Module 3

Read Ahead

Supervisory Transition
Module 3: Supervisory Transition

Objectives

After attending the training in Module 3, participants will be able to:

- learn about the transition to supervisor.
- learn the core characteristics of an effective supervisor.
- recognize the do’s and don’ts of supervision.
- learn some of the potential pitfalls for a new supervisor.
- take an inventory of supervisory strengths and weaknesses.
- learn techniques to turn supervisory ideas into action.

Introduction

Most young professionals have or will have the opportunity during their careers to be placed in a position of supervising other personnel. In larger organizations, it may take some time for positions to become available, but even employees who have been with ALDOT for some time may have an opportunity to advance into supervisory positions. Regardless, any supervisor’s ability to succeed will be based in part on technical capabilities, core characteristics, and ability to self-train in the development of good foundational behaviors. The view of management has evolved over the years as our society has evolved and changed.

In 1977, Abraham Zaleznik said, “Management consists of the rational design, organization, direction, and control of the activities required to attain the selected purposes and the motivating and rewarding of people to do their work.” In 1989, Max De Pree said, “Leadership is an art, something to be learned over time, not simply by reading books. Leadership is more a weaving of relationships than an amassing of information.” In 1995, Barry Posner said, “Today’s employees want to be part of the decision-making process, engaged in the planning and evaluation of programs and projects.” More recently, Ken Blanchard addressed the position of supervision as “Influence, not Authority.”

Most of us were raised in a culture that told us the proper way to manage is to tell people exactly what to do and make sure they do it. To be successful, today’s supervisors must be able not only to formulate a vision of where their organization must go but also to communicate that vision and motivate their people to attain the vision.

Insights into a Supervisor’s Role

Good supervisors are not born, but they can be made. However, many employees transitioning to supervision see nothing but power and authority because of the older definitions of “supervision or management.” In fact, transitioning to a supervisor is one of the most difficult tasks to achieve if done properly. No one is simply promoted and “becomes” a good supervisor. It takes learning, developing, and changing.
New supervisors must understand that they will be required to lead as well as manage. Others will view them differently even if they try to act the same as they always did. As mentioned, people are promoted into management because they are good at doing their jobs or have been there longer than others. But now, they must be good at getting other people to do their jobs. Coaching, giving feedback, motivating, setting goals, developing employees, giving direction—these are not innate skills. Issues dealt with on a routine basis will change significantly. For example, employee relations and conflict management will be required.

A supervisor’s ability to build relationships will play a key role in effectiveness. When an employee is promoted, the relationship to coworkers as friends or peers can change in a single day. Changing relationship from peer to supervisor is difficult, and building relationships with employees is not as easy. However, relationships are still the key to effectiveness. A new supervisor cannot motivate another person without a relationship at work. A new supervisor cannot engage another without a relationship. A new supervisor cannot enter into conflict resolution without a relationship. Intertwined relationships are the prerequisite for good interpersonal relationship skills—advanced communications skills.

One of the most effective ways to approach a new role as supervisor is to find a mentor who has successfully made that leap to effective supervisor and learn from that person. Find a mentor.

**Core Characteristics and Attributes of Effective Leaders/Supervisors**

- **Basic Intelligence**
  A supervisor must possess a basic knowledge of ALDOT’s technical standards, have the educational requirements to meet job requirements, and possess good reasoning skills for the projects with which ALDOT works.

- **Clear and strong values**
  High ethical standards and moral values are imperative because ALDOT is part of the government, is in the public service arena, and has projects that impact every citizen of the state.

- **High personal levels of energy**
  Work in the transportation-specific positions is not like work in other state agencies. We are not always located in an office or in front of a computer. ALDOT has many people who work offsite, engage in manual activity, operate equipment, and walk project sites in all types of weather. Physical and mental energy are critical.

- **Ability and desire to grow**
  Supervision takes people who are ready and willing to mature in their knowledge and experience. If we are not willing to grow, learn, and change, we will not be successful in managing others.

- **Vision**
  The job of supervisors is to see the big picture and provide direction and feedback to
their employees. Without clear vision, a supervisor is destined to struggle or fail. If the supervisor does not provide vision to the team, then employees often make decisions without the information or experience to make the correct decision.

- **Infectious curiosity**
  One of the benefits of being promoted into a supervisory position is that you bring a new energy and enthusiasm to the position. You will be most effective if you also bring a strong desire to learn. All new positions carry a body of knowledge necessary to be effective at that job. Curiosity is critical to stepping effectively into the new supervisory role.

- **Good memory**
  One of the critical characteristics of an effective supervisor is the ability to manage multiple situations at once. Within ALDOT, this may mean, for example, multiple projects, multiple tests, multiple sites. The supervisor needs to be able to keep an incredible body of information readily accessible. The people you will manage, the projects you will supervise, and the public with whom you will interact require you to keep information at the front of your good memory.

- **Empathy**
  Supervisors must demonstrate empathy for their employees’ circumstances and an ability to relate to their issues. As Theodore Roosevelt said, “They don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

- **Predictability**
  Your employees will need a steady hand guiding the team. ALDOT is not an IT startup. Your reliability in your position as supervisor will allow your team to know better what you expect. Managing “hot or cold” depending on the day, your mood, or the phase of the moon does not help your team perform at the highest level.

- **Persuasive capability**
  Good supervisors have the capability to persuade employees. Lee Iacocca said, “Management is nothing more than motivating other people.” As a supervisor, you will often need to persuade your team members to do more than they think their capabilities allow.

- **Leadership example**
  A good supervisor must be willing to lead by personal example. Employees are far more responsive when they know their supervisor is working alongside them and is willing to step in and help. When the team is functioning as a team, with the supervisor leading the way, it can accomplish far more.

- **Effective communication skills**
  Good supervisors get their message across quickly and clearly. Good supervisors also know how to listen. Without strong communication skills, a new supervisor will struggle to connect to the team. If employees receive clear instructions, they are more likely to respond well and accomplish more.
Critical Information for the New Supervisor

As a new supervisor, you should expect a period of transition in your new role. You will not be expected to grasp all facets of the new job immediately or be ready to handle all issues that confront you. If you were promoted from your previous job, you may now be supervising others who used to be your peers. This will take some adjustments on both sides. If you came from “outside,” you will be in unfamiliar territory with unfamiliar people. It will take a while for you to get to know your staff as employees, and it will take a while for you to develop your own leadership style.

Do’s for the New Supervisor

- **Do** be yourself. Do not try to be your predecessor, prove that you are not your predecessor, or copy someone else. Your personality is the one that will surface in times of pressure, so it is important that you develop your own style.
- **Do** give your staff time to adjust to you.
- **Do** use your supervisor. Ask for help when you need it. Make sure you understand the limits of your authority, including when you can act or need to seek input.
- **Do** use existing information. Review written materials such as policies, procedures, and training manuals. Where there are none, create them and involve others in the task.
- **Do** use your staff. They are familiar with day-to-day operations.
- **Do** expect a period of “testing.” It is natural for your new staff to explore your limits and test your reactions.
- **Do** get to know your staff.
- **Do** LISTEN.

Don’ts for the New Supervisor

- **Don’t** apologize for getting your job or for being younger, newer, or inexperienced.
- **Don’t** be a broom, making sweeping changes the first day.
- **Don’t** be afraid to make decisions. But, seek counsel from others in order to minimize your mistakes.
- **Don’t** try to do everything yourself.
- **Don’t** obsess over the details.
- **Don’t** get stuck on the privileges.

Potential Pitfalls for New Supervisors

The new supervisor can face many challenges in a new assignment. Too often the new supervisor is ill-equipped to handle these challenges and is subject to several common pitfalls. Mistakes frequently made by new supervisors include:

- **Failing to take prompt action**
  One of the easiest mistakes is to fail to make an expedient decision when a decision is necessary. Whether it is personnel issues that need to be addressed or a project...
decision that only you can make, you must be willing and able to act when the time is right.

- **Failing to document**
  As with most state agencies, ALDOT lives and dies based on documentation. The paperwork inherent to your new position may be confusing or obscure. One of the most important tasks in your early days in a supervisory role is learning how to navigate the paperwork necessary for leading a team—documentation of project work and of necessary human resource decisions such as performance appraisal and employee discipline.

- **Trying to make sweeping changes from the first day**
  It is not what you know that will get you but what you think you know. It is necessary to test your knowledge by taking the time to get to know your job and employees. While this may seem contrary to the point above regarding prompt action, team or office change is most effective when it is built on trust. Your team members must know and trust you before they will respond well to change. Learn your team and the new job before you try to fix the problems.

- **Failing to utilize staff expertise or include staff in decision making**
  This is especially true if you are moving into a new division or field as a supervisor. Employees who have been in their jobs for a while are your best resource in a new job. They have institutional knowledge that will be critical to your success. They also have experience that can help you avoid critical mistakes. Neglect this resource at your own peril.

- **Making promises before verifying that they can be kept**
  While you may now have the title of supervisor, this does not mean you can do anything you like. Many requests made to you will still be above your paygrade. Do not promise what you cannot fulfill. It is far better to get back to someone after you research a request for a pay raise, policy change, or promotion than it is to say yes and then have to rescind because you are not allowed to provide it.

### The Secrets to Becoming a Good Supervisor

The key to effective supervision is to provide your employees with clear expectations and responsibilities. Let team members know what you expect of them, hold them accountable for those expectations, then empower or correct them based on the results. You will occasionally encounter an employee who demonstrates poor work habits, such as tardiness. This behavior can become contagious if left unaddressed. Prompt action is required to ensure this practice does not infect the organization.

Another aspect of providing clear expectations is effective communication. If your employees feel they cannot communicate with you, they will find someone else with whom to talk. You do not want to be the last to know about an issue or problem. It is important for you as a supervisor to establish a climate of open communication and trust. Without an environment of mutual respect and trust, built on clear communication, you are not going to know when to empower or correct.
Once you have established the expectations and have begun the process of accountability, you will need to be very deliberate about getting to know your employees. Get a feel for their strengths and talents; their reactions to feedback, change, and stress; and their style of interacting with each other. This will help you in providing feedback, empowering them to do more, or correcting them based on their weaknesses. You cannot manage them effectively if you do not know them.

As a new supervisor, you will likely go through a period of testing. It is common for a new supervisor’s staff to test limits and explore reactions. Remember, eventually this test period will be of help. If you have been able to lay out the expectations clearly and provide consistent feedback and accountability, staff members will know where they stand and understand how to perform better. One of the best responses is to catch others doing things right and give public recognition. You will want to recognize correct actions publicly and address corrective actions privately.

If you can provide clear expectations, hold your employees accountable for their performance, and empower or correct them based on their performance, you will create a work environment that is fair and stable. Employees need this from their supervisor more than just about any other attribute. This environment is ripe for high performance.

**Taking Stock of Your Supervisory Strengths and Weaknesses**

Prior to taking a new supervisory job or shortly thereafter, it is to new supervisors’ advantage to assess their strengths and weaknesses, particularly those that will help or hinder their potential success. It is likely that some strengths will help in the supervisory role. Furthermore, a supervisor may have other strengths not utilized in a previous job that will help in supervising others effectively.

The strengths that might help a new supervisor are innumerable. The following are a few that would certainly help any supervisor:

- Understanding the work of the organization or division
- Project management
- Organizational skills and time management
- Planning and goal setting
- Ability to listen
- Coaching good and poor performance
- Decisiveness
- Flexibility
- Concern about people’s welfare
- Ability to make effective presentations
On the negative side, a new supervisor’s weaknesses could work against potential success. Weaknesses are defined as ineffective behaviors, bad habits, or negative traits as well as lack of skills in specific supervisory responsibilities. Negative behaviors are often referred to as “baggage” or “self-defeating behaviors.” Characteristics of supervisory weaknesses include but are not limited to:

- Need for power and/or control
- Indecisiveness
- Stubbornness
- Resistance to change
- Micromanagement
- Fear
- Favoritism
- Lack of vision
- Arrogance
- Blaming others

Because most of new supervisors’ time is spent dealing with other people—employees, managers, staff personnel—they need to recognize that interpersonal baggage or self-defeating behaviors brought to the supervisory position will impact how well they do. In most cases, any lack of skills can be dealt with by formal or on-the-job training.

**Conduct a Self-Assessment of Supervisory Strengths and Weaknesses**

As a new supervisor, you must first reflect on your work with others over the past few years. Have other people said you are particularly strong in certain areas? What are the strengths that make you look like a prime candidate for supervision? Just the fact that you are being or have been considered for supervision indicates there is some reason for thinking you have qualities as a good supervisor.

Second, you need to identify what you have noticed about your behavior and skills that indicates there might be some difficulty in being an effective supervisor. Over the past few years, have others said that you are particularly weak at or need to improve in specific areas? We all have things we need to work on, even if they are not career-killing.

**Activity:** On a 3 X 5 card, write three strengths you or others have recognized in you that could assist in becoming an effective supervisor. Briefly discuss how you feel these strengths can assist in making you an effective supervisor.

On a second 3 X 5 card, write what you think are your three greatest weaknesses or obstacles to becoming an effective supervisor.
Changing Bad Habits

The following process can be used to change habits, baggage, or self-defeating behaviors that will hinder a new supervisor’s progress in becoming effective:

1. Identify and describe the self-defeating behavior you want to change.
2. Describe why you want to change the self-defeating behavior.
3. Describe the new behavior you want to substitute for the self-defeating behavior.
4. Plan and implement a strategy to overcome the self-defeating behavior.
5. Evaluate how you are doing.

New supervisors should take the time early in their supervisory careers to assess their strengths and weaknesses. Building on strengths and making a concerted effort to overcome weaknesses or self-defeating behaviors should be a high priority. Doing so will reap long-term benefits in their supervisory careers and possibly in their future management careers.

Quotes

“People ask the difference between a leader and a boss. The leader leads, the boss drives.” --Theodore Roosevelt

“In the past, a leader was a boss. Today’s leaders must be partners with their people... they no longer can lead solely based on positional power.” --Ken Blanchard

“Start with good people, lay out the rules, communicate with your employees, motivate them, and reward them. If you do all those things effectively, you can’t miss.” --Lee Iacocca