



10 ROADBLOCKS TO SUPERVISION

*The path to successful supervision comes with some challenging roadblocks.
We've compiled these tips for overcoming ten of them.*

#10.

Misreading Communication Styles

Communication styles and work styles vary considerably, and it is easy to misread what employees are saying or intending to say if you do not pay attention to their particular styles. Are your employees more fact-driven, more “get-to-the-point-already,” or are they more interactive, more “let’s talk this through”? Although everyone needs to learn how to communicate effectively with others, supervisors have a greater burden in being flexible in how they communicate to different audiences. Your HR staff can guide you to training programs on identifying communication, work, and learning styles and how to use that knowledge to facilitate understanding.

#9.

Dreading Difficult Interactions

No one wants to be told they are doing something wrong, and no one wants to tell someone they are doing something wrong, so discussing performance or conduct issues with an employee can be nerve-racking. What if they yell or cry? What if I don’t know what to say? What if they see me sweat? Thorough preparation can alleviate some of the dread and make the conversation more productive: Be sure to have your facts in place; know the rules or expectations that have been set already; refresh your memory on previous conversations on this issue; anticipate what the employee might say or do and have a response at the ready. Difficult conversations are as much a physical event as they are a verbal event – practice will help get your body prepared for the emotions and keep you focused. HR is available to help you think through the conversation in advance and can guide you to training programs where you can practice your ability to keep these conversations on-track.

#8.

Treating Employees Inconsistently

“Inconsistency” is often in the eye of the beholder. Regardless of what actions you might take, nothing happens in a vacuum, and employees will make assumptions about consistency in your practices. This is complicated by the fact that personnel issues are confidential, so you cannot give other employees the full story. HR can assist you in determining appropriate, consistent, and equitable action and how to address issues with the team to minimize “churn” as much as possible. Sometimes supervisors hesitate to act because they have not addressed similar problems previously. If so, then draw that line in the sand: Set and clarify expectations, hold future matters to that standard, and apply treatment consistently going forward.

#7.

Jumping to Conclusions

Everyone makes a small mistake now and then. Nitpicking generally causes more distress for your team than not sweating the occasional small stuff. Not every mistake requires strong action; apply gentle course correction as appropriate to keep an employee on track. If you find you’re spending more and more time making those corrections, then all those little problems have become a larger one and may need to be addressed more formally. Likewise, don’t jump to discipline before gathering sufficient information. Always provide the employee an opportunity to explain the situation as they understand it before acting. Your role as supervisor is both enforcer of rules and protector of your staff, so be sure you are working with complete information. Once you’ve heard both sides of the issue, you may find the employee was not at fault – or not as much at fault – as you thought.

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#6.

Leaving HR out of the Loop

Often, and often with good intentions, supervisors won't want "to get HR involved" and will try to address issues informally on their own, or optimistically assume things will get better on their own. Then, six months later, things have gotten out of control and some crucial steps or opportunities have been missed along the way. This is especially true with medically-related issues, which often become very complex, very quickly. Touching base with HR doesn't have to be a lot of effort. It's fine to give HR a "heads up" on an issue and how you are addressing it. If we see any red flags at the time, we will let you know, but at least we will have some familiarity if the matter later progresses down a bad path. HR also may be able to provide you information on other policies, programs, or best practices to address the situation more effectively before it becomes a mess.

#5.

Hoping It Will Go Away on Its Own

To avoid confrontation, resentment, bad behavior, or "exposure" of a problem, you might decide to lock the door to your office, crank up some music, and hope it all goes away. Normally, it won't. Don't be that supervisor who calls HR 10 years later (it's happened) to say they are finally fed up and want the employee gone. Don't settle for 10 years of poor performance! Addressing issues as they come up will either resolve them (and you may get 10 years of quality performance) or potentially begin the disciplinary process (and you may get 9-10 years of quality performance – from a new employee). Also remember: It is much harder for an employee to fix a problem if they have never been told there is a problem. You might not be doing the employee any favors by 'letting it slide this time' and not bringing it to their attention. Give them the chance to succeed.

#4.

Not Providing Clear Direction

It is difficult for an employee to meet your performance expectations if the employee has not received clear guidance on those expectations. Do you change your mind a lot? Do you rush off while explaining what you want to your employees to do without giving them an opportunity to ask for clarity? A little time spent setting expectations early on will often save time in the long run. For SHRA employees, the performance plan provides a means to set expectations, but there are lots of other reference points in the workplace: policies, procedures, protocols, clarifying memos, etc. Be sure your employees are aware of these resources so that they can take ownership of getting any additional information they might need. And, most importantly: Keep the lines of conversation open.

#3.

Not Documenting along the Way

When giving a performance rating on an appraisal, or when taking corrective action, ask yourself: What information do I have to show that taking this step is appropriate and defensible? With chaos flying at you left and right each day, it's easy to lose track of an issue or forget the specifics three or four months down the road. Be sure to document conversations regarding performance expectations, make a plan with the employee for resolving the issue, and send the employee a summary email so that both of you have a common reference point. If things aren't resolved, then you will have a document trail to show how you addressed the issue along the way. And remember: Documentation is just as important for justifying rewards as it is for justifying discipline.

#2.

Making Poor Hiring Decisions

The best way to avoid an employee relations problem is not to hire one. In the effort to fill vacancies quickly, supervisors sometimes cut corners and as a result, do not get as full a picture of their prospective employee as they could have. Some tips: Call several references (HR can provide you a reference questionnaire/template to use when calling); probe discrepancies on the application or resume during the interview (if something doesn't make sense or sends up a red flag, then ask about it); use a diverse interview committee (multiple perspectives are crucial); and ask behavior-based questions (get beyond yes/no; use open-ended questions about how the candidate would react to or approach a specific situation). For new SHRA employees, the probationary period provides an extension of the hiring process to give you additional time to assess if the new hire is a good fit for the organization.

#1.

Just Too Busy to Deal with It Right Now

We get it. We've all been tasked with doing much more with much less. Sometimes it feels like you can't put out one fire before the next two flare up. And, as part of the leadership of your institution, you're always striving to produce the best of the best in every aspect of the University's mission. Although providing clarity up front and taking corrective action when needed may be time-consuming, our experience has been that in the long run, these steps make for less time and frustration than spending every day compensating for mistakes that could have been corrected or avoided long ago. Also: Help your organization be selective about designating supervisory roles. Build your organizational structure with fewer supervisory positions that have more time and greater expertise for supervising.