

The Organizational Role of Supervisors

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based on original work by
Frank Hoffman



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Preface

This book is based on the original work done by Frank Hoffman, cofounder of Practical Management, Inc. (PMI). His work was presented in audio cassette/workbook format as complete self-instructional material that included various case problems and exercises. In this book we have tried to separate the exercises from the body of information. The reader, however, is encouraged to complete the exercises for full application of the concepts. This book, as was the previous work, is for people who are now supervisors. Managers should read this book, not for themselves, but to learn how they can be instrumental in developing their subordinates.

Introduction

The role of a supervisor, as differentiated from that of a manager, often is very hazy in a multilevel organization.

In some cases every level of management gets involved in supervision and duplicates the supervision function. Often these misuses of functions are justified on the basis of "Management by Walking Around," "Show of Interest and Concern with the Worker," etc. These management fads and euphemisms not only produce negative results, they will cause other deep-rooted problems for the organization.

First, by managers doing the job of supervisors, managers do not have the time to perform their own managerial duties which are essential and distinctly different.

Second, when an organization recognizes that managerial activities are not being performed, the organization creates additional levels of management – causing the burden of unreasonable overhead costs.

Third, the managers usurp the function of supervisors, not allowing the supervisors to learn and strengthen themselves. No amount of supervisory training is going to compensate for the lack of opportunity to perform.

Fourth, at best these misuses of functions are going to create many duplications of effort.

Organizations have to realize that supervision is different from managing and that each level requires a different set of skills and a different set of responsibilities. Various levels of the organization are not the result of outgrowth from the previous one. We truly do have levels if discontinuity in organizations. For example, when a worker gets promoted to supervisor, he or she must realize that this new position is different – not only in superficial issues such as title, salary, benefits, perks, parking locations, etc., but also in the nature of the work. Supervision requires learning and performing supervisory skills.

Also, when supervisors become managers, they have to recognize the level of discontinuity again. Managers are not glorified supervisors. Their function is substantially different, and they too have to learn and perform these different functions. One of the important realizations is to “let the supervisors supervise.” This simple statement is the essence of success. Those who do not understand or practice that simple axiom are doomed to reap the results of their own doing.

The preliminary conclusion of the study by Columbia University (Human Resources and Practices in American Firms, by John Thomas Delaney, David Lewin and Casey Ichniowski) indicates that a significant issue in determining a successful organization depends on strengthening the authority of the firstline supervisors and expanding their control.

The purpose of this book is twofold: (1) to delineate the unique functions of the firstline supervisors and to guide them in how they can function effectively in the “real world” and (2) to inform managers on what performance they should expect from their subordinate supervisors and to guide them in achieving productive results from their workgroup.

Jack Asgar

Chapter 1

What Supervision is...Who? And Why?

At first it might seem these questions are too simple to ask: "Who is a supervisor?" and "Why do we have supervisors?" It might be obvious that supervisors are people in an organization who have subordinates working for them, and that we have supervisors who make sure that work is done as effectively as possible. However, as we begin to define the job of a supervisor, it becomes clear that the job is much more significant than just having others working for a supervisor, especially when we start considering a supervisor on the management team. When we look at any sizable organization, we can identify seven distinctively different positions:

1. "Mission Workers": The non-supervisory people who perform the work of the workgroup, headed by a supervisor. For example, the mission of an accounting unit is to perform the various accounting requirements of the organization.

Therefore, those who actually do the job of accounting (accountants, accounting clerks, etc.) are "mission workers."

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2. "Personal Service Workers": The non-supervisory people who work directly for a manager or a supervisor. They provide the manager or supervisor with advice, help or service, but do not do "the work." Secretaries and staff assistants are good examples of "personal service workers." (It is important to know that "mission workers" and "personal service workers" are two separate kinds of positions, because only one of these qualify the boss as a supervisor, as we will indicate later.)
3. "Lead Workers": The people who have some supervisory responsibility but whose mission work assigned load is so heavy that there is really little time for true supervision.
4. "Supervisors": The people who have mission workers or lead workers reporting to them. This position is extremely important because they are charged with a unique responsibility which is not asked of other members of the management team.
5. "Managers": The people who have supervisors or other managers reporting directly to them. There may be two or more levels of management in larger organizations.
6. "Top Executives": Members of top management who have managers or supervisors reporting to them, plan the organization's future, figure how to acquire necessary resources and establish overall policy.
7. "Staff Specialists": Those who serve line managers with specialized advice, but have no mission workers, supervisors or managers reporting directly to them.

Having a personal service worker (such as a secretary) reporting to a person does not qualify that person as a supervisor. Only mission workers and lead workers reporting to an individual will qualify that person as a supervisor. Also, titles do not qualify a person as a supervisor or manager. Titles are often given without any consideration to the organizational role of that person. Defining a true role of a person by the title does not allow the organization to develop a true "team-player."

When you realize a supervisor is a person who has mission workers and lead workers reporting directly to them, then it becomes apparent that:

1. The supervisor needs firsthand, day-to-day knowledge about specific methods and techniques by which mission workers should be doing their work.
2. No amount of knowledge and skills in human relations, communication, leadership, planning and organizing can compensate for a lack of familiarity with job methods and techniques. This important supervisory requirement is so vital that without it we have no true supervisor. We may have a boss, but not a supervisor.

Everyone agrees that a supervisor must also prevent errors before they happen. After an error has been made, everyone can recognize the error. Everyone can tell if an account doesn't balance, an engine doesn't start, a plan is not complete, but only a supervisor with job knowledge can recognize the error while the mission worker is working on that accounting, making that engine or drawing up that plan.

The supervisor exists to be that member of the management team who has expert knowledge and understanding of the specific methods and techniques by which mission workers should be doing their work.

This means that supervisors do not do the same kind of work as managers. The supervisor exists so that the work gets out. Managers should be concerned with resource management and planning for tomorrow so the work can get out. The supervisor is concerned with getting the work out today. The manager's concern is to provide the resources (anticipating the needs for tomorrow's work).

When these two positions (managerial and supervisory) get confused, the organization does not perform as a team.

If a manager is involved on a day-to-day basis with the methods and techniques of mission work, that manager is performing a supervisory role no matter what title he/she uses. How would you like to be on a football team with two quarterbacks calling the plays simultaneously?

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The supervisor plays the most significant role as a member of management. Therefore, a full-fledged supervisor has to fulfill three major responsibilities:

1. As a head of workgroup
2. As a coordinator with other supervisors
3. As a person representing management to mission workers, and mission workers to management (being a member of management)

Head of a Workgroup

The primary task of a supervisor as a head of a workgroup is to make sure that the work gets out, error free, meeting quality standards and according to budgeted cost. In order to accomplish this major accountability, a supervisor needs to be involved in technical details of how the work is going, how it should be going, what the equipment is capable of, and whether the workers are doing the work in a way that will meet quality, cost and schedule requirements. This will reduce or eliminate the problem of facing unsatisfactory products or services after the fact.

Some organizations provide a supervisory training program which teaches that supervisors should “manage,” that is, not get involved in the day-to-day operating details, but spend their time doing forward planning, setting overall goals for the workgroup and reviewing progress at periodic intervals rather than as the work is going on.

If these teachings are implemented by a supervisor, the unit will face:

- Work errors found afterwards
- Late deliveries and schedules not met
- Possible problems with other interrelated work units
- Complaints from other supervisors
- Finding out problems after higher management questions the issues
- Spending time and effort doing “detective work to find out what happened
- Mission workers not receiving needed help and assistance
- Lack of necessary knowhow by mission workers when they are faced with different or difficult tasks
- Lack of immediate knowledge when the supervisor is asked by the boss about a particular piece of ongoing work

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If the supervisor's job becomes "managing" (so that both manager and supervisor are focused on plans and goals, overall schedule targets and standards, etc., but neither is in daily contact with the ongoing work), then no one is supervising. The certain result of this is unproductive work.

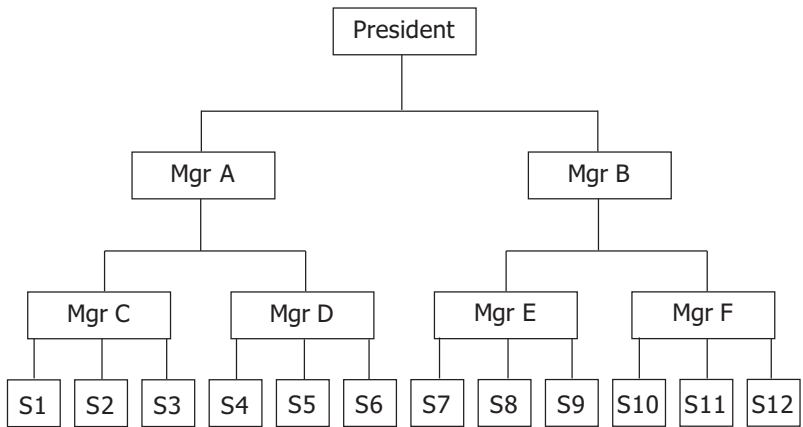
Supervision must happen if the work is to get out properly, but if supervision is not done by supervisors, managers will not manage, they will supervise.

Involvement by the supervisor in the ongoing work does not mean looking over the shoulders of mission workers constantly, but to check with mission workers on how they are coming along against the schedule (are they having problems with the incoming work, etc.).

Coordination with Other Supervisors

It is the job of a supervisor to make sure that the organization functions as designed. This duty requires supervisors, not managers, to coordinate with other units.

Let us examine this concept. Assume we have an organization charted below:



Whose job is it to coordinate unit S1 with unit S3? And whose job is it to coordinate unit S10 with unit S12?

(If you have said Manager C for the first case and Manager F for the second case, you believe that coordination is their function because they are the common boss in each case.) Now who is to coordinate work unit S1 with work unit S4?

With that reasoning you must say Manager A, since Manager A is the common boss of those two units. Then who should coordinate work unit S1 with work unit S12?

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The President? (The only common boss of these units, with that reasoning, is the President.

Would you want the President of your organization to adjudicate problems between the lowermost units of your organization or work on the future direction for your organization?

Coordination is a lateral function, not diagonal or triangular. When we talk about supervisory coordination, we do not mean coordinating the mission workers' job, but rather coordinating laterally with the heads of other mission work units (other supervisors). Lateral coordination by supervisors will allow the organization to work effectively as designed. Supervisors cannot be expected to have authority and control over all services and resources their workgroup must call on. However, a supervisor cannot circumvent the organization by bootlegging work or ignore the poor cooperation of another unit on the basis that "it is not my job." A supervisor is responsible for getting the job done by getting work done through the organization using lateral coordination.

Member of management

As the mission workers look upward into the organization, they should see the supervisor as a person representing management. This concept means that the supervisor must be the first management person they call on for all issues, not only methods and techniques of the job, but also clarification on benefit plans, personnel policy, etc. Also, as managers look downward, they should see the supervisor as an important link between themselves and the mission workers.

In the subsequent chapters we will discuss the three important organizational roles of a supervisor in greater depth.

Summary

Chapter 1

- Supervisors are those who have mission workers (or lead workers) reporting directly to them.
- Supervisors are identified by who reports to them, not by their titles.
- An organization's titles for supervisors, managers and staff specialists often do not tell you who plays on the management team. Since supervisors and managers each have different kinds of people reporting to them, supervisors and managers should each do different kinds of work.
- A manager should not focus on the same goal as the supervisor. The main focus of a manager's time and attention should be on something other than "to get the work out."
- Supervisors should be more knowledgeable than managers about how workers should do their work and about how errors and accidents happen.
- A manager's reason for checking the work in progress and dealing directly with mission workers should not be to "get the work out," but to check on how well the supervisors are doing their job.
- The supervisors should have complete authority and final say over salary increases, disciplinary actions, terminations, performance reviews, official documentation to the personnel file, etc. for immediate subordinates. As a full-fledged, first-string member of the management team, there are three basic roles the supervisor is called upon to play:
 1. Be a head of a workgroup
 2. Coordinate laterally with other supervisors
 3. Be a member of management
- It is not the rightful role of managers to coordinate one supervisor's unit with another. That is a primary role of a supervisor.

A supervisor cannot expect to have authority and control over all the services and resources the workgroup must call on.

The supervisor is responsible for getting the job done...not by substituting for other parts of the organization, but by getting things done through the organization.

Exercises

The following exercises are designed to increase learning by application. For the best result you should read the exercise and respond to the questions asked. Then you can compare your answers against the “correct” answers given. If the explanation given is not sufficient, review this chapter or the related segment for clarification.

Exercise One***The XYZ Company Case***

Otto, Supervisor of a six-person workgroup, has had these questions and comments from his boss, the Section Manager, so far this week:

- A. "I noticed an odd whirring noise in the copy machine, so I told the operator to avoid running it at top speed. When you get over 80% speed on that model, the belts tend to slip and squeal."
- B. "The people in procurement have been complaining again that your workers aren't putting the correct charge numbers on their supply requests. So, I've given Mary, Sam and Tillie a schedule whereby each of them will spend an hour over the next two weeks in procurement to see the problems they're causing."
- C. "Yesterday when the Department Manager, my boss, asked me to find out what weight carton you were using to ship those pamphlets, you told me your people had selected a No. 10 cardboard weighing three ounces. The Department Manager told me to tell you to drop that down to a No. 6 paperboard. No wonder we're running so high on our postage."
- D. "Pete didn't seem to really understand how to boot the new computer we got. So I went ahead and made up a checklist that I think you'll find useful in training him and other new operators on that process."
- E. "I see Tillie and Sam are at it again, bickering all the time. Switch Sam with Joan to get him away from Tillie."

Today, Otto has plenty of time to check out new operators as the computer is shut down because management hasn't arranged for the new program to be delivered yet. In addition, revision of plant-wide supply procedures has not yet been approved by management and Otto can't get supplies because management won't honor the old charge numbers which expired at midnight last night!

Questions
(for Exercise One)

The XYZ Company Case

1. In items "A" and "B" is the Section Manager:

___ managing or ___ supervising?

What determined your answer? (Check all that apply)

___ He was worrying about mission work.

___ He was bypassing the Supervisor and giving workers orders directly.

___ He was concerned with specific methods and techniques by which mission work should be done.

___ His concern for mission work was not in terms of resources and long-range planning.

Other: _____.

2. In items "C" "D" and "E," although never violating the chain-of-command, what are both the Section Manager and the Superintendent doing

☐ managing or ☐ supervising?

What determined your answer? (Check all that apply)

☐ They were worrying about mission work.

☐ They bypassed the Supervisor and gave direct orders to the workers.

☐ They were concerned about specific methods and techniques by which mission work should be done.

☐ Their concern for mission work was not in terms of resources and long-range planning.

Other: _____.

Answers to Exercise One

1. In items "A" and "B" is the Section Manager:

☐ managing or ☐ supervising?

What determined your answer? (Check all that apply)

☒ He was worrying about mission work.

☒ He was bypassing the Supervisor and giving workers orders directly.

☒ He was concerned with specific methods and techniques by which mission work should be done.

☒ His concern for mission work was not in terms of resources and long-range planning.

Other: *He was not performing his managerial job.*

2. In items "C" "D" and "E," although never violating the chain-of-command, what are both the Section Manager and the Superintendent doing

☐ managing or ☐ supervising?

What determined your answer? (Check all that apply)

☒ They were worrying about mission work.

☒ They bypassed the Supervisor and gave direct orders to the workers.

☒ They were concerned about specific methods and techniques by which mission work should be done.

☒ Their concern for mission work was not in terms of resources and long-range planning.

Other: *They both failed to provide the needed resources for the job.*

Exercise Two

Donna's company has a supervisory training program which teaches that supervisors should "manage," that is, not get involved in day-to-day operating details, but to spend their time doing forward planning, setting overall goals for their workgroup and reviewing progress at periodic intervals rather than as work is going on.

As a result, Donna finds out about mistakes, late deliveries, problems with other units and off-target progress at periodic review meetings with her workers or through complaints from other supervisors or her own workers. Occasionally, she discovers something has gone wrong when her boss or her boss' boss calls to ask why. Usually she doesn't know and has to do some detective work to find out.

Donna has great plans and goals agreed to by her workers, but they are beginning to feel Donna used these to get the workers to agree to work harder because she never seems to be there to provide help when needed. Therefore, workers butt their heads against the wall trying to work with inadequate supplies or lack of cooperation from other groups, and Donna doesn't get around to doing anything about it until things have gone on like that for a while. In addition Donna's boss sometimes finds that workers are puzzled about what to do when faced with certain problems or are not sure how to do their work when a procedure has been changed. The boss has stepped in several times to straighten out the workers. He is also increasingly disturbed that Donna doesn't have answers on the tip of her tongue when he wants to find out something about a particular piece of work going through her unit.

Donna's response is, "I'm paid to manage, not get wrapped up in details. My job is to set goals with my people, then leave them free to meet those goals unless they run into problems. I know when my help is needed by the production reports that come out weekly or by complaints from other departments. If my workers need my help, they have only to come tell me...my door is always open. I should be involved with budgets, manpower planning and looking ahead to next year, not worrying about today's work."

Questions
(for Exercise Two)

About Donna's Company

1. What is wrong with Donna "managing by exception" (that is, stepping in to find out what's going on only when a problem occurs)?
2. What are the effects of Donna using periodic meetings, weekly production reports, complaints from other units and her "open door" to find out when things aren't going as they should?
3. What effect did Donna's lack of attention to details have on her boss doing his/her own job?

Answers to Exercise Two

1. What is wrong with Donna "managing by exception" (that is, stepping in to find out what's going on only when a problem occurs)?

Problems are discovered after the fact.

2. What are the effects of Donna using periodic meetings, weekly production reports, complaints from other units and her "open door" to find out when things aren't going as they should?

Mission workers find her approach as a means to get more work out without any help. She lacks credibility in the eyes of her mission workers.

3. What effect did Donna's lack of attention to details have on her boss doing his/her own job?

Her boss felt the need to "straighten out" the mission workers. She lacked credibility in the eyes of her boss.

Exercise Three

The County Hospital Case

Supervisors in the two technical labs have been having troubles with the computer department. It seems the computer was set up originally to serve the accounting and business office, so accounting and business has first priority. As a result, computer analyses of lab reports are slow in coming back and lab people often stand around because they can't go ahead with some of their work until the analyses arrive. In addition, the computer schedulers always seem to be in meetings whenever the lab supervisors want to get something through on a "rush" priority.

Each of the lab supervisors has chosen a different approach to the problem as described below:

1. Chase has decided he'll never get the computer schedulers to respond to his needs. So, Chase has set up a procedure for getting his reports into the computer right away. He hand carries the lab report to the computer department. If a scheduler is there, Chase gives him/her a real sales pitch to get the work marked "RUSH." If a scheduler is not there, Chase stamps it "RUSH" himself, then he hand carries the report to the programmers and stands there until he is sure they started work on it.

Chase has delegated one of his workers to pick up the program when it is finished, carry it to the computer operations and then go pick up the finished data runs when they come off the computer. This avoids the analyses sitting in a corner until someone from computers or mail service gets around to delivering them.

Chase gets the job done. His group never waits for information or reports from other departments because he goes and gets them. They never lack for materials because Chase "RUSHES" everything through procurement or goes and "appropriates" it from another department.

2. Layton has also decided he'll never be able to count on the computer schedulers. He has thrown up his hands and said, "The hospital can't hold me accountable for results if I don't have control over the people who are supposed to serve me. If they'd just give me my own computer or at least my own scheduler, then maybe I could get something done."