
The New Supervisor: A Gamble or a Strategy?

“The transition from individual contributor to manager represents a profound psychological adjustment—a transformation—as managers contend with their new responsibilities. New managers must learn how to lead others, to win trust and respect, to motivate, and to strike the right balance between delegation and control. It is a transition many new managers fail to make.”

---Linda Hill, Associate Professor, Harvard Business School

The Gamble

They rise to positions of supervision as a reward for superior functional expertise or star performance as an independent contributor. Unfortunately, they haven't been assessed or trained for the basics of leadership talent. At times good leaders do emerge from this flawed practice, but it is mostly a matter of luck. Sometimes when companies roll the supervisory “promotion dice” they will win. But the odds of the gamble aren't with the house and these companies eventually pay a heavy price for the failure to recognize leadership attributes or prepare new supervisors for their new role.

Companies pay a heavy price for failure to prepare new supervisors or managers for their new role.

Two distinct competencies must be developed in each new supervisor or manager to ensure excellence—people acumen (the ability to influence engaged performance) and business acumen (understanding how a business creates value and makes money). Like two strands of a coil, these two competencies are inseparable when it comes to success in a leadership role. Failure to address the development of both strands of the coil in the early stages of the supervisor or manager's tenure significantly lowers the odds for success.

Background

Research and statistics continually confirm that organizations with high rates of employee engagement are more successful than companies where such engagement rates are low. However, *Gallup Management Journal's* Employee Engagement Index shows that only 29% of employees are actively engaged in their jobs, while 54% are not engaged, and 17% are actively *disengaged*. The result? 71% of those polled are lacking loyalty and commitment in their present job, and even may be ready to move on.

A high level overview of corporate cultures in the U.S. since WWII offers evidence that corporate cultures are based primarily on two models. The first is the industrial model that emerged with the advances of mass manufacturing, where people were not expected to think and instead “leave their brains at the door.” The other is the military model, where strict adherence to the chain of command regarding input, dialogue, and feedback was required. These two types of culture fostered work environments that were framed as follows, “*you are a labor hour, listen closely, do as you are told, follow orders, and you will have a job.*” These cultures held court consistently until the mid 1970’s when we began to see some clear challenges to these ways of managing people.

As Baby Boomers began their careers, they were heavily influenced by the long wave effect of the 60s social revolution, which said, “Question Authority.” Women became more than unique numbers in the workforce and, with that came the radical idea that relationships were as important as results. Women often used alliances and networks, not hierarchy, to deliver performance results. Globalization was on the rise and, with this; diverse groups brought their own perspectives and values into the workplace. Finally, the access to information and communication provided by the Internet changed the concept of empowerment and people began to inquire, “*Why does it have to be done this way?*”

The “values” emphasis began in the late 80’s and continues today. Recognizing the value of talented people to the success of the enterprise, leaders attempted to redefine organizations through a process of adherence to a set of values that would capture the spirit of employees and improve the quality of results. This has proven difficult as organizations espouse a new behavior by talking a new talk while clinging to old models of managing and supervising people—walking the old walk—treating people as aberrations.

A new dominant conversation regarding the quality of supervision and management needs to emerge if we want employee engagement to become a pervading theme in the hallways and shop floors of our organizations. Organizational culture is to a significant degree based on decisions regarding who is placed into supervisor and management positions. Often these decisions are based on the employee’s previous results while not considering the effect on culture, as if the two were independent variables. This oversight comes back to haunt us.

Overlooking the impact a new supervisor or manager has on both culture and people will come back to haunt us.

Luck or Strategy?

As the title of our recent book, “*People Leave Managers—Not Organizations*” suggests, the supervisor or manager sets the tone and is the major influence on the employee in the work environment. As the supervisor pervades every aspect of the employee’s work life, the quality of this relationship dictates the level of discretionary effort and the degree of

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loyalty employees give to the organization. In this regard, the responsibility the local supervisor/manager has to his or her organization can be daunting. The profound impact this person has on the working life of employees and performance outcomes is critical to an organization's success. Effective performance management and supervisory skills are the lifeblood of the organization. And yet, it's no secret that many new supervisors and managers fail in their first assignment. Often, organizations approach selecting frontline supervisors, team leads, or first time managers with less strategy than rolling dice in Las Vegas. Yet the risk is much higher. As reported in Business Wire in September of 2007, "*nearly 60% of frontline managers underperform during their first two years in the seat, driving performance gaps and employee turnover across the entire frontline.*" The challenges organizations face today are considerable and new supervisors and managers are thrust onto the playing field to deal with these challenges—from the economy, customers, competition, the global market place, increasing technology, budget cutbacks, downsizing, deficits of talented employees, and demanding stakeholders. Without adequate preparation, what can we hope for? To counter this risk, strategic selection and proper training and preparation are needed.

The issue is clear. The relationship between an employee and his or her immediate supervisor has significant impact on performance. Supervisors of frontline employees have a much larger influence on employees' day-to-day performance than managers at other levels. A 2004 Corporate Leadership Council study of 50,000 worldwide employees revealed that "...the manager of frontline employees, in particular his or her effectiveness at managing people, is the most important driver of performance and engagement." This impact is further illustrated, as this same study emphasizing business outcomes indicates:

- If an ineffective manager can shift to an effective people manager, there is the potential to improve employee performance by 25%, employee engagement by 52% and employee retention by 40%.
- Those employees who are most committed perform 20% better and are 87% less likely to leave the organization - indicating the significance of engagement to organizational performance.
- While commitment to the manager is often pointed out as the key driver of engagement—the manager actually plays a more important role, helping the employee commit to the job and organization.
 - ✓ A good manager has the potential to increase an employee's commitment to their job by 34%, the power to increase emotional commitment to the organization by 38% and commitment to the team by an astounding 47%.

Selection

So, how can we get better at this? Assessing people for jobs is the most important task of any organization. The quality of assessment ultimately determines the performance of new hires, as well as the ability of the organization to effectively develop employees. It affects every important aspect of the organization's success.

The first challenge of effective assessment is to fully understand the job and formulate the success factors. Without a clear understanding of the job and corresponding success factors, behavioral assessment cannot be effective. It is essential to understand the tasks performed, the responsibilities, the key performance factors and the requirements that relate to effective performance. And yet, in most cases, the factors used for assessment are merely our best guess at what will enable good performance. These factors should be considered as a hypothesis to be verified by actual performance data that should be collected and used to re-evaluate the accuracy of the job requirements. For more effective selection, two factors must be considered.

As in sports, even the best coach can't build a winning team if he picks the wrong players to begin with.

Eligibility: Most organizations assess the eligibility requirements desired for placing people into new supervisor or manager positions. Years of experience, education, and past performance are examples of eligibility requirements. However, people do not normally fail and are eventually let go due to their eligibility issues. After all, a new supervisor doesn't suddenly have fewer years of experience or less education. It is *suitability* factors that determine success or eventual failure, and these factors are rarely assessed.

Suitability: To illustrate, here are some examples of suitability factors that are relevant to supervisor and managerial jobs:

- How effectively do they communicate with others?
- How well will they influence?
- What is their philosophy on motivating others?
- What is the process they use to make decisions?
- Can they deal well with conflict?
- What is their tendency to take initiative?
- Will they persist when faced with obstacles?
- How well can they handle responsibility?
- What type of coach will they make?
- Will they be able to teach effectively?

Since suitability is more difficult to change than eligibility, it is better to select people who already have the suitability for the job.

Assessing for job suitability is a foundational skill for increasing the odds of choosing successful supervisors and first time managers. The importance of assessing for suitability is evidenced by the fact that most organizations choose people for their

eligibility and then try to develop their suitability; which leads to the old adage that “we hire for eligibility and fire for suitability”. Since behavior (suitability) is fundamentally more difficult to change than eligibility, it is better to select people who already have the *suitability* for the job.

At Impact Achievement Group, we have chosen the Harrison Assessment™ as the process for effective selection. Calibrated to focus on common traits specific to high performers in supervisor and managerial positions, this assessment significantly increases the odds of choosing the right people. The Harrison Assessment™ is the only assessment method that:

- Uses a full spectrum of behavioral assessments, including personality, interests, work environment preferences and task preferences.
- Uses a high-tech questionnaire that provides the equivalent of a full day of testing in only 30 minutes.
- Uses a technological consistency detector that provides an extremely reliable validation of the authenticity of the answers.
- Can be effectively applied without professional interpretation.
- Uses the power of paradox to decipher subtleties and complexities of personality related to job performance.
- Offers complete customization to specific job requirements.
- Offers a complete research database of success traits for different position types.
- Delivers cost-effective high correlation with actual job performance.

Training

Initial training must prepare new supervisors or managers for deliberate practice for the variety of situations they will face in their new role.

Marshall Goldsmith, the universally acclaimed executive coach, leadership expert, long time friend, and a teacher earlier in my career, has this to say about a person who was my mentor as well. “*My teacher and mentor Paul Hersey always taught me that leadership is not a popularity contest.*” Goldsmith further comments by saying that a leader has to be focused on achieving the mission, and that sometimes means disagreeing with your direct reports and taking a tough stand on issues.

On the other hand, Goldsmith offers the following about the author of the “Leadership Challenge”. “*My friend and colleague, Jim Kouzes, points out that leadership is not an unpopularity contest.*” Goldsmith

adds to this that great leaders focus on building positive, lasting relationships with the people they lead - and should be sensitive to how they are perceived by direct reports.

The route to excellence in any endeavor is through deliberate practice; that is practice combined with feedback and self-correction, which refine abilities and judgment. Deliberate practice, a term coined by K. Anders Ericsson of Florida State University (and written about extensively in “Influencer” by Kerry Patterson) works, due to the fact that it actually changes the way the brain accesses and processes information. Initial supervisory or management training must provide a framework to prepare new supervisors and managers so they can successfully practice the conversations and situations they will routinely face in their new role.

Many elements of a manager’s development will be learned through experience on the job. However, without a clear understanding of what is expected of them in their new role, along with a baseline set of skills that will enable them to interact and supervise with a degree of effectiveness from the start, we leave much to trial and error. It is the people management skills such as communicating, influencing, coaching, providing feedback and conflict resolution that will allow them to take on the challenges of their routine daily activities.

Supervisors are literally in the middle between the demands being placed on them by their leaders and the responsibility of managing a team or workgroup. It is not fiscally prudent or respectful to employees to leave the success and effectiveness of supervisors and first time managers to chance. The cost, as stated previously, is clear. Thus, two questions must be answered as we prepare new supervisors and managers for their new position:

1. What types of skill-sets are needed to make the critical transition from individual contributor to successful supervisor or manager?
2. What means will be used to deliver these skill-sets?

“You could fill a book—in fact you could probably fill dozens—with all the ways to get off to a good start as a leader. But the one thing you have to do as a new leader, and from then on, is define yourself.”

---Jack Welch, former CEO, GE

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SKILL SETS

There are seven critical themes that are foundational for the effective preparation of new supervisors and managers.

1. The Initial Impact

Transitioning from individual contributor to supervisor/manager is one of the most difficult & critical transitions. Getting off on the right footing regarding setting expectations, getting to know direct reports, setting the tone, and defining a supervisory/manager approach are essential elements for both short term and long term success. Without effective guidance in the tactics and methods to be used in the first six months, new supervisors and managers are left to sink or swim.

2. Customer Focus—Creating Value

At a basic level, Sam Walton's words should be carved into the new supervisor or manager's handbook: *"There is only one boss—the customer—and he or she can fire everyone in the company from the chairman on down simply by spending their money elsewhere."* Understanding how to create value worthy of customer's money and gaining a clear idea of how the supervisor or manager's workgroup contributes to the financial success of the organization is necessary as a basic framework for managing or supervising the performance of others.

3. The Boss

The new supervisor or manager enters uncharted waters regarding the relationship with his or her boss. Unlike the relationship the independent contributor has with the boss, this new relationship requires a significantly higher degree of alignment, support, communication, and collaboration. Developing a professional and personal relationship with the boss, and using the boss effectively, can eliminate many obstacles in the path to success for a new supervisor or manager. The boss is the person with the greatest control over the future of a supervisor or manager.

4. The Law

Perhaps nothing can cause a supervisor or the organization as much difficulty as ignorance of applicable labor laws. A clear understanding of the rights of employees is not just important, it is essential knowledge. Putting the organization at risk legally due to lack of basic knowledge of the "do's and don'ts" of workplace issues is common. While legal concerns can and will vary by organization, location, and state or province, there are some fundamental

principles that will make both the new supervisor / manager and the organization operate on solid ground.

5. Performance Management

A significant responsibility for new supervisors and managers is direct or indirect input into the organization's formal performance review process. Due to the personal and impactful nature of performance review processes on employees, a lack of basic skills for executing this process can hinder, and in many cases, rupture the relationship with direct reports. It is essential that new supervisors and managers learn key skills and concepts up front that will allow them to add value to the performance review process.

6. Dealing With Difficulties

The success of new supervisors and managers is tested in situations when they must deal with difficulty. This includes handling difficult situations such as workplace complaints and employee conflicts, handling performance problems when direct reports perform at an unacceptable level, and handling difficult people, such as those who are routinely absent or routine troublemakers. These issues do not “stay on pause” to allow new supervisors and managers to enjoy a learning period. Gaining basic skills to address these situations is a pre-requisite for becoming an effective supervisor.

7. Coaching

Day in and day out, routine performance management requires the supervisor and manager to be an effective coach and teacher. The two resources available to invest with others are the supervisor's time and influence. Like any resource investment, a good return is a necessity. To ensure the influence potential is effective during the time available, the new supervisor or manager must acquire effective coaching skills; coaching skills that will have a positive and developmental impact on the variety of direct reports that are being supervised.

A through knowledge of these seven key topics adds up to new managers and supervisors who know what they are supposed to do, how to do it, and why it is important that they do so; taking the right action at the right time. Without this knowledge, both the supervisor and the direct reports lose their effectiveness. Stephen Covey, author of “The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People” gives us a good example of what happens when new supervisors or managers are left to “sink or swim”. These statistics, quoted in his

book, “The 8th Habit”, are taken from a poll of 23,000 employees:

- Only 37 percent said they have a clear understanding of what their organization is trying to achieve and why.
- Only 20 percent were enthusiastic about their team’s and their organization’s goals; said they have a clear link between their tasks and their team’s organizational goals; and, fully trusted the organization they worked for.
- Only 15 percent felt that their organization fully enables them to execute key goals. Covey illustrates the impact of these statistics by using this soccer analogy:

“If a soccer team had these same scores, only 4 of the 11 players on the field would know which goal is theirs. Only 2 of the 11 would care. Only 2 of the 11 would know what position they play and know exactly what they are supposed to do. And all but 2 players would, in some way, be competing against their own team members rather than the opponent.”

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DELIVERY

A variety of means to deliver new supervisory training are available for organizations. The type of training delivery is dependent on time, financial, and facilitator considerations.

Classroom training that allows for face-to-face interaction with a trained facilitator is an option that ensures that key concerns and issues from participants are surfaced and dealt with. This type of training can be done in different time frames, ranging from full day sessions to 2-hour, modular, sessions. The time frame of the training is dictated by issues such as time off the job, travel costs, and availability of trained facilitators.

The availability of technology allows for new supervisory training to be delivered as e-learning. The trade-off is the lack of dialogue and the quality of facilitator responses to questions that a live seminar provides. That said, new advances in technology have made the quality, cost, and timeliness of new supervisory training more attractive to organizations than ever before. Timeliness is the most critical driver, as immediate mastery of the fundamentals is critical to early success and accelerated growth.

Whatever the chosen delivery process, there are some fundamental principles and skill-sets that the method should include. Consider the following:

- Explain "management hazards" very early into the position. There's a specific kind of never-ending hazard that predictably goes hand-in-hand with supervising human beings. Humans do not produce results through consistent,

Boss doesn't equal 'buddy'—but it doesn't mean enemy either.

never changing behaviors and attitudes like a well-built and well-oiled machine. Humans tinker, complain, mess up, don't show up, and at times, defy. Dealing with this takes specific skills and past performance, as an independent contributor, will not make up for the lack of these skills. That said, engaged humans can put to shame the latest technology, and achieve breakthrough performance through intensity, initiative, teamwork and creativity. And, as we've seen, that engagement comes only from the interaction between direct reports and their manager or supervisor.

- Boss doesn't equal 'buddy' – but it doesn't mean enemy either: Preparation for new supervisors and managers must equip them to find the necessary professional and personal balance with their direct reports. Issues regarding tardiness, absenteeism, offending comments and jokes, and employee conflicts—issues they could ignore, laugh at, or even condone in the past—must now be handled as a representative of the organization. Simultaneously, the supervisor and manager must effectively direct and coach the talent of direct reports, taking into consideration their career aspirations, developmental needs, and personal issues. The challenge is great enough without training.
- Perceptions are as important as reality: Effective supervisors and managers give their best efforts to ensure direct reports don't have the perception that they enjoy:
 - The perks and/or power trappings of the job.
 - Holding position power over others—disciplining.
 - Micro-managing direct reports.
 - Being right by virtue of their new position.
 - The access to information and issues that are not offered to others.
 - Using aspects of fear and intimidation to achieve results.

Summary

As senior leadership attempts to drive their values deep into their organization and proclaim the importance of employees, they cannot afford to overlook the importance of initial supervisory and management training.

The cynicism created by placing people into manager and supervisor positions whose behavior is not aligned with espoused organizational values, and who do not skillfully supervise people, is a significant cause of the “values gap” in any organization. Nothing communicates genuine concern for people as much as the appointment of the person an employee reports directly to. Creating a values-driven organization, attractive to talent, is difficult enough without lowering the odds by poor selection and training of new supervisors and managers.

Carefully selecting and appropriately training people chosen for their first manager or supervisor responsibilities, has a much greater impact than just increasing productivity: it honors and demonstrates genuine respect for all employees. As senior leadership attempts to drive their values deep into their organization and proclaim the importance of employees, they cannot afford to put people into positions that impact the performance and quality of work life of their employees, unless they ensure that the people chosen are skilled at supervision and are examples of the espoused values.

Clearly, the unintended consequences of poor or neglected training of new managers and supervisors are detrimental to all three entities—the organization, the employees, and the new supervisor / manager.

About Impact Achievement Group, Inc.

Impact Achievement Group is an assessment, leadership development, and performance management training and consulting company, focused on retention and employee engagement. Through assessments, story-based interactive workshops, simulations, and coaching, we provide managers / supervisors with the skills and tools they need to diagnose, coach, and inspire performance for results. Impact Achievement Group offers organizations of all sizes, a unique opportunity to assess how well managers create an engaging work environment, effectively set expectations, hold employees accountable, and conduct actionable workplace communications.

Impact Achievement Group provides front line supervisor training in leader-led or eLearning formats for transitioning, new or tenured supervisors in their popular series “Supervisory Basics”. This series of 12 modules covers the best practices to accelerate development and establish participants as true leaders, gaining engagement and commitment rather than compliance. For more information:

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