



## STEPPING UP TO SUPERVISION

Always a Big Adjustment ...  
Now a Major Challenge

By Mark Marone, Ph.D., Senior Research Manager  
and Chris Blauth, Senior Product Manager

The step up from employee to supervisor has always been a big one. Taking on new assignments, getting work done through others, shifting from being a buddy to a boss—any one of these transitions is a handful. Together, they can be overwhelming, as any novice supervisor—or first-time manager, for that matter—can tell you.

In the past, new supervisors had some time during their first weeks and months on the job to pick up what they needed to know. There were people around—managers, other supervisors—who could show them the ropes, and even step in to help when the going got tough.

That was then. Today it's a new world.

Changes in the workplace have thrust these brand new managers of other people into positions of such pivotal importance that they have little time to get up to speed. Nor can they count on other people to show them the ropes. Today's supervisors have to hit the ground running.

This may explain why, according to AchieveGlobal consultants, more and more employees are turning down promotions to supervisory posi-

tions. For these people the difficulty of the job outweighs any excitement or pride they might feel in being promoted. Their lives are complicated enough already.

To learn more about the performance expectations supervisors face today—and how to prepare employees to meet them—AchieveGlobal recently conducted a survey of over 500<sup>1</sup> managers in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe, and Asia.

The results of this survey, together with AchieveGlobal's experience in helping organizations achieve success, helped shape our position on today's supervisor. We believe that both first-time and experienced supervisors face a set of responsibilities they may not be prepared for—responsibilities that may in fact be at odds with the abilities and attributes that got them promoted into supervision in the first place.

***For many people the difficulty of the job outweighs any excitement or pride they might feel in being promoted.***

1. 273 managers in the U.S., 204 in the U.K., and 35 in Europe & Asia

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## SOME LONG-STANDING CHALLENGES ...

A new supervisor's first week on the job is almost always an eye-opening experience. Having observed their own supervisors in action, these novices often have a general idea of what's involved. What they don't know is what supervising *feels* like. Their efforts to find their footing are reflected in comments like the following:

- “Guys I've worked with for years look at me different now. I expected the kidding. What I didn't expect was getting frozen out. Maybe this is what they mean when they say it's lonely at the top.”
- “I get pressure to improve production, so I pass it on—and get resentful for it. But I guess that's just part of my job now. You gotta be tough on people.”
- “I miss doing my own work; it's satisfying to know you've done something right. Now I spend all my time dealing with complaints and emergencies and everybody's ‘issues.’ It never ends.”
- “Management thinks they can cut back and still maintain good customer service. Well, they can't—not unless every service rep works a lot harder. And then guess who gets the complaints? Guess who has to step in and take somebody's shift when they don't feel like showing up?”
- “I wish everyone would realize I'm the same person I was before I became a supervisor.”
- “No matter how much I go over instructions, some people will mess it up. I never did that when I had their job.”
- “Where's the work ethic any more, that's what I'd like to know.”

Together, these comments describe a kind of balancing act starting supervisors must master if they are to successfully handle their new responsibilities.

## NEW SUPERVISORS MUST LEARN TO BALANCE ...

<i>Former relationships and friendships</i>	<i>with</i>	<i>New working relations and arrangements</i>
<i>Doing work yourself</i>	<i>with</i>	<i>Getting work done through others</i>
<i>Activities and tasks</i>	<i>with</i>	<i>Goals and accomplishments</i>
<i>Management's expectations</i>	<i>with</i>	<i>Employee needs</i>
<i>Organizational demands</i>	<i>with</i>	<i>Customer requirements</i>
<i>Representing yourself and your peers</i>	<i>with</i>	<i>Representing the organization</i>

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## ... AND THREE NEW REALITIES

Today, along with the “traditional” challenges, there are some new realities AchieveGlobal believes all supervisors must contend with:

1. An uncommitted, diverse, and increasingly cynical workforce
2. Constantly changing job duties
3. More demands from the organization—but less support

These realities have raised the stakes considerably, cut down on the margin for error, and made the job of managing other people much more challenging.

### **New reality #1: An uncommitted, diverse, and increasingly cynical workforce**

Increasing diversity, an uncertain economy, and changes in relations between organizations and their employees have all had a big impact on today's frontline workers and individual contributors—creating a need for special skills on the part of those who manage them.

*Supervising today's workforce takes special skill and understanding.*

- **Older workers.** Some older people today are seeking to enter, or re-enter the workforce, either to make ends meet or to stay active during their “retirement” years. Many employees are staying on to maintain their health benefits, and/or to augment their dwindling pensions. Many others, having turned down opportunities for advancement, stay in their jobs longer than they might have before. The frequent upshot: an age gap that can complicate working relationships. Older employees may not be inclined to take younger supervisors seriously. It takes a certain amount of finesse to supervise someone your father’s age.

- **Worn-out workers.** More and more workers today have a second (or sometimes third) job—working in a fast-food restaurant, for example, or cleaning houses. By the time they get to their “main” jobs, they’re already tired and stressed out.

*For new supervisors, a lack of predictability may be the most difficult aspect of their jobs.*

- **Angry and jaded employees.** Supervisors today cannot assume that the people they manage have much of a commitment to the organization. Competitive pressures have forced many companies to cut back on the perks, benefits, and pensions that were once taken for granted. It should come as no surprise that employees are often demoralized, distrustful, and sometimes actively hostile.

Building commitment and motivation in such a climate can be a real uphill battle. When it comes to organizational goals, employees have always been somewhat cynical. Now they’re often angry as well. It can be difficult to sell a corporate vision to people who have had their benefits cut back.

- **Fractured families.** More women working, more men assuming child-care duties, more families with child-custody and visitation concerns—these add to the supervisor’s challenge of accommodating employees, when necessary, and figuring out how to cover their jobs when they are gone.

- **More diverse workers.** Many workers today differ educationally and culturally from the people who supervise them. This requires special sensitivity on the part of supervisors—and extra time. If, for example, some employees don’t speak the language in which the instruction manual is written, the supervisor may have to explain the procedures.

### **New reality #2: Constantly changing job duties**

New supervisors are often promoted into supervision because of their outstanding performance as individual contributors or frontline employees.

In these positions they may have gained considerable satisfaction from taking on a straightforward, predictable, often complex job and doing it well. As supervisors, their responsibilities are harder to define and more likely to change from one day to the next. Supervisors today are

used to a clear structure, and when they become supervisors, they want to know where the guidelines are. The job is definitely less structured.

In this fluid environment, measuring success is not always as cut and dried as it once was. It’s not always easy to know what to do—or when a job is done. It often seems as if it’s never done.

The move up to supervision has always brought with it less regularly scheduled, concrete duties—handling emergencies, answering questions, and delegating work. These remain today—augmented by trends that make supervisory work even less predictable:

- **New processes.** As companies streamline their operations, supervisors need to spend more time learning new processes. They may have earned their stripes as the best operators on the factory floor. Now, however, the system is completely computerized, their jobs don’t even exist any more, and they suddenly find themselves scrambling to master the new system.

- **Less clear-cut lines of authority.** Today, the command-and-control approach to getting work done through others has given way in many organizations to collaboration, influencing, cross-functional partnerships, and joint efforts with outside organizations. Being a good supervisor has never been simply about telling someone to do something. These days, however, an effective supervisor needs to be a very skillful delegator, influencer, and persuader. To get the resources they need, they must get involved in planning with other departments.
- **Collateral duties.** Many supervisors today have been given temporary duties beyond the scope of their jobs. It's one way for an organization to postpone creating and filling a position. For example, often production supervisors are put in charge of a special training function in addition to their regular duties.
- **Under-supported technology.** Although companies often tout the benefits of their technology, in fact their investment in upgrades and new systems has lagged. What this often means is that manual effort may be required to reap the benefits the technology was supposed to produce. So, for example, a supervisor may find herself spending time to manually assemble production data that was supposed to be captured and aggregated electronically.
- **Disconnect between responsibility and authority.** Even when supervisors are required to step up to new responsibilities, they may not be given the additional authority they need. In an effort to control costs, for example, an organization may expand a supervisor's job duties but fail to bump up his or her signing authority.
- **Higher-stakes responsibilities.** In the absence of middle managers, supervisors may be given responsibilities that managers shouldered in the past. For example, at an auto manufacturer, a committee that reviews the progress of a cross-functional team no longer has any members from management—only supervisors, who often have little familiarity with functions other than their own.
- **Pressures to innovate.** Many supervisors today are under constant pressure to find ways to cut costs and improve work processes. Although many supervisors rise to the challenge, they must often do so without a lot of organizational support. It's difficult to sustain this kind of on-the-backs-of-the-workers effort for a long period of time.
- **Dotting the ethical "i's."** Supervisors, like other employees, are under pressure to conform to new or reinvigorated ethical regulations. They're often under pressure from their superiors to check and double-check the accuracy of key reports. They also feel pressures (sometimes conflicting) to report shoddy work and/or quality lapses.
- **Everything is everybody's job.** With organizations stripped to the bone, everyone's job has grown. "It's not my job" has morphed into "It's everybody's job."
- **Fewer middle managers.** With so many middle management positions having fallen to the downsizer's axe, supervisors often have no one available for coaching and mentoring, either formally or informally.

### New reality #3: More demands from the organization—but less support

Pressures to do more with less, and do it faster, are difficult for everyone, but they're especially hard on the new manager or supervisor—especially when traditional sources of formal and informal support are no longer available. What this means is that new supervisors not only have to hit the ground running, they have to do so on their own.

*Supervisors are expected to do more with less.*

- **Less formal support.** Most organizations today provide less technical support, less IT support, and fewer engineering and financial services. Employees eventually learn to work around these gaps. It's more of a problem for new supervisors, who really need the help.
- **Dog-eat-dog attitudes.** Experienced supervisors who might once have offered assistance to the “newbie” are now too busy and stressed out to devote energy to any other interests than their own. Another factor is the internal competition that frequent job cuts can produce. Why go out of your way to help a colleague, if in so doing you might help that person keep his or her job during the next round of layoffs, while you lose yours?

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## WHAT MANAGERS EXPECT FROM SUPERVISORS

To make sure its training solutions are responsive to these challenges, AchieveGlobal conducted research in 2003 and 2004 to zero in on what thought leaders were saying, and also to identify what the managers of supervisors saw as the greatest training needs.

Here are the issues they identified, listed in the order of relative importance:

**Motivating others.** “Motivating is the key skill required in business,” said one U.K. manager. Described by another as “getting employees to believe in what they are doing,” managers put this skill at the top of their list. They recognize that in this day and age commitment, creativity, and extra effort are required from everyone if the organization is to achieve its goals. It's not enough for employees to simply do their jobs; they must feel the motivation to go that extra mile.

**Adapting to new and changing situations—and helping others do the same.** What new supervisors define as confusing job responsibilities, managers see as managing change. Managers know routine is a

### IF I'D ONLY KNOWN

We asked managers what they wished they'd known when they first became supervisors. Here's a sampling of what they said:

- *The corporate big picture and how to work it*
- *How to delegate*
- *How to win people over*
- *How to manage up*
- *The difference between earning respect and earning friendship*
- *How to trust my staff*

thing of the past. They want supervisors who feel comfortable dealing with the ambiguity and uncertainty that accompany change. “Frontline managers must be able to adapt to new and changing situations,” said one U.S. manager. They must also be prepared to “communicate changes and the reasons for them to the organization's people.”

**Understanding the organization's goals, and using them to motivate employees and determine work priorities.** Managers, who wished they'd known more about the corporate big picture when they started out, see this as even more critical for today's new supervisors. They want supervisors who “are aware of the organization's mission and goals,” who have a “knowledge of the core business of the company,” and who “understand the competitive environment they are operating in.”

New supervisors are often unsure what they should be spending their time on. They want to be told what to do, but sometimes there's no one with the time to tell them—or no one who knows. The only fixed point is likely to be the department's or organization's goals or objectives. Everyone, supervisors included, needs to learn how to use them as their points of navigation—and as motivating descriptions of the future.

**Establishing productive relationships with their managers.** One of the challenges managers cite is the need for supervisors to work more independently while still keeping their managers in the loop. Often first-time supervisors expect too much direction from their own managers. In reality, senior leaders want supervisors who report to them to start exercising their own judgment. At the same time, they want to work out a form of communication that keeps both of them informed so there will be no surprises.

**Making a smooth transition into supervision.** In the survey managers referred to two types of problems for first-time supervisors. On the one hand they cited supervisors who were “above themselves,” had a “big head,” and an attitude of “their way is the only way.”

On the other hand, they saw problems with supervisors who “have a hard time jumping in and taking charge,” who “shy away from conflict or reprimanding employees when necessary,” and who in general “lack the confidence” to do a good job.

Managers want supervisors to “do” less and lead more. “They need a better understanding of the difference between leading and doing,” said one respondent. “They need to learn not to fear trusting their direct reports and to give them the freedom to learn and to fail.” “Technical experts promoted to management need special coaching,” said one respondent.

Managers recognize the difficulty at the human level for first-time supervisors. Respondents spoke of the difficulty of moving “from being a friend to being a leader.” So, while some managers cited supervisors who “maintained their loyalty to their old friends” to the detriment of the work, others talked about the unrealistic expectations for instant respect. “Respect, like trust, must be earned,” said one manager. They want supervisors to shift their focus from the work to the people in their workgroups who do the work—understanding and supporting their

needs, developing their abilities, making resources available, and removing roadblocks.

**Delegating.** Managers indicated the skill of delegating is vital to a new supervisor’s success—and also the most challenging. New supervisors and managers haven’t necessarily developed people skills; their focus too often tends to be on the work itself, and how to do it, rather than on how to assign projects in order to maximize commitment and results.

A poor job of delegating can result in a disgruntled employee, failed results, and a lot of extra work for the supervisor. When delegating is done well, all the pieces of the puzzle come together. Employees are motivated to contribute their best work, they feel good about what they are doing, and they often gain valuable skills and experience. Supervisors, for their part, can get the results they want with the least amount of effort—without either over- or under-managing the process.

Following through on assignments to ensure results is another aspect of delegating that supervisors need help with, according to the managers in these surveys. Some inexperienced supervisors simply “dump and run,” assuming the job will be done, and later become angry when they find out otherwise. Others micro-manage, which in addition to driving the other person crazy, also creates a passive employee who will never learn to work independently.

Many managers fault new supervisors for a lack of planning. Novice supervisors often don’t realize how much thought goes into effective delegation: Should the task be delegated? Who would be the best choice? What kind of support is he or she likely to need?

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## MAKING THE MOST OF A TEACHING MOMENT

Despite all the challenges facing first-time supervisors and managers, there's a big positive built into this transition: most first-timers soon recognize what they're in for. They are usually very open to—and even desperate for—help.

- With so many new and unfamiliar responsibilities threatening to overwhelm them, they want to know where to focus their efforts.
- They need strategies they can master quickly that will help them deal with as many as possible of the problems and issues they are likely to run up against from the very start.
- They want people skills they can put to immediate use—and then build on as they gain in experience and take on more responsibility.

### THE GOOD NEWS

*Most first-time supervisors are open to—and even desperate for—help.*

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## THREE HALLMARKS OF THE SUCCESSFUL SUPERVISOR

Thanks to its research, combined with years of experience helping organizations develop productive workforces, AchieveGlobal has identified the three hallmarks most critical to enable first-time supervisors and managers to assume new responsibilities and improve their ability to supervise the work of others:

- Building personal credibility
- Activating work group commitment
- Engaging management support

### Hallmark 1: Building personal credibility

As organizations become less hierarchical, positional authority means less as a hallmark of leadership than personal credibility. Personal credibility is neither an attitude nor a quality. It's a perception others form of you, based on their

assessment of your actions over time. Once a frontline employee or individual contributor steps up to supervision, everything they do and say will be carefully noted by members of their workgroup and others in the organization. Do their words match their actions? Do they keep their promises? Are they willing to take on the tough issues?

There are several ways to build personal credibility:

- Respect others.
- Acknowledge mistakes; admit it when you don't have the answer; be willing to learn from others.
- Follow through.
- Give others credit.
- Work hard to remove obstacles for your work group and to get them the resources they need.

Being known as personally credible helps supervisors achieve success by:

- Buying some slack when he or she may not know what to do or does the wrong thing—especially during the initial transition to supervisor.
- Making it easier to convince others of new or unpopular ideas or directives. If employees trust their supervisor, in other words, they'll be more likely to buy into what the supervisor says.
- Earning a novice supervisor or manager the right to exert leadership.

### Hallmark 2: Activating work group commitment

These days, organizations cannot succeed simply by maintaining business as usual. Creativity and extra effort are required on the part of every employee from the president to the frontline worker. Successful supervisors and managers know how to activate their employees' energy and dedication.

Creating commitment begins with helping employees see the connection between their daily activities and the organization's goals. First, of course, you need to know the organization's goals yourself and understand the reasons behind them.

Successful supervisors gain workgroup commitment by:

- Creating a sense that the workgroup is doing something worthwhile
- Showing how the work of each employee fits into the bigger picture
- Making sure employees have clear directions, and know how they will be measured
- Listening carefully to employees, and providing supportive feedback on their performance
- Including employees in idea-generating and decision-making
- Creating a sense of ownership of the work

Fully committed employees will use their own ingenuity and dedication to “go the extra mile” to help reach organizational goals. The supervisor can spend less time giving directions and making sure everyone is doing his or her job, and more time on higher priorities.

### **Hallmark 3: Engaging management support**

It's natural for novice supervisors and managers to focus on their workgroups. Successful supervisors, however, know that without a solid relationship with their managers, they can't count on the support they need to achieve results.

The best relationships are focused not on “pleasing the boss,” but on establishing an alliance between partners. Supervisors can help develop a

mutually supportive relationship with their managers by:

- Knowing what's important to the manager, and working to support it
- Offering the manager solutions, not just problems
- Periodically clarifying what they need from their managers
- Keeping their manager up to date on any issues he or she is expected to report on
- Asking directly for help when necessary, rather than waiting for the manager to offer it

Supervisors who enjoy strong relationships with their managers know they will be supported in their daily decisions because the manager has a clear and current understanding of the situation. The manager will therefore be more inclined to support the supervisor when he or she needs extra resources or to have obstacles removed.

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## **A FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE**

Even without a crystal ball, it seems clear that future organizations are going to need more employees at all levels who can work independently. As long as change continues as a dominant theme, supervisors will need to rely on the three strategies of success. These will give first-time supervisors and managers the traction they need to hit the ground running without losing their balance. As they gain experience, they will encounter situations requiring new skills—coaching, resolving disputes, correcting performance, and conducting performance evaluations—but the three hallmarks will remain central to their success.

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## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Utilizing an independent sample of managers of all levels—managers, senior managers, directors, vice presidents, and the C-level—an on-line survey was administered specifically focusing on the skills required for those new to the frontline or supervisory role. The survey was administered both in the U.S. and the U.K. in 2003 and in Asia and other European countries in 2004. Surveys were completed by 273 U.S. managers and 204 U.K. managers within organizations employing 50 or more. In order to validate findings across other geographic areas, a similar survey was completed by 35 managers in Europe and Asia.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Mark Marone, Ph.D.**, is AchieveGlobal's senior research manager. He has more than 13 years of academic and private sector experience in research and consulting on issues such as economic development, corporate strategy, and business policy. His career includes being a senior analyst with Nielsen Media Research, where he was responsible for analyzing market data for key national media accounts. He also served as director of research at the Global Business Information Network, a research firm that provides international consulting to businesses in the Midwest. In addition, he spent several years as a management consultant with KPMG, LLC, and as a client services manager with Sterling Research Group, Inc.

Mark has written extensively on topics such as high technology industries, economic development, and corporate strategy in the telecommunications industry. He has been a featured speaker and presented research findings at numerous international academic conferences.

He earned a Ph.D. from Indiana University, where he has held several academic posts. He is currently an adjunct professor of management at the University of South Florida.

In 2003 Mark co-authored a book on sales performance, *Secrets of Top-Performing Salespeople*.

He is also a member of the American Marketing Association and Marketing Research Association.

**Chris Blauth** is senior product manager for leadership with AchieveGlobal. Since joining the AchieveGlobal product management team, Chris has been responsible for maximizing revenue for numerous products through the creation and execution of product management strategy. He also guides the organization to develop and maintain products that meet the training industry's current and future needs. Chris' recent accomplishments include the launch of *Genuine Leadership™*, AchieveGlobal's newest leadership product system. Chris also launched classroom sales training seminars and an asynchronous Web-based tool designed to reinforce skills taught in AchieveGlobal's flagship sales program, *Professional Selling Skills™*. Chris has also facilitated AchieveGlobal's popular sales performance and leadership courses. Prior to joining AchieveGlobal, Chris spent seven years with Leica Microsystems, Inc., holding financial analyst and product manager positions. Chris earned a B.S. (accounting and finance) from the University at Buffalo and an M.B.A. in marketing from Canisius College. Chris is a member of Beta Gamma Sigma Honor Society and the American Management Association.

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## ABOUT ACHIEVEGLOBAL

AchieveGlobal is the world leader in helping organizations translate business strategies into business results by developing the skills and performance of their people. We are a single resource for aligning employee performance with organizational strategy through training and consulting solutions in customer service, leadership and teamwork, and sales performance.

With offices throughout North America and a presence on every continent, we serve more than 70 countries and offer programs and services in more than 35 languages and dialects. We continually adapt and translate our programs and services to meet the needs of global cultures.



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Through People*