

Getting the Most from Front-Line Leadership

A recent discussion with a department manager of a mid-size process plant turned to the issue of developing shift supervisors. The manager, fresh off a two-day retreat, confided that most of the leadership team's discussion had centered on the performance of the shift supervisors in their five units. He told me "We realized we had no idea what happens between the hours of 7 pm and 7 am, much less on weekends. We know work is getting done because we see the results, but how efficiently is it getting done? And are they really adhering to our safety and quality standards? We just don't know."

Chances are if you are in a management or leadership position, you've had a similar conversation with your management team. Your team is responsible for achieving goals around safety, production, quality, cost management, and operating efficiency, and yet is present for less than 25% of the time the plant is actually running. The rest of the time, your shift supervisors are the face of the management to your operations staff. The decisions they make - how to prioritize the workload, manage their resources and costs, and enforce organizational policy - have a large impact on whether or not your site achieves its overall business objectives.

An even deeper concern is the impact that decisions made on shift can have on process safety – sometimes at the critical moment when an upset can become a major incident. The Abnormal Situation Management (ASM) Consortium® has determined that failure in front-line leadership is a top factor contributing to recent serious incidents in the process industries. In today's tough economic environment with increased global competition and heightened regulatory scrutiny, having shift supervisors that are not trained, fully engaged, and making decisions the way you want them made can have serious consequences for you and your organization.

The Challenge of Managing Front-Line Supervisors

Despite the critical nature of the role, shift supervisors are often overlooked and under-supported due to the 24/7 nature of their job. The vast majority of shift supervisors were promoted to the position because they were technically capable – often the very best operators or technicians. Being able to develop, lead, delegate, coach, and support a shift team requires a different set of skills, and one that is not always readily available. Given their work schedules, many new supervisors receive minimal development, coaching or support.

Another factor that makes managing supervisors difficult is that they often have long tenure in their job position – frequently longer than the people managing them or supporting them. What support is available depends on the ability of the second line of management to define, develop, and model desired behaviors. It is a major challenge for a manager to change long-standing work habits of more senior employees.

Despite the inherent challenges, it is possible to have a program that develops and supports your supervisors, even to the point of making them a driving force in improving performance. A systematic approach such as the one described below will provide a program that is both repeatable and sustainable:

Phase 1 – Define Performance Standards

It is essential to have a clear picture of what is required for supervisor success, particularly for a 24/7 organization. Senior leadership knows the strategic goals for the site; this phase defines what is needed from supervisors to meet those goals. A performance standard details competencies necessary for success to the level of specific,

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observable behaviors at the task level. Subsequent training, support, and coaching activities are based on the standard. The standard also acts as a guide, eliminating the need for the supervisor to guess at 2:00 a.m. what management would want in a given situation. A side benefit to performance standards is they make an excellent selection tool, allowing management to evaluate the candidate pool against objective criteria and decide which skills they are willing to train and which skills must already be present.

Phase 2 – Develop Supervisory Skills

Once the standard has been defined, the current skill level for the supervisors must be assessed. This allows the identification and prioritization of both group and individual performance and development needs. Development needs may be met by group or individual training sessions targeted at the specific behaviors defined in the standard. Few sites have the time and resources needed to comfortably meet all training objectives. Prioritizing behaviors with the most positive impact will ensure best use of training resources and budget.

Phase 3 – Assess and Adjust Performance Support Systems

Integrating new behaviors into everyday work practice requires continual reinforcement. Periodic review of site work processes (Shift Handover, Management of Change, etc.) is a sound practice. When implementing a performance standard, it is a good idea to consider whether the routine work processes at a site facilitate desired behaviors or serve as a barrier. Small adjustments can sometimes have a big performance impact.

Creating job aids for supervisors and managers based on the new performance standard is easy and helpful. For front-line supervisors a job aid provides a reminder on how and when to use desired behaviors. It helps ensure that important longer-term tasks aren't lost in completing the urgent daily business on shift. For managers, a job aid provides a coaching tool for behaviors they should be observing and reinforcing. This is particularly helpful in view of the limited contact time inherent in 24/7 operation.

Phase 4 – Manage Supervisor Performance

In most cases, it is easy to integrate a performance standard into the existing performance review system. Few performance review systems define behaviors to the level of detail contained in a well-constructed performance standard. Implementation of a standard can improve the quality of reviews by providing the reviewer a tool for better understanding and observing individual supervisor performance. Its routine use as a coaching tool can facilitate ongoing documentation during the review period – making reviews much easier to write when the time comes. Finally, a performance standard simplifies the job of ensuring that supervisors are being evaluated consistently across the site.

Conclusion

Most sites already have many of the needed elements in place for developing and implementing a standard for supervisory performance. Sites that are the most effective at implementing such a program build on their existing good practices rather than throwing out everything and starting over. A systematic process is used to identify what is already working well, allowing management to strategically select which elements to modify and directing

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the organization's resources accordingly. The end result is an improvement plan that delivers results in months instead of years.

Implementing an approach like this can seem like a major effort, especially in the face of multiple competing priorities. It is critical to remember, though, the impact that front-line supervisors have on the success of programs, initiatives, and the safe and profitable daily operation of the site. You must consider whether your supervisors are performing at the level you need to be successful. If they don't, how long can you afford to wait to do something about it?

About Plant Leadership Systems

Plant Leadership Systems is an international consulting practice aimed at developing and supporting process plant leadership – from operators through plant managers. Our expertise is the result of decades of solving problems in our own plant leadership positions and the experience of assisting clients from around the globe improve their plant operations. Our work is focused on delivering practical solutions and skills that clients can use to achieve better results now. For more information, please visit our website at www.plantleadership.com.

About the Authors

Chris Dannenmaier, Principal Consultant and Chief Executive Officer of Plant Leadership Systems, LLC, is a Chemical Engineer with 25 years experience in leading and advising all phases of manufacturing operations in the process industries. He has served at a variety of operating companies in his career, including GAF Chemicals, Syntex Chemicals, International Specialty Products, and Roche Colorado Corporation. His consulting work prior to Plant Leadership Systems includes work with TTS Performance Systems and KBC Advanced Technologies. As CEO of Plant Leadership Systems, LLC, he serves as lead consultant and oversees projects that assist clients in improvements to the organization and operation of process manufacturing facilities around the globe. In addition, Chris conducts training and seminars aimed at extending the skill set of plant supervisors and managers. He holds an undergraduate degree in Chemical Engineering from the University of Texas at Austin and is a graduate of the University of Michigan Manufacturing Executive Program.

Amy Gamber, Principal Consultant and Vice President of Plant Leadership Systems, LLC, is a Chemical Engineer with 17 years experience in operations management and consulting in the manufacturing process industries. Operating companies she has served with include The Dow Chemical Company, Air Liquide America Corporation, and Amgen. She was also a senior consultant with TTS Performance Systems and KBC Advanced Technologies. As Vice President of Plant Leadership Systems, LLC, she helps clients achieve measurable results in improving organizational performance at process manufacturing facilities. She holds an undergraduate degree in Chemical Engineering from Arizona State University.