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How to Be the Boss
Management 248x
Spring 2019

Overview of the Course:

Despite the press accounts about the “gig” economy, the Bureau of Labor Statistics calculates that about 92 percent of the people working in the US are employees who are supervised by someone. That figure has remained roughly the same for decades.

The term “supervisor” is sometimes used for the first-level of supervision in an organization, but in fact that role – and indeed the title – goes all the way up to the very top of any employer organization. Even CEO’s are the supervisor of their direct reports. When people talk about their “boss,” they almost always are referring to the person who supervises them.

Supervisors are the central actors in accomplishing work tasks, especially in projects where they also have autonomy over what is done and how it is done. They have an extraordinary amount of power and influence over their direct reports and considerable responsibility toward them.

There is considerable truth to the aphorism that people quit bosses, not organizations, as employee dissatisfaction with supervisors rates as one of the leading causes of turnover. There is little doubt that a bad boss can make the life of a subordinate miserable, while a good boss can do the opposite, i.e. improving job design to make work more motivating, providing support during difficult periods of learning new tasks and facing performance pressures, helping chart a career path, and mentoring in organizational realities.

Stepping into a supervisor position is challenging, exceptionally so the first time. That time comes relatively soon for Wharton grads. Undergrads pursuing consulting jobs typically find themselves supervising new hires by their third year, those working for corporations find themselves in those roles even sooner. Roughly three-quarters of our MBA students report that they had been required to supervise subordinates after college and before arriving here.

In this class, we examine the role of the supervisor and the unique tasks associated with performing that role. We pay special attention to the unique challenges of taking on that role for the first time.

Supervisors have authority, both given to them by the organization and by the law, but they also have obligations to subordinates backed by law. The tasks they must perform include:

- Hiring their subordinates
- Assigning work to them

- Directing that work (telling them how to do it)
- Assessing that performance and rewarding it with merit pay and other compensation
- Improve performance and deal with struggling workers
- Develop their skills and help manage their career
- Helping subordinates “fight fires”, i.e. deal with day-to-day problems that subordinates confront in their own work.

In contrast to earlier periods in business history, individuals are now likely to stumble into their first leadership role without training or preparation beforehand. This class fills that practical concern as well as addresses the unique conceptual issues associated with supervision.

The Contemporary Scene:

Being a boss was never an easy role, but it is arguably more difficult now. One reason is that the span of control has increased - the number of subordinates for which each supervisor is responsible. The rise of alternative forms of hierarchy, such as matrix management where subordinates report to more than one supervisor or where the supervisor is responsible for workers who are organized into teams, further complicates what was already a challenging role.

Even though the reality of “gig” work remains rare, the array of arrangements for getting work done – temps, contractors, electronic platforms, and so forth – also represents a new challenge: because such workers are not employees, none of the traditional tools of supervision can be used with them. Among the new approaches for managing contractors are “algorithmic management,” or incentives and behavioral interventions delivered by IT systems.

The relationship between employees and supervisors is the heart of employment and is therefore at the center of modern organizations. It is where the work of organizations gets done.

Course Requirements:

We examine the tasks that supervisors have to perform and the evidence on how best to perform them. We practice those approaches in every class. It includes role-play exercises, computer-based simulations, and more traditional cases to not only identify problems and solutions but to practice exercising them.

The class meets in a three-hour block so that we have time to both discuss concepts and practice them in class. We use a mix of guest speakers, computer-based simulations, and in-class role plays each week to illustrate and reinforce concepts.

In addition to a course pack, we have two required books:

The First-Time Manager. Loren B. Belker, Jim McCormick, and Gary S. Topchik.

Employment Law for Human Resource Practice. David J. Walsh.

Assignments:

Class participation: The class involves not only discussion but also active participation in exercises. 20% of grade.

Two short papers: Each paper is five pages double-spaced 12pt /1000 words and worth 30% of the grade:

- The first is an assessment of your own experience being supervised, examining the pluses and minuses, due half way through the course. Pick any job you've ever had where you were an employee. (If you've never been an employee, let's discuss situations where you have been working under someone's direction.) The idea here is to describe in some detail how you were supervised, using illustrations where that is useful, and include what your responses or reactions to the experience were. It helps to discuss issues such as what kind of feedback you received, how tasks were assigned to you, what kind of direction you received, and so forth.
- It is useful at the end of the exercise to draw some conclusions about the experience: which aspects appeared to be helpful or useful, which ones not so much or even dysfunctional.
- The second paper due at the end of the class is a reflection exercise looking back over the course. The assignment is to consider two issues. The first is to identify the aspect of supervision (a specific task or a more general attribute of supervision) that you believe is the most difficult to accomplish. Explain why you think it is the most challenging, using content from the course, and then suggest ways to make it easier to do. The second issue is to do the reverse, identify what you think is or should be the easiest of the supervisory tasks we've discussed to execute. Again explain why that is using content from the course.

Short Quiz: 20% of grade. The last assignment is a short quiz on the readings. This is a simply to see who has done the reading, so the quiz is short-answer, multiple choice, or other very objective assessments. It should be simple if you've done the readings and impossible if not. It will be on the last day of class.

Week-by-Week Guide

Week I Introduction – January 23rd, Wednesday

What is a Supervisor, and What Do They Do? Supervision is created by the common law construct of “employment,” which gives employers the formal authority to direct the work of their employees and influence their performance. (Contractors and “gig” workers are not employees and cannot be supervised.) Supervisors span the gap between what the organization wants and what employees do.

In this first class, we consider the nature and scope of the supervisor role and its relationship with subordinates as well as evidence as to how it matters. Especially when they first become supervisors, many people are pleased but also apprehensive about the formal authority they exercise. Over time, however, we learn that formal authority has clear limits and that other ways of managing are equally important.

Readings: Chapter 2: *The Employment Relationship* in ***Employment Law for Human Resource Practice***.

Chapters 1&2: *Starting Out* and *The Road to Management* in ***The First Time Manager***.

The Employment Relationship and the Duty of Care, Peter Cappelli.

The Value of Bosses. 2015. Edward P. Lazear, Katheryn Shaw, and Christopher T. Stanton. ***Journal of Labor Economics***, 33(4).

Three Types of Legitimate Domination. Max Weber. ***Economy and Society***, Chapter III.

Power Failure in Management Circuits. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, ***Harvard Business Review***.

In-class exercise: *New Teacher Evaluation – computer-based simulation*

Case -The Fall of Barings Bank (failure of supervision)

Week II. Motivation and Influencing the Employee’s Duty of Care: January 30th

Employers have the legal right to shape the perceptions that employees have about their obligations to the employer. Those include the basic question of, how hard should I work? That may seem like an obvious question – just set the standard – but in virtually all jobs, measuring performance is difficult, and employees have discretion as to how to perform tasks. Getting them to put in effort is often quite challenging. We review the rational (e.g., incentives), cognitive (e.g., goal setting), and social (e.g., exchange theory) that affect motivation and how they apply to the workplace.

We also consider the fact that employers make very different decisions as to how to organize the tasks of employees, such as how much autonomy to give them, which has fundamental implications for supervision.

Readings: Excerpts from “Motivation” (covers four theories: needs, cognitive evaluation, goal-setting, expectancy), ***Organizational Behavior***, Stephen P. Robbins and Timothy A. Judge.

What is Job Crafting and Why Does It Matter? Justin M. Berg, Jane E. Dutton, Robert L. Kahn, and Amy Wrzesniewski. University of Michigan Ross School of Business.

What Motivates Effort? Evidence and Expert Forecasts. Stefano Della Vigna and Devin Pope. **NBER Working Paper No. 22193.**

The Paradox of Coordination and Control (Supervision at American and Southwest Airlines.) Jody Hoffer Gittel. ***California Management Review***.

The Rig – an in-class computer simulation

Week III. Managing Performance: February 6th

One of the most important tasks of supervision is to manage the performance of subordinates. That includes setting expectations about what they are supposed to do, how they should do it, and what results to expect at the end. Assessing how well employees have performed their assignments, manifested by performance appraisals, is typically a very challenging task because lack of communication leads expectations to be out of alignment.

We describe the tasks associated with managing performance and outline how best to perform them. We focus on the role of the performance appraisal, which includes efforts to improve performance, reward performance, and help shape careers. We practice doing appraisals.

Guest Presenter – Joe Costello, Partner and head of labor and employment practice, Morgan Lewis

Readings: Chapter 16: Performance Appraisals in ***Employment Law for Human Resource Practice***.

Chapter 10. Managing Problem Employees and Chapter 20: Managing Problem Employees in ***The First-Time Manager***.

The Performance Revolution. Peter Cappelli and Anna Tavis. **Harvard Business Review**, 2016.

Manager’s Choices of Performance Measures in Promotion Decisions: An Analysis of Alternative Job Assignments." Isabella Grabner and Frank Moers. **Journal of Accounting Research**, 2013.

What Do Performance Appraisals Do? Peter Cappelli and Martin Conyon. **ILR Review**, 2018.

Algorithmic Management - if the worker is a contractor: Part II of *Employment Relationship and the Duty of Care*.

Case: *The Performance Interview* (in-class exercise).

Mid-Course Paper Due!

Week IV. Hiring, Retention, and Development: February 13th

Supervisors are not the only ones involved in hiring, but they are increasingly involved in the process and often make the final decision as to whom gets hired. Bringing new hires into the organization and keeping them are clearly related tasks, but they are different and require different practices.

This week, we consider what is required at the supervisor level to pick good candidates and to keep them. We practice making hiring decisions as well.

Readings: *Chapter 6: Employment Tests in Employment Law for Human Resource Practice*

Chapter 23: *Your Best Friend: Delegation* in *The First Time Manager*

What's Wrong with Hiring. Peter Cappelli. **Wall Street Journal**, February 2019

Promotions and the Peter Principle. Alan Benson, Danielle Li, and Kelly Shue. 2018. **NBER Working Paper 2434.**

A Market-Driven Approach to Retaining Talent. Peter Cappelli. **Harvard Business Review.**

In-class exercise: Ozark River Bank (assembling a project team)

Case: *Hiring at S.G. Cowen*

Week V. Organizing and Managing Projects: February 20th

In modern organizations, the most important tasks that managers perform is to run projects. Most of us have worked on projects, but organizing, initiating, and leading one requires quite different skills. In this section, we explore how to organize work into projects, how to set up and assign tasks within them, and how to manage the teams around which they are often organized.

There are many challenges in organizing projects, but the most important are the people aspects. Those include breaking the project down into component parts, assigning employees

to those parts, managing the interdependence of component parts – therefore of employees – and considering what to do when things don't go as planned.

Readings: *Note on Project Management Fundamentals*. Richard Ivey Publishing.

How to Be the Best Coach for Your Team, Judith Ross. Harvard Business School Publishing.

Agile at Scale. Darrell K. Rigby, Jeff Sutherland, and Andy Noble. **Harvard Business Review**, May-June 2018.

In-class computer simulation – managing a project.

Case: Performance Management Institute's *Global Green Books* case.

Week VI: Challenging Situations – Older subordinates, dangerous employees, and sexual harassment. February 27th

This week, we consider some of the more difficult challenges that supervisors have to face. They include the increasingly common situation of having to supervise subordinates who are both older and more experienced at the job they perform than the supervisor is, dealing with employee misconduct – most pertinently sexual harassment – and ultimately the situation where subordinates have to be dismissed. March

First-time supervisors are often struck first by the procedures required for disciplining and sometimes firing employees and second by the enormity of the consequences of doing so, not just for the employee but for the employees who remain. We focus on dismissals, or firing for cause, but we also consider the question of layoffs and how those should be conducted.

Guest Presenter: Charles Woodcock, head of employee relations, Amtrak.

Readings: Chapter 18: Employee Terminations in *Employment Law for Human Resource Practice*.

Chapter 14: Disciplining the Employee in The First Time Manager.

"Helping the Younger Supervisor," in *Managing the Older Worker*....Peter Cappelli and Bill Novelli.

"Getting Tough on Sexual Harassment." Peter Cappelli and Dan O'Meara. *Human Resources Executive*.

"*Note on Terminations.*" Jim Ellis and Bethany Shaler Coates. Stanford Business School.

Case: Employment Vignettes. Harvard Business School

Week VII: Computer-Based Simulation – Practicing What We Preach March 13th

Reflection Paper Due!

Quiz on Readings