

TRAINING WITHIN INDUSTRY BULLETIN SERIES

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IMPROVING SUPERVISORS' KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORK

There is no substitute for a thorough knowledge of the very work that the supervisor directs. The technical nature of the work is constantly changing, as products and processes change. Naturally, work that goes by the same name differs from company to company. It differs between departments.

Everyone admits that a supervisor in a rolling mill must know the steel business, but that is not enough—he has to know it as it applies to his own plant, in his own department. A supervisor in a coal mine must know coal mining, and he has to know his own plant's problems and methods of coal mining. A supervisor in an accounting department must know his organization's accounting practice, not just standard accounting practice found in textbooks. It is squarely up to each plant management to see that its own supervisors have this specific knowledge of their work. Naturally the same holds true for every business and every department, covering every feature of technical or operating work throughout the Nation.

Many companies have had thoroughly capable supervisors fail because they lacked the proper knowledge of their work. This need not be. All that is necessary in a given plant is for someone to have a plan and see that it is followed.

That “someone” in each company is the manager, or some other person to whom management delegates this responsibility. Following are a few suggestions for developing a “plan.” Naturally, each company should develop its own plan according to its own problems and the needs of its own supervisors.

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WHERE PLANNING IS NEEDED

Here are a few of the more common circumstances which point to supervisors who need to know more about their work:

1. New Supervisors

Many new supervisors are being appointed to replace men who go into the army or who are transferred or retired. Perhaps the new supervisors know all the operations and have the required technical background—and perhaps they don't. Sometimes the new supervisor is familiar only with those operations on which he worked. Likely he has only passing familiarity with the much larger group of operations for which he is now responsible.

2. Experienced Supervisors on New Jobs

Many times “old hands” are placed on new jobs in new or converted plants or in different departments. Often it is assumed that years of service alone mean adequate technical knowledge even though the experience is limited to one or two operations.

3. Changed Jobs

Countless thousands of jobs have changed because of the necessity of making new products out of new materials on new equipment. Usually the newer the product or materials or equipment, the less standard the operations. Often these are the very jobs that change again and again, as perhaps metallurgical changes in the materials are developed and as new operating procedures are found necessary.

SOME WAYS OF GIVING SUPERVISORS KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORK

1. Instruction from Superior

If, for example, a foreman is newly appointed to his job, sometimes the general foreman can, over a period of time, give him a thorough knowledge of the work. This is an ideal arrangement, for everyone does and should look to his boss for guidance and direction in just about everything connected with his job.

Often, however, instruction from a superior takes the form of guidance on day-to-day procedures only. The superior may not have the time—or may think he hasn't—to instruct the new supervisor in many details. Hence, leaving the training job solely up to every superior isn't an assurance that it will be done. How much the “boss” can do—(or will do!)—should be carefully considered. However, it is sometimes surprising how much “the boss” can help when he is required to do so by the “big boss.”

2. Instruction by Outside Specialists

Outside specialists can help to a marked degree. A common example of such is the help provided by most machinery and equipment companies. Most of these companies will arrange for one of their representatives to come to the plant when the equipment is new and stay for a period ranging from a few days to several weeks. Full advantage should be taken of all such offers.

In other cases a specialist from the ordinance department or from the original contractor company will spend time with a supervisor on the job. Specialists from laboratories or observers from the field of battle provide two more kinds of help. Every company can readily assemble the list of such outside specialists who might be used.

The training itself should be done right on the job. There is no better method than having a specialist spend a great deal of time right in the shop discussing with the supervisor the detailed problems of the job.

3. Planned Work Experience

Often a supervisor—new or experienced—may need to be instructed in performing several manual jobs in order that he can direct them well. This instruction is to give him familiarity with the operations themselves. Of course, there is much more to know about a job than the details of mechanical operation. But where these skills should be learned, there is no substitute for “learning them by doing them.”

Many a supervisor feels he is “stepping down” when he runs a machine for a few days or a few weeks. He feels he has lost his status in the eyes of his workers because the workers can perform the operations better than the boss. Any supervisor who wants to succeed, however, must accept this risk. Actually he runs no risk at all if he is the “right kind of guy.” Workers admire the boss who is willing to “get his hands dirty” in order to “know what he is talking about.” Doing this very thing has “made” many a successful supervisor.

4. Experience in Another Plant

Sometimes a supervisor can be sent to another plant for a short time to pick up some technical knowledge or operating procedures. Thousands of plants have cooperated with each other on this basis already. Even peacetime competitors in many cases have helped “make a man” for each other in wartime.

5. Job Breakdowns

A sure-fire way of getting thoroughly informed as to operations or procedures is to have supervisors make an accurate, written outline of each operation or process. No particular form of breakdown is necessary. However, any supervisor who has used either the Job Instruction or Job Methods form of breakdown would certainly understand thoroughly those operations he “broke down.”

Much time and money has been wasted by supervisors who just observed and talked about a manufacturing process and “thought they knew” all about it. Companies have been known to send supervisors to observe the same process four or five times before they caught all the operating details. If these same supervisors had been required to make a complete breakdown of the process, they would have caught all the details and tricks of the trade the first time.

Making breakdowns at first may appear to be something of a task. However, they become easier to make with practice. Their use saves so much time, effort, and costly mistakes that the making of them is justified a hundred times over.

6. Manuals

The use of manuals is common, and they have many values. Manuals are available from a variety of sources, or may be written in the plant. However, not even the most complete manual should ever be regarded as the sole answer to a supervisor’s need for technical and operating information.

7. Help from Engineers

Help from one or more of the company’s engineering groups is often the most valuable that a supervisor can receive. Some engineers take a “high-brow” attitude toward the “poor shop man.” On the other hand, some shop supervisors consider themselves the only “practical” men. They look down on the engineers. Getting the two groups together will produce outstanding results.

Engineers can help in several ways. The best way of all is for an engineer to spend time in the shop with the operating supervisor right on the job. An engineer can also hold a series of meetings with plant supervisors where he presents technical knowledge or answers questions.

Getting appropriate understanding that the engineers are expected to help plant supervisors is essential. Top management must see to this. Engineers will find that this is not a “one-way” process. They, too, get extremely valuable help from shop supervisors.

8. Plant Conferences

In some companies there are regular staff meetings to pass along information at each executive and supervisory level. In other companies, these are occasional. In still others, there are special meetings about company products and manufacturing methods. The question of “how many meetings” is a vital one. The only answer is to hold as many meetings as are necessary to be sure that every supervisor knows every single thing that is necessary for him to know in order that he do a top-grade job.

9. Supplementary Instruction

Extremely valuable instruction may be received from the engineering colleges and universities as well as the vocational schools. If the plant is not near one of these institutions, very often an extension program, can be especially arranged. If a company desires certain special courses to be developed, and the number of persons justifies such a course, these schools will often develop such special programs. This supplementary instruction is of value to the plant only if the program meets the supervisors' specific needs.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR DEVELOPING SUPERVISORS

Acquiring knowledge about supervisory work should not be left to the supervisor's initiative. There are those who argue that leaving it "up to each person" is one of the tests of initiative, one of the ways of showing who is worthy of promotion.

Unfortunately things do not always work out this way. Often the thoroughly able supervisor will not take the initiative; he may think of it, he may not know what he needs, he may not know what is available. Sometimes he feels that such action might be improper or that he would be regarded by his fellows as selfish and "forward." Conversely, a supervisor with limited abilities but with devastating ambition may voluntarily seek more information about the technical side of his work, be disappointed if he does not get recognition—and resent it.

Improving supervisors' technical knowledge should be planned just as carefully as any other company program. The management should let it be known that every supervisor is expected to keep abreast of the technical demands of his job and that a plan is to be followed in accomplishing this end. Someone in the company should be designated to counsel with each executive and supervisor concerning the needs of each of his subordinates. He should also help each executive and supervisor plan for the development of each subordinate. In larger companies this person is usually the training director. In smaller companies it is often a production executive who gives part of his time to this work.

The procedure between the training director and a line executive is simple. Together they set down what a subordinate now knows about the job. Then they set down what he needs to know. Next they decide which of the above suggestions—or others—should be used. The line executive is then ready to call in the subordinate, go over the plan with him, and see that the subordinate gets the required knowledge.