

Supervising Agricultural Work

Few farmers and ranchers turn biological material and processes into marketable products by themselves. Hired workers, family members, or a combination of both make it happen with their hands and their minds. Whether engaged directly by crop growers, livestock producers, labor contractors, or other service providers, they work under an influence called “supervision”.

Some business operators are not even in contact with the employees they hire to perform production work. The sheer size of their organizations, if not location and language differences between them and production workers, necessitates one or more intermediate levels of management. Supervisory influence for their employees comes from managers closest to the production level.

Employees Who Supervise

Employees who supervise are employer’s agents in managing workers regardless of the name – foreman, crew leader, majordomo, first-line supervisor, etc. From the worker’s point of view, the first-line supervisor is the principal point of contact, often is taken to be the employer, and in some cases has so much autonomy that he or she may as well be. In all their dealings, supervisors affect whether or not capable workers are attracted to the business, whether they stay as long as wanted by the employer, and how well they perform.

Supervisors’ Place and Role

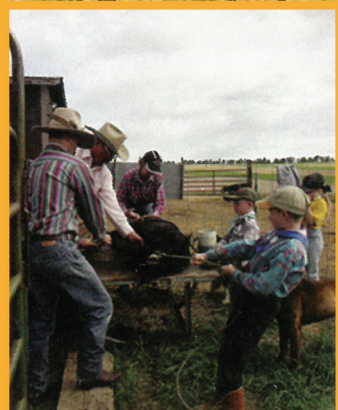
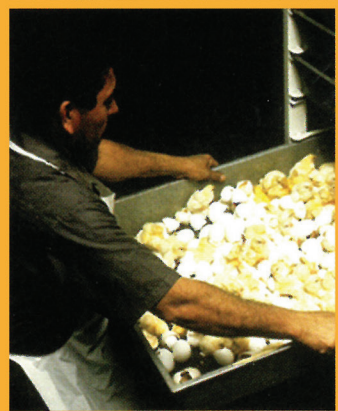
A supervisors’ place and role is, at its most fundamental characteristic, to deal directly and regularly with operational level employees. Supervisors have to communicate with people above and below them in the organization, many of which may have differences

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in rank, frame of reference, language and culture, experiences, and skills. They are the organizational “linchpins” connecting management to employees through their own simultaneous membership in both groups.

Views of Good Supervision

Research shows that employees respond to how well supervisors perform in developing workers and relationships. Better supervisors provide a thorough introduction to the job, teach specific job-related or technical skills, assure employees have specific goals, assign work which allows an employee to use his or her skills, provide opportunities for employees to learn and develop, provide feedback, are willing to discuss pending issues, and represent the employee’s interest and concerns to higher management.

Assigning Work, Delegating, and Getting Things Done

It is the responsibility of the supervisor to achieve results through the use of resources and judgement. They assign work and delegate the tasks at hand because the volume and range of work that has to be done are large. One person cannot do it all, and the mix of work to be performed in



agricultural operations normally requires a variety of abilities that one person does not have. But some supervisors do their businesses a disservice by over-involving themselves in operational work rather than delegating the tasks at hand. A greater degree of delegation is more appropriate for simpler, repetitive tasks. As the capacity of employees grow, duties can be delegated more completely and with more confidence.



Supervisory Decision-Making Styles

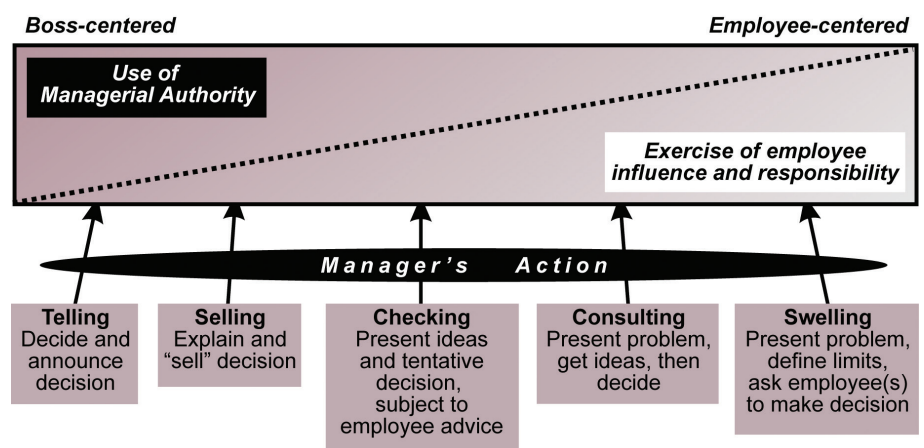
There are various leadership styles supervisors may have as they assign and delegate work:

- (1) **Telling** – the supervisor makes a decision and announces it to the employees. There is no opportunity for them to participate in the decision making process.
- (2) **Selling** – the supervisor makes a decision and explains his or her reasoning to the employees in an effort to gain their acceptance of the decision.
- (3) **Checking** – the supervisor presents a decision as an idea and invites questions and comments from the employees. While employees have opportunities to influence the decision, the supervisor reserves the final decision.
- (4) **Consulting** – the owner or manager presents a problem, asks for ideas and suggestions, and makes the final decision. The decision-maker capitalizes on the employees’ knowledge and experience and expands his or her thought about the issue.
- (5) **Swelling** – the decision-making responsibility is passed to the employees. The owner or upper management identifies an issue, outlines any constraints on solutions, and accepts the decision of the employees. The employees actually diagnose the problem and consider alternative ways of handling it.

The Right Approach

As usual in these matters, different approaches tend to be more practical under different circumstances. The supervisor’s own beliefs and personality can usually predict more or less employee involvement. Some supervisors believe strongly that employees should participate in decisions that affect them, while other supervisors prefer to keep complete control of decision-making. Despite the preferences of the supervisor, circumstances may dictate a greater or lesser degree of employee participation in making decisions.

Sometimes a supervisor’s best move is not to lead but rather get out of the way and let workers do what they know needs to be done in the way they know how to do it. Supervisors want to initiate employee action and maybe modify its direction. They need the power to influence. This takes self-confidence and a good relationship with employees.



Leadership and Power in Supervision

The leadership provided by supervisors may be credited or blamed for operational results. However, the meaning of leadership is often used interchangeably with those of management, supervision, and delegation. Management is oriented to order and control in an existing system, whereas leadership is about recognizing and realizing potential in or out of the system. Managers allocate resources, design policies and procedures, measure outcomes, and solve problems to make operations efficient and consistent. Leaders envision opportunities for personal and organizational gain in the future and find ways of getting people to go after them. In some circumstances – especially in smaller agricultural businesses – people may play managerial and leadership roles at the same time.

Good supervision of employees on farms and ranches is essential to the successes of the businesses. Good supervisors are able to lead their workers, identify issues, and delegate tasks and responsibilities in order to meet the needs of the operation.

AgHelpWanted provides greater details about many issues of employing workers on farms and ranchers. Specifically, Chapter 4 describes many aspects of successfully supervising agricultural workers. The materials identify the roles of a supervisor, why delegate and techniques for doing so, involving employees in decision-making, and leadership and power in supervision. People interested in the topic of supervision will discover many resources at www.AgHelpWanted.org. They may also order the book “Ag Help Wanted – Guidelines for Managing Agricultural Labor” at the web site or emailing info@aghelpwanted.org.

Ag Help Wanted is a full-color, 250-page agricultural labor handbook that presents principles, practical examples, legal considerations, and offers additional references in six chapters: Roles and Responsibilities of an Agricultural Employer; Organizational Planning; Staffing the Farm Business; Supervising Agricultural Work; Managing Employee Performance, and Communication and Problem Solving. The text is designed for use in a variety of ways. It can serve as a reference to help cope with problems that arise, a source of ideas for improving management policies or practices, and a base for systematic study of human resource management in agriculture.

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