



PART 1

Fundamentals for the Supervisor



CHAPTER 1

Do You Really Want to Be a Supervisor?

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- Encourage the reader or student to carefully examine his or her reasons for aspiring to supervision and to assess the willingness of the individual to accept the responsibilities of supervision along with its perceived advantages.
- Provide simple, practical definitions of management and supervision, and establish the importance of the supervisory role in the organization.
- Convey an understanding of the basic functions of supervision and place the performance of these in perspective with their applicability at other levels of management.
- Outline the skills and capabilities essential for success in supervision.
- Review some of the significant changes the individual may experience in making the transition from member of a work group to leader of a group.
- Highlight the elements of a new supervisor's relationships with subordinates, peers, and superiors.
- Identify potential pitfalls that can interfere with the growth and development of the supervisor.
- Offer some practical advice for achieving success in a supervisory career.

KEY TERMS

Supervisor; First-Line Supervisor; First-Line Manager: In the use of these terms throughout this text, these three labels ordinarily refer to the same position at the bottom of the management hierarchy—the person who oversees the labors of those who do the hands-on work.

Management: Management is getting things done through people. It may of course involve a great deal of activity, but it all comes down to directing the application of resources, both human and material, to accomplish a goal.

Manager: A generic term describing anyone overseeing the labor of others from the newest first-line supervisor to the chief executive officer, and second, a position-specific title that may appear at any organizational level.

Middle Manager: Management position residing in a hierarchical layer between first-line supervisors and higher management, such as a department or division head or executive, depending on organization size. Middle managers generally supervise the first-line supervisors.

Entering the Arena Untrained?

Unfortunately, not all healthcare organizations provide supervisory training to the technical or professional employees who are promoted to supervisory positions, and few if any provide supervisory orientation for unskilled or semi-skilled entry-level workers who are elevated to group-leader or supervisory positions. Realistically, most organizations do not provide adequate orientation to supervision. This failure compounds the problems caused by the tendency to promote technically skilled employees who frequently show no particular leadership skills or who sometimes even have little interest in becoming supervisors but accept because of the title and pay.

Many workers do indeed accept promotion to supervision because of the increased salary and accompanying benefits or because they feel obligated to accept what is offered to them; it is a fairly common feeling among many employees that refusing a promotion is a career-limiting move in the eyes of one's organizational superiors. However, insightful employers and employees know that "doing" skills do not convert easily to "leading" skills; that is, the good worker does not necessarily make a good supervisor. If a good worker is to become a good supervisor, the organization needs to make it happen. Unless the promoted employee happens to be a "natural leader" (there are a few of these around, though not too many), those who do the promoting have to do more than just confer a title and pile on some responsibilities.

However, in far too many instances a promotion to supervision mirrors the experience of the relatively new groundskeeper who was placed in charge of a grounds crew of five employees. He lamented: "My total orientation to supervision consisted of my manager saying, 'Here's how to approve time cards; now you're the boss.'" His first week found him having to address the following: Rescheduling a day's work and scrambling to cover because one person failed to show

up; quickly learning how to obtain parts for a mower that broke down; intervening in a heated dispute between two of his employees; and deciding whether a particular employee's behavior warranted disciplinary action. He referred to his first week on the job as "orientation by sink or swim."

If you have never been in a position of leadership, promotion to supervisor represents a major vocational change. You must usually give up some tasks you enjoy and take on others you either dislike or feel uncomfortable doing. It is highly likely that you were promoted because of your professional knowledge, technical skills, or seniority, or some combination of these, with little or no attention to your inexperience as a leader.

Certainly, to be offered a supervisory job is flattering. You can use the extra pay, and your family will be proud of you. But accepting the position could be a decision you regret for several reasons. Your relationship with former teammates will never be the same. You are now part of "them" and no longer "us." Your daily routine, your interpersonal relationships, and your self-concept all must change. Your loyalties will be divided; although you must remain loyal to those who are now your employees, some elements of the organization will expect your primary loyalty to lie with management. And even in these days of a relatively enlightened workforce, there are always a few non-management employees who regard management as "the enemy."

In some ways assuming a supervisory position separates you from your coworkers. Occasionally, you will feel alone. Your decisions and your efforts to enforce policies and rules will not always be popular. Your decisions and actions may create adversaries for you. New peers (mostly other supervisors and managers) may be reluctant to accept you, especially if you continue to identify closely with your old group, a clear danger if you become the supervisor of a group of which you were formerly a member.

If you have not thought about or prepared for the necessary role change, proceed with

care. Weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the change. Think through all that seems to be involved, and consider the following questions:

- Do I truly want to become a supervisor, or am I considering doing so because I desire the increased income or other benefits or because I believe I really have no choice?
- Do I honestly want the opportunity to get things done the way I believe they should be done?
- Am I prepared to take the risk and let go of old patterns of behavior?
- Will I enjoy instructing people and evaluating their performance?
- How will I react to the necessity of enforcing policies and counseling and disciplining employees when needed?
- Am I willing to engage in budget preparation and other forms of planning activity?
- Can I accept the inevitability of participating in workplace politics?
- Do I stand ready and willing to adopt an attitude of continuous learning about supervision?

As you wrestle with questions such as these, seek the advice of your present supervisor, mentors, if any, and experienced employees whose judgment you trust. Also, think hard about the apparent advantages and disadvantages of the supervisory role. There may be much you find appealing about being a supervisor, and thus part of management, but you need to take care to prevent that which is appealing from obscuring your view of possible drawbacks.

Definitions and Essentials

Management is getting things done through people. The term “manager” is used in both a generic and a titular sense. In the generic sense, it refers to any member of the management team, from newest first-line supervisor to chief executive officer. As a position title, it describes someone who is ordinarily at an organizational level

below executive but above first-line supervisor. We generally use “manager” to describe those above the rank of supervisor and “executive” to describe members of top management. However, considerable care must be taken in using various labels and titles; what means one thing in one organization or department may mean something entirely different in another setting. For example, “supervisor,” as used in this text, refers to the lowest level of management, but in some nursing service structures “supervisor” has long been used to describe someone in charge of a wing or collection of units having authority over several head nurses who, in that capacity, are the first-line supervisors.

A distinguishing characteristic of supervisors, as the term is used in this text, is that they oversee the activities of the people who perform the hands-on work; that is, the people who report to them do not oversee the work of others. In this text the terms “supervisor,” “first-line supervisor,” and “first-line manager” are synonymous.

For a frequently cited legal definition, in the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 (the proper name of this legislation is the Labor-Management Relations Act of 1947) a supervisor is “any individual having the authority to hire, transfer, suspend, recall, or discipline other employees; or responsibility to direct them, or to adjust their grievances.”¹

The supervisor is often depicted as the person in the middle, beset by the opposing forces of higher management and the workers. Higher management wants quality work, productivity, and low costs. Workers want higher pay, more benefits, and greater job satisfaction. Although the primary loyalty of the supervisor—for that matter, the primary loyalty of any employee at any level—should be to the organization and its customers, clients, or patients, subordinates nevertheless expect their supervisors to represent their needs and to be their spokespersons.

Supervisors spend much of their time meeting goals, implementing plans, and enforcing policies. At the next higher level, often referred to as “middle management,” managers spend much of their time setting goals, planning, and establishing policies. Supervisors are more likely than middle

managers to be able to fill in for absent workers. In small departments, supervisors often spend much of their time performing technical or professional work alongside the people who report to them.

Anyone who aspires to a successful career in supervision, perhaps leading to middle management or higher, would do well to always remain aware of two essential characteristics of supervision. First, supervisors need subordinates more than subordinates need supervisors. A group can function without a supervisor, perhaps not very well but still it can function. However, a supervisor alone, with no one to supervise, cannot accomplish all of the work. Second, supervisors do not get paid primarily for what they know or what they do. Rather, they are paid for what their subordinates do, and—especially—they are paid for bearing the responsibility for ensuring that the work gets done and gets done correctly.

In the past, a great many supervisors were primarily “bosses” who gave orders and generally managed autocratically. However, given today’s generally enlightened workforce, today’s supervisors must be leaders. They are the primary source of answers, instructions, assistance, and guidance for the employees who report to them. Their primary function is to help their employees get the daily work done. Many employees believe that their supervisors have forgotten this, but as a supervisor you must accept full responsibility for the success or failure of your staff.

Essential Management Functions of Supervisors

In addition to the professional and technical duties from which a supervisor never completely separates, a supervisor has management responsibility related to the following essential functions:

1. *Planning*: for example, budgets, new methods and procedures, goals and objectives, and continuing education programs
2. *Organizing*: for example, position descriptions, locations of equipment, and arrangement of workstations and storage areas

3. *Directing*: including selection and orientation of new employees, scheduling, making assignments, training, coaching, and resolution of employee grievances
4. *Controlling*: applying policies and rules, enforcing standards of performance, conducting performance appraisals, and addressing issues of quality, safety, cost, inventory control, counseling, discipline, and such
5. *Coordinating*: cooperation with other sections of the department, other departments, and various staff activities and services

Time is precious for supervisors and managers. Typically, 54% of their time is spent on their own administrative work, 30% is spent on problem-solving and collaborating, 10% on strategy innovation, and 7% on developing stakeholders.²

Essential Supervisory Skills

First, a supervisor must be technically and professionally competent. Most supervisors regularly help with some technical tasks, and in larger units some supervisors serve as pinch-hitters. In either case, supervisors need professional competency for making decisions and solving problems.

Your influence as a leader must not be limited to the authority granted by your employer. Your knowledge and experience give you much more power. Most healthcare workers promoted to supervisory roles have specific professional or technical competencies. This does not mean they must know more about everything or be technically more proficient than their subordinates, but rather that their expertise must be sufficient to earn the respect of subordinates.

Basic Skills for Every Supervisor

Successful supervisors need leadership skills in the following areas:

- Communication
- Employee motivation
- Problem-solving and decision-making

- Delegation
- Time management
- Career development

The importance of these vital leadership skills comes through loud and clear in the experiences related by some healthcare supervisors. Some healthcare supervisors found the following activities to pose the most difficulties for them:

- Preparing written communication
- Interviewing, whether for employee selection, discipline, or performance evaluation
- Setting goals for themselves and subordinates
- Offering suggestions for improving work processes
- Delegating authority
- Developing data for budgets
- Developing job descriptions
- Resolving conflicts among subordinates³

Traits Exhibited by Effective Supervisors

Certain traits are exhibited by supervisors of proven effectiveness:

- *Self-confidence.* Good supervisors do not become defensive when criticized. They accept responsibility for their own actions and the actions of their subordinates.
- *Respect for others.* Good supervisors welcome input from all sources and are effective listeners. They praise more often than they criticize.
- *Good humor.* Competent supervisors display a sense of humor and can laugh at themselves. They seldom lose their temper.
- *Ability to make decisions.* Effective supervisors make decisions promptly but not before careful consideration. They do not pass the buck.
- *Flexibility and resilience.* Good supervisors adjust rapidly to changing situations, conditions, and demands. They overcome setbacks without becoming bitter.
- *Energy and enthusiasm.* Good supervisors possess a strong work ethic. They are optimistic and cheerful, even when under stress.

- *Creativity.* Good supervisors are always thinking about better ways of doing things. They encourage others to be innovative.
- *Customer awareness.* Good supervisors know their external and internal customers and strive to exceed the expectations of these customers.
- *Quality orientation.* Good supervisors insist on things being done right the first time. They support all quality improvement measures.
- *Empowering.* Good supervisors practice participative management and are effective team builders.
- *Risk-taking.* Good supervisors are willing to express opinions, encourage creativity, and accept responsibility.

Supervisors as Seen by Their Employees

Following are statements that workers have been heard to make about the supervisors they respect:

- “He discusses problems with me and listens to what I have to say.”
- “She shares credit, telling the big boss when we do a good job.”
- “She lets me know how she feels about my work, whether good or bad.”
- “I can trust him to go to bat for me.”
- “He means it when he pays me a compliment, and I know exactly what I did that he liked.”
- “He always has time to listen to me.”
- “She tries to help me do a better job.”

Transition to Supervision

Moving into a supervisory position in the department in which you have been working has both advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, you know the people, and you know the department and its activities. On the other hand, you must establish new relationships with former peers and friends and must henceforth identify with management without completely losing your

identification with the work group. The transition is easiest if the following have already occurred:

- You have already been accepted as an informal leader within the department.
- You have previously served in leadership roles, such as committee chair, trainer, or substitute supervisor.
- You have had experience performing administrative tasks.
- You have prepared for this eventuality through formal educational programs or self-study.

Leading Versus Doing

Your new role requires you to spend more time getting the group's work done through others and less time doing the work yourself. Many new supervisors find it nearly impossible to stop doing what they did before they were promoted. This is so partly because they performed their former tasks well and partly because they were not trained to be supervisors. Since they know one side of the role very well (the working side) but do not know the other side (the supervisory side) nearly as well, they tend to favor the side with which they are most comfortable. Some supervisors become frustrated when they realize they no longer can do everything better than their subordinates; however, although a supervisor must understand the work, he or she does not need to be able to perform every task in a superior manner. Trying to serve as both a full-time leader and a full-time worker simultaneously ends in burnout or failure.

Supervisors must maintain enough technical or professional expertise to answer questions and serve as a resource. They must often pitch in and help with the daily work. Some positions, especially in smaller units or on evening, night, or weekend shifts, legitimately call for hybrid leadership-worker roles.

Relationships with Subordinates

As a supervisor you naturally want to be liked by the people you supervise, but you cannot continue to be part of the old gang. Strive for the

respect of the employees rather than looking for their affection. Be firm, fair, and consistent. Make up your mind to develop your managerial skills while maintaining your professional knowledge.

If you previously earned the respect of your teammates, you are off to a good start. On the other hand, if they resent your promotion, believe someone else was more deserving, or believe you were selected because of favoritism, you may experience some rough going.

Honeymoon Phase

Immediately after the promotion, you and most of your subordinates will most likely make a special effort to cooperate. Your former pals may have mixed feelings toward you; this is referred to as the phenomenon of ambivalence. They want to like and trust you, but they resent your control over them. Certainly they congratulate you and say they are happy to have you as their new leader, and you reciprocate with equal enthusiasm. You tell them that nothing has changed and that with their help you will correct all the problems and annoyances that have long bothered the group. During this phase, those at organizational levels both above and below you will watch you carefully and will judge your competence.

After the Honeymoon

The honeymoon phase, during which just about everyone cooperates, acts friendly, and conceals problems, lasts about as long as a typical marital honeymoon. It may give way abruptly to a phase of discomfort when a sensitive problem, such as the need for a reduction in staff, arises. More often, however, the honeymoon ends gradually as the new supervisor turns down requests or exhibits ineffectiveness. In their desire to be liked, new supervisors often go too far with the friendship approach. This ultimately hampers their ability to provide direction, criticize work performance, or make unpleasant decisions. It is necessary to risk friendship to gain respect. Like it or not, you must finally realize that you are now viewed as one of "them" and no longer as one of "us."

Some subordinates take advantage of the goodwill of the supervisor; the rest take a wait-and-see attitude. The chronic complainers, cynics, passive-aggressives, and negativists cannot stay silent for long. They soon begin to talk about all the weaknesses of the new boss, compare this boss unfavorably with predecessors, and point out how things have been getting worse instead of better.

In most instances, work should be the primary topic of conversation. This does not rule out casual conversation, but your main job is to ensure that the group's work is completed. You must enforce orders from your superiors, even when these orders do not seem sensible or fair to you or to your subordinates. You may well feel an urge to dissociate yourself from these orders, but if you yield to that temptation, you will lose the respect of your subordinates. You gain nothing by claiming that "I don't like this any better than you do; *they* made me do it." Instead, discuss such orders with your manager and see what can be done about changing them or somehow making them more acceptable. You should at least explain to your people the reasons for such directives. Above all, do not discredit higher management by siding with the unhappy employees.

If you let your authority go to your head and lower the boom on your employees, they will unite against you. It is essential to meld humility with firmness. Micromanaging largely involves one-way communication: no listening and a great deal of ordering. This may occur either because a new supervisor wants to do a good job or perhaps because he or she enjoys the feeling of authority.

Because of your new supervisory responsibilities, you should spend less time with former teammates and more with fellow supervisors. Ideally, this should extend to time spent in social activities. Others are more likely to charge you with favoritism if you retain close social ties with your old buddies; you may not be guilty of favoritism at all, but the mere perception of favoritism can be extremely damaging. You are also more likely to reveal confidential information while socializing with your former coworkers. As a supervisor, you must remember that your words

carry a certain weight they did not have before you were promoted. Comments you make about others are more often repeated and can get you into hot water.

On the other hand, do not destroy old relationships. The temptation to please higher management may reduce your sensitivity to your employees. You should take time to continue personal, positive contacts with each person, chiefly during brief encounters on the job or during breaks. Do not be afraid to ask questions or solicit help from them.

Relationships with Other Supervisors

Your new peers, your fellow supervisors, will not accept you unless you start meeting with them and acting as though you are one of them. These contacts are important for other reasons. Sharing problems and ideas with other supervisors enhances your growth as a supervisor. The health-care industry has almost always had an excessive emphasis on professional growth; thus, we tend to identify with fellow professionals rather than with fellow managers, and each occupation or profession tends to become a "club" of sorts.

Another reason for moving closer to fellow supervisors is the increasing need for coordinating the flow of work. Sharing equipment and overlapping services requires close cooperation between and among departments and other units.

Relationship with Your Manager

If you have been promoted from the ranks, you already know something about the person who is now your immediate boss. You know whether he or she prefers to communicate verbally or in writing. You have learned how to interpret the boss's body language, when to stay out of the way, and what pleases or displeases this manager. If you are new to the department, you need to learn these things as soon as you can.

Good supervisors help their managers control their time by handling trifles themselves. They give the managers all necessary information, even when the news is bad. They don't run to their managers with problems asking for help; they do their homework and offer recommended solutions. They admit their mistakes and do not make the same mistake twice.

Adjusting to the New Routine

The transitional phase consists of preparing for your behavioral changes. This involves enhancing your communication processes, learning how to best get the work completed effectively and efficiently, and applying the right skills at the right time. This is called "situational leadership."

Endeavor to balance a task-oriented style with people-oriented needs. Model the behavior you want to encourage in others. Never overlook the potential effects of a strong, visible, positive role model, and remain aware of the damaging effects of the negative role model projected by the supervisor whose attitude toward employees is "do as I say, not as I do."

Pitfalls

Supervisors should do their best to be aware of and to avoid the potential problems that can sometimes encroach upon supervisory behavior:

- Lacking flexibility in dealing with attitudes, biases, perceptions, emotions, and feelings. Previous nonsupervisory experience depended largely on objective measurement and on circumstances one could objectively control and measure, but now the ambience is murky and decisions are more frequently based on subjective factors.
- Lacking assertiveness. Introverts often struggle with leadership roles.
- Unwilling to pay the price of loneliness, with fewer peers and more stress.
- Striving to be liked rather than respected.

- Unwilling to determine specifically what superiors expect.
- Failing to maintain technical and management competence and thus not remaining marketable.
- Withholding important information from peers, subordinates, or superiors.
- Becoming a bottleneck rather than a supporter and expeditor.

Refer to the chapter "Leaders and Managers" for more information about leadership.

Launching a Successful Supervisory Career

Provide yourself with the best possible chance of succeeding as a supervisor by observing the following:

- Know what is expected of you. Be thoroughly familiar with all aspects of your job description.
- Hold regular one-to-one meetings with each employee. Group meetings, although necessary, are not enough; each employee deserves your undivided attention from time to time—and not just when criticism is necessary.
- Work to build relationships and establish a personal network.
- Learn to trust your intuition more than you ever had to before you became a supervisor.
- Remain available to help others; become a great listener.
- Be sensitive to the feelings, needs, and desires of the people who report to you.
- Keep your people as fully informed as possible.
- Maintain high ethical and moral standards; be a model of integrity.
- Be willing to ask for help when needed and to ask questions.
- Join professional organizations serving your field and attend their meetings.
- Maintain an active self-education program, recognizing that the supervisor who does not continue to learn will steadily fall behind.

- Insist on good performance, and acknowledge and reward it.
- Remain calm under stress; avoid shouting and pouting.
- Display self-confidence at all times.
- Remain fair; always keep your conduct free from favoritism or discrimination.
- Defend your employees from hostile people and tormentors.
- Display the courage to make unpopular decisions and see them through.

WRAP-UP

Think About It

Entering supervision is not a matter of simply accepting a promotion and performing tasks different from what you had been doing.

Entering supervision is literally the adoption of a second career.

Questions for Review and Discussion

1. Why should the first-line supervisor be proficient in both doing and leading? Explain.
2. Do you believe it is better to rise to supervision from within the group or to move into the position from outside? Why?
3. What do you believe are the fundamental differences between a traditional “boss” and a true leader?
4. Why is it necessary for the first-line supervisor to be technically or professionally competent as well as a capable leader?
5. Why is delegation a critically important supervisory skill?
6. Concerning the section “Supervisors as Seen by Their Employees,” write one additional statement that you would like to hear said of you as a supervisor. Explain why you wrote this particular statement.
7. Why is it of particular importance for the supervisor to identify primarily with management?
8. As a first-line supervisor, how would you attempt to relate honestly with your immediate superior if that manager’s attitude strongly suggests that “bad news” is never welcome?
9. As a newly hired or recently appointed supervisor, how would you go about trying to determine what expectations you will be called on to meet?
10. What would you do if you found yourself in strong disagreement with a mandate your immediate superior expects you to implement through your employees?

Case: Sarah's Promotion

After spending several years as a staff nurse in the same medical–surgical unit, Sarah was promoted to the position of head nurse of that unit. Immediately after the staff meeting at which her promotion was announced, Sarah was surrounded by several of her coworkers, members of her lunchtime “coffee club,” offering congratulations.

“Great news,” said Jane, “but does this blow the carpool? I don’t think your hours will be the same as ours anymore.”

Emily said, “There goes the coffee club. Management commitments, don’t you know.” Sarah felt she detected a sarcastic edge to Emily’s mention of management.

Debbie said, “Well, maybe now we can get someone to listen to us. Don’t forget, Sarah, you used to complain just like the rest of us.”

Helen said, “Complaining has been a way of life around here. I personally don’t think that our recently departed supervisor ever passed any of our concerns up the line.” Her tone turned sharp as she added, “Now that Sarah’s going to be in a position to do something, let’s hope she doesn’t forget who her friends are.”

Following a brief, awkward silence, the group broke up and the nurses went their separate ways.

Questions

1. Describe the advantages Sarah may enjoy in taking over as supervisor for this group of which she has long been a member.
2. What principal disadvantages might Sarah face?
3. Put yourself in Sarah’s position and describe the approach you would take in attempting to alter her relationships with her small group of friends.

References

1. Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 (Labor-Management Relations Act of 1947), Section 101, Subsection 2(11). -time-should-a-manager-spend-developing-employees. Published July 13, 2022. Accessed March 14, 2023.
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