

WHAT IS A SUPERVISOR?

by David Hartl

There is a popular myth left over from the days when military command-and-control style of leadership was predominant as the correct form of supervision. Supervisors were supposed to control their subordinates and be held responsible for the actions of their subordinates; subordinates were supposed to do what their supervisors told them to do. Today these ideas about supervision are simplistic to the point of almost being ridiculous, especially when they are applied to an organization composed of highly trained professionals. Yet, these ideas are often still applied by new supervisors simply because no other, more appropriate ideas have been learned from role-model examples or from training experiences. Here is an alternative model.

A supervisor is a leader and a support system for a subordinate's effective performance by adding value to the work of subordinates.

To add value as a **leader**, a supervisor:

1. Provides a positive example in all aspects of performance.
2. Provides clarity about the goals that are to be achieved and a detailed picture or vision of what the situation will look like when the goals have been accomplished well.
3. Facilitates subordinates becoming aligned with and committed to the goals and vision.
4. Helps subordinates to control themselves, to focus their energy on their work, and to feel empowered to use their talents and skills to the maximum possible extent on behalf of the goals and vision.
5. Understands the key relationships among people and between organizational units that must be established and maintained well for effective performance.
6. Establishes the norms and standards by which work is accomplished and relationships are maintained.
7. Actively involves subordinates in planning, problem-solving, decision-making, and communicating about issues that affect them and their work.
8. Secures agreements for action; builds consensus when appropriate.
9. Organizes work to assure coordination of effort (flow charts, schedules, check lists, etc.)
10. Takes the initiative in repairing broken agreements, clarifying communication problems, and learning from mistakes.
11. Rewards and/or holds subordinates accountable for their actions and attitudes.

To add value as a **support system**, a supervisor:

12. Understands and interprets the total system in which the subordinate works.
13. Gives attention to the subordinates by active listening.
14. Provides the maximum possible information.
15. Inspires confidence and trust.
16. Offers context and perspective for their work.
17. Suggests ideas, approaches, and methods.
18. Provides feedback, training, and coaching.
19. Secures required resources.
20. Helps to solve problems and make decisions.
21. Authorizes action when necessary.
22. Buffers negative influences from outside sources.