

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

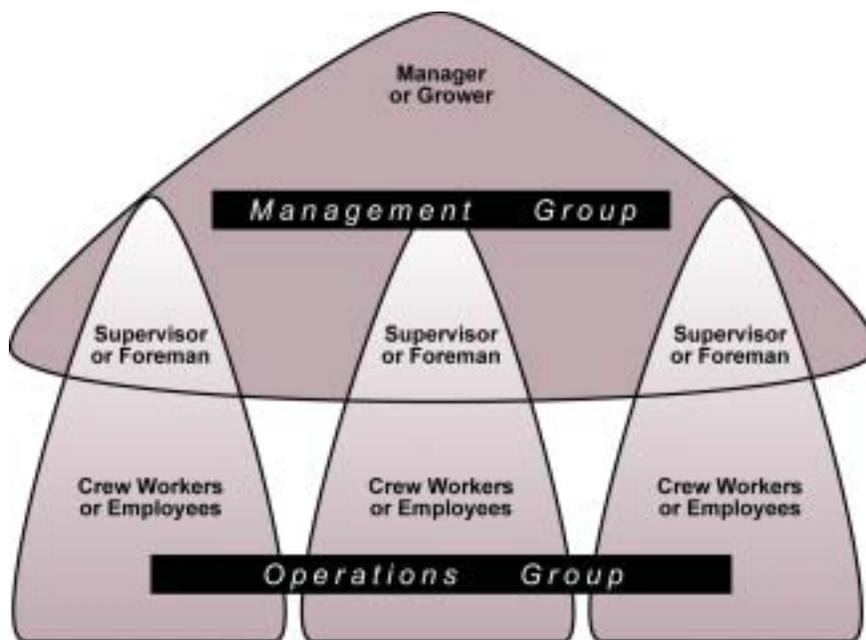
Like other managers, supervisors are charged with getting things done through others. While foremen contribute to all five classical management functions (Chapter 1), their role is distinguished from that of upper-level managers in a few ways, stemming from their place in the organization. Supervisors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

stress. They are organizational “linchpins,” connecting management groups to employee groups through their own simultaneous membership in both (Figure 4.1).

The most fundamental characteristic of the supervisor’s role is that it deals directly and regularly with operational level employees, the people who actually produce what customers and clients receive. Supervisors have to communicate with people above and below them in the organization, people with differences in rank, frame of reference, and, frequently, language and cultural background. They play a critical role in representing workers and the grower or labor contractor to one another. Foremen have to not only understand the people in these two groups, but also help them achieve mutual understanding. In agriculture, as much or more than in any other industry, these individuals are expected to bridge gaps and reconcile basic differences in perspective.

With such closeness to where the action is, a supervisory position entails much more leading and controlling than the other three classic functions – planning, organizing, and staffing. Foremen generally have a shorter time frame to work within than higher level managers do. They periodically make a greater number of decisions, though each of less individual importance, than their bosses do.

Figure 4.1. Supervisors as linchpins.





A grower can be relatively deliberate in making many big decisions such as whether to sell half the ranch business to a long-lost brother, whether to move operations to Idaho, how to comply with requirements for pesticide safety training, where to go for a loan, and at what price to buy the neighbor's herd. A licensed FLC can take some time deciding whether to work in olives next year, which counties to expand into, and when to replace the bus. Many more of a crew leader or majordomo's decisions are reactions to situations with which he or she must cope immediately. When a valve won't close, a planter is plugged, a cow is in distress, two loaders are throwing cartons at each other, half the crew doesn't show up, people are getting dizzy in a new field, or a driver is drunk on his machine, something has to be done quickly.

First-line supervisors' reactions, as well as their planned activities, commonly entail doing some operational level work themselves. Few supervisory positions are strictly limited to managerial work. Staying in close touch with production tasks and lending a hand when needed serve the ranch business and employees in various ways. Yet many supervisors and other managers do their businesses great disservice by over-involving themselves in operational work. Keeping some distance from routine tasks is not the same as never walking around to see what is going on and to talk with employees.

Lonely in the Middle

Successful performance as a foreman begins with the prospective incumbent's and agricultural employer's understanding of what the job entails. For all the heat around it, the first-line supervisory role is not well illuminated. Many farm managers and workers do not appreciate the complexities of the position. Written descriptions of supervisory (and other) jobs in agriculture appear to be used more now than in years past, but they still are not the norm.

Analysis of the job of crew foreman in several California field harvest operations has produced a composite description that includes no fewer than 38 identifiable duties grouped within seven major functions (a variant of the classical five). Twenty-three of the 38 duties refer to the foreman dealing chiefly with people, six with data (i.e., payroll, production, administrative records and information), and nine with things (i.e., tools, equipment, and supplies).