

# Frontline Supervisor

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## This Issue

### The Nature of Improvement: How To Get It Done

*"Continual improvement is an unending journey."—Lloyd Dobens*

#### Organizational Services

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It's true that not everyone could be a Michael Jordan on the basketball court, or his equivalent in the district court. Noted researcher K. Anders Ericsson, however, cannot identify anything so unusual in Jordan's physique, compared with other tall athletes, that would adequately account for his heads-above-others accomplishments. His success, and success for the rest of us, depends upon making small, incremental improvements in what we do every day.

If you think back to your first day on a job you held, you will remember something unfamiliar — a software program, some procedures, or new tasks. Over time, perhaps without even thinking about it, you acquired greater mastery. Mastery includes knowledge of what you are doing, an understanding of the tools and resources necessary to accomplish the job, and ever-greater efficiency. Perhaps the adage, "work smarter, not harder," applies in many situations to personal improvement in the workplace. In addition, because most employees work with others, improvement also has a cooperative application. Not only might individuals improve on a continuous basis, but so do work groups, in official as well as unofficial teams.

Ericsson describes the path to excellence as one of "deliberate practice". There are three essential aspects to deliberate practice. The first, and most obvious, is practice itself, repeating a process or procedure over and over again. The second aspect involves receiving feedback. The third aspect involves refining practice or fine-tuning it based on feedback.

It is not only important for supervisors to train employees initially, but to offer feedback periodically, on an ongoing basis, so that employees will improve how they do things. Additionally, when supervisors employ a work paradigm of refining and reevaluating their own strategies, the result is a more energized team and department.

Such a department will offer better customer service, or higher quality municipal service, as well as greater innovation applied to development or implementation of various technologies.

*"Without continual growth and progress, such words as improvement, achievement, and success, have no meaning." – Benjamin Franklin*

Supervisors can implement a path to improvement utilizing the following five principles and techniques:

**1) Purpose fuels performance better than rewards.** When employees find intrinsic motivation and purpose in what they do, they generate positive energy that contributes to the atmosphere and productivity of the workplace. Money, an extrinsic motivator, is certainly a main reason to work; but researchers consistently find that there is no correlation between income level and happiness. Author David Myers writes, "Once we're comfortable, more money provides diminishing returns." More money does not guarantee a better worker. Supervisors, capitalizing on this notion will make sure to notice and affirm the contribution and importance of each employee, and offer challenges that recognize his or her skills and interests.

**2) Modeling the best qualities of leadership and participation** results in employees who identify with those qualities and who strive to employ them. As Stephen Covey writes in his book, *The 8<sup>th</sup> Habit*, "Modeling is not the work of just an individual; it's the work of a team.... [In a team] you're not there to find and focus on others' weaknesses. You're there to make up for their weaknesses as they make up for yours. No one has all strengths, and very few people can be excellent in all roles. Mutual respect becomes the moral imperative."

Spring 2009

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**3) Balance stress and recovery.** Experts on maximizing our energy both at work and at home, Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz write, "Balancing stress and recovery is critical in managing energy in all facets of our lives. Too much energy expenditure without sufficient recovery eventually leads to burnout and breakdown...too much recovery without sufficient stress leads to atrophy and weakness." Supervisors can reduce negative energy in a team or department by challenging employees to reach higher levels of effort and accomplishment while encouraging productive breaks as well as time for debriefing and team building. While too much downtime leads to boredom and lack of emotional investment in the job, non-stop and unappreciated work leads to low morale, and a poor attitude. Supervisors can also model their own skills at balancing energy input and output at work.

*"Just as energy is the basis of all life, and ideas the source of innovation, so innovation is the spark of all human change, improvement and progress." — Ted Levitt*

**4) Use mind sculpture to get results.** "Mind sculpture" is a catchy phrase for a tried and true strategy for improvement that athletes have known about for years. If you rehearse in your mind, or imagine yourself doing something, it primes you to actually succeed in doing it. The nervous system doesn't make big distinctions between mental imaging and actually doing something. Add to your mental rehearsal an imagined positive result from your actions. Robert Maurer, PhD, an expert on changing businesses through *kaizen* methods, suggested mind sculpture to a supervisor who neglected to give annual reviews or praise to his employees. Morale sunk. Employees complained and resented their workload. Maurer writes, "Psychological research shows that people who feel underappreciated tend to resent criticism and ignore advice they're given."

Maurer suggested to the supervisor that he spend 30 seconds a day imagining himself giving a small compliment to one of his employees for a month. The second month he performed the same imaging work with his family, and the third month he imagined giving one compliment and one piece of advice. By the time the annual reviews came around the supervisor did them without prompting and began to enjoy complimenting the people in his work and home life, thus raising the morale and finding that he now enjoyed a much more mutually supportive environment.

*"What you get by achieving your goals is not as important as what you become by achieving your goals." — Zig Zigler*

**5) Take a small step rather than doing nothing even if the problems seem significant.** It's natural to think big problems need big solutions. But that way of thinking often stalls headway. More useful than asking, "How can I fix this situation?" is "How can I improve this situation?" Research bears out that taking one small step toward improving the experience of workers and customers often has dramatic results and often leads to second and third steps. As an example, a mere apology, or "thank you" to a customer for waiting patiently, has been shown to turn a negative situation into a positive one. In one office where, due to layoffs, the remaining employees were overwhelmed, the supervisor bought inexpensive *Above and Beyond* stickers that she put on colored paper in a small frame and gave them out at opportune moments to individuals. Another supervisor took one employee in her group, every other day, for a coffee break at her expense to chat about ideas for office improvement. This offered each employee both a short refreshment break, and his/her supervisor's undivided attention.

*"Strive for continuous improvement, instead of perfection." — Kim Collins*