

Topic 1 Section 2

What is Supervision?

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Introduction

Any projects you undertake have one thing in common: you must have a goal— a good idea of where you trying to go. Supervision is no different. In order to try to become a good supervisor, you must have a good idea of what makes a good supervisor. This section covers some of the issues that arise from supervision— in particular, what makes a good, and what makes a poor, supervisor. By studying this section, you may be able to gain a better idea of what is required of a good supervisor and begin setting your own goals.

What is a Supervisor?

Before learning the techniques that are covered in the Construction Industry Learning Resource, it is important to agree on the definition of the term ‘supervisor’. The role of supervisor is so varied that it is difficult to define it in a single sentence.

Supervisory roles certainly involve technical skills, such as planning and scheduling, cost estimation, ordering supplies and consumables and so on. However, there is much more to the role of the supervisor than simply technical skills. Supervisors must be able to communicate, lead, develop people, maintain harmony and efficiency, maintain safety and run the project profitably.

The list below outlines some of the tasks and responsibilities that may form part of a supervisor’s job. Not all supervisors will need to do all of the tasks every day and there are other tasks that have not been included here. Supervisors might be required to do any of the following:

- Plan the day-to-day operations that are under their control.
- Plan for the overall project/s under their control.
- Provide cost estimates for labour, equipment and supplies.
- Maintain and improve workplace safety.
- Maximise efficiency and productivity.
- Organise the resources necessary to get tasks completed.
- Achieve maximum utilisation of resources (labour and equipment).
- Ensure that the job is carried out in line with the specification.
- Negotiate prices and delivery dates with sub-contractors and suppliers.
- Ensure that the work done on the job meets all quality control and quality assurance standards.
- Prevent wastage of manpower and resources.
- Assist in the financial management of the project.
- Ensure that all tasks are carried out in accordance with the relevant Australian Standards.
- Communicate effectively with personnel at all levels, including, labour, management, clients, suppliers, sub-contractors, members of the public, etc.

- Act as the chairperson at site meetings.
- Provide leadership to help build your team.
- Play your part in maintaining harmonious industrial relations.
- Be an active trouble-spotter and trouble-shooter.
- Provide progress and other reports to the appropriate personnel.
- Be on the lookout for more efficient ways to do things.
- Be a good team player as well as a good team leader.
- Accept that being a supervisor means more work, not less.

These are all skills that you can learn and the aim of this training program is to help you to do exactly that. If you can learn and use most of these skills in your day-to-day work, then you will be well on your way to becoming a good supervisor. However, just having the right skills is not enough. To be truly successful you also need to be a good communicator and to have the right attitude.

Communicating as a Supervisor

Communications is regarded as such an important part of the role of a construction supervisor that it has been allocated an entire topic in the *Civil Construction Learning Resource*. For any person in a position of responsibility, it is critical that they be able to communicate effectively and efficiently. The difference between communicating well and communicating poorly can mean the difference between:

- Overseeing an efficient and productive site, as opposed to an inefficient and wasteful site.
- Working in a safe place rather than one that is hazardous.
- Working with a harmonious workforce rather than one that is argumentative and belligerent.
- Dealing with a range of helpful suppliers and subcontractors who will go out of their way to assist you, as against suppliers and sub-contractors who have no interest in going 'beyond the call of duty' to assist you.
- Dealing with client's officials who are keen to work out the problems with you, as opposed to client's officials who leave you to 'sink or swim' on your own.
- Dealing with inspectors who want to help you to get the job done rather than inspectors who see no reason not to be a hindrance.
- Dealing with members of the public in such a way that they choose to see the benefits of the project and be helpful, rather than seeing the 'downside' and being antagonistic and unhelpful.

There are many other aspects of the supervisor's job that can be greatly assisted and made easier through good communication with others. As a supervisor or future supervisor, you are strongly urged to study the topic on communications within this learning resource. The skills that you will learn will be invaluable in your role as a supervisor.

Attitude

Attitude is also important and will be one of the deciding factors in whether you succeed or fail as a supervisor. It does not matter how experienced or qualified you are, or how many skills you have, if you do not have the right attitude.

It is your attitude which gives you your motivation and demonstrates to others that you have the desire to succeed. It is your attitude which will help shape the attitude of your team. If you display a 'don't care' attitude then the people working with you will be likely to do the same. As with communication, you will find that your own attitude will be reflected back to you by the other people you deal with; such as clients, inspectors, or the public. Your personal attitude to others and to the project will be a major factor in your success or failure.

What Makes a Good Attitude?

A number of personal traits contribute to a person's attitude. These include:

- A commitment to yourself to be the best supervisor you possibly can.
- Commitment to the company and the job.
- Commitment to the team that works with, and for, you.
- Having a vision or goal of how your project/s should be managed and what outcomes you want to achieve.
- Commitment to building good professional relationships with suppliers and sub-contractors.
- A thorough understanding that the company is in business to make money, but not at all costs— output and profitability must be balanced against safety and quality of the finished job.
- A willingness to accept new responsibilities.
- A willingness to accept change and learn new skills.
- A desire to excel in your work.
- A desire to get ahead within your company.
- Caring about the safety and security of your workers.
- Patience and a willingness to teach other people.
- Caring about the safety and condition of the equipment under your control.
- Personal integrity and a commitment to telling the truth.
- A desire to constantly improve yourself, your team and the work that you do.
- A commitment to getting all your tasks done to the absolute best of your ability.
- Getting satisfaction from a job that is well-done.
- Being honest in all dealings with other people.
- Being polite to all, and being prepared to listen and respond to all questions and complaints in a rational and productive manner.

You probably would not have to think for too long to come up with other personal qualities that help to give you a good attitude and make you into a good supervisor.

What Makes a Bad Attitude?

There are probably a similar number of personal traits that can help to create a person with a bad attitude. The difference between the two lists is that many of the personal qualities listed above are required to make a good attitude, while only one or two bad traits are needed to make a bad attitude and a poor supervisor. In other words, a lot of work, skills and effort can be completely undermined by a very small number of undesirable traits.

To see if your attitude needs to be modified, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I lack commitment to the company and the job?
- Do I lack commitment to the team I work with?
- Do I lack vision or goals?
- Is my attitude likely to be unhelpful in building good professional relationships with suppliers and sub-contractors?
- Am I unwilling to accept new responsibilities?
- Am I resistant to change?
- Do I lack the desire and drive to learn new skills?
- Do I believe I do not need to learn new skills?
- Do I lack concern about personal success?
- Do I lack concern about the safety and security of the people who are working for me?
- Am I unwilling to teach others the skills that I have?
- Am I ever untruthful in my dealings with people at work?
- Do I lack personal integrity?
- Do I believe there is no room for improvement?
- Do I believe everything I say and do is correct?
- Do I put less than 100% effort into my job?
- Am I satisfied even though the job has not been done well?
- Do I lack patience and become unnecessarily angry with people?
- Am I ever impolite in any of my dealings with people at work?

All of your answers should have been 'NO'. If you answered 'YES' to any of these questions, there is a good chance that your work attitude is not going to help you to become a good supervisor. If you did answer 'YES' to any of the questions then it is up to you to begin making changes in the way you see and do things. A person who does not have the right attitude has very little chance of being able to lead his/her team to success.

The most important point about attitude is that you are the only person who can change it. If for any reason you have a poor attitude, it is up to you to deal with it yourself.

Even if you are involved in conflict and work problems, you should still try to maintain a good attitude. Use the conflict to find resolution. Deal with problems and be pleased with yourself that you have been able to solve them. Maintaining a bad or poor attitude in the workplace is counter-productive for you, for the people around you and for your company. A bad attitude about any given problem will only make the problem worse than it is. If you find that you do fit into the category of person who often displays a poor attitude, start working on that particular side of your personality as soon as possible. Rather like a poor communicator, a person with a frequently poor attitude is unlikely to become a good supervisor.

A supervisor who has the right attitude will be the one who gets ahead. He/she will be the one who is wanted on the best teams and the one that managers will want working for them. A good supervisor will find that there are many workers who want to work with him/her.

Outcomes of Good Supervision

Supervision is one those parts of a job that can go unnoticed when it is well done but becomes very noticeable when it is poorly done. In other words, good supervision may not always be apparent to those who are involved with any given supervisor, but poor supervision will be.

On a well-supervised site, the project goes smoothly and the supervisor has most of the problems and difficulties under control. The workforce will be working as a team and the site will be efficient, productive and safe. Good relationships will have been developed with other people involved in the project such as inspectors, sub-contractors, and suppliers. Orders for supplies and equipment will have been made in a timely fashion and there will be minimum wastage. Maximum value will be obtained from mobile equipment such as graders, dozers, or scrapers (there is no value in having equipment standing idle while its costs are running up). The paperwork and reports will be distributed to the right people as they fall due.

Good supervision is really noticed at project milestones and at the project's end. If the supervision has been good, the milestones will be met on schedule and spending will be in line with the original budget. If this is not the case, a good supervisor will have alerted the appropriate personnel, so that they can discuss the difficulties and suggest solutions such as contract variations.

The good supervisor will be constantly “forward planning” and adjusting the plans as circumstances change. It may unexpectedly rain for several days during the project; one or more earthmoving vehicles may be unexpectedly unavailable due to breakdown; a bout of sickness goes through the camp. All of these are circumstances that will have a major impact on the project. A good supervisor will take the difficulties on board and manage his or her resources in such way that the difficulties are neutralised or, at least, communicated to the appropriate personnel so that suitable counter-measures can be taken. A good supervisor fully understands the project and is ready to deal with difficulties and problems as they arise, and treat them as part of normal day-to-day issues.

Section 2 – Assessment Activities

For information on how these assessment activities may be used as part of the learning process, see the section on 'Assessment' in the 'Topic Descriptor' section at the front of this topic.

Theory Questions

The following questions allow you to assess your progress in understanding the material presented in Section 2. The questions may be of any of the following types:

- multiple choice (identify correct answer or answers)
- multiple choice (identify incorrect answer or answers)
- fill in the gaps in a sentence or statement
- identify a sentence or statement as TRUE or FALSE
- write a few sentences or a short paragraph.

Answers to the question are shown in the separate 'Answer' section.

Question 1

Name four responsibilities of a supervisor assigned to civil engineering works.

Question 2

Explain why supervisors must be able to communicate effectively.

Question 3

Why is attitude important for supervisors?

Question 4

Give four examples of a good attitude towards work.

Practical Exercises

Practical Exercise 1

Think about previous supervisors you have worked for. Consider whether each supervisor was a good or poor supervisor. Why? Can you learn from their example?

Practical Exercise 2

When you are next supervising a group of employees, try looking at the situation from their point of view. Should you change the way you are supervising them?