

# Forum

## “Telling Isn’t Training” – and Other Reasons for Supervisor Training

by Dr. Barbara Carnes

**Case #1:** The Smith Company is in a tight spot. One of their former employees is suing them for wrongful termination based on age discrimination. The supervisor became upset with the worker and told him, “You’re such a fossil! If you’re not careful, you’ll be history.”

The next week, the supervisor told him to clear out his stuff and leave. Three days later the supervisor notified the Human Resources Department. The HR representative discovered the supervisor had not documented any incidents of poor work or unacceptable behavior, and had not given any formal warnings to the employee.

The company has a policy and specific procedures to follow for discipline and termination. But the supervisor didn’t know about them. He also didn’t realize that his angry comment to the “fossil” could mean a charge of age discrimination.

**Case #2:** Several supervisors at the Jones Company had

looked up the company policy on paid time off and interpreted it to mean that two of their workers with seriously ill family members could have paid time off, on top of their allotted vacation and sick time.

One employee was off work for four months and a second employee was off the job for two months, both of them on full pay the entire time.

***Both of these situations could have been avoided if the supervisors had received training.***

The supervisors meant well; they intended to follow company policy, but they misunderstood it. Their error was costly in dollars as well as in precedent.

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### From the President

Most lawsuits begin because someone goofed and, frankly, the people in the position to make the most errors are the first line supervisors. In small companies, these folks often are promoted from the ranks and put in charge with little or no training. They struggle with separating themselves from their former peers, learning company policies and procedures, complying with federal and state laws, and, generally trying to do a good job. None of this is easy.



Lois Vander Waerd

In this issue, Barbara Carnes discusses supervisory training – why it’s important; how to determine the kind of training needed; and monitoring the training effectiveness. **In other words, making training stick.**

Training your supervisors is part of good management and good preventive law. If you haven’t provided training for your supervisors, call Barbara and talk with her about it. She can help you design a program appropriate for your company and for your supervisors.

Lois Vander Waerd, President  
**The Employment Partnership**

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termination policy and on paid time off policy. Whether your company is a multi-million dollar company or has a small number of employees, whether you have hundreds or even thousands of managers and supervisors, or you have only one or two, they need to be trained.

It makes good economic sense to train managers and supervisors to comply with current employment laws and regulations.

Training supervisors will ensure that they:

- comply with state and federal employment laws,
- get maximum effectiveness and productivity from every employee,
- deal with poor performance,
- hire the best employee for every job, and
- retain good employees.

The average person works at only 60% of their capability. A skilled supervisor can increase this by:

- delegating effectively,
- knowing how to coach, train, and develop employees,
- helping people deal with change effectively,
- reducing and resolving conflict among workers and conflict between departments, and
- knowing how to motivate people.

In addition to these skills,

supervisors and managers need to be able to hire well, handle performance problems, and terminate when necessary.

Supervisors and managers need skills to **hire the best worker** for each position. Too often the interview consists of one question, "tell me about yourself," followed by a lengthy monologue on the company and anything else the supervisor wants to talk about.

Skilled, trained supervisors know how to ask key questions to determine the candidate's previous experience as it relates to the current opening. They also know how to assess specific skills the candidate possesses, and key characteristics and attitudes that will be important to perform the job and to fit into the company's culture.

Training supervisors on a questioning technique known as **behavior-based interviewing** will help them make better hiring decisions.

In addition, supervisors need to **deal with unacceptable or borderline performance**. In the past, poor performers were either tolerated or terminated, but today's organizations need to make every possible effort to turn poor performers into productive workers.

Of course there are times when the only solution for poor performance is termination, but considering today's tight labor market it is not always possible to hire a replacement for a terminated employee.

In fact, a growing number of managers are reporting that the people they have hired to replace terminated workers

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## Considerations for hiring a training consultant

- ✓ How well do they understand your company and the industry?
- ✓ What training/teaching methods do they use?
- ✓ What means will be used - by them and/or your company - to evaluate the effectiveness of the training?
- ✓ Have you - or anyone whose judgment you trust - actually seen them train?
- ✓ How will the supervisors in your organization respond to the content of the training? To the training methods?
- ✓ Are the training materials written in language your supervisors will understand and relate to?

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have often been poorer performers than the people they fired, assuming they were able to find replacements at all – and some were not.

Better to first use techniques to manage people so their performance improves to acceptable levels. Terminate only if all else fails.

Supervisors need to learn skills related to **performance improvement** that include how to:

- Set and communicate performance expectations,
- Give feedback on performance,
- Set improvement goals,
- Document incidents of good and poor performance,
- Tie documentation together and complete a meaningful evaluation of overall employee performance in pre-determined categories,
- Administer progressive discipline,
- Evaluate performance, and communicate performance evaluations,
- Coach for better performance,
- Comply with applicable federal and state laws regarding discipline and termination,
- Listen and communicate effectively.

Supervisors need training so they can **keep good workers**. Recent surveys and exit interview data show that the major-



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ity of people leave their jobs because they are unhappy with their supervisor and the way they are managed.

Workers get turned off when their contributions and opinions are not valued. Companies with cultures of high involvement,

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flexibility, and respect for workers are companies that have low rates of turnover. Considering that the average cost of turnover is 3-5 times the annual salary of each position, this cost savings is significant.

#### Who should conduct the training?

The answer depends on:

- The size of the company and the total number of supervisors/managers to be trained,
- Whether or not they are all in the same geographic location,
- If someone in the company is capable of conducting the training and has the available time to do it,

- How many supervisors the company anticipates training in the future.

If the organization is very small with fewer than ten supervisors to be trained, an outside seminar may be the best alternative.

At external seminars, supervisors can share ideas with people from many different organizations; however, sometimes issues discussed and topics covered don't apply to some of the supervisors' situations, organizations, or industries.

Other drawbacks are that the content may be too elementary and that too much time is often spent on sales pitches for books and tapes. So, if possible, it is best to train them internally rather than send people to an outside seminar.

If the organization has more than ten people to be trained, several different options are available. Let's take these one at a time.

1. Enlisting someone within the company, usually someone from HR, to develop the materials and conduct the training may appear to be very cost

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effective – and it can be. But developing materials for training takes more time than most people realize.

Rather than using participative training, inexperienced trainers are tempted to dump out a lot of information, which the trainees soon forget.

Developing and conducting the training internally seldom makes sense. However, conducting the training with purchased, off-the-shelf materials may be an attractive option.

2. There are a number of high quality supervisor training programs to choose from. Some of these programs require certification and license agreements.

3. An outside consultant is the best option if no one in the company is available or able to do the training. The consultant should spend time getting to know the organization and employees before beginning the training, and he/she should be willing to customize the training. Prices and quality vary greatly, so consider several consultants before making a selection.

4. If the people to be trained are widely dispersed geographically or if their schedules make it difficult to attend training, **eLearning** is an option. Off-the-shelf supervisor programs are available on CD or on the web; however, this is a very new field and quality varies widely from vendor to vendor.

**How much time will the training take and what will it cost?**

A good supervisor training curriculum will take 15-40 hours. Don't try to cover the information in a shorter period of time. Remember your goal is for the supervisors to learn information and skills that they will be able to remember and apply to their work. If supervisors get too much information in too short a time period, they not only won't remember what they learned, but also won't be able to use it on the job.

The total cost of supervisor training will vary somewhat depending on the option selected. A good rule of thumb is between \$20 and \$30 per contact hour per person.

If training materials are going to be purchased, trainer certification or license fees may be necessary and these costs should be considered, along with the cost of the materials themselves.

**How do we monitor the effectiveness of the training?**

Before the training begins, plan, plan, and plan.

- Be clear about what the supervisors should learn in the training.
- Use a questionnaire or an informal survey to get ideas from upper management and from the workers who report to the supervisors.
- Review any exit interview data for information on why workers have resigned/quit.

- Talk to the supervisors themselves about what they believe they need to do a better job supervising.

During the training, solicit feedback from the participants. Make mid-course corrections if necessary.

After the training:

- Ask participants to complete a short evaluation form,
- Collect these forms and then pass along the information to the trainer,
- Solicit informal feedback from the participants.

Several weeks after the training, solicit feedback from the participants, their employees, and their bosses. What has been most useful and how are they using it on the job?

Spending time and money on supervisor training is a smart thing to do. The benefits of reduced liability, increased worker and supervisor satisfaction, and higher retention make it a worthwhile investment. ■

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