
Role Relationships Between Assistant Managers and Managers: A Positive Look at Our Profession

Martin Vanacour

In the January/February 1990 issue of *Public Management*, Ed Everett wrote an article titled "Perception or Fact? A Disturbing Look at Our Profession from Folks Who Know Us." The article described an informal survey of how headhunters in California look at assistants in our profession. In general, the results were negative and included such comments as: "the profession is not getting the best and brightest"; "assistants are mostly technicians and bureaucratically oriented"; and "they are internal looking with a narrow focus." Ed ended by soliciting reader reactions to his article.

Well, I am taking up Ed's challenge. This piece is not a total rebuttal, but a companion article looking at perceptions of assistant managers from the eyes of managers and assistants. Whereas Ed surveyed all levels of assistants, I looked strictly at relationships between managers and assistant managers, so our findings cannot be compared totally.

My reference points and passion about this subject come from two sources: my recently completed doctoral dissertation and 25 years in the profession as an administrative assistant, assistant city manager, and city manager. I believe our profession has not given enough attention or direction to assistant city/county managers who desire to become managers. It is one thing to let assistant managers observe what is going on, but it takes a secure manager to allow the assistant to participate fully behind the scenes with the mayor and council. If Ed's findings are true, it reveals a weakness not so much in the assistant as in the manager who does not prepare or allow the assistant to experience the real world of management.

Perceptions are important, whether from

headhunters or managers. I will try to paint a different picture of assistant managers, their roles, and personalities. The caveat is that my dissertation is partially descriptive and exploratory, seeking to determine what exists rather than predicting roles, and that I surveyed only from the states of Arizona and Colorado. My results are technically not generalizable to the assistant manager's profession as a whole.

Summary of the Dissertation

My study examined the broad range of role relationships between the assistant manager and the manager. The role analysis concentrated on the perceptions of both positions. The perceived expectations were compared and contrasted with each other to ascertain consensus or conflict. The study also discusses the internal and external role relationships and how the two positions function in a synergistic manner.

Additionally, the study looks at the psychology of being a "number two" person in a council-manager form of government, and discusses the traits and characteristics necessary to being successful. The main research question determines if the assistant manager's role complements, duplicates, or supplements the role of the manager. I discovered that both positions agree on many characteristics that make a good assistant manager.

Role Changes

Ed's headhunter survey does not convey the perception I get from the profession. I believe assistants are now better prepared to become managers. Part of this reasoning stems from the changing role of the manager and the fact that more managers are willing to share

Martin Vanacour is city manager of Glendale, Arizona.

responsibilities. Today's managers have to spend more time with the elected officials, while giving increased attention to state, regional, and national priorities. This means more delegation of critical, internal administrative functions once reserved for the manager.

Being "Number Two"

In Ed's survey, headhunters indicated that assistants "don't seem to lead or make decisions." Is that statement true or does the second-in-command role demand other important traits that need to be developed? In many cases the next-in-charge has to take a back seat to the boss and forego glory and attention. A manager may want a second-in-command who aspires for a higher position yet does not act that way.¹ It takes a certain psychological type to be a "number two" person. Most number twos do a great deal of work they do not receive credit for, unless directly praised by the manager.

Taking a back seat approach should not be considered a sign of weakness or lack of leadership. In fact, it probably is just the opposite. I believe assistant managers as a whole understand their opposition to the manager's policy and public statements has a beginning and an end. Being number two means being able to express differences to the manager in such a way that alternative suggestions and ideas are accepted instead of rejected. If ego gratification and public recognition are required to judge big picture, bright assistant managers, then they most likely will not fill the expectations of most managers surveyed.

Performance

Of the managers surveyed, 71.2 percent responded to the following question: How would you rate the overall performance/effectiveness of your assistant manager on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 as best, 10 as worst? Of those who answered, 21.1 percent gave a 1 rating, 26.3 percent gave a 2 rating, and 19.3 percent gave a 3 rating. Thus, two-thirds gave their assistant managers high-performance marks. This may indicate that the managers in the two states surveyed do not view assistant managers as negatively as California headhunters do.

Critical Characteristics

Another question asked: Please list the three most critical characteristics of the assistant manager role. The three most frequent answers given in priority order were: loyalty, trustworthiness, and competency. Other characteristics mentioned were: supporting the manager's decisions, possessing generalist skills, being a good communicator, and being a self starter.

Most Important Task

When managers and assistant managers were asked the single most important task of the assistant, the responses in priority order were: to assist the manager in achieving goals, to be loyal to the manager, to manage the internal organization, to follow through on assignments, and to be a good communicator in the organization. To me, this does not mean assistants "do not have the big picture or are a conservative group." It means they are doing what the manager is asking them to do.

Desirable Qualities

Another question asked: Rank the qualities in order of greatest desirability for a good assistant manager (1=most desirable; 10=least desirable). Determination, intelligence, helpfulness, fairness, cooperation, imagination, managerial ability, dependability, integrity, and competence. The four responses in priority order were: integrity, competence, dependability, and managerial ability.

The last question asked: Rank the characteristics below in order of their relative importance to the assistant managers' role in relation to the manager (1=most important; 6=least important): mutual trust, affection for each other (interpersonal relationships), conformity, independence, control by the manager (loose or tight), and inclusion in decision making. The answers in priority order were: trust, conformity, independence, and inclusion in decision making, affection for each other (interpersonal relationships), and control by the manager (loose or tight).

Some Conclusions

As in most cases of management, there are many ways to look at perceptions and studies, whether they be formal or informal studies. My study indicates that managers and assistant managers view their roles as tied closely together; more often than not, the assistant manager complements the manager. The managers and assistant managers agree on many traditional values and roles that make for a good assistant. Managers in the two states surveyed are very happy with the roles their assistants play and are not necessarily looking for "flamboyant" assistants.

It is up to the managers and assistant managers to talk to each other and work out different or more complicated role relationships. I agree with Ed that, if our profession is to prosper, the manager must use their assistants in new and meaningful roles. If we as managers are not willing to give more opportunities and responsibilities to our assistants, shame on us. **PM**

¹Gite, L. (1984). "Choosing Your Second-in-Command." *Black Enterprise*, pp. 253-254.