

## Supervisory Do's and Don'ts: Lessons from the Student Leaders of MPSI and IPSI

Lewis G. Bender, Ph.D.

Michigan Public Service Institute (MPSI) Facilitator and Instructor

Management Consultant and Trainer

[www.lewbender.com](http://www.lewbender.com)

Over the years, members of the MPSI and IPSI Leadership Committee have asked the classes of the Institute one simple, yet important question:

**“If you were coaching a new supervisor, what would you tell her are the top supervisory do's and don'ts.”**

The class would break out into groups with flip chart paper and return with their respective answers. We would then have a plenary discussion regarding the responses from each group.

As the facilitator of the exercise, I was always struck by two connected thoughts:

- The answers were virtually the same from group-to-group and from year-to-year.
- The participants were incredibly insightful regarding what it takes to be a good supervisor and what the impacts were of doing it and not doing it correctly.

This brief article is an attempt to capture some of their thoughts and ideas related to Do's and Don'ts and the impacts they identified of doing supervision correctly and incorrectly.

**Supervisor DO: You now belong to the entire team - not just your friends or the people you like.**

This can be easily forgotten. With the blur and excitement of promotion and the shared joy with family and friends, a new supervisor can forget that her role, her expectations, and her work relationships will change. Confusion and numerous negative impacts can occur if roles, expectations, and relationships are not **purposely changed and clarified**. Promotion, for example, often means that you are now on two teams: the team you now lead and your boss's team. That is confusing enough. Now add that your friends may expect that you would hold biases in their favor. “Isn't it great that Lucy is the new boss! Finally, we will have someone who will be on our side!” These and numerous other views can become quickly negative-even toxic-when Lucy makes a tough decision.

Belonging to everyone and making tough and fair decisions means that you must change your expectations and those of every member of the team. Stop the engine. Early on have a conversation with your team. What does this new job mean in terms of what you expect of me and what I expect of you? What does this new job mean regarding my friendship with Joe? You need to have this conversation. Document and share the results and visit them regularly.

If you don't have this conversation with your team. You and the members of your team and your friends will ultimately learn your mutual expectations the hard way. Sometimes you will learn these expectations when problems occur. This can result in permanent, long-lasting damage to your relationships with your friends and members of your team.

### **Supervisor Don't: Put privileges ahead of principles.**

The old saying is: "Rank has privilege." It is easy to get seduced into the lack of tight scrutiny that comes with rank. You have more flexibility and can take breaks when you wish and be in charge of your own time and tasks. These levels of flexibility are frequently in place in order to assist you in your efforts to do your job. They can also be over used and even abused. For example, supervisors who take longer breaks have a tough time holding members of the team accountable for also taking extended breaks. Or, the supervisor who often wanders in late to work has a difficult time disciplining team members who may arrive late to the job.

An example of this occurs at MPSI. If one observes the staff and leaders at the Comfort Inn in Mt. Pleasant (Where MPSI is held spring and fall) the leaders, all the way to the hotel manager jump in and help with clean-up after major events. They are there to support the members of the team when the work is most demanding. They could just sit back and issue directives. They put the principles of teamwork ahead of the privileges of their positions.

### **Supervisor Do: It is About Them. Not You.**

Leadership is about the people you lead. Not the leader. People are amazingly perceptive. We know when someone acts and behaves in a manner that supports us. We also know when someone, whether in a leader role or not, is about themselves. Though people may be seduced by words, it is through behavior-actions that leaders demonstrate who they are about. This is not about popularity. It is about a sincere desire as demonstrated by actions over time that a leader demonstrates that he wants the members of his team to succeed. Effective leaders lead by what they do. Not just by what they say. This is especially true when it comes to support or "backing" members of the team. Team members will accept leaders with flaws. They will accept that leaders need to make tough decisions. They will not, however, accept a leader that puts his self interest above that of the members of the team they lead.

### **Supervisor Don't: Don't Take Crap Personally.**

Easy to say. Hard to not do. If you care about your job, your team and making a difference. This is difficult to accomplish. The problem is that if you take everything personally-you will react personally to every big and little thing. One of the favorite games, for example, of problem employees is to get the team leader "hooked." To get her reacting to their dysfunctional games in a personal manner is tantamount to victory. "Did you see how Lucy yelled at me over a simple mistake!" So, as Lucy takes the game personally the problem child turns that into a device to divide her from the rest of the team.

I will never forget the favor/lesson that my Deputy Director, Bill Gardner, did for me. As Director of Regional Research and Development Services at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. I would often receive idiotic memos/directives from the Human Resources Department. On one occasion such a memo finally "hooked" me. As I charged down the hallway on my way to give the H.R. Director a piece of my mind-Bill stopped me and asked me to wait until tomorrow. He made his request a personal favor. He was so right! My personal-over reaction- would have put my staff in a difficult position for future job re-classifications, promotions. With a cooler, more objective-non personal perspective I was

able to successfully address my concerns several days later. By making the HR memo personal, I would have lost the opportunity to support my staff and successfully resolve the issue.

### **Supervisor Do: Listen. Then Make a Decision**

Participants at MPSI hear this discussion ad nauseum. It is called: Ask and Discuss. It means that whenever possible as a team leader you should seek and discuss significant decisions with your team before you make a decision. Why? If you want members of the team to understand the elements of a decision. If you want them to understand and embrace the competing elements that make a tough decision tough. If you want them to share ownership and carry out the decision effectively. There is no choice but to ask their input and discuss differing and competing ideas. The days of “my way or the highway” are long gone. Like the dinosaurs, those leaders are not successful.

It is not a vote. It is a discussion. Ultimately you-the team leader-owe them a decision. In a timely manner. You also owe them the reasons behind your final decision.

As long as your decision is legal, ethical, and safe the members of the team owe you and the team 100% follow-through, no games. If you want to build a high performing team make the Ask-Discuss process a center to your decision-making process.

### **Supervisor Don't: Don't Micromanage.**

If you wish to send a message to members of your team that indicates that, you don't trust them, or think that they are smart or capable or that they are valued micromanage them. Don't read judgement in what I am saying here. I get it. Being the “boss” is a scary place. You probably became the team leader because you get things done. You are a doer! And now you are in a job where much of your success is dependent upon others doing the job! Scary! And if you are a perfectionist you have often come to the view that very few-if any-people actually get the job accomplished to you level of standards. So, you either do it and don't empower others. Or you correct others to the point where they feel that they can never do it correctly.

There are no perfect solutions to correct this micro-managing behavior. However, if you can learn to become an excellent teacher and interactive problem solver, you will find excellent results. Don't lower your standards. Help people to reach and achieve those standards. Stop implicitly or explicitly judging. Rather, become a supportive teacher. The results will surprise you. Essentially, your posture becomes supportive, not judgmental.

### **Closing Thoughts**

It is constantly amazing the amount of wisdom, experience and insight that the participants of MPSI bring to the institute. We often say that the true learning experience occurs at the tables where the participants sit. Presenters contribute. But as these and the other Do's and Don'ts not presented here reflect, the true sources of knowledge at the Institutes are the participants.