

Successful Front Line Supervision

Some Practical Guidelines



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Introduction

When you accept a position as a front line supervisor, you will learn whether you really want to pursue a career in management. This is one of the toughest jobs in the world. It is also among the most rewarding. Those who report to you will be watching you closely; they will quickly decide whether you have what it takes. Your peers and senior management will be watching too. Like the traffic cop at a busy intersection, everyone is waiting for your signal. Give a clear sign with flair and a smile, and the organizational drivers you serve will go gladly with the flow; gesture sullenly and you will wreck everybody's day.

On the bright side, no manager has a better chance of actually getting something done. You get to orchestrate the implementation of good ideas from start to finish. You can see results right away. As the team leader, you enjoy considerable influence. When a good idea flies, you get the pleasure of being a part of it. When an idea flops, you can pronounce it dead, arrange the funeral and move on to the next idea.

But you can fail in this job too. If the majority of those reporting to you conclude that you are ineffective or mean-spirited, you will have to find another opportunity. Those who choose front line supervision as their life's calling and spend their careers getting better at it are among the most treasured employees in any organization.

This paper offers some caveats that—if understood, embraced and implemented—will increase the likelihood of your success as a front line manager. These are not the only guidelines you will need, but attention to these issues will be critical to your effectiveness. Failure to master these skills will undermine your efforts to succeed.

Come early and stay late

Becoming a front line supervisor offers no opportunity to kick back and take it easy. The uninformed assume that becoming a front line manager is the best way to do less and make more. Nothing could be further from the truth. You will make (some) more money as a manager, and you will do more to earn it.

One of the problems with supervision is that much of what you do is done behind the scenes. Since your employees don't see it, you won't get credit for it. They assume that when you are not there, you are not working. While this is not true, you must find a way to deal with their perceptions. One of the often-quoted maxims of management is, "Perception is reality."

The easiest way to build credibility with your staff is to work harder than anyone else does. That is most organizations'

expectation for managers. Make a point to speak to your staff when you come in after hours. Leave a timed and dated complimentary note on their desks. If you have to work out of the office, give your staff a call letting them know where they can find you. Above all else, respond promptly when paged. Colleagues will tolerate your absence better if they know they can locate you quickly.

Be there

You will have to be off-site some, but excessive absenteeism from your unit will get you into trouble. As a front line supervisor, you should spend at least 80 to 90 percent of your time on the unit. There will be all kinds of reasons why you believe this is an impossible goal, but no excuse is sufficient. You will be urged to attend meetings, join teams, serve on committees, travel to seminars and participate

in all sorts of growth opportunities. You may mistakenly conclude that these distractions are the keys to your success. They are not. Off-site activities are the principal threats to your long-term survival as a front line manager.

Your goal is to make yourself indispensable in your business unit. You cannot achieve this without being there. If you are gone most of the time, the unit will learn to get along without you. Then your colleagues will start to question whether they need you for anything. All of us eventually come to be perceived as either indispensable or dispensable. Being there is not the only key to being viewed as indispensable, but it is the first step.

Be nice

You may want to post these two words on your bathroom mirror. If you long to throw your weight around, indulging in temper fits and tongue-lashing underlings who frustrate and annoy, you will want to put that off until you become a high-ranking executive where such behavior is, unfortunately, more likely to be tolerated. No one looks forward to spending the day with a crabby supervisor who uses his or her position to inflict unnecessary unpleasantness. Front line employees must tolerate and overcome unpleasant customers, the typical aggravations of everyday work life and the demands and frustrations in their personal lives. They do not want to face a nasty supervisor too. They shouldn't have to. You will sometimes need to confront others. You will need to be firm. You will occasionally bring unpleasant news. But you never need to be ugly, and there is no excuse for it. Obviously, some supervisors get away with it, but not as much as they did in the past. In today's environment, people can work anywhere. They don't have to put up with ugly supervisors and they are not going to.

You cannot succeed if you cannot keep an effective team in place. Being nice is a critical requirement for achieving that goal. If you understand how critical civility is to your success, you will guard against the cutting remark, the sarcastic smirk and the exasperated sigh. Such human failings are natural enough, but these lapses and a hundred others like them burn goodwill faster than the space shuttle burns fuel at launch.

Clarify your expectations

You want your colleagues to look around and see what needs to be done, decide what is most important, get on with it, persist in the face of distracting adversity and produce high quality work on time and under budget with a customer service heart. When your team can pull this off by themselves, they won't need you. You can relax.

Supervisors will be needed for the foreseeable future.

Making your expectations clear is not as simple as you think. First, you have to know what they are. All new managers have expectations, but these often first come to light when someone in the shop has failed to measure up to the leader's unstated—and sometimes unconscious—expectations. For this reason, it is helpful to write your expectations down and to discuss them with your colleagues early on. If they agree that your expectations are reasonable, confronting them when they don't measure up will meet with less resistance.

Set limits

Some of your colleagues will want to see how far they can push you. They will arrive late for work and take extended lunches. Personal phone calls will increase. Smokers will light up in the restroom instead of going outside. Dress and grooming will deteriorate. Deadlines will come and go; others will be blamed. The blissful slackers will call off more often and act more insulted when you point it out.

Too many adults continue to behave much as they did as children.

It would be nice if all adolescents finally grew up. Sometimes they do. Sometimes, they just get older. The annoying fact is that too many adults continue to behave much as they did as children. And these people still need limits. The self-disciplined, highly motivated adult does exist in the workforce, but it is unlikely that such people will be the only members of your team. This does not mean that the poorly motivated and less disciplined will not contribute; it just means that you will need to set limits and nudge them when they veer off the path. The sooner you make the limits known, the sooner the adolescent testing will recede. Of course, ongoing unacceptable behavior calls for appropriate disciplinary action.

Manage conflict

Unresolved conflict causes more aggravation in the workplace than any other issue. Many leaders cope with conflict by trying to avoid it. They will fail. Conflict is inevitable. Your colleagues will experience conflict with each other. They will disagree with you. And you will quarrel with your peers and superiors. The question is whether you will manage conflict or whether it will manage you. Conflict is the sludge produced by every team refinery; manage it and conflict can be turned into something useful. Ignore it, and it will gum up the works.

Because managing conflict is such an essential skill for managers, you will want to learn more about how to do it. Reading and attending seminars will help, but timely coaching from a respected mentor while you are actively managing conflict is the most efficient way to learn. Be patient with yourself. No manager does this perfectly. You will become more effective and less distressed as you discover effective strategies and learn to implement them quickly and instinctively before you become angry and resentful.

Over time, you will develop your own approaches for dealing effectively with conflict, but there are some steps you will always include. Ignore your uneasiness and identify the conflict early. Explore the roots of the conflict and resist the temptation to draw conclusions or to take impulsive actions until you have considered all sides. Explore all of the options available, including doing nothing. Decide whether to manage the conflict privately or publicly. Settle on the best option, implement it and then move on. Reflect on, seek consultation about and learn from this uncomfortable development. Don't spend too much time and energy dwelling on what you should have done. You will get plenty of opportunities to improve.

Stay cool

This is easier said than done, but it can be done—and it must be done. Your most serious mistakes as a manager will occur in the context of your emotional arousal. You will feel hurt or angry or insulted or taken for granted. And you will snap at, attack, lie in wait, ruminate or fire off an ill-advised memo. Whatever you have done in the heat of the moment, you will usually come to regret it when you have cooled off and thought about it. It's not the end of the world. We've all done it. But you must do it less frequently over time or you will not thrive as a front line supervisor.

You must pay attention to your own arousal. And you must learn to predict when you are more likely to become aroused. You will not always succeed in remaining cool under fire, but you can and must get better at it. When you realize that you are becoming aroused, recognize the danger and take action. Shutting your mouth is a good start. Just listen. Permitting others to blow off steam is a service you can easily provide. By focusing on your attacker's arousal, you can dampen your own. Clarify the militant's position instead of trying to come up with a counteroffensive remark. Take a deep breath and say, "That's a good point. Let me think about that." When it is clear that the exchange has exceeded the bounds of respect and reason, postpone the discussion until everyone has settled down.

Listen for meaning

Listening is hard. Talking comes more naturally. Actually saying what we mean is another matter. That does not come naturally. You will hear all kinds of talk at work, but you will have to listen hard to figure out what people mean. Often, they won't know it themselves. This means that listening for meaning, that rare jewel in the landscape of conversational gravel, is not only a skill that will enrich your relationships with others; it is a bankable asset in your managerial portfolio.

You have to be quiet to listen effectively. You will be amazed at the number of leaders who do not get this. Then you will want to concentrate on trying to understand how your colleague feels and what he or she means. Personal growth guru Steven Covey exhorts, "Seek first to understand." You will improve your understanding accuracy while convincing your expressive colleague that you are paying attention by asking clarifying questions to make sure that you've got it right. Understanding the other person's position thoroughly does not mean that you necessarily agree with that position, but you will be more successful in persuading him if you have been considerate enough to understand his position first.

Praise publicly and confront privately

Every business book that has ever been written stresses the importance of praise. And every employee survey that has ever been completed documents that everyone wants more of it. So long as your comments are genuine, you can't praise others too much. If you praise others publicly, the impact is multiplied. This is easy. And all of us miss opportunities to do this every day.

Confronting others is not easy. We don't do it nearly enough either. Confronting others should almost always be done in private. The point of confrontation is to promote constructive change. The painful humiliation of a public confrontation will usually kill any chance for that. The personal resentment you will have engendered by your public confrontation of a colleague will shadow you, casting a pall on your efforts to lead and giving those around you the shivers.

Stand and deliver

Leadership is about producing results. Inspiration is important. Communication is critical. Integrity is essential. All of the practical guidelines in this paper will play a role in your success but, in the end, you must get the job done. Failure to get to port will result in a new skipper no matter how skilled you are in open water.

But few things in life are simple, and this caveat comes with an important qualification. Just producing results is not enough. You must deliver on your organizational goals and personal commitments in a way that is consistent with your organizational culture. In most organizations, this means that you must treat others with dignity and respect. Those leaders who intimidate and abuse others in their zeal to produce results will be bitterly disappointed when they finally realize that the method matters too.

Keep your hands dirty

As a front line supervisor, you will not be able to do everything you formerly did and just add your new duties to that list. However, you must continue to spend a good part of your time on the front line. Those people you support will be watching to see whether you consider yourself “too good” to do their work now. They will not expect you to do their jobs; they will expect you to help out on a regular basis.

Identify the front line duty that everyone hates the most and volunteer to do that on a regular basis.

When you understand the importance of keeping your hands dirty, this is not hard to do. Identify the front line duty that everyone hates the most and volunteer to do that on a regular basis. Invite them to call when they need your help, and then drop whatever you are doing and lend a hand. You can relax. Few of your colleagues will take advantage of your availability by failing to pull their own weight. Having the boss working nearby is usually highly motivating.

Become the best at something

The most successful leaders are both generalists and specialists. You will need certain general organizational and interpersonal skills, but these alone will not get you where you want to go. You will also need some skills that set you apart. Specialists, especially those eager to serve others, quickly develop reputations for being “go to” leaders, people everyone thinks about when that thorny crisis or substantial opportunity arises.

Learning organizations need all kinds of experts. Make up your mind to become one of them. Take a look at your strengths and those activities you most enjoy. Pick several of those and get the training and experience you need to become expert at them. Let others in the organization know about

these interests and abilities, and volunteer to provide these services at every opportunity. Find other experts in your “field” who will assist you in becoming even more expert. Before you know it, you will have to graciously decline requests for your services. You will then have arrived as an expert.

Focus on your stars

Your colleagues will start to compete for your attention the first day you show up as a supervisor. And that first day, you will begin making a serious mistake. You will give most of your attention to the squeaking wheels. The whiners, gossips, slackers and insecure troublemakers will consume most of your energy. Like plastic heads popping up randomly in the arcade game, these grouchers will burst into your office, entreating you to bop their issue with the boss’s hammer before they sink back into the muck, wailing about how unresponsive and ineffective you are. Meanwhile, your stars are working quietly toward organizational goals, ignoring the gossip, solving problems and reaching for fire extinguishers instead of gas cans. Don’t forget about them. They are the ones getting the work done.

Drop your star performers a note for no reason at all. Share an encouraging word, telling them specifically how much you appreciate their steady resourcefulness. Make it clear that your failure to speak to them more often is not evidence of your lack of concern or support; it is the result of your recognition that they are self-starters who perform most effectively when others stay out of their way. Let them know that you are at their service. And when they do call, pay attention and respond promptly. By word and deed, make it clear that you understand they are the foundation of the organization’s success.

Seek consultation before making decisions

You probably took this job thinking you would have to make a lot of tough decisions and that your agonizing over them would be lonely and trying. Leaders do have to make some tough decisions but if you find yourself isolated and agonizing, you need to take a close look at your decision-making process. Most of the time, when you examine all of the available options, the best one stands out. Most effective organizational decisions require broad support if they are to mean much; if you are making decisions alone, no matter what you decide, your isolation will likely increase. There are two complaints that people just love to parrot. One is, “I told you so.” The other is, “Don’t blame me. The boss didn’t ask my opinion.”

When you realize that a decision is looming, consult as many thoughtful people as time will allow. Put them on record. Insist that they support the position they are

espousing. You will often discover valid points that you had not considered. A consensus will usually emerge. When that happens, the implementation of the decision will be easier.

When opinions are evenly split, the partisans will be forced to admit that someone has to make the decision and everyone, even the losing faction, is more likely to eventually come around. When you go out on a limb alone, someone will bring a saw and invite the company voyeurs to the spectacle.

Be fair

It is perfectly natural to have favorites. Some of your colleagues will show up on time, greet everyone with unflinching good humor, volunteer to help out when you are in a bind, do good work without whining and actively resist the negativity that grows like kudzu in many organizational environments. Who wouldn't like these folks more? A commitment to fairness means that you must see to it that everyone on the team enjoys the same opportunity to thrive in the workplace. It does not mean that you must be held hostage by the childhood refrain, "That's not fair."

Any perceived special relationship with those you supervise will be viewed with suspicion.

It does mean you must strive to be scrupulously fair in posting schedules, apportioning the workload and in listening to different points of view. It means that you must avoid spending more time with your favorites. Look elsewhere for personal friends. Any perceived special relationship with those you supervise will be viewed with suspicion, commented about and used to undermine your credibility.

Everyone close to you will be very sensitive to your moods. Do your best to maintain a calm, steady temperament in all of your professional exchanges. Your colleagues will interpret even the most subtle changes in tone as evidence that you are partial to others and guarded with them.

Ask permission to persuade

Persuading others to go along with your ideas is a big part of this job. You already realize that barking orders won't go over; it doesn't go over well with you. We are all more likely to support a project if we have been invited to give our opinions, ask questions and mull things over before the project is rolled out. No one likes the hard sell either. For these reasons, you will be more successful in persuading others if you ask for permission to persuade before you launch into your sales pitch.

Admit up front that you would like to sell them on a new idea. Make it your idea. If you begin by saying, "Administration wants us to do this," your opportunity to get their personal buy-in is lost. Tell them you want to try to make a compelling case. Ask them if that is okay. They will usually say, "yes," and they will remember your respectful approach for a long time. Invite questions and answer them as honestly as you can. Your questioners will often raise important issues that you had not considered. If they decline to buy in and you decide that you must go ahead anyway, acknowledge their understandable reluctance and ask them to give the project a chance. This approach works better than the stealth memo no one saw coming.

Be flexible

At any given moment, you must remain flexible while behaving consistently.

Every management position comes with two imperatives: be consistent and be flexible. Total quality management principles demand decreased process variation. Effective customer satisfaction strategies require continuous customization. Improved clinical quality is said to be dependent on the widespread use of practice guidelines. In reality, no patient fits the criteria perfectly. Clinical judgment must be brought to bear if the unique needs of individual patients are to be adequately addressed. How can you embrace both of these dicta at the same time?

One of the great intellectual traps of the western world is "either-or" thinking. You must adopt "both-and" thinking if you expect to be effective in today's complex business environment. If you are interested in a more detailed discussion of this necessity for following conflicting rules at the same time, read more about chaos theory and complex systems. If you don't want to go that far, just remember that, at any given moment, you must remain flexible while behaving consistently. Don't fret, you will get better at it over time.

Invite feedback

Every person around you has opinions about you—how you communicate, whether they like your style and how effective you are. While you have no choice about whether others have opinions about you, you do have a choice about whether you hear about these opinions directly, or whether they will remain in the shadow world, unexposed to the light. Although the opinions of your colleagues may be painful to hear at first, the consequences of not knowing are

worse. If you don't know what they are thinking and saying you can't correct misperceptions, apologize, make amends, decrease annoying or destructive behavior or secretly exult in the realization that, "They like me, they really like me."

When you first ask those you supervise to be straight with you, they will wonder whether you are serious and whether this is a trap. They will worry that they will hurt your feelings or, worse still, that you will hold what they tell you against them. So they will test you. Make sure to pass the early tests. Thank them for being frank. If they are only telling you positive things, they are not being entirely honest. No supervisor is that good. Remind them gently that you also need to hear the negative stuff. When they give you negative feedback—and it is a gift—admit that it stings, but thank them anyway. Ask them to help you work on it by promptly calling relapses to your attention. Then shake it off quickly. Don't pout or react defensively. Refer to the negative feedback publicly and state your intention to do better. It is not easy to welcome and respond appropriately to feedback, but you will be a better supervisor for it.

Identify key indicators

Today's supervisors must demonstrate that they are effective, and they must produce real data to do it. Trying hard is not enough. The fact that most of the people you supervise seem to like you is not enough. Even having your boss like you is not enough. One of the worst things that can be said about a supervisor is, "He/she is a nice person, but..." Take a careful look at your operation and decide what processes or outcomes matter most. Ask your colleagues what they think. If important data do not exist, start collecting data right away. When you have decided what is most important to your unit's success, select a key process that can be improved. Then document that improvement. To flourish as a manager, you must be able to show that your unit is continuously improving. Next, make sure that those people you supervise, your boss and other appropriate organizational leaders see your results on a regular basis. And make sure that they can understand the significance of your information at a glance. Keep it simple.

Make it fun

You have the opportunity and an obligation to set the tone in the workplace.

Leadership is a serious business—too serious sometimes. As you cope with increasing demands, information overload, conflicts about finding a balance between your work and family lives and a host of other stressful factors, don't forget that, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine." (Proverbs 17:22) As a supervisor, you have the opportunity and an obligation to set the tone in the workplace. Make it fun. In the health care industry, some of the fun will have to be kept "off-stage." But that is no reason to miss a chance to laugh, to poke fun at yourself and to thoroughly enjoy those wonderful people who have joined you in this great quest to care for suffering people.

Conclusion

The need for successful front line supervisors has never been greater. The demands are considerable; so is the satisfaction. The hours are long, but you get to make a difference. You are just one step removed from the most important relationships in business—personal interactions with customers. You will come in for some criticism no matter what you do. The thicker skin that will result, like the tough calluses on the cellist's fingers, will allow you to work through demanding organizational passages with relative ease. Watching those you have coached grow, stretch and turn into stars will make the minor aggravations of this job seem insignificant.

These practical guidelines—kneaded and baked by your hands—will help to assure your success as a front line supervisor and supply starter dough to pass on. Every supervisor in the world is looking for fresh insights about ways to approach the challenges of leadership in today's business environment. Bake and share your recipes.

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