



SSU 2009-01

ACTION STEPS FOR SUPERVISING EMPLOYEES

By SeaBright Insurance Loss Control

It is not at all unusual for a supervisor to achieve their position within an organization based on their superior knowledge and experience in a particular craft. All of a sudden, a new supervisor can find himself or herself responsible for an entire crew, craft or department comprised of workers that used to be their peers. Their new responsibilities not only include the multitude of duties associated with production, but also the safety of each worker that they supervise. They are in charge of orienting new employees, training new and existing employees, conducting safety meetings and safety inspections, performing thorough accident investigations, and so on. Success in carrying out these duties requires a new set of skills. Unfortunately, many supervisors are not given the skills training they need to effectively manage people and the problems that may arise. This is indeed unfortunate because almost all experienced supervisors will say that managing people is the most difficult aspect of their job as a supervisor.

To help, the following action steps are offered as tools for enhancing supervisory skills.

I. Communicating Performance Standards

- Meet with your employees to review the duties of their job based on written job descriptions. Make sure these are *clearly* understood.
- Discuss performance standards for each of the employee's major areas of responsibility.
- Get commitment by having the employee describe the steps he or she will take to meet the standards.
- Ask for and respond to any questions or concerns.
- Tell the employee that you have confidence in his or her ability to achieve the performance standards, and encourage the employee to ask you for any help if needed.
- After several days, follow up with the employee in order to address any areas of concern that may have arisen since your original talk.

II. Dealing with a Performance Problem:

- Focus on the performance problem rather than on the employee's personality or attitude.
- Clearly state the nature of the performance problem.
- Ask for the employee's help in solving the problem by exchanging ideas on how to solve it.
- Agree upon and write down the steps to be taken by both of you.
- Make clear the disciplinary action that will need to be taken if improvement does not occur.
- Express your confidence in the employee's ability to correct the problem.
- Set a follow-up date and praise the employee when the job performance is improved.
- If improvement does not occur, the disciplinary action will need to be taken.

III. Administering Corrective Action:

- Define the problem in terms of lack of improvement since the previous discussion.
- Ask for and actively listen to the employee's reasons for the continued behavior.
- Agree on specific steps to be taken to solve the problem.
- Express your confidence in the employee's ability to solve the problem.
- If corrective action is called for, indicate what action you must take and why. Be sure to spell out consequences of *not* improving.

- Set a follow-up date to check on progress.
- Reinforce any positive behavior change.

IV. Improving upon an Employee's Average Performance:

- Find an aspect of the employee's performance that is above average and explain why it deserves special recognition. This will open the employee to you and your attempts to seek improvements in other areas.
- Ask the employee what you can do to help him or her improve other the aspects of their job performance that are not meeting expectations.
- Express your confidence in the employee's ability to perform other aspects of the job in the same outstanding way.
- Set a follow-up date to see how he or she is doing.

V. Delegating Responsibility:

- Indicate what new responsibility you want the employee to handle and why they are the right person for the job.
- Describe the new responsibility in detail, outlining the specific task, performance standards, and any training procedures needed.
- Do not forget – to succeed, they need to be given the *authority* to be able to fulfill the responsibility.
- Ask for the employee's feelings, questions, and suggestions.
- After dealing with the employee's concerns, ask for a commitment and make it clear that you are available if help is needed.
- Express your confidence in the employee's ability to handle the new responsibility.
- Agree on a follow-up date to see how he or she is doing.
- Remember, you can only delegate the duties. As a supervisor, you still hold the responsibility to make certain the task is done satisfactorily.

VI. Conducting a Performance Appraisal:

- Make it clear that the reason for the appraisal is to give feedback on current job performance and to aid career development.
- After completion, review the rating given for each factor with the employee, citing specific examples of behavior or skills that determined the rating.
- Ask for and actively listen to the employee's feelings about the ratings.
- Decide with the employee specific ways performance areas can be strengthened and then write a developmental plan.
- Express your confidence that the employee will improve.
- Set a follow-up date prior to the next formal performance review.

NOTE: Performance evaluations should be an ongoing process. The formal appraisal should just recap prior discussions. The use of an employee drop file is a good way to capture pertinent information that occurred throughout the year.

VII. Conducting a Career Development Session:

- Prior to meeting, ask the employee to jot down notes on short-term and long-range career objectives. Make sure they are realistic, measurable, and attainable.
- Discuss these career objectives, indicating your evaluation of the employee's present potential to reach these goals.
- Describe the development steps needed to reach the goals.
- Ask for the employee's ideas on actions to achieve the objectives.
- Develop a specific plan of action.
- Express your readiness to help the employee achieve the objectives.
- Set a date to review progress.

VIII. Rewarding

It is said, "Reward people for the right behavior, and you get the right results. Fail to reward the right behavior, and you are likely to get the wrong results." So, what is the 'right' behavior to reward? An article written by John C. Maxwell entitled *Rewarding for the Right Reasons* suggests rewarding the following:

- Quality – Work should be done correctly and quickly. Reward those who produce quality results over those who finish quickly by cutting corners.
- Smart Work – Reward people for achieving specific goals that are in line with your company's top priorities.
- Simplification – A valuable worker is one who can look at a complicated problem, and reduce it to something that is clear and easily understandable.
- Risk Taking – It is only by exploring new ideas that progress is made and efficiencies are discovered. Remember though, not all risk taking will be successful. Failures have to be expected. However, safety should never be comprised.
- Teamwork – Remember the saying, "There is strength in numbers." However, this is only true if everyone is pulling in the same direction and moving toward the same goal.

Now that you know what to reward, you need to recognize behaviors that *should not* be rewarded.

- Quick fixes – Implementing the first solution is often the easiest but many times the quick fix will not solve the long-term problem. The quick fix is usually just a patch and the problem will reappear.
- Squeaky Wheels – Such people will usually get your attention, but for the wrong reasons. Pay too much attention to the squeaky wheels and the quiet producers will feel ignored and taken for granted.
- Over-Analysis – While having all the information helps guide in solving a problem, it is possible that an extended search for detailed information will result in no action being taken.
- Charisma without substance – Some people stand out due to their personalities. However, they may not be good producers.
- Mindless conformity – Every organization needs good soldiers. These people do as instructed, but little else. Real value is in those individuals who are creative and come up with new and better ways to get things done.

Summary

There are several common themes threaded through the supervisory skills discussed. Used together or considered alone they can assist you in improving your skills a leader supervising others. These themes include maintaining the employee's self-esteem; focusing your attention on performance or behavior rather than personality or attitude; actively listening to your employee's concerns; obtaining commitments; and establishing follow-up dates for review. Finally, reward those that deserve reward and motivate others to contribute their best.

By sincerely practicing these action steps each day, improvements in productivity, quality and safety can be realized. Remember that employees respond to leadership and confidence. Treating your first-line people with respect and courtesy will go a long way toward solving behavioral or safety problems.