

Improving Supervisory Leadership

Idea #1 - Train supervisors and foremen on leadership skills

For most people, leadership skills must be learned through education, training, and experience. Below are four aspects of a true leader. While one would not necessarily be trained separately on each of these, the scale can be used to evaluate where supervisors and foremen are currently and prioritize areas for improvement.

1a. Leads by Example – Is a role model for safety—“Walks the Talk”

Workers are constantly observing their supervisor’s and foreman’s safety-related attitudes and behaviors to learn what the safety-related expectations are on the jobsite. Supervisors and foremen who lead by example consistently demonstrate through their words and actions that safety is valued. Supervisors and foremen who give inconsistent safety messages reinforce worker perceptions that productivity trumps safety, and that it’s ok to cut corners, not wear PPE, or not report close calls. Supervisors and foremen who consistently send and demonstrate pro-safety messages get better outcomes.



1b. Encourages Innovation

Exemplary companies expect their supervisors and foremen to communicate with workers in their crew about work tasks as well as potential hazards. This can be done during daily pre-task planning meetings where workers, who are exposed to the risks, can provide practical solutions. Depending on the complexity of the solution, the company can reward the worker(s).



1c. Is a Coach

Supervisors and foremen with good coaching skills create safety goals collaboratively with workers and help them achieve goals by removing barriers and providing feedback. Constructive feedback is essential and is a skill that can be learned using these steps. Initially, the supervisor or foreman tells the worker what was observed and why it was risky and the potential outcomes if the activity continues. Next, they would work together to create a goal and a plan for making changes (if needed). Timely feedback should occur frequently. Remember that goals should be in line with the overall expectations of the safety management system and should drive continuous improvement.



1d. Motivates Others

Supervisors and foremen motivate workers by empowering them to participate in their own and each other’s safety. They must ensure everyone understands the expectations, obligations, and opportunities including: attending and providing input at daily pre-task planning meetings, taking all required safety training and applying information learned, stopping work and notifying their supervisor or foreman when hazards are identified, and reporting all near misses/close calls. Trust is gained when a supervisor or foreman listens, takes worker input seriously, and involves them in implementing suggestions. When an incident happens, a supervisor and/or the foreman and the workers should conduct a blame-free investigation to find the root-cause. Together they can identify lessons learned, reduce the risk, and prevent future incidents.



Idea #2 - Include leadership skills in performance evaluations

Performance evaluations should emphasize the supervisor’s and foreman’s safety leadership skills and their contribution toward achieving safety goals. A competency based scale (like the one above) could be developed that lays out the expectations for poor to superior performance. The scale would contain leadership behaviors described above, and evaluation information could be gathered by asking the workers for input and also by observing the supervisor’s and foreman’s on-site leadership behaviors. Management should discuss the strengths and shortcomings found during the evaluation with the supervisors and foremen, and together establish goals for improvement, including additional leadership training.

