

The supervisor's role in lowering human error

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Editor's note: The following article is the fifth in a series about human error and its role in medical error. This month, the author discusses where a manager fits in when lowering human error. The second part of this column will appear in next month's issue of this newsletter.

The key role of a supervisor is to provide leadership to those whom he or she manages. How effective this leadership is will determine the productivity of one's staff.

An effective leader does the following:

- Takes personal responsibility for his or her performance and the organization's performance
- Attempts to influence the improvement of organizational processes and values
- Influences others through relationships characterized by respect, honesty, and fairness
- Minimizes risk aversion limitations
- Provides personnel the opportunity to succeed

In the past, the supervisor was viewed as a “pusher,” one who ensured his or her personnel did what they were getting paid to do. Today, supervisors are viewed as coaches and mentors who provide their employees with the tools to complete their jobs. Previously, the supervisor held a more powerful position; today, that power is diminished because supervisors support their personnel.

Supervisor characteristics

The following are common supervisor characteristics:

- Respect for self and others
- Confidence—steady effect on situations
- Competence
- Independence
- Consistency

Although most of these characteristics seem obvious, they are not always common among supervisors. Many

supervisors that adhere to the “pusher” mentality seek the power position and demand respect for it. However a good supervisor will earn respect rather than demand it.

Last on the list of traits is consistency. We are sometimes frustrated by our supervisors because one day we are told to do one thing and the next day we are told something contrary.

Supervisory activities

The following are some supervisory activities:

- The four Cs: Command, control, communication, and coordination
- Standards reinforcement
- Complacency mitigation
- Accountability management
- Review and verification
- Problem solving
- Coaching

Some companies believe the more regulatory procedures they use, the safer the company will be. When something goes wrong, it is the knee-jerk reaction of a facility to create another policy or procedure to correct what went wrong rather than to find out the true causes and fix the problem. Providing more procedures actually adds more complexity to the system and more rules for the staff members to remember. Therefore, staff members are overburdened with too many procedures and are not able to follow them all as designed. Instead, staff members take shortcuts, which eventually results in undesirable outcomes.

The four Cs

1. Command. When a supervisor is in command, he or she provides authoritative direction with confidence. This attitude resonates with those who work for the supervisor. Someone in command accepts responsibility for his or her actions. There are often instances in which the head of a department must accept responsibility

for the actions of those in his or her department—even though that manager may not have had knowledge of the situation.

When a supervisor is in charge, staff members know that he or she is the final decision-maker. He or she gets paid to be accountable for decisions made.

2. Control. Supervisors who are in control dictate the work to be done, how it will be done, and in what sequence. Prioritization of work is a key supervisory skill necessary to produce consistent outcomes.

New tasks must sometimes be completed because they were given to staff members by a superior, and presumably the supervisor knows how to prioritize tasks.

3. Communication. From the perspective of the supervisory role, efficient and effective communication is one of the top traits, if not the most important, of a supervisor. Poor communication is the trigger to virtually all undesirable outcomes.

Think about the lines of communication all around us, and you can see how easy it is to not receive information as intended. We must communicate with our peers, our superiors, and our staff members. We must communicate within our departments and also outside of our departments. There is a great deal of room for error.

There are also multiple forms of communication today. Sending and receiving messages can easily get distorted in the transition.

Clear and concise information will yield the lowest human error rate. If our communications require interpretation, they will yield a higher error rate; if critical information is missing in our communication, the error rate increases yet again; if our communication is misleading, then the error rate will jump once more.

4. Coordination. Coordination involves managing the work to be done in an efficient and effective manner.

Specifically, coordination involves:

- Assigning the right workers to the right jobs
- Providing the right tools to the right people
- Providing the right support to the right people
- Performing the right jobs at the right time

Often when we are short-staffed we tend to seek “warm bodies” to fill an immediate need. This can result in placing unqualified people, creating unnecessary risk.

Sometimes we have qualified people performing tasks, but we do not provide them with the proper tools to do their jobs successfully. For example, work performance may be hampered because our computers are slow. After a period of time, slow computers are no longer abnormal but instead a routine part of the day.

Providing the right tools to the right people is one form of support provided by the supervisor for the employee. Other forms of support include monitoring career paths of the employees within the corporation, providing resources from other departments that may be needed by an employee to complete a job effectively, ensuring ideas and recommendations are listened to and followed up on, and providing feedback to the employee who submitted the ideas.

Supervisors are responsible for the right jobs being completed at the correct time. If certain jobs are done out of sequence, then the end result will likely not be desirable. In hospitals, if we perform diagnostic procedures on patients that have not yet been properly prepped, this will result in the test having to be done over again, which will be of great inconvenience to the patient and an additional cost to the hospital.

There are limitations in correctly assigning jobs to certain people. It is not always easy to assess the skills of a person in enough depth to ensure he or she is qualified to do the task at hand. When we outsource work to fill a temporary need, we cannot possibly know the knowledge and skill level of the person provided. For example, there is a nationwide shortage of nurses in hospitals. It is common to contract with nursing agencies in order to fill a need. It is difficult to know the skill level of the nurse(s) being assigned under these circumstances.

Editor's note: Visit www.proactforhealthcare.com for more information about the Reliability Center. ■