

Supervising Agricultural Work

Few farmers or 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.”

Many business operators are not even in touch with the employees they hire to perform production work. 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, commonly known as first-line supervisors.

Employees Who Supervise

Foremen, crew leaders, majordomos, first-line supervisors – by whatever name – are employers’ agents in managing workers. They are involved in most aspects of personnel management, by explicit delegation or a drop in the lap, and they often have roles in other functions, such as record keeping and grower-contractor communication. They are also employer agents from a legal perspective, so growers are liable for penalties that result from any labor law violations committed by supervisors while working for them.

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 many firms has so much autonomy that he may as well be. How the crew foreman translates grower goals into worker tasks and how he interprets employee suggestions or complaints to a general manager affect operational results and the people involved. Even seemingly simple things, such as how the foreman relays a request for a day off or a revision in the employee health insurance plan, can color the basic relationship between growers and workers. In all their dealings, supervisors affect whether or not capable workers are attracted to the business, whether they stay as long as wanted, and how well they perform.



The supervisor is often seen as the employer.

Ideally, interaction between supervisors and workers results in understanding, cooperation, and productive behavior. Some foremen, however, elicit confusion, frustration, antagonism, waste, sabotage, and other unwanted outcomes.



Learning on the Job after Promotion

Both her boss and her coworkers thought of Juanita Alvarez as a fine horticulturist. It was an exciting day when she was promoted to the foremanship of her work group. Juanita had decided that if she ever received an opportunity like this, her approach would be different from those she had experienced. She would treat her employees with a great deal more respect and even be friendly with them.

Initially this style appeared to be working well for her. Within a few months, however, the group's productivity started to slide. When the nursery owner mentioned this to her, she became concerned about being demoted and losing the position she had worked so hard to obtain. She decided to talk with another supervisor, Mary, about the situation. Mary had a reputation of being very tough on her staff but getting results. She advised Juanita to 'take a hard line' and 'get rid of the trouble makers.' Mary said it would be the only way to earn enduring respect.

Reluctantly, Juanita started taking a very forceful approach. While tension increased in her work group, productivity did not.

Juanita felt that Paula, a senior member of her group, was causing most of the problems. She confronted Paula privately during a break, and their encounter quickly deteriorated into a heated shouting match. Paula accused Juanita of always picking on her. Juanita angrily replied that if she would just do what she was told and wasn't such a disturbance, she wouldn't think she was being picked on. Eventually, Paula went home crying.

Paula felt hurt, and her husband was infuriated when she told him the story. He called his sister, an attorney. Within a week, the nursery manager had a formal harassment complaint on his desk.

Supervisors' Place and Role

Like other managers, supervisors are charged with getting things done through others. While foremen contribute to all five classical management functions (Chapter 1), their role is distinguished from that of upper-level managers in a few ways, stemming from their place in the organization. Supervisors are people in the middle, not seen the same by those on either side, which adds a special