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First-Line Supervisors: Part of the Solution – or Part of the Problem?

Top-notch supervisors actively patrol their departments looking for problems, make sure operators stay on task and make sure company resources are utilized wisely. Good first-line supervisors pay for themselves many times over.



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Top-notch first-line supervisors make sure their operators stay on task and make sure company resources are used wisely.

In my experience, and for some unknown reason, most companies in the United States do not properly value their first-line supervisors in their manufacturing plants. Virtually every company my consulting firm has encountered – especially those in financial trouble – have very poor floor supervisors, or very poorly managed and trained floor supervisors, or both.

This issue's discussion is primarily focused on supervisors in the manufacturing setting, specifically the production floor "first line" supervisor, but the principles apply to any first line supervisor, whether in the plant, in the office, or in a clinical setting.

The First Line Supervisor

The dictionary defines a "supervisor" as someone who observes and directs the work of others, or someone who oversees the execution of a task, project or activity. It sounds simple, but in reality it is a

difficult job with pressures and issues coming from all directions.

Supervisors work in a unique and difficult position within the company. They tend to be the one who catches the wrath of management for manufacturing performance issues and production problems.

On the other side, they have to deal with all of the employee issues that come up throughout the day, such as their personal problems, disciplinary action, and absenteeism. Then, in between management pressures and worker issues, there are those pesky daily activities such as meeting production schedules, quality, downtime, scrap, overtime, materials availability, going to meetings, record keeping, safety, time card approvals and much more.

First-line supervisors are truly the first line of defense and can be a company's secret weapon – if they have good ones on the job. Instead of being one of the lowest paid salaried employees in the com-



pany, they should be some of the highest paid people in your employ and should be a more valued and prized member of the team because he or she is where the rubber meets the road. Good supervisors pay for themselves many times over. It is not easy to be a good supervisor, but it is very easy to be a poor one.

Obviously, the underlying problem is with management not understanding the value of having high-quality supervision on board. Given that changing the mind of management is a daunting task too large for this article, we are simply going to discuss the mechanics of the solution once management comes around.

Hiring & Training

Great supervisors are either hired from the outside or promoted and trained from within.

There are advantages to hiring someone from the outside. Sometimes you can hire people on a trial basis for 60-90 days to see if they fit into your organization, to evaluate the way they get along with others, and to see if they live up to the skills that they had on their resume. A trial period is easier to sell if the person is unemployed. I have always been a fan of "try before you buy," if possible.

Another reason to hire from the outside would be the experience they bring to the table that was acquired from other companies. Sometimes the expertise they bring, in the form of professionalism or improvement ideas or just a fresh face representing management, can be very rewarding and profitable for the company.

Many companies prefer to hire from within their own organization. This practice is not without its challenges.

There is nothing inherently wrong with promoting from within. However, manage-

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ment must be willing to put in the time to make sure the new supervisor is properly selected and trained and not just oriented to the department in the name of training.

Many times the “training” is done by supervisors who themselves are poor supervisors and the cycle continues. The superintendent or plant manager, if they are qualified, needs to spend one-on-one quality time with the new supervisor teaching them what is expected and they should be measured and evaluated against those expectations until they prove they can do the job. There should be a training plan that explains and defines the duties and responsibilities of the supervisor.

One recurring theme that my firm has found, with companies that promote people from within, is that the person they promote was a good employee or a great operator at their job, probably a reliable long-term employee. However, as good as they may be, this does not ensure that they will make a good supervisor, and in fact most of the time it doesn't unless they get the proper training, coaching and mentoring from people who they themselves understand what a good supervisor looks like.

In addition, when they fail as a supervisor (quit due to frustration or get fired for poor performance) the company not only loses a skilled longtime employee, but also the needed supervisor for which they must start the search again. It is a tragic double loss.

If you prefer to hire from within, one thing to consider is to create and train your own supervisors through an in-house training program. I know of one company that does this and has been very successful in creating a pool of qualified supervisor candidates that are currently in their employ doing other jobs.

This pool of candidates must attend a weekly company-sponsored training program, while they are still on the clock. Once they successfully complete the basic training, they remain in the pool for selection when supervisor jobs come available. Some candidates don't make it through the training and simply stay at their current jobs – no-harm, no-foul. The key is developing an effective basic training program

that properly prepares the candidates and then the proper on-the-job training once they start work.

Sometimes companies contract with a training company or send the new supervisors away to an offsite seminar, which is not always a good plan either, especially if that is all you do. Many times they only hear theory and eat donuts rather than truly get what they need to be effective on the shop floor. On the other hand, supplemental training can be very beneficial if they are exposed to safety topics such as lockout/tagout and blood-borne pathogens. In addition, training in sexual harassment, union activity and sometimes things like how to handle employee confrontations, can be very good and are highly recommended.

Practical Training & Expectations

My firm sees very little good practical training of supervisors. What we are talking about are practical duties and responsibilities that we believe make up the core activities of a supervisor's day and those activities that make the company the most money for the salaries paid. Things such as:

- Patrolling their departments regularly looking for problems, directing traffic and keeping the company machine (production) running efficiently.
- Making sure material handlers are on task servicing the operators.
- Making sure operators stay on task, meet production and quality requirements and adhere to break and lunch time policies.
- Making sure company policies are enforced and information is efficiently passed from the office to the shop floor.
- Making sure maintenance is informed of equipment or facility problems and that production needs are being satisfied quickly.
- Making sure workers have what they need.
- Checking machine cycle times to make sure they are to standard and not degraded or slowed down.
- Audit operator methods to make sure the proper authorized method is being used and the most recent work

instructions are being followed.

- Be tenacious with management or other departments in getting their departments needs taken care of.
- Carefully manage the materials being used and watch out for waste, theft, or misuse.
- Work on cost reductions and waste elimination at all times, whether it is labor, materials or other resources.
- Make sure all company resources and assets are efficiently utilized.
- And similar type tasks that all focus on keeping things running efficiently, thereby minimizing downtime and disruptions.

Conversely, I've witnessed supervisors doing (or not doing) activities that are contrary to the above discussed duties, which promote efficient use of company assets. I do understand that some organizations are so small, slow-paced, or staffed with so few employees that the supervisors may have to wear more than one hat. However, if their supervisor duties are not being done properly, there is a good chance the company is running less efficiently because of it. Here is a partial list of what we have seen:

- Getting caught up in too much clerical-type work, which keeps them in their office doing reports or other paperwork that should be done by others.
- Doing purchasing work, scheduling work and/or inventory responsibilities, thereby restricting their presence on the shop floor.
- Being allowed to sit in their office idle or waiting for employees to leave their work areas and come find them.
- Being afraid to act because of a union or difficult employees.
- Doing production, packing or material-handling work themselves instead of delegating that work to others. Sometimes they do this because it is easier to do it themselves or they would rather do physical work rather than do supervisory work. I have also seen supervisors that were too timid to ask others to do it and would just do the work themselves.
- Staying in a particular area/depart-

ment (and neglecting other areas they are responsible for) because they are more comfortable or familiar with it.

You always want your supervisors on the floor, being visible and patrolling their areas as much as possible.

Recently, I was asked to look at a poor performing manufacturing plant in Canada. The plant was a real mess and the workers managed themselves. They walked off the job anytime they wanted to and did exactly as they pleased. There was no supervision on the floor, as they were always in their offices doing reports for management, time cards, calling for quotes and buying materials for production.

The only time they were on the floor was to check inventory, collect time cards or check the production counts to determine

if they were to work overtime that day. This is about the worst possible scenario for a manufacturing plant, yet this is played out all over Canada, the U.S., and Mexico every day. As it turned out, the company refused to implement my firm's recommendations and the plant was closed due to its continued poor performance.

Group Leaders

Group leaders, or team leaders, are experienced hourly workers who know a great deal about their line, department or group of machines and are paid a bit more per hour to provide supervisor-like oversight in their areas. Some companies that I encounter rely too heavily on group leaders or the team leader concept as a way of supervising. Sometimes this is an attempt to save money and sometimes

this is an attempt to engage and involve the workforce.

There can be a useful place for group leaders – if there is a supervisory presence also – but when companies substitute group leaders for supervision it never works out well, in my experience. There is no substitute for having a real supervisor on the scene looking out for the company's interest.

In summary, supervisors should be carefully selected people and trained by someone who understands what being a supervisor is all about. This process may be the single most important thing an organization can do to help themselves not only survive, but prosper in the long run. Never underestimate or look down upon the value of the first line supervisor. They may be the most important people in the organization. **PRO**



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