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SUPERVISION – ESSENTIAL TO PRODUCTIVITY

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Abstract

Supervisors are responsible for not only meeting corporate goals,but also bridging the gap between upper management and front-line employees. The supervisors that take this task seriously are the ones that have a dramatic and positive effect on the overall business as well as their staff's performance and behaviour. As these things are affected, so is the productivity of employees and the company.

Supervision is a delicate and often misunderstood function that can have huge consequences on the productivity of employees. In some situations, supervision can help improve results, while in other cases it can detract from the effectiveness of the staff. With appropriate supervisory intervention in the workplace, we can consistently improve the team's productivity. But, for supervision to be effective, there must be a good supervisor/supervisee relationship. A good supervisor/supervisee relationship is not only beneficial to the individuals but critical to the success of the organization.

Abusive supervision (aka, having a bully boss) is one of the greatest challenges of supervision in the workplace. This practice does not just affect the person at whom it's directed – it can affect an entire office. Its presence can extend to others "second hand," as they hear about it or witness it occurring in co-workers and friends. And if it spreads to other people, it may likely affect employees' overall perception of the company they work for – and, in true domino effect, this can affect the productivity of the company itself. In other words, it is not something to be taken lightly from a social or a business point of view.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between effective supervision and employees´ productivity, and also ascertain factors that affect employees' productivity. In order to achieve this, the paper is divided into seven sections – introduction, techniques of supervision, factors affecting employees' productivity, effects of supervision on productivity, keys to effective supervision, conclusion and recommendations.

Key Words: Supervision, relationship, productivity, employees, workplace.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, when people talk about "supervision" they are usually referring to the managerial or leadership function of overseeing the productivity and progress of employees – typically the employees who report directly to the supervisor. But, Bernard, (2005) defines supervision as the ability of superiors to influence the behaviour of subordinates to take a particular course of action. It is the art of influencing people towards achieving organizational goals. He further clarifies that quality of supervision therefore refers to the effectiveness of the superiors in influencing the behaviour of the subordinates in taking a particular course of action.

Stemming from their experiences in providing both training and supervision to employees, Rising Sun's Consultants' approach to supervision takes a very different perspective; defining supervision more from a coaching and mentoring perspective than from a managerial perspective. They define supervision as a developmental process designed to support and enhance an individual's acquisition of the motivation, autonomy, self-awareness, and skills necessary to effectively accomplish the job at hand.

Productivity can be defined as a measure of the efficiency of a person, machine, factor, system, etc., in converting inputs into useful output (http://www.businessdictionary.com). Productivity is computed by dividing average output per period by the total costs incurred or resources (capital, energy, material, personnel) consumed in that period. Productivity is a critical determinant of cost efficiency.

Supervision is a delicate and often misunderstood function that can have a variety of effects on employees' productivity. In some situations, supervision can help improve results, while in others it can be a distraction to the effectiveness of the staff. Appropriate supervisory intervention and a good supervisor/supervisee relationship in the workplace can consistently improve employees' productivity. But, as research clearly demonstrates, it is not only in the best interest of the employee, but also the business, to pay close attention to the supervisor/supervisee relationship. This relationship is critical to the success of the employee and ultimately the organization. We need to have well trained supervisors who are prepared to provide the necessary and appropriate guidance, structure, and encouragement to their staff.

All too often, employees are promoted to the role of supervisor because of their strong technical expertise. However, an effective supervisory relationship requires that the supervisor not only be a content expert, but also accept the enormous responsibility of mentorship. Unfortunately, poor supervision has an enormous impact and cost for both the employee, as well as the organization as a whole.

2. Techniques of Supervision

Managers can supervise through performance reviews. In fact, many firms conduct employee performance reviews, but often the review sessions are awkward, difficult, and rarely structured to analyse problems or suggest ways to

improve performance. Within the supervisory structure, performance reviews need to encompass at least three steps: goal setting, progress review, and performance review. One of the most cogent ways to achieve successful review results is in the training of both supervisors and employees to practice the art of performance review (Bennett, 2000).

Unfortunately, for many managers, this regular task is often approached with a variety of trepidation and dread. Supervisors and employees both know they are required to participate in performance reviews. Instead of using the review as a motivational and communicative tool, many fall into the trap of the "redundant review". Supervisory programmes, for example, should address negotiating goals with subordinates in order to get better performance in the long run (Bies, 2000).

According to Wang (2000), "…every employee must know essential company goals, it seems like common sense that everyone knows the company's overall goals. It is amazing when you talk to co-workers who do not completely grasp it. As a supervisor, you cannot just assume your subordinates are knowledgeable.'' As a supervisor, you can never assume your people know your company goals. Informed employee's will grasp and appreciate, stay focused on what is important, and more importantly, limit what is not.

It is important to set realistic timelines to complete tasks with subordinates through effective supervision. If the supervisor sets unrealistic goals, it says a lot about his/ her expertise, and vice versa. A supervisor loses respect if he/she does not set realistic completion timelines (Boles, 2000).

Hoobler (2006), notes that having proper training and tools to accomplish a company task seem like common sense, but it is often overlooked or underestimated by managers. It is essential that managers/ supervisors understand how to identify skill and tool deficiencies. It is also critical to keep your personal skill levels on par with the ever changing world of technology and trend. Supervisors should always encourage their workers to have input on training. Managers have an obligation to set standards, but should be receptive to new ideas. In addition, supervisors must ensure that subordinates maintain accountability for company tools and identify deficiencies to you as the supervisor (Burton, 2006).

Supervisors need to always be fair and consistent with all of their subordinates. Being firm with an employee means they understand that there are grave consequences if they either violate policy or fail to meet company standards or goals (Byrne, 2003). It is very difficult to be totally impartial when dealing with a high performer versus a low performer, but it is one of the most important traits to have as a supervisor. There is loss of valuable respect from your co-workers if you are ever deemed to give anyone preferential treatment. Once you lose this respect, it is almost impossible to regain.

Being consistent is one area that is often underestimated by managers and supervisors. Being consistent is critical to how subordinates perform. As a manager, it is important to be professional when confronted by an angry employee, by remaining calm and consistent with policy in order to remain professional. Therefore, being consistent is one of the greatest assets to the manager or supervisor.

Cropanzano (2003) notes that all employees are important and will contribute when they feel their inputs are important to the company. If they perceive a lack of interest from management, they will cease future input. When an employee understands that his input is valuable, he will look for ways to keep improving. Their inputs are very valuable to the success of your company. Supervisors should encourage creative thinking through a formal or informal reward system (Cropanzano, 2003).

According to Rupp (2003), trust and verification are critical for supervisors whose trust can only be earned but it is important to verify. This is also a form of impartial customer feedback. When a supervisor delegates authority, it shows trust in the ability of the employee. Supervisors who believe in their employees allow them to perform at their peak. High performers understand the importance of mutual trust and will not threaten it with poor performance.

Supervisors should appreciate the importance of preparing their subordinates to grow professionally. Not all employees want to become managers, but all employees want some type of advancement. It could be pay-structured advancement or promotion in title only (Mills, 1997). However, it is important to provide them with information on how to improve themselves in the company. In addition, It is important that the information be in written form so that there is no ambiguity.

According to Pagon (2002), the basic need to feel appreciated for work performed is important. When an employee feels appreciated, he/she will work even harder for the company. When a subordinate completes a task and does it well, it should be appreciated. Supervisors should not assume that their subordinates understand how they feel about their work. A simple compliment for a job well done from the supervisor or manager motivates the subordinate to even perform better and does not cost a penny. This technique is easy to remember and follow.

3. Factors Affecting Employees' Productivity

There are several factors on the job that help maximize what an employee does on the job. While employee compensation affects productivity, some factors may boost output without costing the company anything.

   i.   Morale: It is no secret that unhappy employees often do not perform well and often share their negative opinions with their co-workers. If you suspect that low morale is the cause of the decrease in productivity, find out why your employees are unhappy. Long hours, insufficient training, management issues, low pay, lack of recognition and poor working conditions can lead to morale problems. Involving employees in the solution can help to develop a workable plan that will increase both morale and productivity.

   Poor morale exists when there is significant whining, complaining and people just don't want to come to work. On the positive end, the workplace is energized by a sense of purpose and teams that genuinely want to work together (Hom, 2000).

   ii.   Comfort Level: It is hard to be productive when you are physically uncomfortable. Anything that makes employees uncomfortable, including chairs, desks, workstations, lighting, temperature and noise levels, can affect productivity. A 2009 study on office design published in the *Journal of Public Affairs, Administration and Management* discovered that a comfortable and ergonomic office design motivates employees and substantially increases performance. Before you buy new chairs or change the lighting, ask

the employees for input. New chairs will not help the situation if the employees do not think they are any better than the old ones.

iii. **The Right Training and Tools:** Employees' comfort level with equipment and software also can affect productivity. If employees are not well trained and do not understand how to use equipment or software, or use it incorrectly, performance and productivity suffers. Problems also occur when the existing equipment is not sufficient to handle the department's needs. Upgrading equipment and tools, and providing ongoing training to employees though expensive, is essential in maintaining or improving productivity. Supervisors should evaluate skills level, equipment and software yearly to catch problems before they affect productivity.

Griffeth (2000) notes that just as a driver needs a vehicle in operating condition, employees must have the tools and equipment necessary for their specific jobs. This includes physical tools, supplies, software and information. Outdated equipment or none at all has a detrimental effect.

iv. **Poor Supervision:** Supervision can be a contributing factor to low productivity. The National Business Research Institute notes that productivity suffers when supervisors do not keep promises, give inappropriate credit or blame others for their mistakes. Supervisors who are too controlling can unwittingly slow down work flow by requiring even the simplest task to have their (supervisor's) approval. A hands-off management style also can be a problem. When supervisors are uninvolved or unavailable, employees have no one to turn to for direction or guidance. Supervisors who adopt a positive attitude help foster the same attitude in their employees.

v. **Validation:** Pay is a part of the issue, but an employee needs to feel validated if he is to be productive. He needs to feel his work is worth something, and he needs to believe he is justly compensated. While good wages and benefits help, validation does not even have to be monetary. A simple pat on the back can go a long way in making a worker feel valued.

vi. **Having a Stake in the Matter:** Related to validation, an employee will be more productive when he can see where he fits in the big picture: he does not want to just be a cog in the machine. He needs to have a handle on the whole operation, which may be a plus because he may show he can do more than his job. He needs to know the supervisor will listen to his suggestions and ideas.

vii. **Team Work:** Workers do pay attention to their co-workers, and discontent can spread rapidly among an organization if some employees are negative or do not do their fair share. On the other hand, an enthusiastic team that helps one another out can make even a seemingly dead-end job pleasurable. If the team has minimal turnover, worker will be assured that his job probably will not disappear overnight.

viii. **Work-Life Balance:** If an employee enjoys his time off, gets enough rest, eats well and takes care of himself, he will have more energy to devote to the job. A happy home life usually translates into a happy work life, and problems at the home front usually clock in when the worker does. Remember that a happy employee is a productive employee and vice versa.

4. Effects of Supervision on Productivity

Supervision is an extremely vital part of a workplace that intends to maximize its success potential. It naturally follows, then, that poor supervision in a workplace is one of the primary obstacles to achieving potential success by an organization. After all, employees, no matter their task, must have the proper instruction and training to ensure that they are doing their jobs correctly, and with minimal risk of error or injury (Leiter, 2001).

Abusive supervision (aka, having a bully boss) that is gradually gaining more attention is a big problem in the workplace. It does not just affect the person at whom it is directed – it can affect an entire organization. Its presence can extend to others "second hand", as they hear about it or witness it occurring in coworkers and friends. And if it spreads to other people, it may likely affect employees' overall perception of the company they work for – and, in true domino effect, this can affect the productivity of the company itself. In other words, it is not something to be taken lightly from a social or business perspective.

According to Roberson (2008), when a company has poor supervision, there is not enough responsibility for taking action for the prevention of problems, mistakes, accidents, and injuries. Poor supervision removes a very important part of the employee support process, eliminating the opportunity for reference, learning, and safety. After the initial training has been completed, supervision remains necessary for continuing skill and knowledge development among employees. It is for this reason that many organizations today refer to their supervisors as coaches.

Productivity is essential in ensuring that employees are motivated and committed to their jobs. Traditionally, managers monitor their employees' productivity/performance through quarterly or annual performance reviews. These sessions allow managers and employees to discuss the employee's strengths and weaknesses exemplified over the course of the review period. However, other activities are required to monitor employees' productivity because supervision improves employee productivity (Hinkin, 2000).

Tracey (2000) notes that poor supervision opens the door for unethical behaviours within an organization. With poor supervision, employees commonly feel that their work is not valued by the company, and loyalty is difficult to form – if it forms at all. Without loyalty, employees are more likely to deviate from acceptable business practices. Such activities can include theft, decreased employee effort, using equipment without authorization, and falsifying documents, among other things.

Goal development is important in supervision because effective goal-setting activities in employee supervision are directly associated with higher employee satisfaction and performance. Having clearly defined target motivate employees to work toward their expected achievements. In turn, employees are evaluated by managers based on their performance throughout the period under review (Harris, 2007).

Providing regular supervision for subordinates increases employee productivity and overall performance. Regular supervision acts as a continuous monitoring mechanism. At this time, supervisors should compare employees' work performance against the standards and expectations. Supervision sessions also allow employees to express concerns and ask questions as things come up, rather than having to wait all year to touch base at their annual review. By being available to connect with employees, managers monitor productivity on a more consistent basis. In turn, they detect concerns and resolve issues arising more promptly (Zivnuska & Shaw, 2007).

Offering employees feedback on their work is an effective way of monitoring their progress and letting them know how well they performed a particular task or project, which is a form of supervision. Furnishing employees with constructive notes make them feel their work is valued and appreciated, without having to meet in a formal setting (Harris, 2007).

Formal performance reviews are individual meetings between supervisors and their employees. Prior to the meeting, the supervisor fills out an evaluation form that scores the employee's performance based on professionalism, quality of work, organizational skills, timeliness and productivity (Shaw, 2007). When the supervisor meets with employees, the results of the evaluation are shared and the supervisor summarizes what the employee's strengths are, as well as which areas need to be improved.

Poor supervision does not only mean that there is not enough supervision; it can also be the exact opposite – too much supervision. When employees feel as though they are being too heavily policed, they get the feeling that the company does not trust or respect them. This increases tension in the workplace and decreases overall employee morale (Zivnuska, 2007).

If a supervisor is not present enough, or is too overbearing, then the reaction from employees will only be fear, resentment, and displeasure in their work (Pagon, 2002). The productivity will not be as good as expected, and the employee turnover will increase. In an organization that intends to maximize its performance and profits, a quality supervisory team should be employed and trained to ensure the very finest results from their individual employee groups. These supervisors should have their own support system, and their importance should be made very clear, to ensure the highest degree of productivity.

Supervision involves helping subordinates to extend their understanding and professional skills (Byrne, 2003). Effective supervision in the workplace acts as a motivating factor and increases job satisfaction, leading to high productivity and hence profitability. However, lack of supervision in the workplace has far-reaching negative impacts on employees' safety, productivity, morale and performance.

5. Keys to Effective Supervision

With the developmental perspective in mind, Rising Sun Consultants recommends the following 10 keys to effective supervision:

With the developmental perspective in mind, Rising Sun recommends the following 10 keys to effective supervision:

1. **Support growth** - Provide support for employees' professional development through:
   - Professional Development Plans
   - Strength-Based Performance Appraisal Systems
2. **Unite with your team** - Be available and accessible to employees by maintaining:
   - Open door policy
   - Regular one-on-one supervisory meetings
3. **Praise others** - Provide praise and encouragement through:
   - Formal recognition systems
   - Informal compliments
4. **Expect excellence** - Set high expectations for employees through:
   - Clear position descriptions
   - Regular feedback sessions with staff
5. **Demand accountability** - Uphold individual responsibility by:
   - Creating a culture where staff hold each other accountable
   - Creating a culture where staff hold themselves accountable
6. **Verify Potential** - Develop an atmosphere of hope and confidence by:
   - Providing staff opportunities to succeed
   - Having high expectations for employees
7. **Instil independence** - Allow autonomy of employee through:
   - Appropriate delegation
   - Encouraging risk taking
8. **Share continuously** - Establish two-way communication through:
   - Active listening
   - Being transparent
9. **Optimize ownership** - Create opportunities for employees to contribute through:
   - Participatory strategic planning sessions
   - Encouraging risk taking
10. **Reinforce Relationships** - Share with and care about employees by:
    - Getting to know what motivates individual employees
    - Creating opportunities for staff to share personal accomplishments.

6. Conclusion

Supervision is a developmental process designed to support and enhance an individual's acquisition of the motivation, autonomy, self-awareness, and skills necessary to effectively accomplish the job at hand. Supervision can be very rewarding when rightly applied and detrimental when it is wrongly applied or when applied for the wrong reasons.

The role and responsibility of the supervisor, therefore, is to create a safe environment in which the employee can work through the developmental issues or challenges of each level in order to gain the necessary motivation, autonomy and self-awareness to successfully move to the next level of development.

Taken all together, the information presented in this paper describes a more positive and strength-based approach to supervision. From this perspective, supervision has less to do with teaching and evaluation and more to do with establishing an environment which encourages employees' growth and productivity.

7. Recommendations

In the light of the obvious relationship between supervision and productivity, the following recommendations are proffered for organizational success:

1. The need for organizations (public and private), to have well-trained supervisors who are prepared to provide the necessary and appropriate guidance, structure, and encouragement to their staff.
2. In order for an individual to develop the knowledge and skills to become an effective supervisor of others, he must first go through the process of effective supervision, particularly in terms of being supervised and mentored in the role of supervision.
3. Supervisors should create a safe environment in which the employee can work through the developmental issues or challenges of each level of the job in order to gain the necessary motivation, autonomy and self-awareness to successfully move to the next level of development.
4. Bearing in mind that most of what we call supervision consists of making it difficult for people to get their work done an effective supervisory relationship therefore, requires that the supervisor not only be a content expert, but also accept the enormous responsibility of mentorship.
5. Proper training and tools should be made available to employees by their respective supervisors to accomplish company tasks since poor training and tools were among the factors identified to have had a detrimental effect on employees' productivity. It is essential that supervisors understand how to identify skill and tool deficiencies. It is also critical to keep personal skill levels at par with the ever-changing world of job requirements.

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