Impact of Supervisor’s Behaviour on Team Performance

A key function of individuals in supervisory roles is to promote the accomplishment of organisational goals by their subordinates. In a production environment these goals usually include quality and output. The latter is the result of two underlying performance indicators: utilisation and productivity. In a man-driven process (as oppose to machine driven) we define utilisation as the degree to which you use your people during a shift and productivity as the measure of output you get from them while they perform work.

This article deals with different styles of supervisor’s behaviour and how they correlate with the utilisation of a team under supervision. The report is based on observations conducted in eight South African manufacturing environments over the last few years.

Six types of supervisor’s behaviour were defined: active supervision when supervisor engages proactively with workers in order to set and communicate production targets, assures achievement and tries to outperform or prevent downfalls; passive supervision when he/she observes the process and only reacts after approached by the worker; manual work i.e. performs a task which could be performed by a team member; training when on-the-job training with worker is performed; admin when performs administrative work and; away from the team for any reason whatsoever. The study methodology entailed a consultant observing a supervisor and team members for the entire shift. Data from all observations was collected and averages calculated. The results are graphically presented in this diagram.

Labour utilisation in all teams was observed to be very low - between 36 and 55 per cent. Added to this, there was little evidence of direct/active supervision at any level of the operation. The predominant style of management was “passive” (average 25%, standard
deviation 21%) with only 5% (STD DEV 4%) of the time being spent on active management of the workforce. The rest of supervisor’s time was mainly spent on manual work (42%). Significant correlation between time supervisor was away and time team members spent away from their workplaces was found \((r=0.865)\). Average team utilisation was only 49% and 28% of workers’ time was spent on waiting for some unscheduled activity to happen.

After the observation the consultants asked each supervisor to answer few questions from the structured questionnaire. The most interesting answers came from these three questions. When asked how they control the flow of work in their work area they responded: “The people know what to do for the next two weeks, I don’t have to tell them. I just guide them”, “Checking that they stick to what they should do” or “The guys know what to do. If something changes, I will tell them”. When explaining how they measure performance of their team members the most common answer was: “I see what they produce”. In the same time no short interval controls were evident on any shop floor whatsoever. Finally when asked how they allocate work to team members they responded: “You start the next job when you finish. Specs (work standards) are not available but I must go on” or “Work is off-loaded and employees know what to do - work is not handed out to anybody specific”.

The best way to explain the above findings and how they differ from the desired behaviour is to quote the Good Model of supervisor’s behaviour from the Chartered Management Institute (www.managers.org.uk):

- On-line 95% of time; admin is minimal
- Spend time focusing on quality
- Does not interfere once engineering resources are actioning work
- Very good relationships / knows his people
- Asks about their problems or concerns
- Uses the 1-hour boards & quality data to determine remedial action
- Follows up on remedial action until problem solved
- People assigned and coached
- Knows what authority he needs to get his job done
- Proactive, not waiting the instruction from manager
- Coaches without doing the job himself

In our experience, achieving anything over 75% labour utilisation in a man-driven process is very good for South African environment (as a percentage of paid time). A supervisor must spend at least two thirds of his/her time supervising and helping employees to improve their skills and identifying potential problems and preventing them. When a company faces a similar situation as described in this study, the only way forward is to implement the formal Management Control System and the Short Interval Controls in the area.

African Performance Specialists offer Performance Improvement Projects which are ideally designed to ‘sort’ passive behaviour of the supervisory personnel and to implement proactive, corrective action driven, Management Control System.

During the Project definition, a decision must be reached on which measures to use in each particular area (e.g. attendance, first pass yield, output and downtime), how to measure and collect data, how to analyse them and report, and finally, where in the corporate structure this report is needed and would add real value to the decision-making process.

The change process must include all team members and the best is to use internal task force - selected perspective employees from within the company - to assist with the Project implementation, thereby providing an unrivalled opportunity to the company in terms of grooming individuals for future promotion.

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On the improvement route the management and consultants must also review and scrutinise the systems and structures that might inhibit project success. They include:

- How an organisation hires personnel
- How an organisation develops their personnel
- How an organisation rewards and recognises their personnel
- How an organisation assesses performance.

Considerable emphasis during the change process must be placed on developing the appropriate "mind-set", approach, "tools" and skills required in order to effectively differentiate and concentrate on actions and solutions to the root causes of issues and not their more obvious symptoms. Consultants act as facilitators and support the implementation of formal Management Control Systems. They focus on employees and their training and active problem-solving to support the improvement work. The aim is to create long-term opportunities for implementation of sustainable organisational learning capability.

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