

On Being a Supervisor

There is more to the job of supervisor than the physical management of a daily work schedule. The intangible goal of obtaining top efficiency while maintaining pleasant work surroundings presents an exciting challenge. Factors creating this productive atmosphere are discussed in this article. If a supervisor combines good judgment, positive action, reason, and a sensitive knowledge of people in dealing with his employees, he can produce a staff that will do its best with enthusiasm for the organization.

EVERY organization requires efficient management of its daily work, intelligent administration of its financial affairs, and competence in dealing with men and women. The principles are fundamentally the same whether we are managing an army, a nation, an organization, or a suburban home. Managers are people who make things happen in the best way to arrive at desired objectives. They originate, plan, and push things through.

This is a skilled occupation. The manager or supervisor must have competence in managing not only things and people but situations. He needs to practise certain fundamental principles of good administration. This is true whether he is an Extension director, a state 4-H leader, or a county agent working with an office staff.

It is impossible for a person to be an efficient supervisor unless he knows the big picture of which his staff is a part. He must know precisely what the administration expects of him in the way of operation and effort toward a definite objective.

Supervisors should be consulted when plans are made affecting their departments, and they should be given the authority to carry out the projects. As Prime Minister Churchill told the House of Commons, "I am your servant, and you have the right to dismiss me when you please. What you have no right to do is to ask me to bear responsibilities without the power of effective action."

An organization will operate smoothly and competently when functions are clearly set out for each management position and kept

Adapted from The Royal Bank of Canada Monthly Letter of August, 1967, and printed with the permission of The Royal Bank of Canada, Montreal, P.Q., Canada.

up-to-date. "Function" includes responsibilities, authority, and relationships—responsibilities to the organization, authority in the office, and relationships with other offices. These must be known to staff members.

THE ART OF MANAGEMENT

Management is a professional enterprise. The supervisor's constructive imagination is governed by an orderly mind, viewing the possibilities, analyzing the difficulties, and controlling the execution. He must be an organizer. Good organization is the heart of any successful operation. It means distributing duties or functions among subunits and among individual employees so that they can operate at high efficiency, with production and service of the required volume and quality at the required time, by the best method, and at the lowest cost. It is the supervisor's duty to detect any discrepancy between a staff member's potential productivity and his performance, and to see that the gap is made smaller.

The competent supervisor is custodian of the organization's interests. He has technical qualifications, a broad intellectual outlook, a high sense of honor, and appreciation and understanding of human relationships. He is not only a clever man but a superior person.

Leadership

The supervisor belongs to one of the world's scarcest species: the leader. Everyone on his staff has a practical stake of the most concrete kind in the quality of his leadership. Leading a group to an understanding of a complex problem and securing its cooperation in working out such a problem is one of the highest and most rewarding forms of management. It stamps him as a person of influence as well as of action.

A bustling manner and a commanding voice are not evidences of good leadership. The leader does not say "Get going!" He says "Let's go!" He leads all the way, always a step in front. A dictator may point, with some justification, to certain advantages in his system, such as speed of action and vigor in execution, but the factors against acceptance of dictatorship far outweigh the benefits. Instead of winning people to his side, the dictator plays upon feelings of unease, anger, apathy, and despair. He has no friends except those who are friends for fear.

One of the critical qualifications for leadership is the ability to take substantial risks with reasonable equanimity. The supervisor

cannot be submissive, depending upon others to lead him by the hand, or dilatory, waiting for the whiplash of authority to goad him to action. His drive is within himself.

He is flexible. He examines and re-examines the performance of his department in the light of changing conditions. He grasps the essentials, decides what is to be done, makes clear to all concerned what he intends to achieve and how he will do it, and then sees that his staff members get on with the job.

This demands poise, wisdom, suppleness of mind, courage, energy, determination, and the ability to keep going under frustration and disappointment.

Understanding People

The functions of a supervisor are greatly involved with a fundamental understanding of people. There are four key rules to guide him: treat employees like human beings, harness their desires, teach them how, and criticize constructively. These add up to something big—they show the supervisor's desire to make something out of his staff members.

The successful supervisor has learned to transform "power over people" into "power with people." He makes his staff members want to do the right thing in the right way for the good of the organization. He has patience with the inefficiency of men and women who are trying. A supervisor needs insight. With his *eyesight*, he will see things wrong in an employee's work; with *insight*, he will see the cause.

One can tell a great deal about a supervisor by observing those who work for him. Are they happy in their jobs? Are they ready with a smile? Are they free of job tension? Do they give the air of being glad to be working for this organization?

Part of the supervisor's strategy is giving recognition to individual achievements. He praises loudly—that is, where others can hear—and blames softly, in private. He does not praise indiscriminately, or lay it on with a trowel. The worker knows when he has done a good job; if a supervisor praises every job, the employee knows his boss is using a technique and he will discount even merited commendation.

We should keep in mind that all people have latent abilities. Periodically, we should give a worker a job slightly over his head, one at which we know he can succeed if he tries. A successful supervisor wants each worker to make good, helps him to make good, and rejoices when he succeeds. However, the happy staff member *must* be

productive. Employees should not be encouraged to let their contentment interfere with work.

The supervisor must avoid becoming so wrapped up in his own operations that he loses sight of the big picture. He needs the support of others in the management group. He will avoid office jealousies (which prevent effective cooperation) and rivalry for status (which is bound to adversely affect the organization). He will talk *with* other supervisors, not about them.

GOOD SUPERVISION

Supervision is not something that is learned once and retained forever. The explosion of knowledge in the past few years demands that supervisors keep learning and relearning. No person will have the cyclopedic knowledge for handling all management functions unaided. He must know where to find the answers. Some will be in his organization's statements of policy, its staff handbook, and its periodic memoranda. Much is also to be found in books.

We should learn something every day. Even abstract knowledge on all kinds of subjects is helpful. It may be foreign to our line of work, but it provides background and room for growth. A well-stored mind makes us capable of doing our own thinking. It gives us size.

Status in Perspective

Supervision can be done without flaunting authority or developing a superiority complex. A supervisor should wear his title lightly, and yet make sure that workers know he will discharge his responsibilities.

How democratic should a supervisor be? He should associate with his workers sometimes, and be an example of courtesy and friendliness. Nevertheless, he should maintain the dignity of his position. He should allow others to share the limelight, and delegate responsibility to them. Some supervisors make the mistake of assuming that the job will not be done right unless they do it themselves. This failure to deputize is inefficient. Delegation comes easiest to the man who has a strong sense of the end result. He sees his objective clearly and strives to attain it through others while giving a clear lead and firm guidance. This requires good two-way communication between supervisor and worker. The effective manager is one with whom employees feel free to discuss important things about their jobs. A worker who has something to say likes to think that he will

be heard. It confirms his belief that his job is an important part of the organization.

A successful supervisor does not communicate with staff members exclusively on a high management plane. He identifies the ideas, facts, and changes with the job of each worker and his environment, and talks over important matters with workers. Dialogue is the key to harmonious work. What we know about the work that our employees should know but don't know, will damage or slow down work. So will the things that our employees know, that we haven't found out. The solution is to tell staff members promptly and clearly what they should know, and listen interestedly to what they have to say about their jobs.

We should be particularly careful to explain new things. People are not often successful in carrying out plans that they have not mentally assimilated. We should anticipate possible objections and state them in our presentation, together with the reasons. By looking at the change from an employee's viewpoint, we see the things which need to be cleared away so he can appreciate the good points of our proposition. We must state our thoughts simply and make our instructions definite and specific. Crises sometimes develop because someone got the message wrong.

If a subordinate makes a suggestion, we should tell him what action we have taken and why. If his suggestion is not adopted, he will accept that fact with full understanding when we show him that the reasons for rejection are clear and sound. The cause of offense is not the rejection of an idea, but the rejection of it without careful consideration and discussion.

Problem Solving

It is a sign of strength, not of weakness, to admit we don't know all the answers. Research is needed in even the most routine-bound office. It should be directed toward building and revising a sound structure so that it tends toward the most efficient discharge of work. Research may consist merely of standing at the door, looking at the activity of our staff members, and asking: "What is the result of all this action? Is it all necessary?" Questions, even though we do not get the answers immediately, are valuable because they imply the existence of another viewpoint. One great foe of efficient supervision is the belief that things are all right as they are.

The secret of problem solving is to collect and analyze the facts, segregate the essential elements, and put them together in a related and meaningful way. Our superiors and our staff may admire the re-

sulting solution as intuitive brilliance, but we know that it is the result of thorough, painstaking investigation resulting in evidence considered and plans made.

We must keep our thinking organized under pressure. We have to know about pressures and tensions and stresses created by the management job, but we can minimize them if we see our problems clear and whole and tackle them with optimistic confidence. Fussiness is a great hindrance. A supervisor who carries the heaviest responsibilities with calm efficiency is often upset by the trifles he has not learned how to handle.

Discipline

The maintenance of discipline in an organization is a clear-cut, indisputable obligation of management. There have to be rules, but they do not need to entail regimentation, which destroys personality, standardizes action, and stultifies the spirit. Some supervisors impose strict disciplinary measures not because these are needed, but because they think it is good for their workers to learn to obey.

A good supervisor is resolute in enforcing the principles in which he believes, but yields in matters of custom which make no difference in the success of his office. He wastes little time in finding fault, but makes clear that his supervision is designed not only to uncover bad work but also to bring good work to light. This is management by inspiration, not by repression.

He bolsters the faltering worker and encourages improvement. There is no distinction to be gained through firing people, but there is honor attached to building people.

Morale

Above all, a supervisor should be fair. Tyranny degrades not only those who suffer it, but also those who exercise it, and partiality is loaded with dynamite for the supervisor who indulges in it.

Good morale cannot be bought or imposed; it must be earned. It is the product of consistently high management character. Morale is the worker's emotional stance toward his work. It may be measured by the degree of satisfaction of four basic wants: a sense of security, a sense of achievement, a sense of justice, and a sense of participation. A supervisor should be able to answer affirmatively when he asks himself, "Have I done something today deliberately to improve employee relations and give my staff members a feeling of satisfaction in their work?"

SUMMARY

Supervision does not consist in having an autocratic mind, leading to arbitrary government, but in judgment and reason and knowledge of people.

It is among the most interesting occupations in the world, because it challenges the supervisor to administer to the most difficult creatures on earth—men and women. He has to do so with fair play, appreciation of people's problems, and knowledge of organizational principles and practices: planning, organizing, controlling, and supervising so as to mesh these in his organization's interests.

This is not a life of ease, whatever status may attach to it. There is still a connection between effort and reward. The supervisor is judged by his skill in effective action under varying conditions. He must avoid what is unfit as diligently as he observes what is suitable.

The standard for both supervisor and staff is to do their best with enthusiasm. That gives zest in living, and makes many things bearable which otherwise would be unendurable.

When all is said and done, when we have read the books and essays on how to do it, we come down to the moment of action. Recall what Admiral Lord Hawke, aboard the *Royal George*, said to his pilot at the battle of Quiberon Bay in 1759: "You have done your duty in pointing out the risk; and now lay me alongside the French flagship."

THE CONCERN FOR MAN and his destiny must always be the chief interest of all technical effort. Never forget it among your diagrams and equations.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN