

Does the exercise of each type of power have the same effect on workers? While immediate acceptance of influence might be achieved through any of the five, people tend to be more committed to and feel better about following a leader who operates from personal power. Sheer use of positional power, particularly coercive, often produces immediate compliance along with long-term resentment and a determination to get even or resist supervisory influence in the future.

What type of power, then, is best for supervisors to have? Not Plato, not Aristotle, not Shakespeare, nor even Gardner or Goleman could say it any more concisely than Al Capone did. “You can get a lot more from people with a kind word and a gun than a kind word alone.” What this notorious theorist was advising was not really to carry weapons in the workplace but rather to combine types of power if at all possible. The greater the number of power bases a supervisor can work from, the greater his or her capacity to perform effectively in the role.

The likable, knowledgeable individual with some control over valuable rewards and punishments within a clear, respected organizational hierarchy is well equipped to lead. But woe is the first-line supervisor armed with only a job title. Supervisors simply have to recognize this fact, and higher level managers do even more so. Managerial actions affect the amount and types of power that supervisors have.



Managing Supervisory Work

Veteran supervisors face trials, but a person who has been working mainly at the operational level has to cope with the additional challenge of adjusting to a supervisory role. Self concept, relationships with former coworkers, and the use of time all have to change. The selection, guidance, and management support of first-line supervisors, particularly new ones, have expansive impacts.

The selection, guidance, and management support of first-line supervisors have expansive impacts.



The New Supervisors

Part I

About a year ago, three new supervisory positions were created within Rosa Orchards. Rosa always has been known as an attractive place to work. It offers good pay compared to local norms and has experienced relatively little employee turnover. The ranch had rapidly expanded to include 40 regular employees working on 620 developed acres, and Production Manager Ed Bradshaw was finding himself ever shorter of time. For a couple of years, he had been able to cope by giving directions through two of the older workers who seemed to be respected by the others. Ed realized, however, that this arrangement would not be workable for long, so he asked for and got approval to officially create the new jobs.

Ed had been very impressed by five exceptional crew members. They always showed up on time, performed their assigned tasks quickly and completely, displayed a positive attitude, and, most importantly, seemed to have what the manager called "vision." All were at least workably fluent in English, in their mid- to late-twenties, and family men. Ed thought that each would be able and motivated to grow with the company as it continued to expand. It was difficult to choose from among them, but he finally selected Lupe Ruiz, Geraldo Montana, and Jaime Martinez to be the new supervisors. After informing each at the ranch office, Ed went out and announced his decision to the other employees during their lunch break in the orchard.

What was the nature of the organizational change made by Ed Bradshaw, and why did he make it? A new level in the official hierarchy was created. He had over-extended himself as the ranch and its staff grew. He needed the first-line supervisors to carry some of the overall management responsibility and his initial response (before creating the new positions) to the increasing demands was to rely on two of the older workers, apparently informal leaders among the crew members, as communication links to the others. This pattern is very common among founders and managers of growing organizations.

Did he choose the new "official" supervisors well? Selection processes in general can be the source of a myriad of personnel problems in the short- and long-term (Chapter 3), and this particular one appeared more emotional than systematic. Ed seemed to have an idea of what attributes he was selecting for, but he made his choices privately, without others even reviewing the criteria or how potential promotees stacked up in terms of them. Perhaps he mentally placed a "halo" on the five he considered simply because of their English fluency or efficiency as workers. There is no evidence that he really chose for attributes that were tied to good performance as supervisors.

Ed compounded his trouble by neglecting the informal organization. Within the Rosa workforce, age was probably an important determinant of status. Ed himself had taken advantage of and lent legitimacy to the informal hierarchy by communicating through two of the older workers. Awarding the official leadership positions to younger men created status incongruence within the workforce.

Did it matter how the promotion of Lupe Ruiz, Geraldo Montana, and Jaime Martinez was announced to the other crew members? It seems sort of back-handed for such an important and possibly sensitive action. We do not know all the details, but perhaps both the creation of the new supervisory level and the choice of the three promotees were dropped in an inappropriately casual way. Ed might have at least done it on company time and preferably explained the reasons behind his decisions, also indicating what changes, if any, they implied for others. Holding a quiet preview discussion with the two senior people through whom he had been giving directions would have been a nice touch.

Part II

Lupe, Geraldo, and Jaime were excited with their new jobs and grateful to Ed for his confidence in them. They wanted to justify it. All three started arriving about 20 minutes early in the mornings to check equipment and field conditions. They tried to be friendly and fair with the crew members, their former coworkers. Despite their efforts, the general manager of Rosa received an anonymous letter of complaint from "Several Loyal Employees." It charged that the new supervisors were abusing their power in the field and giving to their own relatives (on staff) most of the desirable machine operation assignments, which paid 25 cents per hour above the standard rate.

The general manager announced that he would not act on such a sweeping charge by nameless employees. He invited the letter writers to contact him and arrange a meeting at which specifics could be discussed. He said that confidentiality would prevail and that there would be no possibility of reprisal, whatever the merits of the allegation. No one acted on the offer, and no further complaints have been registered since. Ed, however, was not willing to leave the matter at that. He met with Lupe, Geraldo, and Jaime to discuss the complaint. The supervisors assured Ed that they were giving machine operation and overtime opportunities that arose strictly to the best workers available. No favoritism was involved, they said.

Some of the good natured needling that had long spiced work in the vineyard began to erupt into horseplay and even fighting. After a few such outbreaks in his area, Jaime decided to nip this action in the bud. The next time he saw any such fooling around, he fired the worker who started it on the spot. This crew member had not been involved in any of the previous incidents, but Jaime thought that an example had to be set. The worker claimed that the dismissal was unfair and subsequently sued to get his job back. The orchard work has gone fairly well over this past year, although four workers have often been out with the flu. Three others have developed back trouble. Two of them have continued to work as long as they could be spared the more strenuous tasks (e.g., clearing rocks for orchard expansion on a hillside), but one has filed for worker's compensation insurance. The new supervisors have been able to personally fix most equipment problems and other things that have gone wrong. They have met no overt resistance from their crews. Still they express discomfort with parts of the supervisory role. Each says that it is hard to give orders and make work assignments. Ed thinks that they could use some supervisory training.



Is there a problem now at Rosa? Yes, and the supervisors are its most obvious bearers. Ed and the GM are also in some trouble, whether or not they see it. Root issues include credibility, morale, adequacy of skills, and status incongruence within the workforce. The anonymous letter, supervisory discomfort, and back problems are some of the smoke, and they probably indicate a fire of demoralization and discontent.

Even after how he chose the new supervisors and made the announcement, Ed could have done things to make the supervisors' jobs and lives easier. For starters, he could have established policies that would gently tie the supervisors' hands on task assignment decisions. If there were rules to guide, if not fully specify, the allocation of the easier, dirtier, and higher paying jobs, the supervisors would be less subject to charges of favoritism. Permanently assigning some recurring tasks to individuals or sub-crews was another possibility. Surely supervisory training immediately after promotion may have helped, but a supportive organizational structure can be more powerful and more immediately effective.

Did the GM respond effectively to the anonymous letter? If effectiveness is shutting off overt expressions of dissatisfaction, perhaps he handled it well. He appeared to fail, however, to appreciate the information that he received. While it is not clear whether the supervisors were abusing their positions, it is clear that the letter's authors were upset about something. The manager should have attempted to find out what the problem really was because most probably it will come up and bite again.

A good first step for the GM would be to take up the matter with Ed. Beyond that, an attempt to subtly and respectfully address questions with employees may clear the air considerably. Do crew members have ideas about how to make Rosa a better place to work? Who did write the letter—the two “demoted” senior employees, the two younger candidates, a group of disgruntled workers, one complainer, or someone else? Why did they bypass both the supervisors and the production manager?

Is supervisory training the answer? Training for supervisors may be useful, but emphasis would be better devoted to other aspects of organizational structure and process that managers largely control. Important messages to convey to workers are not only that they can be heard but also that Ed and the GM welcome information from them. Given all that has happened, however, workers cannot be expected to communicate freely or extend their best efforts in the field unless managers take deliberate, sustained action to earn their trust.