

## **Successful Supervisor Part 54**

### **Plotting Your Future**

**by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

Regardless of current position, every professional owns his or her future. Some people leave it up to fate or “the breaks” to figure out their pathway in life. That tendency is evident in all occupations, including supervisors.

In this article, I will explore why only a few supervisors take command of their forward path and offer some ideas that may be helpful at changing the pattern for those supervisors who want to move up.

#### ***Sometimes the role of Supervisor is a terminal role***

One typical pathway to arrive in a position of supervisor is up from the ranks. This person has a great deal of process knowledge and has demonstrated dedication to the organization over a long period of time. In addition, this individual has displayed some form of natural leadership characteristics. People within the crews seem to listen to what this person says and usually do what is suggested. This individual will often perform as a backfill for another supervisor who is out. When conditions call for someone to be elevated to the supervisor position due to a retirement or termination, this individual is the natural and easy choice for the job.

Without a professional degree, she is not likely to be elevated into levels above supervisor and may not even want to move up further. She might be content to lead crews at the operational level.

In other cases, a person is brought into the organization with a professional degree with the understanding that gaining knowledge and seasoning as a leader will lead to higher positions in the organization. Sometimes these professionals can stay in a supervisory role for many years before moving on. Let's examine some situations where a worthy person might languish in the first line supervisor position far longer than necessary and why they do not take more control of their path forward. I will suggest some antidotes.

#### **1. Becoming a Forgotten Soul**

People who operate at the shop floor level daily tend to get caught up in the activities that are necessary to run the operation well. They become preoccupied with things like attendance issues or the struggle to have all people follow the stated rules (such as

length of breaks). As they work to survive on a daily basis and put off seeking longer term goals, their exposure at the higher levels is less, and they may be taken for granted or forgotten by higher management.

Often the performance goal line for supervisors can be moved from year to year. If a supervisor performs well during the current year, then the goals for next year may be increased in a never ending cycle of continuous improvement and higher expectations. In that environment it is hard to step back and plot a pathway to a better existence, so some supervisors remain in the position longer than they really want to.

If you are in this position, the antidote is to put a priority on your long term goals and take the time to figure out where you wish to go next in your career. This planning should include your supervisor and some concrete positive steps to take in the direction so you are ready to move up when a slot opens up. Try to include one or two development courses a year that will prepare you to advance.

## **2. Getting too embroiled in the turmoil**

The role of supervisor is extremely challenging, even in the best organizations. Hourly people test the supervisor's ability to maintain control on a daily basis. It is important to establish a pleasant work environment where the workers are both empowered and engaged in the job, but inevitably the supervisor needs to play the role of enforcer in order to maintain control.

This tension between the ideal state and reality creates a kind of turmoil where the supervisor is compelled to be unpopular at times. In fact, it is a mistake to have an objective to be popular all of the time. It means the supervisor is weak and lets the employees abuse the rules to make life easier.

On the flip side, some supervisors revert to a command and control atmosphere where the workers will find ways to subvert the rules in ways that cannot easily be detected. Some workers will become openly hostile when the supervisor tries to gain control of their behaviors. She will often spend inordinate amounts of time trying to deal with a few troublemakers while the more docile workers watch with amusement.

If you can relate to these symptoms, the antidote is to be both hard and soft at the same time. Show people you care about them personally, but stress that the organization requires that people follow the rules, and that you intend to have that happen.

In the crucible of trying to make the best decisions today, it is easy to lose sight of the longer term objective instead of continually seeking to leverage a positive reputation for performance into a pathway to the future. The cure is to keep the future in mind while striving to make excellent decisions today.

### **3. Getting a bad reputation**

The role of a supervisor is like a juggling contest trying to balance all the needs of the people who report to her while simultaneously turning in impressive performance numbers. Many supervisors fail to get the right balance and either appear to lose control or have sabotage crop up. Upper management sees only the result of the chaos and may not be sympathetic to the daily plight of the supervisor.

The antidote here is to manage your reputation with upper management. That is a tall order because of the balancing act previously mentioned. Since your reputation is mostly what people say about you when you are not present, it is necessary to be an expert at reading body language. You can often learn more by watching your superiors than by what they tell you. Learn to be alert to signals that something has soured your reputation and find out what it is. Often the damage can be mitigated if you are aware of it.

### **4. Operating Outside of the Supervisor's control**

There are a number of situations where the path to higher positions appears to be blocked, at least temporarily. Sometimes there is not much a supervisor can do but continue to shine in her role and be patient. The politics of moving up in the organization can include things that are not easily understood, such as diversity issues or other forces that can impact organizational choices.

### **5. Failing to plan**

Every person should have a plan for his or her life. I believe in setting aside a day each year to assess where I am and plot my own future. This simple practice has made a huge difference in my life, and it will do the same for anyone who expends the energy to do it. The magic lies in setting aside the time to actually do the exercise. If you want to see a template for how it works for me, here is a link to my [Renewal Article](#).

No matter your situation, take the time to invest in your own future and do not be content to just do your best in your current role. We all need to grow and become more valuable to our organization. That is a formula for getting ahead in life.

### **Bottom line: Focus on the Next Step**

The point of this article is to encourage supervisors to not get so focused on surviving the vicissitudes of current business that you neglect your path forward. Use the ideas above to keep an eye on your future every day. Do everything with a purpose to enhance your path toward your next step in your career.

*This is a part in a series of articles on "Successful Supervision." The entire series can be viewed on [www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision](http://www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision) or on this blog.*

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