

Growing great supervisors

*Editor's Note: Front-line supervision is a tricky business, and warehousing creates supervisory challenges that do not exist in manufacturing or clerical environments. There is a difference between a "doer" and a leader, yet many warehouse supervisors were chosen for their ability as doers rather than leaders. This article was inspired by Ray Attiyah's excellent book **The Fearless Front Line**. If you like this article, we urge you to buy the book. KBA*

Maybe there was a time when it was easy to find new warehouse supervisors. When Joe Forklifter was recognized for his operation skill, and furthermore he always had a good word for the boss, the sensible thing to do was to promote him into supervision. No leadership training was necessary because Joe was surely smart enough to figure this out.

If that didn't work, we placed an advertisement for skilled warehouse supervisors and hired the best person who came in the door. Again, no leadership training was necessary because the respondents all claimed ample experience and skills.

When labor is scarce, promotion from within is the safest option. When unemployment predominates, looking outside can be a good strategy. But in the absence of leadership training, newly minted supervisors may fail. The consequences of that failure can be serious.

Where are the leaders?

Author Ray Attiyah observes that a typical organization can be segmented into performers, followers and draggers. 10% of the group are performers, another 10% are draggers, and 80% are competent followers. In warehousing, the outstanding performer handles more units per hour than expected, he or she looks for more work without waiting for an assignment. The dragger is the exact opposite.

In many cases, the warehouse supervisor spends too much time coaching the draggers. As a result, the performers are neglected and become demotivated. The leader should consistently invest more time with top performers in order to raise the standard of excellence of the crew. This does not mean that the draggers should be ignored. Perhaps some can be moved from dragger to follower, but it is far more important to inspire the top 10% to achieve even better performance.

However, as we have just observed, there is a differ-

ence between outstanding performance and effective leadership. In a warehouse environment, leadership may start with a daily huddle, perhaps five minutes at the beginning of the shift when the supervisor communicates with the team. The daily huddle demands above average communication skills by its leader. The supervisor must communicate in a language that is common and well understood by everyone on the team. The supervisor sets an example and inspires the team to improve performance. The huddle should consider three questions about yesterday's work:

- What went well?
- What needs improvement?
- Have you seen any barriers to productivity?

The sequence is important. Describing what went well creates a positive spin for the meeting, and avoids the possibility that the huddle is simply a place to complain. Ability to lead the daily huddle effectively is the hallmark of a skilled supervisor. On the other hand, inability to handle the huddle is a warning that the supervisor may not be the right person for the job.

The move from performer to warehouse supervisor

To repeat, senior management commonly makes the error of assuming that a top performer will automatically be an effective leader. Creating leaders from performers begins by setting the example. The supervisor can and should be a mentor to outstanding performers. He or she can create the desired environment by modeling leadership behavior and teaching apprentices to develop the skills of a leader.

Top performers need to understand why the manager of a bakery is hired to manage the bakery, *not* bake the cakes. In the warehouse, that means that the leader should not also operate a lift truck. Yet the leader may occasionally demonstrate ability to operate a lift truck and to do most of the jobs assigned to the crew. He or she may occasionally be a doer, but not all the time!

The supervisor as a change agent

The best leaders embrace change. Many performers and nearly all followers take pleasure in the *status quo*.

In the warehousing industry, the best companies are often the ones who initiate meaningful change. Nearly every survey of users of logistics services reports that shippers feel that the service providers are not innovative. By go-

ing against the trend, your company can stand out. However, doing so requires a leadership team that recognizes the value of change. “We’ve always done it that way” must become a forbidden phrase!

The quick win is a proven way to get the work crew interested in change. It can be a very small thing, like changing the pick path, but it is a change which gets results and shows the crew that it is useful to constantly look for a better way. Quick wins are sometimes the moving of roadblocks. Consider these examples:

- Complicated procedures
- Unreliable processes
- Functional silos

Another forbidden phrase should be “that’s not my job.” Quick wins may be nothing more than improvements in teamwork. Does the account clerk in the office really understand the processes used on the warehouse floor? Would trading jobs for a day improve that understanding? Are some of the people in your organization committed to protecting turf? Are some managers territorial about their jobs?

We have seen how the huddle team can become the vehicle for identifying future leaders. However, the huddle can also be a catalyst for change. The examples mentioned above may be detailed in huddle conversations. Outstanding performers and even followers may see roadblocks that are not recognized by the leadership team.

Resistance to change

It is common to blame resistance on the draggers. Yet sometimes resistance comes from bureaucracy, and even from the top of the organization. Structures, reporting mechanisms and procedures can all be instruments that facilitate resistance to change. When the warehouse supervisor is a change agent, he or she should also be outspoken in identifying and attacking sources of resistance. In a warehousing environment, the resistor may be your customer. It is obviously never wise to pick a fight with a client, but the resistance should be at least recognized. Entrenched resistance creates stagnation, and a stagnant organization will not retain talented people.

Is the system the root of the problem?

An operating system is a highway that directs the entire warehousing group toward a higher objective. It is more than a computer system, but today the software may be an integral part of the system problem. Here are three signs that the system is part of the problem:

- Too many meetings
- Constant “checkup” email and calls
- Too many reports

Remember the meetings you have attended that had no clear objective? Think about the reports that must be filled out. Do you understand how they are being used and why they benefit the organization? How many checkup phone calls or emails do you receive from someone who wants to be sure you are staying on task?

All of these actions betray a lack of trust, and they become entrenched because they are part of a system. Systems can be changed. What are you doing to become the change agent?

Accountability, ownership and engagement

Effective supervisors know how to hold their team members accountable. When a worker is given an assignment, does it get done correctly and on time? When this does not happen, what action is taken? Failure to hold people accountable is the hallmark of ineffective leadership. Yet many of us fail in this area because we either forget or never learn the critical importance of accountability. When a worker refuses to be accountable, discipline is essential. The ultimate outcome may be dismissal.

When a warehouse worker performs well because it is part of his or her DNA, that person has taken ownership in the job. Not everyone will do this, but the effective leader must set the example and persuade others to follow.

Engagement happens when a worker feels aligned to the purpose of the job. In many ways, it is similar to ownership, but engagement involves a greater sense of enthusiasm.

In the warehouse, the engaged team members are those who never really need supervision. They do what needs to be done and go on looking for other things to do. In addition to doing the work, they make suggestions for how to do it better.

Management by asking good questions

Instead of just getting product out the door, the effective supervisor tries to spend more time listening to people, soliciting improvements, and taking the initiative to drive change.

That means more than asking “how is it going?”

Consider these questions that stimulate improvement:

- What are one or two changes your team put in place as a result of last week’s huddles?
- Which crewmembers did you recognize for their good ideas?
- What changes have you made?
- Who on your team may be a potential leader?
- What were some new *What Went Well* items you recall from last week’s huddles?

Questions like these are focused on improvement and growth, not just on running the warehouse.

Putting it all together

A great supervisor is a leader, not just a doer. Therefore, a first step to growing great leadership is to understand the difference between doing and leading. In a growing organization, additional supervisors are constantly needed, so a critical task is to find the next leaders. The best warehouse organizations are those that are committed to change. The leaders should be change agents, but sometimes the ideas for change may come from below. Accountability is a hallmark of effective supervision, so a great supervisor is one who knows how to hold people accountable and is willing to discipline those who do not perform.

Finally, your warehousing organization is enhanced when great supervisors know how to ask good questions.

KEN'S COMMENTS

Quieting the digital noise



A hallmark of business life in the current decade is the extent to which we are connected. Forget about computers, even our cell phones allow us to handle text messages and email as well as phone calls. Furthermore, there are no boundaries. A message to Timbuktu is as easy as a call to Peoria. The fact that your colleague may be working nine time zones away may not prevent you from trying to contact him at 2 AM local time.

Some believe that unlimited connectivity has gone too far. Late-night use of your smartphone may not be good for productivity and engagement. One survey indicated that participants were connected to email for 14 or more hours on every weekday, as well as about five hours on weekends. When any manager becomes over committed and overwhelmed, he or she can become a bottleneck. When decisions are made under stress, or reports are not checked for lack of time, the outcome is poor work.

One manager decided that she had had enough. With her boss's permission, she stuck to a 9 to 5 schedule and stayed off-line when not in the office. She checked email

twice, once in the morning and again at the end of the workday. For the rest of her work time, she focused on just one task at a time. She found that she was getting the same quantity of work done in a shorter time, and the quality of the work was noticeably better. Based on the success of her digital detox, Kate Unsworth founded a new company called Vinaya, a Sanskrit term that describes tranquility and discipline. The company is dedicated to helping its clients control the digital noise.

Leadership actions speak louder than words

In a warehousing environment, what you do can be just as important as what you say. Consider these questions:

- When you know that significant change is imminent, do you respect your employees by providing ample advanced notice, emphasizing the why along with the what?
- Are you prepared to answer the universal question: "what's in it for me?"
- When one of your people is assigned to a new job, does she or he know what they are supposed to stop doing or start doing?
- Is there a strategy, and have you shared that strategy with your people?
- When you make a mistake, do you take ownership, or do you shift the blame?
- Do your people know that you welcome their ideas for improvement?

WAREHOUSING TIPS

A new warehousing role for drones

Because the use of a drone has been so widely publicized, most of us assume that delivery is the primary application in logistics. In fact, one drone provider, PINC Solutions, has emphasized drone technology for inventory control. The first application is yard management. Many larger warehouses today use "drop and hook" technology to avoid dock delays, placing both loaded and empty trailers at strategic locations in the yard for later transfer to a dock for handling. Yard management systems have become a supplement to WMS technology to control the locations outdoors. A bigger problem is a physical inventory check to be sure that each trailer is exactly where the system says it should be. This physical check is performed faster and more accurately with a drone than manually. When trailers are used for outdoor storage of spare parts, inventory control becomes particularly critical. Another inventory control challenge is outdoor warehousing of finished vehicles. We learned of one case in which a four-year-old "new" car was discovered buried in the yard next to just manufactured vehicles.

The drone can also be used to check inventory inside the warehouse. The drone verifies the identities of pallets

and bins. It is equipped with a camera to read rack labels, analyze rack content, and fly through the warehouse to check the inventory. Indoor operations are sometimes controlled by a Google SLAM (simultaneous location and mapping).

The perils of warehouse automation

The chief marketing officer of Invata Logistics reminds us of some spectacular failures identified with warehouse automation. A drug chain in New England went out of business as a result of losses connected with an automation system. Quoting DC Velocity magazine, he reported that 48% of software deployment fails to meet the owner's expectations. One of the challenges is a lack of accountability. "Bifurcated delivery" is found in many automation efforts. Responsibilities for success are shared by a materials handling consultant, the automation producer, and a supplier of software. The sad result is that no one of the three is held accountable for the performance of the system.

Fortunately, there are some success stories to go along with the disasters. One hallmark for success is software that is purpose built for the automation system.

In the successful companies, each of the designers has "skin in the game."

Putting products into services

By M. Sawhney, *Harvard Business Review*, September 2016, pg. 84.

While the examples in this article did not include warehousing, logistics service providers can readily adapt the ideas to enhance their service offerings. For example, most warehousing firms offer transportation management, and in today's environment a TMS (transportation management system) is essential. A service provider who develops a customized TMS should be marketing it as a "better mousetrap" that has not been duplicated by competitors. The same principle could apply to other software used in warehouse operations. In an industry where commoditization is a continuing threat, the logistics service provider who makes customized information technology a part of its services can create a unique offering which provides greater margins in return for improved quality.



A remix for voice

By B. Ames, *DC Velocity*, August 2016, pg. 47.

Voice technology for picking orders is now described as a product that has reached maturity. However two things are new. Several suppliers now offer voice picking applications on consumer devices such as smart phones, tablets and smart watches. Voice technology is also employed for business analytics. By capturing data from every interaction in the DC, reports will identify the causes of unnecessary delays and generate predictive analytics that forecast shortages before they occur.



Know your customers "jobs to be done"

By C. Christensen, T. Hall, K. Dillon, and D. Duncan, *Harvard Business Review*, September 2016, pg. 55.

Innovation success rates are low because developers focus too much on customer profiles and not enough on what customers are trying to achieve. Innovation can be more predictable and profitable if you start by identifying jobs that customers are struggling to get done. Then determine what obstacles must be removed to get the job done.



Time to rethink scenarios

By W. Kemmsies, *American Shipper*, August, 2016, pg. 27.

The international logistics environment is best described as VUCA volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. One planner suggests scenario planning. One scenario involves population growth forecasts. Another considers productivity. Foreign exchange rates and fuel are other significant variables. The planner reviews changes that will be made to adapt to each of these moving scenarios.

Making sense of outsourcing

By C. F. Lynch, *DC Velocity*, August 2016, pg. 45.

Outsourcing should always be measured against the alternative of doing the job in house. It is also valuable to include the outsourcing provider in the process at an early stage. Yet many companies buy outsourcing services by the same method they use to buy pig iron or corrugate. Buyers with little or no knowledge of supply chain negotiate for the lowest rate. The author recommends a different approach one that begins not with the RFP but with the RFI (request for information). This exercise will identify one or more providers who might be included in the planning process. It makes good sense to expose the providers knowledge early in the process.



Seven drivers behind WMS decisions

By R. Michel, *Modern Materials Handling*, September 2016, pg. 30.

- ① The first driver is technical obsolescence. Some older WMS products do not have features that are necessary in today's operations.
- ② The second is omni-channel. A growing number of users require this capability.
- ③ If your warehouse is introducing automation, will the system accommodate these changes?
- ④ Labor management systems become critical at a time when prevailing wage is increasing.
- ⑤ Does your system offer inventory visibility?
- ⑥ Fast delivery requirements of today's e-commerce may require kitting, light assembly, and 3-D printing on site.
- ⑦ The newest systems have ability to coordinate with transportation management systems.



Who are the industry's next innovators?

By T. Nightingale, *American Shipper*, Aug. '16, pg. 46.

Logistics innovators in the last century were people like Don Schneider, Malcom McLean and JB Hunt. The new crop of innovative leaders are more digital than physical. They are identified as companies rather than individuals. They include Uber, Airbnb, and Packsize. Each has disrupted the world of logistics.



Getting your warehouse in order

By J. Minghini, *Supply & Demand Chain Executive*, September 2016 pg. 30.

The author lists those things that could limit management's ability to retrofit or design a new warehouse. Money tops the list, since companies need their budget limits. Space is second, since it may or may not be possible to add space at the existing location. Availability of labor is critical. Information systems must be adequate for the new environment.