

Supervisors—Safety Asset or Liability?

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Introduction

It has been the experience of the author over the last 40 years that most companies have not done an adequate job of properly preparing an employee to take on the role of a supervisor. They take their best welder (or any craft position) and make him/her a foreman and in doing so have accomplished two things. They have lost their best welder and usually now have their worst supervisor. This person has gone from burning rods one day to leading people the next. So, what happened overnight? Was there some magical transformation that has taken place? No! And here in lies the problem. This paper will focus on what the author feels are the key components to developing leadership at the field level and making a difference in an effective safety process. This paper will key on the fact that a supervisor can be an asset (valuable to the company) or a liability (disadvantage to the company).

Definitions

As defined by the U.S. National Labor Relations Act, a supervisor is:

“Any individual having authority, in the interest of the employer, to hire, transfer, suspend, lay off, recall, promote, discharge, assign, reward, or discipline other employees, or responsibility to direct them, or to adjust their grievances, or effectively to recommend such action, if in connection with the foregoing the exercise of such authority is not of a merely routine or clerical nature, but requires the use of independent judgment.”

John Maxwell in his book, *Developing the Leader Within You*, simply states, “leadership is influence”.

Definition most used by the author simply states, “leadership is the ability to inspire others to exceed their perceived talents through guided empowerment and being enabled” It also helps if you have followers!

Asset: 1. anything owned that has exchange value. 2. valuable or desirable thing to have.

Liability: 4. something that works to one’s disadvantage.

Expectations

What is it that we expect of a foreman or front line supervisor?

This is another area where most companies fall short. They don't do an adequate job of letting front line supervisors know what is expected of them. When an employee is promoted to supervisor, without proper training or experience, the thought process usually goes along the line of: well, my foreman did a pretty good job, so I guess I will pattern myself after him/her. What happens here is that we have a long line of supervisors that have had the same thought process and it almost becomes an incestuous issue. We have a supervisor in 2011 trying to use antiquated techniques from 30 years ago and it simply will not work. And this 30-year-old focus usually is primarily on "production" and "intimidation".

The company should have very specific guidelines when it comes to promoting an employee to supervisor. At the same time, the person being promoted should expect some type of training from the company to help them become effective leaders in the field. Usually there is a breakdown on the part of both parties and this is setting the new supervisor and the company up for failure.

The critical issue is that the front line supervisor is the person that employees see as the face of the company. It is also the person that the company sees as representing their interests to get the job done. Being such a critical role, you would expect companies to realize that they have full control over the people that work for them and the people they promote and take the necessary steps to insure they have the right people in the right places.

The expected roles of supervisors are very diverse and need adequate training on leadership as much as they need experience on the job functions. Let's take a look at a non-inclusive list of supervisory duties:

- Knowledge of job duties & experience
- Mentor to employees
- Trainer
- Motivator
- Disciplinarian
- Evaluator
- Leader

Knowledge of Job Duties & Experience

An excellent working knowledge of the job duties, along with experience, is usually the very reasons that an employee is considered for the role of a supervisor. They generally have years of experience working in the related field and have shown some type of imitative to move ahead. There is hopefully something in the selection criteria that shows that this employee has a pattern of working safely in getting the job completed.

Mentor to Employees

It has been my experience that this one area can be a positive or negative with regard to the impact that a supervisor has on employees.

I have worked with supervisors that conducted their business in a very safe manner and were able to make production schedules very easily. They had high expectations for employees to work in a safe manner. These supervisors complied with or exceeded safety requirements and had a history of taking care of employees and having very few injuries within their ranks. They develop a relationship and want to ensure that their employees go home at the end of the day.

I have also worked with the exact opposite of this situation. Supervisors that were constantly taking short cuts in order to make production and very often at the expense of an injured employee or damaged property. They felt that injuries were just a cost of doing business and really had no compassion for their workers. Some even felt that work related scars and injuries were a badge of honor. The sad fact is that many of these supervisors are still in the work force today and have not changed their thought process. I have heard countless times from these supervisors that “that is the way we have always done it”. Change happens. Get on board or jump ship.

Trainer

One of the more challenging aspects of being a supervisor is being assigned a “green hand” or a brand new employee. These are employees that come into an industrial or construction environment and have only worked retail or in a fast food restaurant. Most will come in from attending a safety orientation with a glazed look in their eyes from all the rules and regulations they have gotten in 8 hours of cramming. Now it is up to the supervisor to take the classroom training and transfer that into the work environment. If handled properly, it gives a supervisor the opportunity to truly craft a safe worker.

All supervisors must ensure that all employees, new or experienced, are properly trained and have adequate experience to perform the assigned tasks. They must make sure that employees understand and can recognize the hazards associated with the work. Some of this must be taken at face value when a worker transfers in with experience on their records. It is then up to the supervisor to evaluate employees and this will be discussed later in this paper.

Motivator

The author feels that motivation is something that comes from within but can be influenced by many factors. There are basically two types of motivation: intrinsic or internally driven and extrinsic or outside driven.

The supervisor playing on the positive side of *intrinsic motivation* will get employees motivated by giving them opportunities to grow or learn new tasks, gain knowledge by putting in more effort and reaching desired goals, and actually mastering specific goals or skills. The belief and recognition that they can grow in the specific craft and gain self-confidence.

The extrinsic or outside driven motivation comes from wanting more money, competition among peers, or the fear of punishment. This is definitely the wrong type of motivation and usually does not produce a long-term employee.

Disciplinarian

While not a favorite role, supervisors must understand that disciplining an employee comes with the territory. One of the key rules for a supervisor in handling discipline is to conduct it in a private setting. The idea is not to humiliate an employee but to try and influence change when an employee fails to meet performance standards. This will also give the supervisor an opportunity to ensure that the employee actually knew what was expected in the job performance.

It is also imperative that the supervisor is aware of company policy regarding how to handle discipline cases. Most companies will have some type of progressive discipline procedures, i.e. verbal, written, days off and termination. There are also issues within industry that a first time offense is just cause for termination, especially in the area of safety.

The key for the supervisor is to fully understand the focus on discipline is not to punish or seek some type of personal revenge but to influence future performance. This is probably the most difficult role for a supervisor especially when they have employees with which they have developed a working relationship. However if they turn a blind eye to the issue of risk takers it is simply stating that I really don't care about you as a person as long as the job gets done. This puts everyone on a road to disaster.

I have worked with companies that had some very unique ways of handling discipline. One of the most effective had to do with an employee that was given a suspension for some type of a safety violation. The employee had to return to the job with a written plan on how they were going to change their performance. This was evaluated by their foreman and other members of site leadership to determine if the employee was going to be allowed to return to work. This was very effective because it required the employee to elaborate on the effect of an injury or death for his family.

Evaluator

As stated early on in this paper, the supervisor has a key role in the hiring, transfer, assignment, promotion and discharge of an employee. Companies rely heavily on the supervisor to evaluate employees as they progress through their work careers. They must be good readers of people and be able to effectively recognize both strengths and weaknesses and then work through evaluations to help the employee grow.

Evaluations for new employees should be conducted on a weekly basis to help them progress in a manner consistent with the overall training scheme. Regular communication between worker and supervisor will help discover cracks in the plan and help resolve issues and provide ideas for improvement.

Evaluations for experienced employees are another part of the supervisors' role. They must, through their own job experience, determine fairly quickly whether a so called experienced worker is actually capable of performing necessary job tasks. If not, then additional training, mentoring, transfer or discharge will come into play.

Recognition on a daily basis will go a long way in producing the type of employees that companies want; motivated, skilled and willing to go the extra mile. Supervisors that regularly offer sincere appreciation for a job well done will find that when they do have to discipline an employee that it will be much easier.

Leader

I am often asked if I feel there is a difference between a leader and a supervisor/manager. My answer is always an unequivocal yes. I am a firm believer in the statement that you ***manage things and you lead people***. This is one of the missing pieces when it comes to front line supervisors ... leadership training. I have seen evidence of companies that do all types of company and regulatory training and completely disregard one the most important pieces of training for their leadership.

Companies rely on front line supervisors to guide, direct, motivate, reward, discipline, evaluate, discharge and promote employees under their direct care and manage the front line of work. This takes a lot of work and to get the work completed requires employees following a leader. There is a leadership proverb that simply states: ***“He who thinketh he leadeth and hath no one following him is only taking a walk”***. I guarantee that most of the supervisors in the workforce today are simply taking a walk without anyone willing to follow.

Here is a list of what the author feels are the qualities of an effective leader:

- Character – What you are when no one else is around.
- Trust – Doing what you say you are going to do
- Strong People Skills – Fully understands people
- Vision – See the big picture for themselves, workers & the company
- Integrity – Doing what’s right but maybe not popular
- Positive Influence – ability to attract the right people
- Responsible – Doesn’t pass the buck
- Positive Attitude – ability to pass on this attitude to the right people
- Problem Solver- Solver not creator
- Desire to continue to learn
- Time Manager
- Unselfish – Gives credit to others
- Self-Discipline – Follow tasks to completion
- Change Maker
- Good Listener
- Willingness to serve others
- Legacy Builder – Growing other leaders
- Executor – Gets things done

Conclusion

The role of the supervisor in today’s workplace is more important than ever. There is a need for safety leadership at the front line level to help make a difference and to ensure that all employees get to go home at the end of the workday. A supervisor that is an effective leader will get buy-in at the worker level and safety will be just the way we do business.

The author believes that not providing proper training for supervisors is doing a disservice to the company, the supervisor and most importantly to the workers under his or her care and creates a clear liability. Companies have to make the extra effort to pick the right people for the job and then do everything in their power to help make them successful.

Progressive companies can even take on a professional stance for their supervisors by subscribing to the tenets of the Safety Trained Supervisor (STS) certification program. This truly demonstrates managements' safety support and accountability. Benefits of this process allow employers and owners to have tangible evidence of demonstrated competence and fundamental safety knowledge by their supervision. It helps increase safety awareness among all employees and moves the company toward a value added culture.

The STS process has proven to improve productivity with better communication among work groups and gives management a higher level of confidence that all employees are making the right choices in the work place. Lower workers compensation cases and higher profits from safe work add to the benefits realized.

Employees benefit from having a demonstrated knowledge of fundamental safety practices along with better opportunities for increased job responsibilities and future employment. Certified employees bring added value to the employer and provide evidence to the owners that the company is truly serious about the overall safety process. This also gives the employees increased confidence when dealing with safety and health matters.

Bottom line is that is it a win-win strategy with all parties involved benefiting from having a safe work environment and most of all allowing employees to go home each and every day. Now that is what we are after.

I simply ask that you go back and take a hard, evidence based assessment of your current supervisors and how you select and train them. It is my hope that after doing a thorough assessment that you don't have to say: "we have a clear liability with our supervisors".

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