

Memo

To: Supervisors
From: Mark Kennedy, Chief Human Resources Officer
Date: January 30, 2004
Re: **HR Perspective: The role of a Supervisor**

The attached article appeared recently in the newsletter for the HR Association of Greater Detroit. The article is a letter from a father to his two sons explaining the changes they will experience as they move from employee to supervisor/manager. I think you'll find the article an interesting summary of the key challenges each of us face as supervisors and managers.

I hope you'll read the attached but if you don't have time for the whole article – here's a quick summary.

The father points out “five clear and dramatic differences experienced by new supervisors trying to make the transition from individual contributor to leader of others” as follows:

1. Change in accountability – as an employee, we're only responsible for our own performance. As supervisors, we're accountable for the entire team's results but we might not have much control over how those results are achieved.
2. Change in agency – as an employee, we can speak as an individual. As a supervisor, we are agents for the organization, in our case, we are “the College.” What we say and do (if done improperly), can establish bad precedent for others and can subject the organization to litigation.
3. The responsibility of leadership: “A leader is a person with a vision and the ability to inspire others to make the journey....If the supervisor can't improve on current performance, there's no need for the role—most work teams can maintain the status quo quite well on their own, often more cost effectively than a group with an ineffective leader for a supervisor.”
4. The responsibility of developing others
5. Change in expectation: “You'll be expected to put in extra hours planning work, preparing reports, attending meetings...you'll struggle with an issue even away from work....However, the group that places the heaviest burdens upon you will be your employees. They expect you to treat them fairly and with dignity and respect. They expect you to give them feedback and to recognize and reward their achievements....”

Hope you find this information helpful as you think about your role as a leader here at Mott.

HR Perspective: The Role of a Supervisor What changes Will it Bring? By Brian R. Lee

In the past six months, two of my sons have been placed in supervisory or management roles. In more than 22 years of human resources and management, I've seen many supervisors and managers fail and become miserable because the role of supervising others was not what they thought it would be, it was not a role which they were well-suited, they were willing to pay the price to become a successful supervisor, or some combination of the above.

In an effort to help my sons and anyone else who's interested avoid failure and misery as a supervisor, I have written the following letter:

Dear Son,

I know you'd like me to congratulate you on your recent promotion. I am proud of the accomplishments that brought you this apparent honor, but my hesitation to congratulate you comes from my understanding that you have a long way to go before you determine whether this "promotion" is a good thing.

I've seen many supervisors struggle, and ultimately fail, in this highly coveted role. I know that we learn through our struggles, but struggle that causes pain for the new supervisor and the employees who depend on him or her for leadership benefits no one.

I've identified five clear and dramatic differences experienced by new supervisors trying to make the transition from individual contributor to leader of others. They are changes in accountability, agency, leadership, development of others, and expectations of others.

The most dramatic, and often disappointing change is in accountability. As an individual contributor, you were accountable for your own performance results and sometimes for your contribution to the team's results. And, you controlled the efforts that produced those results.

Now, as a supervisor, you are accountable for your entire team's results, but you may not have much control over how those results are achieved. Regardless of how hard you try you alone cannot determine the outcome of your team's efforts. At times, you'll get credit for your team's success when you had little to do with it, and at other times, you'll be blamed for mistakes you didn't make and for poor results achieved in spite of your best efforts.

Many new supervisors find this absolute accountability without absolute control frustrating and unfair. It's often both, but it's part of the territory.

The second piece of turf that comes with being a supervisor is a change in agency. As an individual contributor, you speak for yourself. You are free to share your opinions and suggestions to anyone willing to listen.

For example, a supervisor praises an employee by saying, "You're such a valuable employee, there will always be a job for you here." Later, when the employee is terminated for violating a work rule or in a reduction-in-force, that comment is interpreted in court as a change made in the normal employment relationship. As an agent of the company that supervisor made a legally binding commitment to that employee for unconditional, lifelong employment.

The agency burden may also manifest itself in interpersonal relationships. As an agent of the company, any comment you make to an employee of a sexual nature, about the person's appearance, or expressing interest in associating outside of work could subject the company to expensive penalties for sexual harassment. Even if the

other party is interested and a relationship ensues, any action affecting that employee may be viewed as reward or penalty for the relationship with you, and could subject the company litigation.

In addition, any decision you make could set a precedent for other supervisors in similar circumstances. You may feel that a policy is inhibiting you're ability to give a break to a valued employee, so you may be tempted to ignore the policy "just this once." Once you do, your action becomes the precedent for any other supervisor in your organization faced with similar situation. In fact, any time another supervisor uses the policy you ignored to discipline or terminate an employee, your action will be used as the benchmark for fairness and equity of the other action. Supervisors can thus inadvertently set a precedent that supersedes company policy without the knowledge of the senior managers and HR personnel. When it's discovered that you've changed or invalidated published company policy, your tenure as supervisor or as an employee may be in question.

Many new supervisors, who've dreamed of unlimited power, find these constraints distressing. If you decide you can accept the accountability for results over which you have limited control, and you accept the constraints that law and policy put on your authority, you must still accept the mantle of leadership to become a true supervisor.

A leader is a person with a vision and the ability to inspire others to make the journey. As a supervisor, you're expected to make your group more productive and profitable than they currently are. If the supervisor can't improve on current performance, there's no need for the role-most work teams can maintain the status quo quite well on their own, often more cost effectively than a group with an ineffective leader for a supervisor.

We already know you'll be accountable for your team's results and that you must stay within the bounds of law and policy in all of your actions. What could possibly make leadership more difficult? The answer lies in getting the employees to share your vision and to follow you to the "promise land." You'll quickly learn that you cannot drive employees to go anywhere. Autocratic supervisors rarely achieve the sustainable and continuous progress needed for success-and are soon replaced by those who can lead, or by more cost-effective work team structures that don't require someone to give orders.

You must learn to educate employees on business issues they can affect and show them why it's in their best interest to do so.

You must remove barriers to progress and provide measurements to help employees see how far they've come and how much farther they have to go.

Another key supervisory responsibility is to develop others. As an individual contributor, you were responsible for developing your own skills and, from time to time, sharing your expertise with a new employee. As a supervisor, however, you're responsible for the continuous development of the skills and capabilities of your team members-without control over learners. You must help your employees see the value of improving their skills and help them choose to do so.

This process obviously requires patience, creativity and salesmanship. Every one learns differently; one size does not fit all. You must be perceptive enough to discover what each employee does best and steer him or her in the direction most likely to bring continued success.

Many new supervisors find these challenges confusing and overwhelming. The same person who took great pride in being able to coax ever-greater performance out of an aging machine, may find it extremely difficult to encourage continuously greater results out of human beings.

Possibly the broadest range of changes for new supervisors comes in what is expected of them. As an individual contributor, you were expected to run a machine or produce a certain amount of product or process a certain number of invoices during your shift. When the shift was over, you were free to leave, even if it meant leaving a job partially finished. After all, the job would still be waiting for you when you returned.

As a supervisor, you can't walk away so easily. You'll often be expected to put in extra hours planning work, preparing reports, or attending meetings. You'll find it hard to leave until you've prepared for the next day, and

you'll struggle with an issue even away from work. You'll find being a good supervisor is more about who you are than about what you do.

As an employee, your supervisor had certain expectations for you and your coworkers. If you didn't meet those expectations, you heard about it. As a supervisor, you still have manager and peers who expect you to do your job and contribute to success of the team. However, the group that places the heaviest burdens upon you will be your employees.

They expect you to treat them fairly and with dignity and respect. They expect you to give them feedback and to recognize and reward their achievements. They expect you to communicate with them constantly, sharing information on team and company performance and on future strategy and direction. They expect you to represent the company to them and to represent them and their needs to the company. In short, they expect you to make their work lives meaningful, enjoyable, and profitable.

If they don't think you're trying to do all of these things, they may not follow your lead and your instructions. They'll wait for you to be replaced by someone who will meet their expectations. They've seen supervisors come and go, and they know they can outlast you too. They're probably right.

At this point, you may wonder why anyone would ever want to be a supervisor. But believe me, the satisfaction of watching employees grow and move on to more responsible positions, of seeing a team reach for and achieve higher goals than ever before, or of building an organization that continues to succeed long after you move on can be worth the trials and challenges you face.

So at this point, son, I'd rather wait to see how you cope with your transition from employee to supervisor before I congratulate you on your "promotion." Remember, though, that I will be proud of you and your accomplishments regardless of your role when you accomplish them. Whether as a supervisor or employee, outstanding performance and contribution to team success are worthy of pride and acknowledgement.