

Congratulations! You're a Supervisor. Now What?

15 Tips for Becoming an Effective Supervisor or Manager

Remember being a repressed teenager and pledging an oath that when you were a parent you would never treat your children the way your parents treated you? Now you take pause when you hear yourself, or other parents correcting or advising children with the same words your parents exclaimed. It all comes down to a change in perspective. It's much the same way when stepping across the career threshold of being an employee responsible for just your own performance to becoming a supervisor or manager whose success is now defined by the performance of her or his direct reports.

Remember how great it felt to get that promotion to supervisor? You are on your way up. You now can be the cool, understanding, easygoing boss you always wanted your past uptight bosses to be. Enjoy this feeling. It doesn't last long. Reality hits you square in the jaw on about your 3rd or 4th day in a supervisory role jolting you awake out of a sound sleep. Coworkers that were once your lunch or happy hour buddies now won't look you in the eye and avoid social conversation. Bill was 20 minutes late coming back from his lunch break. . . again. Susan felt sick and had to leave early requiring you to reassign Rachel from what she was doing to cover for Susan. And Mike, who is your strongest performer, but who you just learned also applied for the supervisor job, just glares at you, rolling his eyes and muttering something under his breath whenever you speak. Your boss needs this or that report on her desk in the morning -- you don't even know where to find the data much less create a pie chart. You need to post next month's shift schedule and three people asked for the same day off. You just got an email that OSHA will be in the office next Monday to perform a workplace safety audit. And oh yes, HR needs you to sign a document saying you have reviewed and understand all their supervisory conduct and ethics policies. Yes. Congratulations. You are a supervisor. Cheers.

How did this happen? New supervisors find themselves in their position in one of three ways.

1. An employee who does not see a future with their current employer seeks a supervisory position at another company. This scenario is the least likely because most hiring managers that need to fill a supervisory level position and are looking at candidates outside the company want a resume showing both hands-on job/industry knowledge AND supervisory experience.

The following two scenarios are much more common:

2. An employee has worked for his current employer over a period of time during which he 'paid his dues' showing himself to be a competent, reliable, and skilled employee that would accept responsibility and achieve results. When an opening in his company was posted for a supervisor he applied for the job, was selected, and promoted.
3. As a top performing and highly skilled hourly employee the staff member was essentially at the top of her position pay scale. In order to keep the employee motivated, and provide a higher level of compensation, she was promoted to a supervisory position.

Note that in each of these cases, the employee has never before been in a supervisory role. Too many companies merely "crown" an employee a supervisor or wave a magic wand and hope the employee becomes an effective supervisor with little or no supervisory training. What happens from here is pretty much up to you. Take solace in knowing that all experienced managers were once in your same shoes.

The following tips will help a new supervisor take the first steps to acquiring the skills and perspective to be an effective supervisor and leader.

1. **Think and act using both sides of your brain.** Many employees are promoted because they have great technical skills not because they have good managerial abilities. An effective supervisor must combine job expertise with HR knowledge, people skills, and motivating personal characteristics. The first step to becoming a good supervisor is to understand and accept that the skills that got you the promotion are not the same skills that will make you successful in a supervisory role; i.e. admit you have a problem and need help.

2. **Step back and see the big picture.** Talk to your boss. Talk to other department supervisors. Find out what performance goals are important to them. Learn how the team you lead contributes to these goals and success of the company. A supervisor focuses on group performance.
3. **Become a leader.** Accept the fact that you are now viewed as a leader and take steps to be a more effective leader. Look into supervisory leadership training. Understand that much of leadership comes down to planning, communicating and executing. If these components are done in a balanced manner the chances that you and your team will be successful are much increased if not assured. A good, and smart leader (especially a new one) acknowledges (privately, and sometimes publicly) that he doesn't know everything and creates a personal plan to acquire and develop leadership skills.
4. **Get a mentor.** A mentor provides you with access to something you don't have – experience. Talk to HR and ask for a recommendation or simply take a look around at other supervisors in the company. Most seasoned managers or supervisors would be happy to provide guidance to a new supervisor for a period of six months to a year. Perhaps your own boss can serve as your mentor. Set times for regular weekly or monthly conversations with your mentor. Ask your mentor if it is okay to call her for advice when you are unsure how to handle a particular situation. Most importantly LISTEN to the advice – it is based on real world experience. Don't make the mistake of going to the well too often or of complaining and venting to your mentor. Respect her time and use discretion. Another important point is not to confuse the resource of a mentor with the resource of a trained human resources professional. Some situations should only be discussed with HR.
5. **Keep a professional distance between yourself and your staff.** Employees don't want bosses that will be their buddy. Employees want bosses that stand up for them, are fair and honest, provide them with resources to perform their jobs, tell them what's going on, and believe in their ability to achieve success. As a supervisor you are now an outsider to your staff. It's OK. Really! It's better for everyone. A certain amount of distance is healthy and actually benefits the supervisor/employee relationship. It's not your imagination that people who were once your peers as individual contributors act and treat you differently because you are now a supervisor. This is because you are now in a perceived position of power. You control the work schedule, who gets what assignments, who gets what days off, who gets a new computer, who steps up and covers for you while you are away, etc. These are significant things to your staff. It is important for your effectiveness as a leader to be respected. The best way to gain respect is for your reports to believe and understand that you are looking out for them and able to make well considered, fair decisions, especially under pressure. Don't take it personally if you don't get asked to join any of your coworkers for a lunch run, or if water cooler conversations end abruptly when you approach.
6. **Your success is now based on the success of the team you lead.** Up to now your skill set and personal performance were all you needed to be successful. Those days are over. You must take a back seat. It's all about the team. Clearly communicate to team members what their roles are and how they contribute to the success of the whole. Clearly communicate to the team what defines success and how it will be tracked and measured. Share results. Let the team know how they are performing. Take satisfaction and have pride in the accomplishments of your team members. Provide recognition for jobs well done. Take pride in recognizing individual and team performances and communicating these accomplishments to others in the organization.

7. **Groom for growth.** One of your key supervisory responsibilities (and area of personal job satisfaction) is grooming and preparing deserving members of your staff to grow and develop in areas that will further benefit them and the company. How can you expect your staff to grow and develop new skills if they are not provided the opportunity to perform new tasks or take on increased responsibilities?
8. **Manage and measure performance.** Learn your staff's strengths and future career development goals. Prepare a simple development plan with achievable goals for each employee. Similarly, request copies of your staff's personnel file to review. Take note of any past or ongoing disciplinary issues, and areas requiring improvement. Learn how your company measures employee performance and keep good records and notes on each employee's performance. Let each employee know how their performance will be measured. Be concise, fair, and honest in your evaluation using examples wherever necessary. Always complete and conduct performance appraisals on time.
9. **Delegate.** Effective delegation is a significant milestone in the development of a savvy and productive supervisor. Because it will take you three hours to train someone to do an administrative task you can do in an hour is no reason to keep doing it yourself. The few hours of time you invest in training to delegate non-supervisory administrative tasks will save you time and increase your overall efficiency. Of course there are tasks that should not be delegated. They are your responsibility alone to complete. Delegating them would send the wrong message. But clearly there are administrative, or project related tasks that can be delegated to staff members with skill sets equal to the task requirements. Sure, staying late each night, and doing it all yourself is a way to get noticed by senior management but it also conveys that's the only way you know how to get ahead, have time management issues, and don't trust your staff to do any of the work. Working hard is not always working smart.
10. **Roll up your sleeves and get in the trenches.** The price of leadership sometimes requires you to set an example by taking off your supervisory hat and stepping in alongside your staff to contribute towards achieving a team objective. Warning, don't make this a habit and send the wrong message. In a pinch, such as someone calling in sick or during a peak order period you can step in, but on a day-to-day basis your staff must understand they are responsible for meeting their performance goals and your job is to make sure they have the resources, tools, and processes to achieve these goals.
11. **Stay out in front.** Keep in touch with the reality of what's going out there on the "shop floor". Do daily 1-2 minute status checks with your staff. Is everything on schedule or do they have any concerns that will affect the deadline? Communicate to your staff the understanding that it is okay to let you know about problems when there is adequate time to implement a solution. You want and need to know so you can stay out in front of a potential problem. It's not okay to wait till the eleventh hour to raise a red flag and inform you of a problem. You don't want to be surrounded by "yes men" and be assured all is okay today only to have the wheels fall off tomorrow. Your staff must know that it's okay to tell you when problems arise. Staying in front also means you are looking ahead and identify, plan, and address future budgetary, staff, or resource issues that could affect the success of your team. Don't let yourself get caught up putting out fires on a day-to-day basis and take your eye off the horizon. If your team doesn't have supplies or equipment, they can't build widgets. Like you, your boss also needs to know if there is something he or she must be aware of to provide support that will help you achieve your goals.

12. **Don't play the blame game.** Be Accountable. In a modern work environment there are complex processes, systems, and diverse functions that intricately mesh together to bring a product to market or provide a service that generates revenue. Invariably things will occur somewhere that reflect negatively on you and your team. The impulse will be to get defensive and find blame. Blame, even if justifiably directed does not fix a problem. In the heat of the moment, stay calm and be in control of your words and actions. Whenever possible take the discussion to a more private location to plan a course of action. As a supervisor and professional, you can't simply shrug your shoulders and say, "oh well", you must set an example of doing whatever it takes and is within your control to remedy the situation. How you deal with adversity will define how you are viewed as a leader. There is plenty of time later to hash out what went wrong and who dropped the ball. Direct conversation and action towards a solution and away from blame.
13. **Take one (or two, or three) for the team.** When overtime or weekend work is necessary to meet a deadline, the absolute worst thing you can do to destroy any credibility you have gained is to say to your staff, "I'm not coming in because I don't get paid by the hour any more and you do." As a supervisor your most important function is the day to day management and leadership of your team. If you expect members of your team to give up their personal time to come in to work, you must exhibit the same willingness. And even though nobody thanks you for coming in on Saturday or staying late, be sure to thank each member of your team for being there.
14. **Earn and maintain trust.** Trust and respect is more important to a supervisor than being everybody's buddy. What you don't say can be as important as what you do say. As a supervisor you will receive and have access to information that is confidential. Keep in confidential. Do not gossip about coworkers. Avoid or redirect conversations that are of a personal nature about coworkers or critical of company operations. If something is told to you in confidence by a coworker, keep it private (unless there is a legal obligation or safety concern requiring you to alert HR or senior management). Express appreciation and acknowledgement of individual staff and team achievements publicly. Express dissatisfaction with an individual's performance privately and keep the matter private. Once again it is emphasized as a supervisor what you don't say can be as important as what you do say. Use discretion.
15. **Being a defendant is no fun.** Did you know that as a supervisor of employees you can be held personally liable for a long list of employment law offenses that can result in hefty fines and/or jail time? To compound the matter each state may have a different statute. Sexual harassment, sexual discrimination, workplace violence, drugs, alcohol & firearms, gender, age, religious, lifestyle discrimination, work safety conditions, disability accommodation, medical conditions, overtime, etc. etc.; the list is endless and the penalties can be severe. How can you possibly know the right thing to say or do in every situation? The answer is to seek out and get supervisory training. Talk to your HR dept. READ and reread the company policy manual. Become informed. The other thing you must do is keep thorough documentation on your staff involving disciplinary, corrective action, or termination.

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