

TRAINING WITHIN INDUSTRY BULLETIN SERIES

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KEEPING SUPERVISORS INFORMED ABOUT THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES

This bulletin outlines a simple plan for giving training to supervisors in the knowledge of their responsibilities. It is prepared especially for those managers who have the point of view of “anticipation and prevention” rather than “discovery and correction.” It is for those who look beneath the surface for the solution of their supervisory problems.

It is important that every supervisor know not only the technical phases of his job but also just what his responsibilities are. Since these responsibilities change, it is necessary that the plan for keeping supervisors informed of their responsibilities shall operate continuously.

No plant management can hold a supervisor responsible for things about which he has not been informed. This plan is only an outline for a method of approach within which any company can develop its own program in detail according to its own problems and needs.

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RESPONSIBILITY FOR DEVELOPING SUPERVISORS

The one dominant influence in each supervisor's life, just as in the case of each employee, is his boss. Therefore, the best supervisory training in the world is having a “good boss.” The most successful supervisory development program is one sponsored and directed by top management.

This plan enables each officer and supervisor to keep his subordinate supervisors informed in an organized manner. Without some organized plan this job is easily crowded out of the picture by the rush and pressure of production duties, and the supervisor acquires information about his responsibilities in a haphazard manner through costly experience.

It is essential that the program start at the top—the president, or at least the general manager, of a given plant.

Basic Features of the Plan

1. Acceptance by top management of the responsibility for adequately informing supervisors of their responsibilities
2. Regular conferences at each organizational level, sponsored and directed by line organization supervisors
3. Frank discussion, free consultation, and appropriate action concerning company policies and individual responsibilities, at each level
4. The appointment of staff training men to direct the routine of these meetings, see that arrangements are made, notices sent out, agenda prepared, and reports issued

SETTING UP THE PROGRAM

The initial meeting should be called by the chief officer of the company or plant and attended by his immediate staff and other key people who are regularly associated with them.

The object of this meeting is to discuss the need for keeping supervisors informed about their responsibilities and the details of a proposed program for accomplishing this objective. The head of the company or plant should be the active chairman of the meeting. A training man should assist the head of the company or plant in laying out the agenda for the meeting and should attend the meeting to lend assistance in planning the later program.

Naturally there are certain problems outside the ability of the supervisors to do anything about, but practically every company problem—plant extension, equipment, finance, quality control, shipping schedules, costs, labor relations, etc.—should be touched upon to determine at the very outset the scope of the responsibilities to be carried out at each successive layer of supervision. Succeeding conferences on lower levels should each determine definitely just what responsibilities are to be carried out by each supervisor on each level of supervision.

The extent to which it appears that information about responsibilities is lacking on the various levels of supervision will determine the character of the program both as to agenda and as to schedule of meetings.

1. Periodic conferences for supervisors on all levels

Each chief supervisor should meet regularly with those supervisors who report to him. Experience will determine the length and frequency of these meetings but usually one and one-half hours every two to four weeks will be found satisfactory. The best meetings are those for which the agenda is brief and the conference itself is kept informal. The make-up of the conferences is to be determined according to each company's organizational structure. The criterion is to have in each meeting only those supervisors who have comparable responsibilities.

As soon after the close of the first meeting as convenient, each member of that conference should call a conference of those supervisors reporting to him and carry on the discussion. This process should continue on down the organization until the first-line supervisors have been reached.

This pattern is of vital importance. It includes regularity of meetings, topics to be discussed, promptness of sending out reports, promptness of following up unfinished business, and many other items vital to steering the effectiveness of the program as a whole.

The head of each group should always be present unless unavoidably detained and should never fall into the habit of leaving the conduct of the meeting to a substitute because of casual reasons. A conference which is not worthy of the attention of the supervisory chief is not worth holding at all.

2. Conference leadership

The executive or supervisor in charge of each group at each level must be chairman of his own conference. If he is a trained conference leader he may lead the meeting himself. If not, he may turn the leadership of the discussion over to a conference leader or he may open and close the meeting and tactfully participate in the discussion but depend upon the conference leader to keep the discussion on the topics and on schedule.

Some supervisors inexperienced in leading conferences will quickly become familiar with the procedure and gradually take more detailed responsibility. Others will never attain competence in using the conference method, and still others may leave the conduct of the meeting to a conference leader just so they can participate in the discussion and otherwise aid the program as a member of the group. Whatever procedure is used, there must never be any doubt that the supervisor in charge is responsible for the conference and is personally going to see that it is a success—that everyone who attends feels it was worth his time.

3. Agenda of current supervisory problems

The responsibility for determining the agenda rests with the conference conducted by the top executive. The company training director, meeting with groups at all levels, maintains the thread of continuity and sees that action is not delayed and that proper reports are rendered. In some plants, particularly in large companies, there may be a full-time “conference secretary.”

The first step in planning a series of agendas is to find out what policies have already been set down in writing. This applies particularly to employment, training, hours, wages, transfers, promotions, seniority, layoff, and discharges. Plans include explanations of insurance, hospitalization, sick benefits, vacations, savings, stock purchase, and incentives; procedures including methods of wage payment, routine for reporting accidents, and method of arranging transfers; and rules, covering a wide field, which are often not too sharply defined.

Quite often there is nothing in writing on a supervisor’s responsibility as to scheduling, cost, maintenance, quality, waste, or interdepartmental relationships. Each supervisor should also have knowledge of legal restrictions and regulations which effect plant operations. There will be written material on union contracts and often on a grievance procedure.

Each conference, from the top down, places on its agenda two kinds of topics:

- Those which concern its own particular group only.
- Those which should be brought to the attention of other groups.

Many conclusions arrived at must be passed on to groups of lower levels for execution but many of the conclusions and some of the opinions should be passed up to groups on higher levels for their information. One of the major results of this program of conferences is to help break down the natural insulation between an executive and the entire structure below him.

Many suggestions and opinions, if tactfully presented, will be welcomed by the higher officers and supervisors of a plant or company.

4. Subject-matter for supervisory conferences

The top conference group usually develops enough topics for discussion by groups at lower levels to keep the schedule overcrowded. The problem generally is how to eliminate topics for discussion rather than how to suggest them. Additional topics also flow upward.

However, for those who may not know how to get started, the following suggestions may be helpful:

Open the meeting by presenting one or two topics which have been handed down by the next higher group.

If the company has no written industrial relations policy, each group may develop initial drafts of such policies and present them to the higher groups.

If the company has well defined written industrial relations policies, each group may periodically review them in light of current requirements and recommend changes to the higher group.

Recent government rulings, labor agreements, and training programs affecting responsibilities of supervisors may be discussed.

Questions of customer service, quality, maintenance, inspection, store-keeping, and shipping, often involve misunderstanding as to just which supervisor is responsible for what.

The most effective method yet discovered by which areas of responsibility and authority can be clearly determined, overlapping of functions eliminated, internal jealousies dissipated, and procedures clarified and simplified is through group analysis of the responsibilities of the individual departments, divisions, supervisors, and getting group agreement to conclusions. Frequently such agreements clear up difficulties between departments of different levels. There is scarcely an activity that is not materially changed and improved when subjected to the group analysis of the various executives and supervisors affected.

All supervisors need up-to-date information concerning the company, its products, and its technical processes. This is easily accomplished by inviting company specialists to attend group meetings and lead discussions in their respective fields of activity.

5. Importance of first-line supervisors

Having general matters start with the chief executive group and flow down through the various conferences sometimes requires special help when such matters reach first-line supervisors. If there are two or three work shifts, it may be impossible for the foreman to meet with all his supervisors. Perhaps it is not possible to remove all supervisors from the floor at one time. In such cases the foreman or general foreman can delegate to a conference leader the responsibility of conducting some of the conferences for him.

It is important to remember that information tends to lose its clarity and significance as it passes from one level to another. A report from the first-line supervisors telling their understanding of the information should be asked for when there is any possibility of misunderstanding.