



JEANNE M. HOLM CENTER

Effective Supervision

Cognitive Lesson Objective:

- Comprehend the concept of effective supervision.

Cognitive Samples of Behavior:

- Identify the five rules of supervision.
- Identify tasks that shouldn't be delegated.
- Identify common mistakes made by supervisors while delegating.
- Explain the four steps in delegation.

Affective Lesson Objective:

- Respond positively to the importance of executing effective supervision.

Affective Sample of Behavior:

- Provide examples of the benefits of effective supervision.

A supervisor's words and actions have great impact on the behavior of subordinates and the responsiveness of the organization to leadership efforts. Consider the case of a second lieutenant given a task by his commander to improve the performance of his subordinates. A few months later, the subordinates had already forgotten everything the lieutenant had discussed with them during their first meeting. Except for his opening statement, they would never forget that: "I have been sent in to straighten things out around here." At that moment, resistance to his leadership was born. If asked, many of the subordinates could probably have suggested changes to improve the organization. However, the lieutenant didn't ask. He told them, and they resisted every change he sought to introduce.

Your success as a leader will depend on your skill as a supervisor. Your supervisory skills, in turn, depend on how well you learn and apply key principles of supervision.

Remember the difference between a boss and a leader: a boss says, "Go!"-
-a leader says, "Let's go!"

E.M. Kelly

As an officer, you'll be charged not only with managing your section, but also supervising your people. We should first distinguish between these two functions. The Air Force definition of management, which you encountered in Management Functions and Principles, is broad-- "the process of organizing and using resources to accomplish predetermined objectives." The term "supervision" is a specialized function within this overall objective. Insofar as you consider your personnel as material cogs in the functioning of a unit, you are a manager, but as you deal with them as differentiated human beings, you are a supervisor. As one writer succinctly put it, "We manage things, we supervise people."

This distinction is important because material resources and human resources differ fundamentally. A gun, a tank, or a typewriter is designed to reach a certain level of performance. With proper maintenance and use, machines will not fall short of this level nor will they ever exceed it. Human resources, on the other hand, have no pre-engineered performance level, in speaking of the great variability of human achievement, we must use the vague term "potential." Unlike a machine or a robot, human workers can excel. Under the proper circumstances, they can achieve virtually unlimited development.

Thus, "human maintenance"--i.e., supervision--is a very different task from mechanical or managerial maintenance. In a time of budgetary constraints, the Air Force recognizes the importance of effective supervision in tapping our great human potential. To this end, our managers must also become effective supervisors.

DEFINITION

Supervision means literally, the “overseeing” (not the “overlooking”) of people within a work unit, with the purpose of achieving maximum productivity through them. For a supervisor to “oversee” people implies not only a power relationship (i.e., the OIC is “over” people; the supervisor as boss), but also a knowledge relationship. If the hierarchical organization is a pyramid, the person at the top sees more by virtue of that vantage point. The supervisor is able to take in the whole of the section’s integrated mission, as well as observe each person’s contribution to that mission. However, the supervisor’s task doesn’t end here. The supervisor communicates what he/she sees to his/her subordinates. Unfortunately, many otherwise skilled managers neglect the second of these tasks, assuming that their people know all they need to know for the performance of their jobs. However, this isn’t the case. A bad supervisory relationship is usually marked by a breakdown of communication between the supervisor and subordinates, resulting in frustration, confusion, and lower productivity.

FIVE RULES OF SUPERVISION

The following five rules are offered as general guidelines for improving your performance as a supervisor.

1. **Get involved.** Supervision isn’t an armchair occupation, nor does “getting involved” mean running your section “by decree” from a closed office. It means getting out and understanding the day-to-day operation firsthand. It means knowing your people as individuals and being known by them. Real involvement on the part of the supervisor reaps two advantages. First, it will provide you with knowledge about your section that is unobtainable any other way. Secondly, frequent interaction with your people promotes what managerial experts call a “therapeutic climate”—the supervisor demonstrates concern for the workers’ daily performance, rather than taking it for granted. Visible and personal involvement by the supervisor builds morale and a sense of cohesion within the entire section. This forms a substantial base for a productive supervisor-subordinate relationship.
2. **Open channels of communication.** Effective communication probably won’t occur unless you, as supervisor, take active steps to open channels between yourself and your subordinates. To be effective, communication should travel in both directions—from the bottom up, as well as from the top down. Most important, you must create situations in which frank communication is possible and likely to occur. Here are some effective practices:
 - Schedule meetings for the entire work center. The frequency may vary, depending on the type of organization, and they don’t need to follow a regular schedule. Whatever the case, these meetings should be inclusive.
 - Invite suggestions, and use them whenever possible.

- Be available for discussions. Have an open door policy.

Open communication within an organization tends to bind the group more closely into a cohesive unit. Instead of working in isolation, people feel they're part of a group with common goals. Some situations, of course, may demand that you act decisively without prior consultation. In any case, you should at least ensure that your people understand the decision making process, rather than perceiving it as something inexplicably imposed from above. Share your view from the top--it's one of your primary responsibilities as a supervisor.

3. **Give your people a chance to develop.** Human beings, unlike machines, are inherently dynamic. They work best in situations where they can develop themselves, rather than simply repeat a static routine. Allowing for and promoting worker development is a key to effective human relations. Be sensitive to individual differences in your people. Tailor their duties and their training to match their respective capacities. People, doing outstanding work or who demonstrate superior capacity, should be challenged with tasks that are more responsible. As a supervisor, you'll be responsible for providing a graduated challenge to the people in your section, as well as keeping track of their long-term training and development. To do this requires great sensitivity and flexibility on the part of the supervisor. Rigid formalism and mindless adherence to work routines are the great barriers to a dynamic work environment; while the results may be adequate, such practices will result in stagnation and discontent.

For example, know the promotion and testing requirements of the enlisted people in your section. An enlisted member may work in the Mobility section, but, as a part of upgrade training, may have to take Career Development Course (CDC) tests over several areas of the logistics career field, not just mobility. It is important to rotate your people through many jobs within the section to give them experience in various aspects of their career.

4. **Establish standards and stick to them.** A major part of your job as supervisor will be to evaluate the people in your section. Since all evaluations must be based on some standard of judgment, the supervisor should communicate job performance standards to the workers at the outset. At the earliest opportunity, meet with each person (individually, if possible) and spell out exactly what you expect. Be forthright--workers are entitled to know the standards upon which they'll be judged. Once you've established and explained a framework for evaluation, stick to it. Don't introduce new categories unknown to the worker along the way. Workers who feel the "rules of the game" have changed without their knowledge tend to become confused and discouraged in their work. Ensure that the standards you set are clear, comprehensible, and firmly adhered to.
5. **Provide feedback.** Feedback is communication between supervisor and subordinate, intended either to correct substandard performance or reinforce superior performance. Besides establishing standards, providing people with feedback on their work is an essential step in evaluating your personnel.

To be effective, your feedback must be timely and specific. The time to let people know how you rate their work is as they do it, not just in a formal annual evaluation. If you observe deficiencies in a worker's performance, you should give the person an opportunity to correct these deficiencies. Make your criticism as specific as possible. Don't deliver a general condemnation and leave the worker wondering exactly what went wrong. The supervisor should offer feedback as corrective criticism. Its objective should be to improve performance, not punish transgression.

Unfortunately, many supervisors are reluctant to give negative or corrective feedback for fear any adverse comments on their part might cause discontent and lower morale. Yet, as understandable as these motives are, studies show that any feedback (positive or negative) results in higher morale and productivity among workers than no feedback whatsoever. Even negative feedback, so long as it's offered as constructive criticism, and clarifies a worker's understanding of job performance requirements, will result in improved morale and productivity. Withholding negative feedback hurts everyone concerned—it hurts the worker who isn't given a chance to correct poor performance, and it hurts the organization because you are tolerating substandard work. Frequent, well-intentioned feedback builds a "therapeutic environment" in which workers perform in their full capacity.

HOW WILL I REACT?

Recalling Situational Leadership, we discussed how Leadership styles tend to vary considerably from situation to situation. This can't be truer than when being the effective supervisor. Being aware of the various situations and their impact on your leadership style will better prepare you to handle any situation that arises. However, what will the situations be like? A good leader will adapt his or her behavior to the mandates of the situation. Below are eight situations, together with the behaviors that are likely to be effective in dealing with them. Obviously, these behaviors cannot be mechanically fitted to each situation and you may have to combine several to meet a specific situation, but they will give you an idea of the range of behaviors available to the leader.

Situation 1. The work group encounters an emergency for which no standard procedures exist.

- **Appropriate Behavior:** Act quickly and decisively, and announce your decision to the troops with the expectation that they will follow your instructions without question or hesitation.

Situation 2. The work group is new and minimally competent, lacking confidence in its ability to do well.

- **Appropriate Behavior:** Treat employees as though you were convinced of their ability to perform well. Be directive. Make sure that each person knows what is expected, and supervise closely. Train and coach as time permits. Be supportive, patient, and available.

Situation 3. The work group is discouraged because of a series of defeats and setbacks. It is competent and has good will.

- **Appropriate Behavior:** Conduct a group discussion of the reasons for past failures and how to avoid them in the future. Show your confidence in the group's ability to do well. Be alert for signs of discouragement, and move to counteract them. Give positive reinforcement of any improvement.

Situation 4. The work group's attitudes are resentful or hostile.

- **Appropriate Behavior:** Analyze the reasons for the attitudes. Be directive and controlling at the outset, and supervise closely. Spell out the rules of the game, making certain that everyone knows what is expected and what behavior will be rewarded or punished. Make it clear that sabotage will not be tolerated. Reward any positive change in attitude. If prudent, have a constructive group confrontation, helping the group to analyze its own attitudes and the harmful results that will occur.

Situation 5. The work group is competent but lethargic and apathetic. Productivity is lower than it should be.

- **Appropriate Behavior:** Analyze the reasons for the apathy. Clarify objectives, expectations, and standards of performance. Monitor work closely at first. Make sure everyone knows the reward and punishment system you will employ. Model in your own behavior the importance and contribution of the work, and reinforce any improvement.

Situation 6. You were brought in from another unit to head your group. There is resentment on the part of two subordinates who hoped to get the promotion.

- **Appropriate Behavior:** Establish your credibility by doing the job as well as possible. If the resentment continues, have a constructive confrontation with each subordinate privately. Speak well to key authority figures of the positive achievements of the work group. Get their criticisms of any important action in advance and privately. Reward any positive change in attitude. Do not think of them as enemies.

Situation 7. The work group is full of conflict and breaking down into warring camps. Group members are competent and respect you.

- **Appropriate Behavior:** Show clearly that you will not allow the friction to hurt production. Call the leaders of the cliques together privately and explain that you will give them a certain time span to come up with a plan to reduce the friction. Warn them that if they fail to do so, you will take unilateral action to resolve the matter. Try to act as a mediator to bring the parties together. Make it clear that

no undercutting will be tolerated. If possible, assign representatives from each group a task with joint accountability for success or failure. Reward increased cooperation.

Situation 8. The work group must cope with a radical change in the method of doing the job. Group members lack confidence and are uneasy, but are competent enough to cope with the change. They trust you and respect you.

- **Appropriate Behavior:** Explain the reasons for the change and its advantages. Spell out just how the change will be implemented, taking time to answer doubts and questions. Make sure all employees know what is required of them and how each person relates to the others. Treat them as though you were sure of their ability to perform as expected, and get the show on the road. Monitor work closely at first, being supportive and available if they need advice or help. Reward each success promptly.

MAKING THINGS HAPPEN: THE RULES ON DELEGATION

It has been said the most difficult part of being a leader is first learning how and when to delegate. How many times have we had something so important to accomplish that instead of handing it over to someone else, no matter how overloaded we already were, we just went ahead and completed the project ourselves? It happens more than we'd like to admit, but as an Air Force supervisor, it's up to you to keep yourself out of the quagmire, so you can lead your troops. The following steps and suggestions are a guide to helping address the intricacies of delegation.

In order to better understand the world of delegation as an Air Force supervisor we must first define delegation. Delegation is defined as:

“Giving a subordinate the Responsibility, Authority, and Accountability, to complete a task.”

Let's take a look at the three key words in the definition:

1. **Responsibility.** This amounts to an obligation on someone's part to complete a specific task within the organization. Basically, when a subordinate is given a specific job, they have also been given an order and therefore are obligated to complete the assigned task. But, you must keep in mind that the overall responsibility still remains with the boss, the OIC, the supervisor.
2. **Authority.** Whenever you give someone a task to perform, you must also give him/her the authority to carry it out. Authority is the influence one person exerts over another to get the job done. How much authority is a matter of degree and varies widely. It's up to you, as a supervisor, to decide how much authority is required to get the job done.

3. **Accountability.** As far as delegation goes, this is an item where a lot of supervisors fail-- one, by not telling their subordinates what will happen if they fail to perform as required or two, not following through on what they said would happen. To be an effective leader, you must hold your followers accountable; if you don't, the good order and discipline within the organization will falter.

One way to increase that feeling of accountability is to use feedback. Feedback cannot be something done just at the end of the tasking and expect the follower to react in a positive manner; feedback must be given throughout the tasking to ensure the member understands they are being held accountable.

THE FOUR STEPS OF DELEGATION

We've already set the foundation for understanding delegation by breaking down and defining what it means to actually delegate. Now, we must understand how the delegation process works--that's right, a process. Believe it or not, there are four steps to the process--but who would've guessed that there was actually more to it than just saying, "Hey, Airman Jones make it happen!"?

1. **Define the Task.** Define it to whom? Well, first you have to define it to yourself: Is this something I need to delegate? Is this something I can do? What's the outcome I want? Who would be the best person to do this task? Etc., etc.
2. **Assign the Task.** After you've decided that the task needs to be delegated, then it's time to select whom you want to take the job. Bring that person in, sit them down and explain to them the purpose of the job and its goals, obtain commitment from the subordinate and then finally encourage questions.
3. **Grant Authority.** Now that you've given the task away, make sure you've cleared the way for them to complete the task. Give them the right amount of authority based on the job and level of training. It's up to you to ensure they can accomplish the task without any snags. You're the one delegating, so make it happen.
4. **Follow-Up.** Give positive and timely feedback. Don't leave it until the task is complete, follow-up with your subordinates on a regular basis. Be realistic and have self-restraint--realize that mistakes are going to be made.

TASKS THAT SHOULDN'T BE DELEGATED

There are actually some types of jobs that shouldn't be given to your subordinates. In fact, these are the types of things that should catch your eye when you're at step one of the delegation process.

1. **Conceptual Planning.** This is the responsibility of higher-level supervisors to establish the vision and goals for the organization.

2. **Morale Problems.** This is definitely the responsibility of the supervisor, not the subordinate. It is your job to ensure morale issues are put to bed and taken care of immediately. Handing them over to someone else would show a lack of respect and care for your subordinate's needs.
3. **Staff Problems.** Just like morale problems, staff problems must be taken care of at the highest level of supervision over that specific staff. A leader must identify the problems and eliminate them on the spot, or face an unstoppable erosion of unit morale and cohesion.
4. **Subordinate Performance Reports.** Who should know his or her people better than anyone? If the words "the supervisor" or "the boss" or something to that effect didn't flash across your mind, then you need to know: as the supervisor, you, not anyone else, should write and review your subordinate's EPR or OPR.
5. **Pet Projects.** Don't get wrapped around the axle with this one. We all have our own ideas as to what a pet project could be, but in this instance we define pet projects as things that are a misuse of time, a waste of assets/money/people, especially when there is a mission to complete.

COMMON MISTAKES IN DELEGATION

Though we continue to improve our leadership style, and work harder than ever to learn the proper techniques of delegation, there are always going to be those times where mistakes are going to be made. The next list is some of the common mistakes supervisors have made while trying to delegate.

1. **Unclear Delegation.** Go back to step one of the delegation process (if you've forgotten, it's "Define the Task"). This is what happens when supervisors fail to define the task first to themselves, and then to the people who are assigned the task. Come out clean; tell the person exactly what you want...be clear about it (**who, what, when, where, why and how!**)
2. **Supervise Too Closely.** Also known as, micro management. After you've assigned the task, get away! If you've defined the task correctly, then you're going to select the right person for the job, so trust yourself and that person. It's okay to "follow-up," but it's not advised to stand over their shoulder and take control-that means you obviously haven't really delegated, right?
3. **Rushed Delegation.** Give your people time to complete a task. Don't wait five hours before a task is due to assign it to someone, especially when that task deserves a week's time.
4. **Improper Selection of Subordinates.** Step two of the process is "Assign the Task." Here's where it counts in making the right choice for the job. Do you know your people well enough to make a decision? Sometimes it can be a guessing game, but getting to know who can handle what type of work will make your life that much easier.

CONCLUSION

Being the effective supervisor will demand a great deal of time and attention. Supervision is a continual, rather than periodic task; you're never "done" supervising. Administrative duties will also make their demands on your time. Whereas these duties may seem more concrete and pressing, it's unlikely that they're any more important than your supervisory task. To supervise your subordinates properly, you must take the time (even make time) to involve yourself and find out how the work is going, rather than waiting for problems to come to you. The time you spend on human maintenance is time well spent. By being an effective supervisor, you're helping the Air Force gain the most from its human potential.

Bibliography:

1. Air Force Doctrine Annex 1-1. *Force Development*, 15 December 2014.
2. AFPAM 36-2241. *Professional Development Guide*, 1 October 2011.