

Core Competencies of a Supervisor

Introduction

Stories from the field

Whether you're a new supervisor or have been at it for decades, supervising national service members is a unique experience—rewarding, energizing, and, at times, challenging. Read through the following scenarios. Do any of these resonate with you?

Olivia

"I'm not sure this program is worth the hassle."

Olivia is the newly-minted supervisor of one VISTA and two AmeriCorps members at a small nonprofit focused on job training. After only two months, she's ready to throw in the towel. "My goodness!" she exclaimed to her program director. "I'm not sure this program is worth the hassle. I didn't expect them to come to me fully trained, but some days I wonder if they ever crossed the threshold of a workplace!"

Howard

"I get nervous when my AmeriCorps member goes off on his own to build partnerships."

Howard was asked by his executive director to supervise Don, a mature gentleman who joined service after retiring from a maintenance job. "Don means well," Howard confided to his colleague. "But he's stuck in his ways of doing things. And what a yakker. I get nervous when he goes off on his own to build relationships. You never know what's going to come out of his mouth!"

Sandy

"I don't have time to supervise my VISTA!"

Sandy is Davin's site supervisor. She also supervises five employees and is the Director of Development. Sandy thinks Davin is a great guy doing good work, but she feels overwhelmed with her supervisory responsibilities. She has committed to meeting with Davin once a week to talk about his progress, but he has asked if she would meet with him twice a week. He also wants her to accompany him when he meets with prospective partners. She has suggested that her colleague, Wong, go with Davin instead, but Davin says that he prefers doing visits with Sandy and she doesn't want to let him down.

How do you channel the passion and enthusiasm of members to help them make the most of their service year? How do you build an effective member-supervisor relationship and balance your many roles?

Members vs. Employees

Are they really that different?

Chances are you supervise both members and permanent staff. But members are different than employees, in what they can do and what they need from you as a supervisor. Consider the phrases below and whether they're true of members or employees:

- Unclear about the assignment
- Identify with your organization
- Want a "coach" or "mentor"
- Want to make a difference
- Need life skills coaching
- Anxious about finances
- Committed long term
- Fixed term contract
- New to workplace
- Get a "paycheck"
- Expect training
- Can be fired
- "Retired"

The answers will depend a bit on your organization and staff. But the following characteristics make a national service member different than an employee.

National service members:

- Are on a fixed term contract
- May be new to the workplace or transitioning from one job to another
- Receive a stipend, not a salary
- May need help understanding their specific assignment
- May be anxious about making it financially on the stipend
- May need help accessing community resources
- Want to make a difference
- Might need coaching, help with life skills and local resources, and training in the first few months
- Might identify with AmeriCorps or VISTA more than your organization

Dan Jordan, community services director, Spokane Neighborhood Action Programs (Spokane, WA), talks about the differences between supervising an employee and a member:

We have a VISTA member for 12 months, usually. It's a blessing if we get them more, but you have 12 months to work with this person as opposed to an employee that may be years and years and so you would supervise somewhat differently in that process, so I think developing some competencies around— I've got to really be on top of things quickly so that work plan, or the VAD, is really important, I need to really stay in communication with the member – a lot, especially, initially, so he gets a good launch to their project year so that they have a sense of what they're doing through the next and subsequent months.

Site Supervisor Skill Areas

What does it take?

A successful member-supervisor relationship [benefits the entire community](#): the member, the supervisor, and the population served. When national service members are inspired by a supervisor, their service experience, effectiveness (and sometimes life paths) are enhanced.

What do you think are the key skills to being a good supervisor of national service members? Take a minute to reflect and write your thoughts.

Compare your thinking to the skill areas mentioned by experienced supervisors in the field:

- Able to coach
- Strong communication skills
- Able to balance needs

Nancy Olson, program manager, RSVP/VISTA (Fargo, ND) and Lisa Keyne, executive director, North Carolina Campus Compact (Elon, NC) discuss the unique aspects of supervising VISTA members.

Nancy: That VISTA person needs to be treated in a more developmental way, because they may not have the background of the organization. They may not have the work experience. So there'll be some ramping-up period and a good supervisor needs to recognize that and take steps to deal with that.

Lisa: And I think that a good follow-up to that is that the supervisor is a coach or a guide for the VISTA.

Nancy: I like that.

Lisa: Our primary VISTAs are right out of college, and this is their first full-time commitment, so they're learning everything from, how do I find a place to live, where do I go to get groceries, how do I make friends right out of college, are the people who I'm supervising as a VISTA student—are they my friends?" So, just a chance to be open to them, to the kinds of questions they have related to getting into the workplace related to the project, and related to getting started in life beyond college.

Able to coach

When Olivia said, “I’m not sure this program is worth the hassle,” she was not considering the opportunities she would have to be a coach. Some members may not know how to fill out a time sheet; some bring little workplace experience. But most members come to service because they want to learn and make a difference.

Coaching is one way to meet AmeriCorps and VISTA members where they are and to take them to new places in their personal and professional lives. Assume a developmental approach to supervision.

By coaching you:

- Set an example in how you approach work, interact with colleagues, and deal with conflicts
- Are an active listener
- Give constructive criticism and provide guidance to improve
- Are accessible to talk and problem-solve
- Celebrate successes
- Might even help members plan a career and think about their next steps after their service year

A member may need coaching in basic workplace skills, such as:

- Dressing appropriately
- Arriving on time for work and meetings
- Interacting with colleagues
- Interacting with service recipients

Strong communication skills

Howard recognizes that Don is a good guy, but he worries that he talks too much. Although Don may be a “yakker,” it is also possible that Don and Howard have different communication styles. Part of developing good communication skills is being aware of your communication style and being able to work with people who have a style different from your own.

Importance of Communication

Learning more about your members' communication styles will make you a more effective supervisor.

During orientation, Lisa Keyne sets the groundwork for effective communication with her members:

It's important from the very beginning to be really clear about what you're trying to accomplish, don't make assumptions. And so we spend a lot of time just talking about that communication style that I think Nancy mentioned. Be clear about expectations, the priorities, and then we spend time at the end of their first week with supervisors and VISTAs together in a supervisor training where—well, with everybody together we talk about the vision for the year—what makes a good year together. And in the afternoon, we use Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to take them through exercises on their preference styles, and that allows us to get into, how do you prefer that I communicate with you?" in terms of both ways. What if I feel like there's a conflict, what's the best way to approach you?" How should I communicate to you if I'm feeling overwhelmed?" So we get into some really concrete things that I think lay good groundwork for the year.

Dan Jordan believes honesty is the key to effective communication.

Honesty almost always works, that if you're just genuine about yourself and your passion for what you're doing—and they are—you can confront, talk about, get around, resolve, any issue and they will take it in the right way because they know this is not me trying to tell them they don't know how to do their job, or they're bad people or whatever, it's like, okay there's an issue here that we need to talk about. So I think that's really critical, and I think that has to be a competency of all of our supervisors or management staff is, you realize this is professional. Don't personalize these issues, don't feel like it's a judgmental thing, it's an issue to talk about and resolve.

Strong communication styles

Four styles of communication are:

- Degree of Directness
- Verbal vs. Nonverbal Communication
- Protecting One's Self Image (or Face)
- Work vs. Relationships

Use this [worksheet](#), created by the Education Northwest/Bank Street College (BSC) training team for the VISTA PSOs, to reflect on your own style and how it impacts your work relationships.

[Learn more](#) about how one program enhanced teamwork by understanding communication styles.

The [Johari Window](#) is a group exercise to improve communication.

It's so much about building relationships. It's not just the time, but the emotional investment. I didn't realize [at first] how much supervising would be about establishing and maintaining communications. (Karen Mauldin-Curtis, Peace Corps Fellows Program, Macomb, IL)

Able to balance needs

Sandy feels like she doesn't have time to supervise Davin. This is partly true, but she is also struggling to say "no" to his requests. If she thinks meeting with Davin once a week is enough, then it is all right to tell him so. And while she might have wanted to accompany him on his first few offsite meetings, it makes sense that she would now delegate this task to someone on her staff.

Being a sup takes a lot of time and, if that's not your main job, you have to make sure you carve time into your schedule to deal with it. Keep that time sacrosanct: Don't let other kinds of meetings intervene." (Patricia Rivera, Chicago Public Schools Homeless Education, Chicago, IL)

Balancing the needs of members, the project, and yourself can be challenging. Experienced supervisors offer this advice:

1. Set a pace you can sustain all year. Marissa Mizer, program coordinator, AppalCORPS (Athens, OH), discusses this topic:

It's easy to just let yourself work more than 40 hours a week or you start working on the weekends, or - I don't know you just let things go and then midway through the year all of a sudden you just you can't do it anymore, and your members just they feel that you're being distant or you're not as happy or energetic as you were when you first started and so it's really easy to let that affect your members and everybody around you, so be aware that you can only do so much and just remember why you're there.

2. Network with other site supervisors for support. [The VISTA Supervisors](#) List is an e-mail discussion list created to promote dialogue among AmeriCorps VISTA supervisors around the topic of managing projects and VISTA members.
3. Keep lines of communication open with your own manager.
4. Visit members at their sites. Lee Gault, program director, Montana Conservation Corps (Bozeman, MT), encourages his supervisors to not get stuck behind their desks and to make an effort to spend time side-by-side with members:

We really encourage our site supervisors to get out with our crews. I think at times when they've been with them for a long time during the training phase it's like, "I'm just glad they're gone." But after awhile you're wondering why you're there because you're just pushing papers and it really gets you re-energized when you get out with the crew and watch them operate and see how well they've learned their skills and so you're reminded, "oh – that's why I do what I do" and so you're really experiencing the crew and what your members are doing. It's really revitalizing for our site supervisors.

5. Reflect at the end of each year to identify your motivations for doing the work you do, and set goals for the next year.

Next Steps

How do you want to develop?

Take some time to think about yourself and your supervisory skills. Where could you develop in the next year? Would you like to focus on your communication skills? Coaching? Or finding balance? How will you develop the skills that you need to create the most effective relationship possible with your members?

Conclusion

In this tutorial, you've explored the differences between a member and an employee, learned about three skills for supervising members and taken some time to reflect on your next steps. Visit "Coaching & Supporting" in the Supervisor section of the VISTA Campus for more resources.

Our experts

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- Lee Gault, program director, Montana Conservation Corps, Bozeman, MT
- Marissa Mizer, program coordinator, AppalCORPS, Athens, OH

VISTA

- Lisa Keyne, executive director, North Carolina Campus Compact, Elon, NC
- Nancy Olson, program manager, AmeriCorps VISTA and RSVP, North Dakota State University, Fargo, ND
- Dan Jordan, community services director, Spokane Neighborhood Action Programs, Spokane, WA

Resources

Resources from this tutorial include:

- [The Multilayer Benefits of an Effective Member Supervisor Relationship](#)
- [Styles of Communication Worksheet](#)
- [Team Building and Communication Styles Presentation](#)
- [The VISTA Supervisors Mailing List](#)
- [Johari Window](#)