

## **CRAFTING A SUPERVISION PROCESS (A Very Informal Concept Paper)**

The following ideas and proposed process do not deal with some of the legal issues that a supervision process should include. It also does not deal with ineffective or poor performing employees. There are plenty of articles and books in the field that deal with these topics. It is hoped that this concept paper might create real discussion about supervision within your organization. In the end, you need to design a supervisory process that meets your unique needs, organizational culture, strategy, and goals.

### **SOME THOUGHTS. . . . .**

1. Supervision, if it is to be effective, must be valued by the organization. This means that leaders need to be trained, supported, and rewarded for supervision to be truly effective, especially at the top levels of senior management. (This is rarely the case.)
2. Effective supervision communicates to people throughout the organization that investing time and support in people is an organizational value. It also communicates that honest feedback, rigorous goal setting, good communication, and developing people is prized by the organization.
3. Supervision is essentially about the relationship between the supervisor and employee. Without an honest, open, and supportive relationship based on trust, real supervision cannot take place. (The classic Failure of Management by Objectives (M.B.O.) in the 1970's and 80's was due to the lack of attention paid to the relationship between the boss and the subordinate. In theory, it looked great on paper. The boss and subordinate would set mutual goals and performance standards and everything would be wonderful. Unfortunately, when there is little trust in the organization or between the supervisor and supervisee, employees will set minimal goals. Without trust, people tend not to take risks, stretch themselves, experiment, or make themselves vulnerable. What ends up happening is a negotiation around minimal goals and expectations. In the end, organizations achieve mediocrity). Pay attention to the relationship.
4. The employee is in a vulnerable position in a supervisory process. The supervisor is in the "power" position because he/she can reward or punish the employee. The supervisor needs to be proactive in establishing a safe and trusting relationship with the employee. They can do this by: listening carefully (very difficult to do); providing clear examples of performance; focusing on the strengths of the individual; giving honest feedback; and being interested in the development of the employee.

Unfortunately, supervision is not a sexy topic. The current rage is "leadership". All the leadership in the world does not produce results. People do. Effective leaders deeply understand that you achieve meaningful results (add value) through the hard work and thinking of people. Supervision enables leaders to accomplish things because it builds the capacity of people, supports their development, and holds them appropriately accountable. It is important but not glitzy work. It is desperately needed in our organizations.

5. Effective supervision takes time. The research shows that we spend an average of an hour a year in some kind of supervisory process with most employees. These tend to be perfunctory sessions, utilizing checklists, and focusing on a one-way dialogue from the supervisor to the supervisee. Real supervision is an investment of time in the employee, but not much time. Somehow we have convinced ourselves that there is no time to do real supervision because there is too much work to do! We often spend much of our time putting out fires, being reactive, and going from one crisis to another. Too often, people are rewarded for being busy and not for being productive. We often hear leaders say, “I don’t have enough time to supervise!” That is a myth.

## The Facts

1. A “typical” workweek is 40 hours (for most of us it’s 50 – 60 hours).
2. A work year consists of 2000 hours, excluding two weeks for vacation (again, most of us have real work years consisting of 2500 – 3000 hours per year).
3. The proposed supervisory process/schedule would take approximately 8 – 10 hours per employee, per year. Which is about ½ of 1% of your total available work time. Even if you have 8 –10 direct reports, this would take approximately 5% of your work time, leaving you lots of time to do other “important” stuff.

Bottom line: There is no excuse for not investing a fraction of your time developing your people. If you cannot find the time, look at the results you are producing not all the busy activity.

## A PROPOSED MODEL

I. The Initial Supervisory Meeting: This meeting would take place yearly and be approximately 1-1/2 – 2 hours in duration. Both parties (supervisor and supervisee) should come to the table very well prepared. This is not an informal meeting and should be treated seriously.

This meeting should be an in-depth discussion, reviewing the employee’s progress, accomplishments, contribution, and work of the previous year. The employee should have some clear examples and indicators of success (e.g., completing a project; writing a report; negotiating a business opportunity; implementing a process or procedure; etc.). The supervisor should also come to the meeting with examples of the employee’s productivity and accomplishments.

To provide an appropriate structure to this discussion, an agreed upon set of questions should be crafted. These questions promote good dialogue, reveal areas of strengths and focus on areas of needed development. Creating these questions together enables both parties to “own” the process and, therefore, the outcomes.

The following questions are working examples that many people have found helpful and constructive. Both the supervisor and the supervisee must answer these questions before they meet for the initial meeting. The purpose of this is to ensure both parties are prepared for the meeting and the homework enables each party to share their perspective.

1. When you look back over the past year, what stands out to you regarding what you have accomplished? Please be as specific as possible.
2. What have been some important “lessons learned” from the past year? This could be either positive or negative lessons (e.g., “I learned that I am a little too ambitious when I think about what I can actually accomplish”, or “I am better at project management than I originally thought”, or “I have to be more rigorous in establishing timelines and deadlines”).
3. What have been some challenges or difficulties you have encountered over the year? Have there been any disappointments?
4. What are some things you would like to accomplish over the next 6 – 12 months? (Please provide a rationale for each goal and a way to measure them.)
5. What are 1 – 2 areas of “needed development” you need to work on this year? Why do you need to work on them? How will they enhance your effectiveness (e.g., “I need to be more assertive in meetings”; “I need to become a more effective listener”; “I need to focus my attention and energy on fewer things and not try and do everything”)
6. What support (e.g., education, specific courses, coaching, experiences) do you believe would be essential in helping you be successful this upcoming year? Please be specific.
7. How can I be supportive as your supervisor? (e.g., Spend more time with you? Develop a learning network? Provide more timely feedback?)

*(These questions create an information data base that is rarely accessed in most supervisory meetings. It is obvious that if there is not a constructive and honest relationship based on trust between the two parties, these questions cannot be answered.)*

Both parties would share their perspectives and examples with each other. Reviewing one question at a time, they would identify common ground themes and clarify differences. This takes time, patience, and good listening.

The most important outcome or product of this meeting is an agreed upon set of performance goals for the employee. The employee needs to clearly understand what is expected of them over the next 3, 6 and 12 months; along with expected support, resources, lines of authority, reporting mechanisms, and ways to measure success and progress. (A brief follow-up meeting, 20 – 30 minutes or so, should be conducted about a week after the initial supervisory meeting. This time is an opportunity to have both parties reflect upon the review, share insights, rightsize expectations, and correct any misconceptions.)

## **II. Monthly “Check-ins”:**

These are brief, scheduled meetings (30 minutes) to maintain the dialogue, rightsize expectations, provide feedback, problem solve, and build the supervisor – supervisee relationship. An employee should never be surprised at the end of the year that they are not meeting their goals, and making a contribution. These check-ins prevent this from happening. A short summary of this meeting should be recorded.

## **III. “Half-time” Check-in:**

This meeting would be conducted approximately six months after the initial meeting and be formal in nature. It should take

about an hour and have some structure to it. This is an opportunity to determine what has been accomplished so far and what is reasonable to accomplish over the next six months. This “half-time” meeting could easily take an hour and, again, take some thought and preparation beforehand. (A brief review of the initial supervisory questions might be helpful.)

#### **IV. 360° Feedback:**

This feedback process has been around for over 20 years and there are many excellent books and articles describing how to do it right. It does take some time and preparation to implement the process but, if it is done well, it is well worth the effort. Ideally, it would be great if everyone throughout the organization participated in some kind of 360° process. Realistically, it should involve, at a minimum, all formal leaders in an organization.

In short, the 360° process involves soliciting (anonymous) feedback from a diverse set of stakeholders who interact with a particular leader. The primary purpose is to create an honest and wholistic picture about how a particular individual is seen and experienced by people they work with.

A report is created after participants provide the necessary information, detailing the strengths and weaknesses of the individual. Most importantly, the supervisor needs to help create an action plan that builds on the strength of the individual and improves the areas of needed development. This is essential. A 360° feedback process is not an intellectual exercise. It is meant to create a rich database that moves an individual toward change and enhancement.

Ideally, leaders should participate in this 360° feedback process yearly. Some attention needs to be paid to the process so it doesn't become a routine exercise but rather a development of leadership skills throughout the organization.

#### **V. A Learning Agenda:**

If a supervisory process is to have integrity and add value to the organization, it must include a learning process. After the (yearly) or initial discussion, both parties need to agree on a plan for improvement for the supervisee. Their improvement plan should focus on both the strengths and areas of needed development of the employee.

For example: If an employee realizes that they need help with managing their time, selected courses should be identified and participation ensured. Most importantly, the supervisor and supervisee need to agree on some practical measures to monitor the employee's progress regarding time management. Just taking the course is not enough, it must impact behavior. (e.g., “We will monitor the number of times you deliver your monthly production reports on time”; or “Periodically, we will keep track of your timeliness in our staff meetings”). The purpose is to measure results, not activities.

Another example: If an employee recognizes that they need to be more assertive in staff meetings because they often have something to contribute but don't. A learning agenda might involve taking some assertiveness training courses, reading appropriate books regarding assertiveness, and getting some counseling from a professional. The end result should be a change in the behavior of the employee, not more knowledge about assertiveness. The supervisee and supervisor can agree to track the number of times the supervisee speaks up in meetings.

Every employee should be working on their “learning agenda” throughout the year. There is always something to improve or build upon. Don’t leave the supervisory meeting without agreeing upon your learning agenda with appropriate support (courses, coaching, reading, etc.).

## **SUMMARY**

Obviously, these suggestions will take time and attention to be effective. All of it is do-able if the organization has the will and discipline to do it right. In the end, supervision is about developing the capacity of the people in the organization, creating a learning agenda so people can enhance their skills, and holding people accountable to agreed upon, meaningful goals.