

q-u-a-l-i-t-y: realities for supervisors

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Supervisors are constantly bombarded with pressures to get jobs done quicker and with fewer defects. Persons who have been around for some time have experienced management by objectives, total quality management, continuous quality improvement, reengineering and self-directed teams. All of these concepts focus on quality and the importance of attaining results. Yet, successful supervisors still must match equipment and human resources in productive ways, often with relatively little freedom to change the “system.”

Capable supervisors do not lose sight of objectives and strategies to attain them. To get things accomplished, several questions merit thought: In the workplace, who must benefit? As a supervisor, why am I important? How can I positively influence subordinates? While these questions may appear to be quite simple, the answers can make a difference between success and failure. Let's consider each of these questions.

1. In the workplace, who must benefit?

Self interest characterizes human behavior and influences actions. Whenever an interest is not perceived to be important, high levels of effort are not apt to be forthcoming. Supervisors must recognize positive outcomes are necessary for employees, customers and the company. Failure to address the needs of any constituent group ultimately leads to complications and lost productivity.

2. Why am I important?

Supervisors often take their roles too much for granted. In reality, they represent the “keys” to accomplishments and are frequently role models for subordinates. To many employees, supervisors are THE COMPANY and are the persons relied upon to assure excellent performance outcomes by effectively matching human and production resources. As a supervisor, you are a coach, facilitator, counselor and communicator who interprets policies, allocates rewards and administers discipline. Realize it or not, these are awesome responsibilities that should not be taken lightly.

3. How can I positively influence subordinates?

Two things are vital: a positive attitude and an ability to think before acting. Notice how subordinates react to knowledgeable, motivated and enthusiastic supervisors whose positivism helps to win people over. By thinking before speaking, you are less likely to say something that will be regretted. Actions often speak louder than words, and people remember personal interactions, especially with bosses. Timely responses to questions and concerns are most important. Making time to listen to problems, taking an initiative to represent subordinate viewpoints and practicing fairness (as viewed by others) are key influential strategies.

Quality in an Era of Change

The performance “hurdle” has been raised with renewed emphasis on not simply meeting, but exceeding, expectations. Firms and supervisors can no longer afford to take a “business as usual” approach. With rapid growth of e-commerce and Internet technology, geographic location no longer provides a distinctive competitive advantage for many companies. Wireless technology has rapidly evolved to provide instant voice communication and will soon combine both Internet and speaking components. In an era of rapid change, accompanied by greater stakeholder demands, the concern for quality cannot be ignored.

Supervisors must be responsive to change, which represents the one constant that is predictable in an otherwise unpredictable environment. This implies having confidence in personal capabilities and professional job skills. Priorities will likely include emphasis upon learning, development of an appreciation for diversity and recognition of implications from organizational structural changes (mergers, consolidations and reorganizations). An understanding of quality as an integral component of business success helps make necessary adjustments in an ever more complex environment.

Applying Supervision Skills

Supervisors are challenged to understand the impact of workplace realities. Yesterday’s focus on competence at managing individual

jobs has given way to a need for excelling at management of multidimensional jobs, often involving entire teams of people. Through the concept of empowerment, which means a granting of authority to employees for various job-related decisions, subordinates have become more involved in having greater control over how jobs are performed. Once considered primarily from the perspective of payroll costs, human resources are increasingly recognized as a firm’s most valuable asset.

While role expectations of today’s supervisors have changed, the job of tomorrow’s supervisors will become even more challenging. First-line managers will have to be technologically competent and also be well versed in both interpersonal and problem-solving skills. While supervision will become more demanding, it will also provide opportunities to be personally and professionally rewarding with quality as a dominant theme in the new millennium.

Reflections on Quality

Several guidelines are worthy of consideration to help assure continual emphasis upon achievement of quality outcomes. The concern for quality must be genuine. In practice, supervisors need to demonstrate, through both words and actions, that they “care enough” about quality. Otherwise, subordinates can too readily adopt a perspective of indifference toward expectations,

and it can be more than a challenge to alter an established pattern of mediocre job performance.

When communicating, supervisors need to focus on similarity of intended meanings, as interpretations of what is understood can vary widely among people.

Miscommunication leads to wasted time, defective products and unnecessary rework. One of the best ways to check the accuracy of communication is to ask questions and have receivers of messages repeat their interpretations of the content back to you. Frequently, not enough time is taken to get feedback; requesting feedback is seldom a waste of time. Quality is not just management's responsibility; it is a concern for everyone. Some subordinates may not realize the detrimental consequences that can arise from a lack of emphasis on excellence. For example, use of company time to conduct personal business may be inexpensive for an individual employee but be quite expensive when a large number of employees are involved. Education is a key to gaining and retaining a continual focus on quality. Supervisors need to train subordinates to assume responsibility for quality and stress the importance of a continual quest for improved performance.

Avoiding Frustration

It is easy to become frustrated by attempts to develop a quality-oriented work unit. Therefore, an understanding of why quality efforts can cause frustration is relevant. Several sources of frustration deserve consideration:

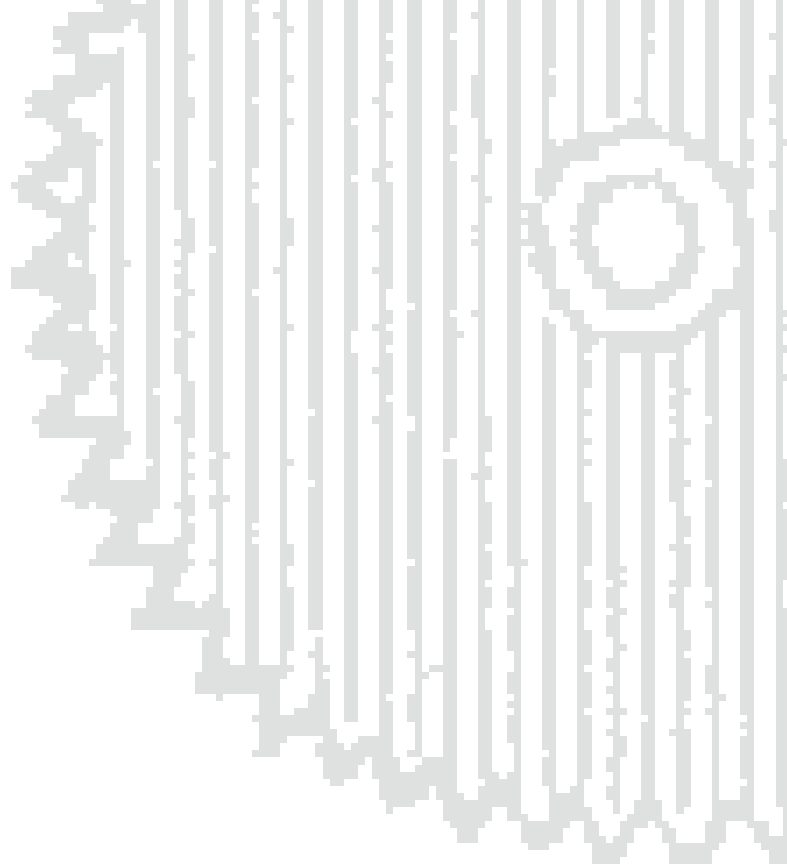
- **Failure to communicate clearly and clarify messages.** Communication is so important it merits additional emphasis. Again, keep in mind the key is sharing of meaning, and words do not convey meaning. Meaning is given by interpretations of senders and receivers of messages. After all, words can have vastly different meanings: blazer (a jacket or a vehicle) or date (something to eat, reference to a particular day, or going out on the town with someone).
- **Inability to understand the concept of quality.** Quality refers to sustained efforts focused on exceeding expectations. A quality-oriented objective implies more than attaining targets and then relaxing. Quality is a never-ending endeavor and a conscious effort to improve is an essential reality to a successful long-term quality philosophy.
- **Lack of or poor training practices.** Competency is a necessity in a competitive business environment. Too often, training is viewed as a cost rather than an investment that is needed to assure desired levels of performance by employees. Mistakes and shoddy

work are far more costly than commonly realized. Supervisors can be observant and, when needed, recommend training to improve job skills or provide appropriate professional development experiences.

- **Lack of clearly identified and understood objectives.** Quality outcomes depend on effective job-performance. Supervisors cannot just assume employees understand where their jobs "fit into things." It is worthwhile to provide explanations of how a company is organized and how the output of various employees or teams is related. Take time to answer questions and clarify understandings.
- **Avoid unrealistic, vague and confusing expectations.** Doing the impossible and uncertainty are major barriers to job performance. When things are not "clear," the tendency is too often to do nothing or proceed ahead and take needless risks of making errors. A key strategy is to think carefully before initiating requests, seek feedback quickly and revise accordingly.

We've examined various factors for supervisors to consider in gaining desired performance results and successfully navigating the uncharted realities of the

workplace. In many companies, the concept of quality is “talked about” to a greater extent than good quality practices are utilized. Generally, quality outcomes do not just happen. Constant thought and attention are essential prerequisites. In practice, supervisors who adopt a personal commitment to quality will experience the best results and overcome numerous human and nonhuman obstacles that contribute to less-than-optimal results. 



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