Supervisory Skills Series, Dominican University, May-June 2011

By Rebecca Miller, Interim Head of Public Services, Trinity International University

I attended a series of four workshops on supervisory skills that were part of Dominican University's continuing education program. The speaker was Diane Decker. She did a great job of setting up the time to have a variety of modes of learning, including group discussion, brainstorming, role playing, individual work, etc. This provided a good opportunity to start practicing some of the skills and to think through how to apply them to our situations. All of the other participants were from public libraries, but everything was relevant to both academic and public library settings.

The first workshop was on "Interpersonal skills for supervising others." Much of the discussion was about communication skills. The part I've remembered most and tried to implement is body language. Particularly when leading meetings, I've thought about what my body language, eye contact, and voice are conveying. We discussed how to communicate expectations well, including asking good questions to make sure the person understands and is committed. Diane Decker also had us analyze our personalities using a scale I wasn't familiar with (driver, investigator, expresser, associator). I have found that understanding my personality and those of others I work with has been helpful.

The second workshop covered staff motivation. Our first activity was to rank how engaged and motivated our staff were. We then discussed what motivates us personally. The research shows that the highest motivation was feeling a sense of belonging. Thus building a good team where people feel connected and motivated by others can be helpful. There was also a discussion of how to delegate, which has been one of the more challenging things for me to do. We also looked at giving positive and constructive feedback. I would like to be more intentional on doing both of these things regularly.

The next workshop was on hiring and performance reviews. This workshop was particularly relevant, since I had just completed hiring my first position and conducting performance reviews. It may have been nice to have the workshop beforehand, but it was also useful right afterwards so I could evaluate the process while it was still fresh. I also had many questions to ask. One suggestion I would like to work on is establishing competencies as part of the job descriptions. This would focus not on what the person does, but how they do it. This can be more useful for setting goals and providing performance feedback. In the interviews you use these to uncover information about well they would fulfill those competencies. I also want to start files on each person, where I can keep track of both positive achievements and issues to address with them. Then I should meet regularly with them, so it's not just feedback at the end of the year.

The final workshop was on team building. What I have remembered most is the stages of team development. Near the beginning is a period called "storming" where there are a lot of disagreements. What I thought was interesting is that you have to go through this period to move past the more polite introductory level to get to the more productive stages after that. I want to consider more how to move our team through that level well. Some of the things I want to focus on include working through conflict

instead of burying it and understanding personality and communication styles. Another good idea was to have "team principles" that give expectations that everyone agrees on (for example, we are respectful of each other). We did a role play where we practiced with a conflict in our library, where we played the role of the other person. It was an interesting exercise for me to articulate the other person's position strongly.

Overall, the workshops were very useful for me as I am taking over a new leadership position. Probably much of the same information could have been found in a book. However, what I found useful was the interactive elements of it. It was good to be able to ask questions I've struggled with in this new role. I enjoyed discussing the issues with other people, and hearing about the problems they are facing. (It made me feel better about my struggles!) Most importantly, it provided the opportunity to reflect and evaluate what I've been doing and considering ways to improve and change.