supervise people who have more experience, education or influence than you.* Some people you supervise may be older or have more lived experience. Leading those with higher credentials or longer tenure requires humility, curiosity and a focus on shared goals more than authority.
- *You will inherit people on your team you didn't hire (and not everyone will welcome your leadership).* When you step into an existing team, dynamics are already in motion. You'll need to earn trust while setting expectations, balancing patience with clarity.
- *You will need to find your voice among new peers.* You will have new peers which will likely include other supervisors or managers. It may feel unfamiliar at first and there will be some sense of loss of prior working relationships. You'll have the opportunity to decide what kind of leader and colleague you want to be and establish yourself among these new working relationships.

- *You will have to reestablish boundaries and people will watch how you do it.* A new position changes power dynamics. The timing of your early decisions will be magnified. Your choices about what you share, how you respond, how you manage situations will be felt by others and impact the team in new ways.

As your role expands, so does the complexity of your relationships. You begin to see how influence is built not through friendship or authority, but through shared experiences and trust. Over time, people will come to understand who you are as a leader by how you show up, by how you listen, hold tension in the day-to-day and make decisions that balance care with accountability. The trust and support you create in your relationships becomes a foundation that allows others to do their best work.

System and Time Pressures

The logistics of supervision often surprise new leaders the most. Suddenly, your calendar is full, your inbox is overflowing, and the time once spent in action has been replaced by meetings, reports, and documentation. These pressures can feel both necessary and constraining.

- *Your time will no longer feel like your own.* At times you'll be in back-to-back meetings, with urgent messages and ongoing interruptions. Structure where you can and accept that some days your plans will unravel.
- *You will at times spend more time managing systems than people.* Reports, audits, compliance and metrics can consume your focus. Your job is to humanize the system, not become it.
- *You will have to learn new ways to manage time and energy.* Give yourself grace as you learn a new rhythm. Learning what matters most and aligning your time, energy and attention accordingly is how to sustain effectiveness over time.

The structure of your days will look different now, but the heart of the work remains the same. What once felt more immediate and predictable becomes layered and more complex. It requires a new level of discipline and

discernment to maintain a relational focus and stay anchored in purpose rather than pressure.

Emotional Labor and Support

Working as a supervisor can require a greater emotional capacity. Supervisors become the steady point for others' uncertainty and pain. The question isn't whether it will affect you but how you'll hold it without becoming overwhelmed and losing heart. It's easy to underestimate how much emotional weight the role carries. You're expected to remain calm in crises, mediate conflict and carry others' stress without showing too much of your own. The emotional labor of supervision is rarely named yet it defines much of the role.

- *You will be asked to support staff in difficult, unprecedented circumstances.* When a crisis hits, people will turn to you. You will likely face bigger crises and decisions than you did in direct care. Situations involving the complexity of staff roles, teams, family members, and the community. You'll make decisions that impact young people's lives in short- and long-term ways. And when things go wrong there is often no one else to blame.
- *Your presence will be received differently.* There will be times the eyes of the entire team are on you. People will read you constantly. Your words, expressions and pauses communicate either safety or concern. Learning to be present without absorbing everything around you is one of the hardest leadership skills to master.

Over time, you'll find that your supervisory role isn't just about the actions you take. It's about the emotional climate you create. Your steadiness becomes a source of safety for others, but it also requires care for yourself. Learning when to step in, when to step back and when to seek support of your own is part of sustaining your ability to lead for the long term. Asking for help from others is not a form of incompetence or weakness. It is a sign of a maturing supervisor.

Growing Into Your New Role

In the beginning you may feel you have to prove yourself, achieve perfection and do it all yourself but growth as a new supervisor comes from staying open to learning in complex conditions. That openness to reflect and learn from your experiences is what develops stronger integrity and courage. Over time, the uncertainty of the early months gives way to a deeper steadiness built through experience and reflection.

The same compassion and curiosity you extend to your team is the same approach you need for yourself. You are in your role for a purpose, and your people need the unique strengths and gifts you bring to them. When you stay connected to your values and who you are, the new role will feel less like a trade-off and more like an expansion of your influence and your capacity to strengthen the people around you.

References

- Ibarra, H. (2023). *Working identity: Unconventional strategies for reinventing your career* (2nd ed.). Harvard Business School Press.
- Northouse, P. (2021). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (9th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Petriglieri, G. & Peshkam, A. (2022). Stranger leaders: A theory of marginal leaders' conception of learning in organizations. *Academy of Management Journal*, 65(4), 1240-1273.
- Uhl-Bien, M. & Arena, M. (2018). Leadership for organizational adaptability: A theoretical synthesis and integrative framework. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 32(6), 89-104.