

Good Management for Better Supervision

What makes for good supervisory performance? A well-qualified person as supervisor helps, but ultimately it is good management that makes good supervision. Supervisory positions exist in an agricultural organization because the next higher level of managers, or the owner, cannot do it all. First-line supervisors relieve the grower of most leading and controlling responsibilities. They work directly with the employees who produce what the farm or ranch sells. By no means does that mean that farm and ranch operators can afford to avoid being managers of people. To the contrary, it is absolutely crucial that they be good supervisors themselves. Given both the importance and difficulty of first-line supervisory jobs, their incumbents desperately need to have good supervision.

Managers often unwittingly place first-line supervisors in tough situations. Faced with increasing demands on his time, the production manager at Rosa Orchards chose three young men to fill a new level of foreman jobs. Though well-intentioned, he set the stage for crew discontent by passing over a couple of older workers who had been unofficially carrying some supervisory responsibilities. He didn't explain what the new jobs would mean to everybody, and assumed that the new supervisors could function with little guidance or training. Ed subsequently failed to investigate the facts or feelings underlying a letter of complaint sent to his own boss.

Listed in the box below are some common shortcomings in the management of supervisors. It is not difficult to turn this list of problem causes around into a set of suggestions. What can farm managers do to promote more effective supervisory performance? They can start by specifying the responsibilities, major duties, and basic role of the supervisor's job within the organization. Whether or not expressed in a written description, a clear and shared conception of the job is fundamental to intelligent selection and management of its occupant.



Common shortcomings in management of supervisors

- Unclear definition of the job and performance expectations
- Selection based on nonrelevant or unknown criteria
- Disregard for the “informal organization”
- Lack of orientation, training, or emotional preparation
- Insufficient ongoing support through policies, decision backing, information, and recognition

Promotion can stress relationships and self-concept. Supervisors need more than positional power.

Wise managers can and should establish knowledge, ability, and skill qualifications closely related to the job content. They inform both potential candidates and other employees of these criteria and attempt to select new supervisors who meet them. Past performance in an operational job or total length of service on the ranch may be reasonably included among selection criteria. It is unfortunate, however, when they are considered to the exclusion of other attributes that correspond more closely with ability to perform as a supervisor.

Often complicating the selection/promotion decision, its announcement and the subsequent exercise of leadership by a new supervisor is an “informal organization” of workers that the manager ignores at his own peril. Growers who are aware of the informal groups and leaders in their operations are obviously more likely to avoid ending up with first-line supervisors whose power is only positional. Not that selection to foremanship should be a popularity contest, but appointing somebody whose influence will not be accepted is tantamount to spitting against a very stiff wind, and its result may be even less palatable.

Orientation and training, even provided without the assistance of informal leaders, can be a very high-yield investment in supervisory effectiveness. Many supervisors enter their positions with only vague notions of what they really entail, no less how to perform them. Written job descriptions can be an advantage during or after the selection process to help make the role more vivid. Understanding the supervisory role, though, is often not even half of the challenge. Most new supervisors promoted from within face major changes in not only on-the-job demands but also social relationships and self concept. The manager of a large citrus operation used to help his new supervisors to make these difficult adjustments gradually through a six-month development program that included off-site training courses, as well as an on-the-job apprenticeship.

Even well chosen supervisors who know their jobs need ongoing support from management. Carefully developed policies make many supervisory actions easier to render and defend. Disciplinary action policies are perhaps the most common aids to farm supervision, but guidelines for other types of day-to-day decisions also can be quite useful. An astute cotton farmer noticed that his shop foreman’s life was being made miserable by the mechanics’ persistent dissatisfaction with their work assignments, no matter who got what to do. He devised a simple system of rules that turned the assignment of incoming repair jobs into an objective procedure that saved the foreman from any further charges of arbitrariness or favoritism.

Not all decisions can or ought to be removed from a supervisor’s discretion. When a supervisor does make a decision, especially a tough one, he can become subject to questions about his morality, rationality, and sanity. While reversals at higher levels are sometimes necessary, the manager who tries to stand by reasonable supervisory decisions builds his staff’s confidence and his own leadership power.

The owner of a vegetable firm who includes his crew foremen in regular management meetings where all phases of the business are discussed, provides a good example of continuously developing supervisors on-the-job. Like many effective operators, he also uses other means to keep his supervisory staff as informed as possible about business conditions, plans, and ongoing operating results. He believes the more information they have to work with, the more intelligently they can work.

In conclusion, first-line supervision is extremely important in agricultural operations. Though they are members of management, supervisors deal mostly with working-level employees. They face constant and complex challenges of reconciling the very different frames of reference of those above and below them in the organization. As leaders, they often have to exert influence, and to be effective, they need power beyond that which stems purely from their positions.

Among the many factors that can contribute to supervisory success, the quality of higher level management is probably most consequential. The decisions and actions of farm managers go a long way to determining what supervisors are encouraged, inclined, and able to do for their businesses. Because good supervisors are more “made” than “born,” the effectiveness of agricultural supervisors is inseparable from that of the people who manage them.



Supporting Teamwork

It is axiomatic that a group of people working together can accomplish more than the sum of what each could do individually. Teamwork is necessary and common in agricultural operations at management, as well as production, levels. Relatively stable work crews and other units defined by the organizational structure may themselves function as a team or include multiple teams. Seasonal changes and the nature of farm and ranch production make it necessary to form teams for one-time or short-term jobs. In virtually all teams, the quality of member relationships affects the work product.

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