

# Empowerment and Accountability of Front Line Supervisors Improves Construction Performance

*Presented by*



*For several years' productivity improvements in the building industry have been focused on getting craft personnel to work more efficiently. This paper presents an innovative approach to increase productivity and efficiency focusing on the success of front line supervision.*

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### **Overview**

The building industry labors under a well-deserved perception: It lags other industries in improving performance. As managers, we've tried various methods to increase productivity and efficiency. Time-motion studies. Questionnaires. Sampling. Suggestion boxes. They're all proven tools in motivating employees to raise their performance, regardless of the building phase.

But what else can we do to inspire a *performance breakthrough*?

This article demonstrates that by empowering front line supervisors, we can help them empower their subordinates to improve their work product. How?

- By building policies and procedures within the organization that recognize the responsibility and accountability of supervisors to motivate others.
- By giving them the tools — information, measurements and rewards — to get the job done in new and different ways.

But the real key lies in changing the culture of the organization so that upper management becomes the driving force for front line supervisors — and their teams — to succeed.

### **Historical Perspective**

Construction projects are, by their very nature, dynamic environments, full of many variables. One day it's necessary to spray water to keep down the dust; the next day it's necessary to pump water to control the mud.

Determining performance amidst such constant change is challenging at best. But the situation is more tenuous because our industry doesn't measure its front-line supervisors nearly as much as it tracks schedules, costs or safety. Yet these are the very people who have direct contact with hands-on personnel. Because they can influence performance and efficiency daily, their role should be encouraged, tracked, measured and rewarded.

But how? Begin by retooling attitudes of the past. Gone are the days when a project boss can run his(her) site by simply invoking "It's my way or the highway" or "We've always done it that way" or even "If it's not broke, don't fix it." Gone also are the days when the solution to improving productivity and efficiency is simply pushing people to work harder. Managers have learned that putting the muscle to individuals can cause a backlash. Rather than raising

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productivity, it leads to quality problems and safety issues, not to mention absenteeism and low morale.

Today, savvy upper managers build on traditional productivity measures by motivating their front line supervisors to take responsibility for project outcomes. To do so, they create an environment in which supervisors are both informed and armed with:

- Written descriptions of their responsibilities
- Access to planned-versus-actual data specific to their team's tasks
- Clear and measurable goals for success
- Frequent feedback on performance
- Continued training and rewards for their efforts —and those of the team

Communication is key. Regardless of their titles, most supervisors want to do a good job. Yet they often ask questions for which they should know the answers. During my 18-year stint as a construction project manager, I was constantly amazed at the time I spent responding to my supervisors' queries: "When is 'X' scheduled to be finished?" "What is the equipment budget for 'Y'?" But I came to realize that as managers, we were often not effective in closing the information loop. Our front line supervisors sometimes didn't know or understand what was expected of them, even though we thought we had the items covered in the weekly schedule or budget report.

We have every fiscal reason to make things clear since supervisors routinely have direct weekly responsibility over thousands of dollars in labor, equipment and project material costs. So motivating subordinates to work smarter, not just harder, can be a positive step in improving the bottom-line.

### **Finding the holes; targeting changes**

Moving forward starts with an honest evaluation of the organization for ways to improve it. Your corporate soul-searching will no doubt lead to changes for both upper managers and front line supervisors. But you want to begin by asking people at every managerial level some trigger questions to identify what might be missing.

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1. Do we have an effective communication tool to share information with our front line supervisors? Is that sharing done in a timely fashion?
2. Are we getting the right information concerning cost, scheduling, materials and effort hours to supervisors to help them with day-to-day decision-making?
3. Do we clearly define the expectations of our front line supervisors? Do they understand those expectations?
4. Do we have a program in place to measure accountability of our front line supervisors?
5. Do our front line supervisors understand the fundamentals of cost management?
6. Does our organization have an effective change management system in place? Have our front line supervisors been instructed in the “do’s” and “don’ts” of that system?
7. Do we have a process in place to identify where front line supervisors need training?
8. Do we allow, even encourage, our front line supervisors to implement innovative ideas?
9. Do we have a mechanism or forum in place to implement those ideas in other projects or areas? Does your organization have a best practice data source?
10. Do we have a program for recognizing and rewarding success?

Answering “no” to any of the above questions should raise red flags since they cover the components necessary for breakthrough success.

### **Information Empowers**

To create any win, you want to ensure that each supervisor has accurate and timely information — along with clearly defined goals — to effectively manage subordinates. Every supervisor should understand his(her) specific activities — and the labor and cost implications of them. As managers, we tend to keep detailed cost information close to the vest. But such data can be useful in making day-to-day work decisions, not to mention, improving

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efficiency and performance. The important thing is to package goals in relation to the factors most important to the organization: *Cost, schedule, safety, quality and attitude.*

For example, your schedule should spell out each task clearly so that front line supervisors know their assigned responsibilities and can't fall back on that old canard, "that's not mine to do." The budget for each task needs to include both effort-hours and labor-dollars, details which can be very valuable to supervisors in making daily decisions.

Once you've established each supervisor's responsibilities, the next step is to identify targets that will define this individual's success. That can be done in various ways. You may define success, for instance, as:

- Completing an activity before the actual due date
- Working activities in their planned sequence
- Achieving an actual progress percentage that's greater than the plan

In looking at "budget vs. actual effort-hours and costs," you also may define success as:

- Keeping construction equipment rental at 10 percent under budget
- Keeping actual effort-hours at five percent below budget
- Managing change so that cost of it is recovered with no impact to schedule.

But merely outlining budgetary and labor goals for supervisors is only part of the success equation. Every definition has to be backed-up by a management team that's both supportive and continuously involved. If we're to see positive results, we need to encourage supervisors to discuss schedules and budgets with subordinates and, as a team, look for innovative ways to save time and money.

### **Quality and safety also an issue**

Building projects, by their dynamic nature, involve other responsibilities — namely quality and safety — that deserve similar attention. As managers, we should define specific goals for these areas too. Of course, each supervisor may have different requirements, depending on his(her) trade, but it's still important

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to establish guidelines. Quality success, for instance, may be defined as:

- Installation meets specification.
- Rework is less than one percent
- Zero punchlist items remain at the completion of an activity.

As for safety, it is, and should be, one of the highest priorities for builders today. Injuries can devastate a project in both money and morale, not to mention taint the reputation of the company. Supervisors and their subordinates make the best safety proponents on any construction project. You can empower them by defining aggressive requirements involving everyone. Safety success might include:

- Four safety audits performed each week by every front line supervisor
- Periodic examination by project and upper managers of safety practices being implemented
- Random interviews with subordinates by managers to determine the perceived attitudes toward safety of their supervisors

### **Attitude Is Key**

Schedule, cost, quality and safety are fairly easy to define and, if managed professionally, will net a satisfactory project. But there's another "softer," more elusive issue that can have a profound impact on the project too. Attitude, in my opinion, is everything. It involves managers, supervisors *and* subordinates. It permeates all aspects of the project and site: In planning the work, in delivering a quality product, in training for safety, and in interacting with both internal and external clients. As managers, we usually know the type of attitude we want to see in others. The trick is to convey that message to our supervisors. Attitude success might include:

- Cooperation – readily helps subordinates and other front line supervisors
- Communication – readily and accurately shares information with subordinates, peers and managers
- Teamwork – readily implements team and morale building activities or functions.

But how do we actually *measure* attitude since it involves perception? It's really quite easy once you've defined what's

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acceptable and what's not acceptable. You simply score each person, based on the collective observations of managers, peers and subordinates. I have to admit, measuring attitude can yield a few surprises. On one or two occasions, my perception of a particular supervisor has been considerably different than that of their subordinates.

But the underlying message is that by talking to others you gain valuable insight. For instance, some of the most experienced supervisors can be some of the worst communicators. Yet by learning that, you can provide specific training so that a supervisor not only improves his(her) skills but takes one step closer to success.

### **Accountability Is Essential**

As a manager, you'll probably have other objectives or targets important to your organization that you'll want to measure. After defining all the elements of a supervisor's success, you need to periodically monitor his(her) performance. Gathering, reporting and analyzing data is critical in measuring an individual's progress. But you'll need to determine how, and with what frequency, that information is collected and shared.

There are any number of measuring sticks to score a person's performance. It can be as simple as checking a "yes" or "no," indicating achievement of a specific target or marking a scale from one to five – or zero to 100 percent.

Whatever the gauge, by formally grading supervisory performance, managers can pinpoint accurately what and where attention is needed. For example, a supervisor who routinely scores low on safety may be putting others at high risk for an incident. Or a supervisor who seems to have a substantial rework rate could be experiencing outside influences – such as design or material deficiencies – that negatively affect performance. Low scores will trigger management to act.

Periodically reviewing and adjusting each supervisor's goals, as predicated by the project, has to be part of the process. Objectives may be different, for instance, during the design-versus-construction phases. A word to the wise: Invite front line supervisors to be part of the goal-setting and evaluation process. You'll have instant feedback on how the program is playing – and a perfect backdrop for getting supervisors to buy-in.

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What's important is to focus attention where it's needed with laser-type accuracy instead of a shotgun approach.

### **Recognize and Reward**

Managers are sometimes quick to discipline, but slow to recognize. But the suggestions enumerated here should help you identify those supervisors who are excelling within your organization and, more important, merit your praise.

Supervisors who are successful in meeting their goals deserve to be rewarded, even if it's just a kind word. Too often, however, I think we ignore the obvious: Recognition, given in front of peers, goes a long way in lifting a team's spirit and improving morale. Upper management should also encourage successful supervisors to acknowledge subordinates who've contributed positively to the team effort. Rewards don't need to be elaborate or expensive. Gift certificates or a catered lunch will suffice. The idea is just to motivate others by acknowledging "job well done."

You might be surprised at the spin-offs. Recognition will foster an innovative environment where camaraderie and even friendly competition helps everyone meet overall objectives.

The bottomline? Organizations that help supervisors be successful – and recognize them in the process – can expect measurable increases in performance and efficiency.