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## COMMON SENSE MAINTENANCE FRONT LINE SUPERVISOR DEVELOPMENT AND UTILIZATION—PART I

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## INTRODUCTION

It is a generally accepted fact that most Front Line Supervisors (FLS) come up “from the ranks” of the hourly staff. This can be rewarding to the individual promoted as recognition for knowledge, experience, and dedicated service is gratifying. However, most companies provide neither training nor any type of preparation or guidance for the person they have now placed in a supervisory role. In essence, the new FLS is dumped at the deep end of the pool, sometimes in lead boots, and left to sink or swim. They are forced to either determine how to best do the job on their own, or go down trying. Many seek refuge in administrative work where they do not have to go in the field and confront the people who they worked side-by-side with before they were promoted. This causes ineffective management of the craftspeople, FLS burnout, or a high rate of turnover in this job function. By and large, some degree of all of these circumstances usually occurs.

This short article will examine the shortcomings that may result when a craftsman is promoted without proper training and support and what should be done to assist the novice supervisor to be successful. Certain specific and enlightened actions assist a productive transition from hourly craft to management, and becoming an effective FLS.

## DON'T...

The person who has been promoted should not be placed in a position to manage their former co-workers. While placing the new FLS with a crew and area they are intimately familiar with may seem like the round peg in the round hole, there are disadvantages to doing this.

The prevailing attitude among their former colleagues, now subordinates, will almost invariably follow the thought process of “one of us is in charge, and now we can really do what we want.” This is understandable. These craftspeople may have worked together for a number of years, and may hunt, fish, or bowl together, or may even be related. Seeing one of their own promoted, they may naturally assume life will be easier, and their new boss will cut them copious amounts of slack on a daily basis. This is a disaster waiting to happen, and should be avoided if at all possible. The new FLS will be forced to decide between long-forged friendships, and excelling at the job they were promoted to accomplish. They may do neither one well, and subsequently struggle to fulfill the role and antagonize their crew. The FLS shouldn't be placed in a position which may be setting them up for failure from day one.

## DO...

Occasionally, the person being advanced has served as the step-up/fill-in supervisor when the primary supervisor is absent.

They may therefore have a basic understanding of the role and be marginally cognizant of the position's full requirements. However, not performing the duties on a regular basis, they may be unaware of many of the nuances and demands.

If at all possible, supervisory training should be provided to the individual before they assume their new role. Forward-thinking companies maintain a skills matrix for the tradespeople and require a predetermined amount of computer-based and/or classroom training each year. This is to maintain and increase their knowledge and proficiency levels. It should be no different for supervisors and other managers. They too need to continually hone their skills and add to their toolbox of knowledge.

Numerous training programs are available in “Supervision 101.” Send the new FLS to one or more of these training sessions. Just because an individual is an outstanding and skilled craftsman does not necessarily directly equate to being a good FLS. Each craftsman served an apprenticeship to attain their skill level and journeyman classification. Too often, companies fail to provide training for their supervisory staff. They assume everyone can learn on the fly and are unable to fathom why the new FLS is struggling to take hold in their new function. Too many times training programs which were successful and effective in the past have been shelved to cut costs.

Each site should have already established and clearly defined the expectations and behaviors of the FLS, as well as the role and responsibilities of the position. How the position interfaces with site productivity, safety, work execution, equipment reliability, and other critical factors should be demonstrated and fully understood by the FLS. Management should be transparent regarding how these requirements should be fulfilled on a daily basis, the tools that will be used, and the yardstick by which they will be measured. The FLS should be cognizant of “what good looks like.”

It could, and should, also be arranged for the new FLS to shadow a successful, experienced supervisor to help them “learn the ropes” of being an effective supervisor. They probably also need to learn company-specific processes and procedures that go with the FLS job, and the experienced FLS can help in setting the expectations of the position before they officially take on their assignment.

## GOING FORWARD

Let's assume you have put into practice some or all the recommendations listed above. After the new FLS has completed their training, they should be assigned a short-term mentor/coach from the existing supervisory staff. This person can spend time with them in the field, answer questions, and provide on-going practical direction and guidance to assist the new FLS in their new

responsibilities. Coaching must be formal, regular, and aligned to the training content in order to embed the desired behaviors in the FLS. Ideally, this would be the senior supervisor they shadowed during their training.

There will still be a learning-curve for the newly minted FLS, and questions and situations will invariably arise where they will need assistance. There needs to be a designated individual that guides the new FLS through the rocks and shoals they will encounter.

Once the FLS has settled into their function, management cannot simply let the poor soul fend for themselves. On-going training and coaching can, and will, provide a broader base for the FLS to perform their daily activities. Superintendents need to audit the FLS while in the field, observing and providing feedback as necessary, to reinforce appropriate behaviors and correct inappropriate behaviors in the short term.

As noted above, maintain a skills matrix for the FLSs. Each will have their inherent strengths and weaknesses. Determine who requires additional training in which area. Thought must be given to who will provide the training and coaching. The coach must be respected, seen as a role model, and fully understand why the behaviors are necessary and what results are the ultimate goal.

Annual external training and seminars should take place as well. Attendees should be selected based on where they are in their learning curve and what role they will play in the future. Are they being sent to reinforce past training or to learn to become a better coach? There must always be an ROI when someone is sent to training.

Obtaining input from the FLSs will assist in pinpointing the areas where training is desired, and pare down the spectrum to where the greatest return of the training budget can be obtained.

Continual training of all staff should be a normal course of events. Everyone needs to continuously sharpen their skills and improve their expertise. The training should be geared towards closing gaps in existing knowledge, learning new functions or processes that will expand skill sets, or augmenting current skill levels. The ROI of ongoing training is a facility that is agile and profitable, with a staff, management and hourly, that is knowledgeable with up-to-date practices and adept at quickly addressing and correcting difficulties and challenges. The training can potentially pay for itself from one or two incidents that would have normally generated lost production or required outside assistance from contractors.

In part 2 of this series, we will examine the difficulties supervisors encounter while attempting to perform their daily functions and assignments, and circumstances that get in the way. ■

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