Theory Background



Supervisory Skills Questionnaire

Fourth Edition

HRDQ

Supervisory Skills Questionnaire



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Introduction

With responsibilities abounding, supervisors are those who are most responsible for an institution's or organization's day-to-day relationships with employees and customers (Priestland & Hanig, 2005). It is these front-line leaders that are proving to have the most influence on sustaining quality, service, innovation, and financial performance (Hill, 1992). So what makes a good supervisor? Most organizations are faced with this fundamental question. In fact, it was this driving question that motivated the development of *Supervisory Skills Questionnaire*. Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to this question, primarily due to rapid organizational change and the shifting demands of the supervisory role. The qualities that made a good supervisor fifteen, ten, or even five years ago are not necessarily those that make a good supervisor today.

Supervisors today find themselves in a unique position. They are charged with creating an environment in which their employees can achieve superior performance, yet they often have minimal control over that environment. An era of increasing government regulation, sophisticated technology, movement toward cross-functional teams, and diverse, entitled, and better-educated employees has turned the role of supervisor upside down. The skills required to operate effectively in such an environment differ substantially from those exercised in an environment in which the supervisor had complete control over his or her work group and their work environment. These circumstances make training and developing supervisors a difficult business.

Our experience and research have revealed that certain identifiable and definable skills, when learned, make supervisors more effective—a finding that is consistent with contemporary views of supervisory skills (Certo, 2013). Building on the classic understanding of supervisory skills, we recognized the need to emphasize *task-related*, *people-related*, and *change-related* activities. A supervisor's abilities to plan, establish employee objectives, monitor performance, manage employees, and develop their skills—as well as remain flexible and diligent enough to meet organizational goals—are foundational to his or her success.

A supervisor typically learns these skills over time as he or is exposed to situations that require them. Helping participants gain knowledge that usually derives from experience is a challenge for trainers of supervisors, especially new supervisors. Our goal was to create a tool that could enable supervisors to learn these skills in a short period of time. With that goal in mind, we decided to structure the assessment as a series of situations, providing participants with an opportunity to gain quick exposure to a variety of circumstances they could potentially face in their supervisory roles.

The other major challenge of training supervisors is dealing with the breadth of the skills they must learn. That breadth requires a comprehensive learning tool that addresses a range of skills. *Supervisory Skills Questionnaire* distills key information from the vast array of research and writing on effective supervision. The program presents five essential Supervisory Skills: Guiding the Work, Organizing the Work, Developing Direct Reports, Managing Performance, and Managing Relations.

Supervisory Skills Questionnaire has three primary learning outcomes. The first is for participants to understand the core responsibilities and roles of a supervisor. The second is for them to evaluate their performance in the five Supervisory Skills to identify their strong suits and potential areas for improvement. The third objective is for participants to develop a plan to improve their competence and impact as a supervisor.

Theory Background

The Role of the Supervisor

In this program, the term *supervisor* refers to anyone who directs and is responsible for the work of others, whether in a formal or informal capacity. This person is familiar with the daily work of his or her staff and receives direction from those who make higher-level decisions for the organization. Others may call this role by a different name, such as *manager*, *team leader*, *project leader*, or *director*.

Perhaps more than any other organizational role, that of the supervisor has changed dramatically through the evolution of the organization and the changes in society (Certo, 2013; Humphrey & Stokes, 2000; Kerr, Hill & Broedling, 1986). At the heart of the supervisor's job is the task of getting work done through others. But this simple definition has taken on different meanings over the course of history. A supervisor during the Industrial Revolution, for instance, was given almost complete control of the people he oversaw. His role resembled a contractor for the company who was granted the independence to hire, fire, and discipline as he saw fit.

As the years went by, several societal changes restricted the supervisor's independence (Cole et al., 2003). One such change was the rise of unions, which protected and extended workers' rights. Another significant change was the introduction of scientific management, in which managers planned the process of work in fine detail and supervisors were merely responsible for making sure those plans were followed.

More recent changes have once again made the role of supervisor more limited, yet also more complicated. Increasingly restrictive government and safety regulations constrain how work must be done. A more educated workforce and demographic shifts of employees have put more demands on the supervisor. In addition, increasingly frequent technological changes in organizations have made it difficult for supervisors to keep current on work processes.

Throughout all of these changes, the control of the work—which the supervisor used to maintain—has been dispersed throughout the organization. Human resource departments now oversee hiring, firing, and discipline, with unions having a say in disciplinary matters for their members. Technical experts often handle the functioning of the technology, while management often sets priorities.

Although supervisory control may have diminished, the supervisor's importance within the workplace and the demand for productivity certainly have not. The basic function of the supervisor remains the same: getting work done through the efforts of others. In today's workplace, however, we expect supervisors to be able to handle employees with diverse backgrounds, manage individuals with more technical expertise than themselves, and follow complicated rules and regulations while fulfilling the needs of the organization.

The importance of the supervisor to the organization cannot be overstated. Effective supervisors are the lifeblood of the institution—linking the strategic planning of upper management with the heart of the organization (Ellis, 2007). Although supervisors are charged with productivity and efficiency to help sustain the bottom line, it is their impact on the intangibles that can be most meaningful to the organization. In fact, a supervisor is likely to have a significant influence on employee retention, as well as possess the ability to attract and onboard new employees, maintain morale across a variety of departments, impact safety and overall employee well-being, cultivate culture, and deliver and reinforce the organization's most vital messages (Kossek & Hammer, 2008; Ellis, 2007; Sullivan, 2005).

The abilities required of the supervisor to meet these demands have also expanded over time. A supervisor today needs to be able to:

- Communicate effectively with diverse groups within and outside the organization (Humphrey & Stokes, 2000).
- Employ problem-solving skills, creativity and imagination, and critical thinking (Morieux, 2011; Dotlich & Cairo, 2002; Humphrey & Stokes, 2000; Thompson, 1995; McKenzie, 1992, 1988).
- Demonstrate empathy, support, and compassion (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008; Kossek & Hammer, 2008; Bradberry & Greaves, 2005; Pagonis, 2001).
- Know how to develop his or her employees (Buckingham, 2005; Sullivan, 2005; Kerr, 1986).

Furthermore, supervisors can increase productivity by using their employees' relational interests and skills to guide decisions, determine project assignments, and provide career support (Pink, 2009; Butler & Waldroop, 2004). These abilities do not necessarily come from the prior experience of most supervisors, particularly those who were promoted to supervisor from an operative position.

New supervisors must face some unfamiliar issues, such as how to direct the group, how to let go of the day-to-day tasks while still remaining knowledgeable enough to guide the work, and how to maintain good relations with former co-workers who now report to them. Making the transition to supervisor requires much more than building one's knowledge; it requires a shifting of attitudes and an increased ability to perceive the emotions of direct reports and to manage one's own emotions, which will enhance interpersonal skills (Caruso & Salovey, 2004; Dotlich & Cairo, 2002; Walker, 2002; Ramsey, 1995; Nanda, 1988).

The Supervisory Skills

The research on supervision identifies numerous skills that an effective supervisor should possess. *Supervisory Skills Questionnaire* organizes the key skills into five categories: Guiding the Work, Organizing the Work, Developing Direct Reports, Managing Performance, and Managing Relations. A common thread runs through all of the skill dimensions—the ability to balance the goals of the organization with the needs of the work group. The supervisor's primary role is to function as a link between the organization's management and the employees. The supervisor is accountable to management for completing the work according to expectations and to his or her employees for their well-being. Additionally, the supervisor is responsible for his or her own development.

Figure 2 illustrates the five Supervisory Skills as the supervisor practices them.



Figure 2: Supervisory Skills Model

The supervisor uses direction from the organization to perform his or her job. This direction is needed to successfully guide his or her group's work. In order to accomplish the work, the supervisor must organize the work, develop his or her direct reports, manage their performance formally and informally, and manage relationships with several groups outside his or her own.

The remainder of this section provides concise descriptions of each Supervisory Skill.

Guiding the Work

The first Supervisory Skill involves taking the direction of the organization and translating it into actionable plans for the work group.

The supervisor's view of work must be broader than that of his or her employees. Being an effective supervisor means understanding the bigger picture, which includes the goals of the organization (Certo, 2013; Dealy & Thomas, 2004; Thompson, 1995). This is not always an easy feat for a supervisor, particularly a new one whose perspective has been focused on the needs of a work group (Walker, 2002). Although it may be challenging at times, the direction of a supervisor's group has to be supportive of the organization.

If this Skill were a simple matter of instructing employees to carry out the direction of the organization, perhaps Guiding the Work would be a relatively easy task for a supervisor. However, giving direction and having it carried out successfully are not the same thing. The supervisor must guide his or her work group toward organizational goals in such a way that employees know their needs are not being ignored or forsaken (Kossek & Hammer, 2008). Supervisors should clearly communicate and espouse the company values, while simultaneously creating a challenging and satisfying work environment (Nohria, Joyce & Roberson, 2003). Supervisors have a responsibility to foster an environment in which employees are encouraged to collaborate and feel empowered to develop creative solutions to complex problems (Morieux, 2011). Failure to empower employees can lead to decreased performance and increased turnover (Sullivan, 2005).

Another essential employee need is direction. A supervisor's direct reports will look to him or her for guidance on a daily basis because the supervisor is the main link to management. Acting decisively is very important because employees' daily work depends on their supervisor's decisions; lagging or wavering could not only affect their workflow, but also sets a poor example. This may not always be comfortable, particularly for a new supervisor, but failure to act is one of the factors that leads to unsuccessful supervision (Bilanich, 1994).

Planning the work flows naturally from following the direction of the organization. Without specific commitment to action plans, understanding the goals of the organization and being motivated to carry them out do no good. Plans are necessary to translate intentions into actions. Whatever strategy the supervisor decides on, it must be clearly defined, well understood by employees, and unmistakably communicated.

Organizing the Work

The second Supervisory Skill involves assigning the right people to the right tasks and providing necessary resources to meet work goals.

Shifting organizational and personal priorities necessitate almost constant reorganization of work (Humphrey & Stokes, 2000; Thompson, 1995). With change comes opportunity and cost. The supervisor, with responsibilities to the organization, must consider the impact on the bottom line (Collins, 2001). The primary consideration in Organizing (or reorganizing) the Work is the effect on the organization. However, maintaining the needs of the organization as the primary decision criterion is not always easy. It depends on a steady stream of communication and understanding of the priorities of the organization and what is expected from the supervisor's work group.

Equally important is for the supervisor to take into account the demands placed on the employees (Hunsaker & Alessandra, 2008; Kossek & Hammer, 2008). The supervisor must keep the needs of his or her direct reports in mind while Organizing the Work (Buckingham, 2005; Bilanich, 1994). Meshing these needs with those of the organization, which usually are based on different priorities, requires some skill. To be most effective and maximize employee engagement, the supervisor is encouraged to understand what motivates his or her employees, be sensitive to their needs, and actively listen and seek their feedback (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008). By doing so, no matter what organizing decisions are made, the employees are more likely to understand the decisions and feel that the supervisor has done everything he or she could to accommodate employee needs along the way (Pagonis, 2001).

Organizing the Work efficiently often requires the assistance of people more knowledgeable than the supervisor. These people may be within or outside of the supervisor's work group. Supervisors are often afraid of looking uninformed in front of others and will fail to take advantage of the knowledge resources available (Kanter, 2011a; Kets de Vries, 2005; Fuller, 1995). Concerns over one's image should not be an impediment to organization. A supervisor is constantly learning and what he or she learns from others facilitates the organization of work.

Supervisors are part of a hierarchy in their organizations. Working within that hierarchy is critical. It is also critical, however, to have an awareness of the unspoken hierarchy, known as the "informal organization" (Cross & Prusak, 2002). The informal organization can have a strong impact on the organization of work, often exceeding the effectiveness of prearranged cross-functional teams (Sethi, Smith & Park, 2002). When it is in line with the formal organization, the supervisor should simply let it be. Fighting the informal organization is often fruitless work. The supervisor should intervene only when he or she is aware that the informal organization is working at cross purposes with the formal one (Thompson, 1995). The need to intervene will be less frequent if the supervisor encourages a culture of transparency, trust, and teamwork (Evans & Wolf, 2005).

Developing Direct Reports

The third Supervisory Skill involves knowing and actively working to increase the skill level of each employee being supervised.

The important component of Developing Direct Reports is gaining knowledge of employees as individuals. Each employee has his or her own skills, abilities, needs, and personality (Butler & Waldroop, 2004). A supervisor who is aware of the unique features of each person in the work group will be best equipped to help them meet their potential (Buckingham, 2005; Butler & Waldroop, 2004).

Developing employees requires an investment of time in an effort that may seem like a low priority to many supervisors. The immediate work of the group often takes precedence, and the natural tendency is to complete the work in the most efficient manner for the moment. As a result, supervisors may become trapped in the habit of completing work themselves that could be completed by their employees if time was invested in their development (Painter, 1995).

The way out of this trap is through delegation. Investing in an employee's development takes commitment, trust, a well-defined objective, clearly established action plans, and follow-through by both the supervisor and employee (Hunsaker & Alessandra, 2008). Delegating work to employees builds the skill base of the organization and frees the supervisor to develop his or her own skills. Furthermore, if the assigned work is perceived as challenging and engaging and aligns with the employee's underlying interests, supervisors can boost productivity and company morale (Butler & Waldroop, 2004; Walker, 2002; *A Supervisor Asks*, 1991).

When delegating work, the supervisor should start by organizing the task, and then choose an employee who is willing and able to develop the skill to complete the task. The process of delegation involves setting expectations for results, coaching and instructing the employee, and maintaining a reasonable level of control over performance of the task (Walker, 2002; Painter, 1995). The supervisor also needs to emphasize the responsibility that comes with accepting a delegated task and should ensure that proper training is available for employees (Maruca, 1999).

Managing Performance

The fourth Supervisory Skill involves removing the obstacles to better performance so employees can meet their own and the organization's objectives.

The obstacles to employee performance can be found both within the employee and in the work environment. An effective supervisor is mindful of and manages obstacles in both areas. Managing Performance, like the other Supervisory Skills, is a daily task that requires the supervisor to remain aware of each individual employee (Certo, 2013).

A large part of Managing Performance involves the continual coaching of direct reports to achieve their potential. Coaching begins with looking to the future and deciding what level of performance can reasonably be expected of an employee. Beyond teaching employees *how* to perform, the supervisor should strive to instill in them the self-confidence in their *ability* to perform (Dotlich & Cairo, 2002).

Another aspect of Managing Performance is dealing with performance problems, which the supervisor is bound to encounter. When these problems occur, the best approach the supervisor can adopt is to maintain a voice of reason and calm (Hunsaker & Alessandra, 2008; Caruso & Salovey, 2004). Once again, taking the perspective of the organization and encouraging employees to do the same will focus the discussion of performance issues on what is really important.

Whether coaching an employee or handling a performance problem, the key to this Skill is setting expectations for performance that both the supervisor and the employee understand (Certo, 2013; Hunsaker & Alessandra, 2008). A supervisor must tell direct reports what he or she expects of them. Without this knowledge, the employee will flounder. As simple as this sounds, the step of stating expectations is often disregarded when discussing the details of how to perform a job.

Keeping employees involved in reviewing and tracking their own performance will increase their commitment to improvement (Pink, 2009; Dweck, 1999). An especially powerful tool is self-feedback, in which an employee assesses him- or herself and corrects his or her own behavior. In fact, research indicates that self-feedback is the most efficient way to manage performance (Hunsaker & Alessandra, 2008).

Managing Relations

The fifth Supervisory Skill involves developing and maintaining good relationships with other groups so that the supervisor's employees and the organization meet their goals.

The supervisor and his or her employees do not operate in a vacuum. As organizations become more connected, both internally and externally, the ability to manage relations with other groups has become a key skill for supervisors (Certo, 2013). Between human resources, technical experts, regulatory bodies, and internal and external customers, the supervisor usually has his or her hands full in trying to maintain good relationships with all of them (Kerr, Hill & Broedling, 1986).

Like the other Supervisory Skills, Managing Relations should be guided by the goals of the organization (Fuller, 1995). Taking an organizational perspective in dealings with one another puts the supervisor and the other groups on common ground, providing a reasonable basis for decision making. When it comes to interfacing with these groups, "real cooperation is not a matter of getting along well; it's taking into account the constraints and goals of others" (Morieux, 2011, p. 83).

Communication is crucial to maintaining good relations, particularly with groups that regularly interact with the supervisor (Thompson, 1995). Keeping other groups informed of plans and keeping abreast of the activities of the rest of the organization ensure that the supervisor's work group will be well positioned to succeed. In line with Drucker's (2005) philosophy, by committing to understand the strengths, the preferred style, and the value of the people they oversee, supervisors will leverage their strengths and thus be of higher value to other groups.

Maintaining relations can be stressful for a supervisor when other groups' needs conflict with those of his or her own work group. In addition to using the organization's goals as a gauge in external relations, the supervisor should take into account the impact of any external interaction on his or her employees. Many supervisors want to help out other supervisors, often to return a favor or gain their support in the future, but realize that doing so would strain their employees with a heavier workload.

Supervisors who are successful at Managing Relations must learn how to handle conflict effectively, as disputes between groups are inevitable. An individual's personal, professional, and emotional health is greatly affected by how successfully he or she manages conflict (Dijkstra, van Dierendonck, Evers & De Dreu, 2005; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Frone, 2000). Part of managing conflict adeptly is recognizing how one prefers to respond to it; some people find a mutually beneficial solution, some act aggressively, some acquiesce, some compromise, and others shrink away from it. No matter what an individual's tendencies are, he or she must understand them in order to interact successfully with others (Rahim, 2002).

It is important to note that Managing Relations and the other Supervisory Skills require a fair amount of practice. A supervisor should not expect to be able to handle every situation masterfully from the start. Keeping a balanced perspective, which entails considering both the organization's and the work group's needs, is key to developing these Skills.

Learn More

Empower your supervisors with *Supervisory Skills Questionnaire*. This comprehensive training solution provides the foundation to get your supervisors up to speed quickly. Equip your team today and ensure they're ready to meet any performance challenge!



LEARN MORE

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