

# The Secret Behind Operational Excellence: Why Supervisor Matter



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# The Secret Behind Operational Excellence: Why Supervisor Matter

Supervisors play a critical role in translating strategy into practice and to ultimately supporting an organization's journey to operation's excellence. In today's changing environment, that means marrying functional and technical competencies with the soft skills needed to inspire and engage their team members.

When it comes to executing on strategy, many companies look to technology or processes first – often overlooking the contribution of their own workforce. Yet people are key. Supervisors play a crucial role in motivating and engaging their teams to fulfill the goals of the organization.

How much influence do supervisors have? One study from the University of Wisconsin<sup>1</sup> concluded that while only 2 percent of employees will change their behavior based on something they read, 70 percent will do so after a face-to-face interaction with their supervisor. Along with that opportunity, however, comes an ever-growing list of challenges that comes with managing a global workforce.

<sup>1</sup> Phillip Clampitt, "Employee Perception of the Relationship between Communication and Productivity: A Field Study," *Journal of Business Communication*.

## **The world and the way we work is changing**

No longer confined to a single geography or even the boundaries of one organization, the contemporary workplace is more like a global network of teams and individuals. Dispersed through a range of time zones and professional specialties, this diversity also extends to culture, gender and age. Amid so many differences, what brings people together is a common purpose. Members of the millennial generation especially look for a sense of shared values and the chance to further a good cause – often social or environmental – in their work, and are less motivated by a high salary.



At the same time, employees at all levels are taking a more entrepreneurial approach to their jobs, pitching ideas for new products and services and often leading efforts to develop them. This form of "intrapreneurship" is just one example of the disappearing distinction between internal and external, or even group and individual. Driven by the pace of technological progress and ever-increasing volume of information, new hybrids are being born from other pairs of opposites too: independent and interdependent, fast and slow, local and remote, freeform and standardized. In order to thrive in this new world, supervisors must adopt a mentality based on "and" rather than "either/ or."

### **What soft skills do supervisors need?**

The ability to embrace paradox and think holistically is a foundational element of leadership. In order to effect sustainable change, however, supervisors must also win the hearts and minds of their employees. Is this just a question of personal charisma? Actually, the ability to inform, inspire and influence comes from harnessing a set of specific soft skills. At the heart of these skills is affective communication, which means connecting to people on an emotional level. By addressing employees' concerns and motivations, supervisors can better explain why the organization's goals are important and how the employee's job fits into the bigger picture. Supervisors who master affective communication also are able to help employees manage stress in their lives and immediate work environment (which includes awareness of diversity issues); ensure that remote workers remain engaged; and coach employees to make behavior change sustainable.



Developing these skills has two parts: first, cultivating supervisors' own competencies and second, targeting the mindsets and behaviors of employees. Both components must be used together for supervisors to become strategic influencers.

### **COMPONENT 1:**

#### **Cultivate ultimate functional and technical competencies**

When an organization does not have its own internal process for supervisor development, a competencies based development program can provide a targeted way of bridging the functional and technical skills gap. Such a program should be systemic in its approach, encompassing both the lateral dimension of processes and procedures along with the vertical axis of understanding employee capabilities and behaviors.

### **COMPONENT 2:**

#### **Influence mindsets and behaviors through affective communication**

How can supervisors actively participate in promoting a companywide commitment to operational discipline in all they do? An approach based on mindsets and behaviors asks leaders to find out how individual employees think and feel in order to understand their everyday decisions and actions. With that knowledge in hand, supervisors can clearly communicate the values of the organization and ensure their teams are accountable for adhering to those values.

Supervisors are positioned to lead in today's workplace by using their influence rather than the authority of their job titles. For example, a survey by the University of Groningen in the Netherlands put the correlation between supervisors' informal engagements about safety and a decrease in serious accidents at eight Dutch chemical plants at 42 percent<sup>2</sup>.

Another study broke this down into even more detail: when supervisors spoke to their direct reports about safety, rates of unsafe material handling dropped by 56 percent, unsafe electrical work by 66 percent and failure to use personal protective equipment by 74 percent<sup>3</sup>.

What does this process for turning supervisors into leaders look like in practice? First, supervisors talk with their team members to understand the culture and climate of their organization, as well as to make behavioral observations. The purpose of this initial discovery phase is to identify areas for improvement and priorities for developing specific skills. The next phase is about integrating these findings through workshops that help supervisors develop the competencies they need. Finally, the new skills that have been learned are embedded into existing routines through coaching. This ensures that the behavior change is lasting and that a sustainable learning organization is established.

### **Signs of a successful supervisor**

When supervisors are able to understand the mindsets and behaviors of employees, while also building their own soft skills and competencies, their ability to translate strategy into operations excellence improves. The improvement is underway when:

- Effectiveness of communication between management, supervisors and employees improves
- Productivity rises through better (and delegated) decision-making and problem-solving
- Roles and responsibilities become clearer, as needed improvements are identified and understood

This two-part, integrated approach for supervisor development has yielded proven results across a wide range of industries, from manufacturing to health care to energy.

### **CASE STUDY:**

#### **A global chemical company addresses a management disconnect**

Despite having a new high-performance strategy, an Italian chemical manufacturer noticed that one of its sites was suffering from high production costs and low employee morale. What was the problem? Employees had not embraced their part of execution, since supervisors didn't feel responsible for implementing business strategy through translating it into behavioral changes for themselves and their teams.

In an initial assessment, dss+ identified key areas for improvement, such as a lack of decision-making by supervisors, as well as a lack of communication between finance, operations, safety and quality. Several months later, dss+ held "Supervisor on the Scene" interactive workshops for almost 40 supervisors and first-line managers. This was followed by on-the-job coaching to develop and practice competencies and techniques that would support productivity goals and enhance interaction through all levels of the organization.

This not only resulted in improved operational results, but also a more positive attitude toward operational discipline on the part of employees.

### **CONCLUSION**

Both organizations and the nature of work are changing. Supervisors play an increasingly important role in organizational performance as mediators and leaders between management and employees. Developing their functional competencies, combined with affective communication skills and employee engagement, helps supervisors translate highlevel strategy into practice so they can support an organization's journey to operations excellence.

2 Sicco van As: "Communication and Industrial Accidents," SOM Research Report, University of Groningen

3 Dov Zohar and Gil Luria, "Use of Supervisory Practices as Leverage to Improve Safety Behavior: A Cross-Level Intervention Model."

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