



Unit 4

Supervising others

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Adjust to the supervisor's role with confidence.
- ✓ Develop your skills in listening, asking questions, resolving conflict, and giving feedback to employees

Unit 4

Skills required for a Supervisor

Active Listening Techniques

About Active Listening

Active listening means that we try to understand things from the speaker's point of view. It includes letting the speaker know that we are listening and that we have understood what was said. This is not the same as **hearing**, which is a physical process, where sound enters the eardrum and messages are passed to the brain. Active listening can be described as an attitude that leads to listening for shared understanding.

Key Listening Skills

When we make a decision to listen for total meaning, we listen for the content of what is being said as well as the attitude behind what is being said. Is the speaker happy, angry, excited, sad...or something else entirely?

Responding to Feelings

The content (the words spoken) is one thing, but the way that people feel really gives full value to the message. Responding to the speaker's feelings adds an extra dimension of listening. Are they disgusted and angry or in love and excited? Perhaps they are ambivalent! These are all feelings that you can reply to in your part of the conversation.

Reading Cues

Really listening means that we are also very conscious of the non-verbal aspects of the conversation.

- Ñ What are the speaker's facial expressions, hand gestures, and posture telling us?
- Ñ Is their voice loud or shaky?
- Ñ Are they stressing certain points?
- Ñ Are they mumbling or having difficulty finding the words they want to say?

Demonstration Cues

When you are listening to someone, these techniques will show a speaker that you are paying attention, providing you are genuine in using them.

Physical indicators include making eye contact, nodding your head from time to time, and leaning into the conversation.

You can also give **verbal cues** or use phrases such as “Uh-huh,” “Go on,” “Really!” and, “Then what?”

You can use **questions** for clarification or **summarizing statements**. Examples:

- Ñ “Do you mean they were charging \$4.00 for just a cup of coffee?”
- Ñ “So after you got a cab, got to the store, and found the right sales clerk, what happened then?”

Tips for Becoming a Better Listener

- Ñ **Make a decision to listen.** Close your mind to clutter and noise and look at the person speaking with you. Give them your undivided attention.
- Ñ **Don’t interrupt** people. Make it a habit to let them finish what they are saying. Respect that they have thoughts they are processing and speaking about, and wait to ask questions or make comments until they have finished.
- Ñ Keep your **eyes** focused on the speaker and your **ears** tuned to their voice. Don’t let your eyes wander around the room, just in case your attention does too.
- Ñ Carry a **notebook** or start a conversation file on your computer. Write down all the discussions that you have in a day. Capture the subject, who spoke more (were you listening or doing a lot of the talking?), what you learned in the discussion, as well as the who, what, when, where, why, and how aspects of it. Once you have conducted this exercise 8-10 times, you will be able to see what level your listening skills are currently at.
- Ñ Ask a few **questions** throughout the conversation. When you ask, people will know that you are listening to them, and that you are interested in what they have to say. Your ability to summarize and paraphrase will also demonstrate that you heard them.
- Ñ When you demonstrate good listening skills, they tend to be **infectious**. If you want people to communicate well at work, you have to set a high example.

Communication Skills

Questioning Skills

As leaders, we should be spending a lot of our time asking questions and providing answers. When it comes to asking, however, we often aren't aware of our technique. Open questions in particular often give us difficulty, which is unfortunate since they are the most important ones for us to become skilled at using. If you are having trouble with open questions, it can be helpful to get more comfortable with small talk and easing yourself into the conversation at hand.

Open Questions

These are broad, general questions that require your conversation partner to provide more than just a "yes" or "no" answer. They also permit the other person to decide how much information to give.

Open questions can do the following:

- Ñ Give us more information
- Ñ Encourage your conversation partner to speak openly
- Ñ Encourage people to share opinions and ideas
- Ñ Help us determine if people have interpreted what we say accurately

Closed Questions

Closed questions can be answered with a single word or two, such as a simple yes or no. They can begin the closing process in a conversation, or provide confirmation of a detail, but they don't usually lead to a richer conversation or gathering more information. The advantage of closed questions is that they give you control over the questions and the type of answers you receive. Closed questions are easy to interpret and more questions can be answered in less time.

However, closed questions don't allow for detailed explanations or for the other person to share how they feel about a particular circumstance. If you wish to encourage a richer response or to encourage a frustrated person to talk freely, then you need to avoid asking closed questions.

Here are some examples of closed questions:

- Ñ "Does this make you angry?"
- Ñ "Do you think that meeting was fun?"

To open up those same questions, you could try these open-ended statements:

- Ñ “Please explain how you feel about this situation.”
- Ñ “Tell me how you feel about this meeting.”

Probing Techniques

When we do not get enough information by using open-ended questions, we can use probes to expand the conversation.

Verbal and Non-verbal Probes

A probe will encourage your conversation partner to add to their previous response. Verbal probes are often a single word or short phrase. Some examples are:

- Ñ “Tell me more about that.”
- Ñ “That’s interesting. Tell me more.”
- Ñ “Really?”
- Ñ “Why?”
- Ñ “Can you give me a specific example of what you mean?”

Non-verbal probes rely on your body language and gestures to get the same results as a verbal probe. Some examples are:

- Ñ Raising the eyebrows as if you are surprised
- Ñ Nodding
- Ñ Frowning
- Ñ Pursing the lips

Probing Techniques

There are many ways that you can use probing in your conversations. We’ve provided some techniques for you below.

Ask an open question.

Some good questions include:

- Ñ “Can you describe that more clearly?”
- Ñ “Would you give me a specific example of what you mean?”
- Ñ “What do you think we should do?”

You'll soon recognize that if you ask too many of these questions, your conversation partner will feel like they are under interrogation, so use them carefully.

Pause.

Many of us feel uncomfortable when silence overtakes a conversation, and we will fill the silence by expanding on what was said previously.

Use reflective or mirroring questions.

For example, if the employee says "I just don't feel challenged by my work anymore," you may respond by just reflecting back to them, "Challenged?" Then pause. Usually, the other person will provide you with an expanded answer without you asking more questions or interrogating. These kinds of statements also serve to focus or clarify and summarize without interrupting the flow of the conversation. They demonstrate your intent to understand the speaker's thoughts and feelings.

Paraphrase.

Reflect what has just been said in your own words. "So if I understand you correctly, you..." This technique shows that you want to understand your conversation partner and that you want to be accurate. It also allows the sender to hear back what they have said from someone else's point of view.

Use summary questions.

Summary questions are a helpful way of probing and winding up the conversation at the same time. "You have spoken to your colleague about his foul language in the office, you have tried to ignore it, and you remain concerned about the impact his swearing has on our visitors and staff. None of these techniques have worked to reduce the amount of swearing and now you are asking me to intervene. Have I got it right?"

Here is another example: when we asked an employee why it would take until next week to finish the project, one of her reasons was lack of cooperation from the production department.

Rather than come back with yet another question, you might just say "Cooperation..." in a reflective tone of voice, and pause again. Usually, the other person will recognize that reflection as a clue to expand or provide you with additional information.

Summary statements or paraphrases sum up what has been said, and will show that you have listened and absorbed what's being said. Don't use them to take over the dialogue.

What Is Said and What Is Heard

What we say isn't always what the other person hears. Our message goes through a complicated system of filters and outside influences before it reaches the recipient. We must always clarify that the person has received the message that we intended to send.



Managing Our Non-Verbal Messages

Non-verbal messages can be far more important than the words we say. The way we stand, what we do with our hands, the sound of our voice, the way we walk, and the expressions on our face can support, enhance, and even contradict what we say.

In our fast-paced world, we don't have time to get more than a quick snapshot of how a person looks before we make up our mind about them. They are making up their mind about us at the same time, so it is essential that our non-verbal messages are consistent with what we say verbally.

Remember that one important aspect of your role is to encourage employees to learn and grow. If, for example, an employee gets a low rating on some aspect of a performance appraisal, and you as the supervisor notices the employee's flushed face or tight lips, but you do not make any observation about it (and the employee asks for no explanation), you are not likely to stimulate improvement. In an even worse case, you could see even less performance.

The face and the eyes are the most expressive means of non-verbal communication. Additional positive or negative messages are sent by your gestures, posture, and the space between you and the other person.

Positive body language is important to encourage conversation and support your positive intent in meeting with the other person. When we don't pay attention to our non-verbal signals, we often send mixed or confusing messages to people. Get control of your image by working on your non-verbal language.

Giving Feedback

Six Characteristics of Effective Feedback

One goal of feedback is for it to contribute to an improvement in future performance. Even when it does not lead to a desired level of performance, the feedback meeting itself provides the platform to discuss expectations, results, motivation, and how to succeed. For employees who choose not to perform at an adequate level, the meeting serves as a benchmark within the larger performance management arena. If an employee refuses to comply, has been supported and coached to do well, and continues to refuse, then the supervisor has the necessary means to move into a disciplinary performance management plan.

When feedback is perceived to be negative (because of our own behavior, or perhaps because it is not well delivered), people will naturally try to avoid it, or at least minimize the negative effects. However, we need to let people know that it can be a great tool for personal development, especially when we include information on both the issues and the possible solutions. With this in mind, let's delve deeper into the six major characteristics of effective feedback.

In Private

Feedback should be given in private if your comments can be embarrassing, and a formal feedback meeting should always be held in private. While some people like the attention that comes from sincere praise or celebrating an accomplishment in front of others, some do not, and no one wants negativity shared in front of their peers. (This should be apparent without having to state it, but sometimes we get excited and forget!)

Balanced

Balance in this context is about designing the feedback session so that, even though there may be constructive criticism required, the employee does not feel attacked, or that all you have to say about his work is negative. We recommend that you avoid the older form of "sandwich approach" (by making a positive comment, a negative, and then a positive). However, you should still start any feedback with a positive comment about some aspect of the employee's work. If you are not comfortable with this, or not good at small talk, write some comments down ahead of time to keep yourself focused. Your employee will appreciate that you get to the heart of the meeting quickly instead of letting any anxiety build. Feedback that is delivered in specific terms and in a sincere manner is usually accepted well, even when we are receiving criticism.

Relevant

Keep the conversation focused on feedback that is relevant and job related, and to things which the employee has control over. For example, complaining about the way a letter looks when the employee only has access to an ancient printer that adds lines to everything, or asking for a sophisticated looking brochure when there is no budget provided for the proper paper and licensed photography, only adds to the employee’s stress and frustration.

Specific

Avoid general statements when you deliver feedback. “You seem unmotivated,” is not nearly as helpful as, “You arrived late to work at least three days a week, your last two assignments were late, and you did not attend the new employee lunch last week.”

Documented

Base your comments on documentation, facts, and your own observation. Don’t rely on what another manager or a colleague told you, or what someone overheard, when you should be available to monitor what is going on yourself.

Personal (In the Right Way)

Compliments or criticisms that are directed generally toward the team are meaningless to an employee. “We just don’t seem able to get out error-free invoices,” is not as constructive as, “Three of the last invoices you sent out had errors in them.” Describe the behavior that is unsatisfactory, rather than judge a person because of it. Base it on their actions, and don’t make a personal attack on the individual.

Skill Building

Think of somebody at work or at home that has earned some positive feedback. In the space below, describe the situation and the people involved.

Think of somebody at work or at home that you would like to give constructive criticism to. In the space below, describe the situation and the people involved.

Receiving Feedback

Accepting criticism from others can be really difficult. We often hear criticism as a very personal attack on behavior that we already may not be proud of. It helps to think about criticism as feedback and as something to help you improve. This is what we refer to as **positive intent**.

While you may hesitate in doing this, it can be an outstanding opportunity for you to grow. It also means that you are going to follow up a feedback session by asking the other individual if your feedback was helpful, sensitive to their needs, and respectful.

Here are some tips on accepting criticism.

Listen attentively.

Make sure you understand the criticism and what needs improvement. You may even want to paraphrase the other person's remarks.

Ask for details.

Find out as much as you can about the incident(s) described. Ask lots of open ended questions to gather all the information that you can.

Find something to agree with.

You don't need to say that you were wrong if you weren't, but it does do a lot for your own integrity for you to say that you were wrong if you were. Of equal importance, you need to acknowledge the person's right to criticize and to recognize the importance of the person's concerns. If you cannot agree with the

other person about any aspect of the criticism being offered, you could be perceived as rejecting the person as well.

Try not to take their comments personally.

If they've learned anything about offering feedback, they will know they need to speak to your behaviors and not your personal self, but not everyone knows this. Consider that they are being brave and offering feedback (not an easy thing for most people to do) as an opportunity to improve yourself.

Giving Instructions

Understanding Learning Styles

We can learn by seeing, by hearing, and by doing, but we usually have a preference for one method or another. Depending on what we are learning, we may need things shared with us in different ways. When we are working with employees, we must use all three of these learning styles in order to make our instructions stick.

Do you need to see someone's name written down before you can remember it? That is an indication (not a guarantee) that you are a visual learner. This means you learn best by seeing your new skill being done by someone else, or you need to see directions on a map before you understand where you are going. On the other hand, if you need to actually say somebody's name before you remember it, or if you only understand a problem by talking it through, or reading it out loud, you may be an aural learner, meaning you need to hear what you are trying to understand.

Still others aren't really going to get the gist of any skill until they actually do it themselves, or incorporate some kind of physical activity. Kinesthetic learners have to be doing something, like completing the spreadsheet, or talking with the customer. During training they may be doodling or appear distracted, but they need the physical activity in order to register what's being said.

Obstacles to Effective Instructions

Lack of Preparation

Inadequate preparation on our part can lead to problems. If we aren't clear about the steps involved, forget to tell the employee which steps require independent action and which must go by the book, or try to foresee potential problems and forewarn the employee, we can create obstacles for everyone later on. What steps can we take to make sure this doesn't happen?

Vague Instructions

Many people are afraid of asking questions because they are afraid of appearing stupid, so we don't always get the feedback we need about how others perceive our instructions. Similarly, we aren't always aware of how we are making our needs known. For example, when you want others to do things your way, you can choose orders, requests, or suggestions. (We will discuss these terms more after lunch.)

Jumping to Conclusions

Don't assume what the employee knows or doesn't know. Ask questions, and make your instructions a two-way process.

Orders, Requests, and Suggestions

Suggestions are just that – suggestions – and you shouldn't use this style of asking if you want something done, and done within a specific time frame. Saying, "Jamie, it might be a good idea to turn off the valve," is a passive way to get work done. Don't be surprised to learn that Jamie thinks he has a choice now, to turn off the water or not to turn off the water, as he sees fit.

Defining the Terms

Giving orders is a telling style of getting things done. It's still used frequently, even though most of us hate to be told what to do. As a supervisor, only give orders when you have to (for example, because of a safety issue or because of an emergency). In giving orders, we would expect an employee to obey instantly without hesitation. We shouldn't use them more than absolutely needed, and when we need that instant reaction. (For example: "Jamie, shut off the water valve.")

Making requests are our usual way of getting things done. We ask rather than tell, and we apply good manners to what we do. (For example: "Jamie, would you please shut off that valve.") We will use these most of the time. To further aid in getting the response we want, it can be useful to include a time frame for the task. (Example: "Jamie, can you get that valve turned off before the technician arrives at lunchtime?")

Test your knowledge

Define orders, requests, and suggestions. Then, come up with an example for each and illustrate when to use each method.

	Definition	Example	When to Use
Orders			
Requests			
Suggestions			

Further Reading:

- ✓ Canfield, Jack, Mark Victor Hansen, and Lee Hewitt. *The Power of Focus*. HCI, 2000.
- ✓ Gladwell, Malcolm. *Outliers: The Story of Success*. Little, Brown, and Company, 2008.
- ✓ Godin, Seth. *Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us*. Penguin, 2008.
- ✓ Kouzes, James M., and Barry Z. Posner. *The Leadership Challenge (5th Edition)*. Jossey-Bass, 2012.