



Supervising Difficult Direct Reports: Tips and Guidance for New Managers

Part 9 in a 12-Part Series on Helping First-Time Managers and Seasoned, But Untrained, Supervisors Transition to Effective Leaders

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About the Supervisory Basics Article Series

The transition from an individual contributor to a supervisory or managerial role is one of the most critical and difficult career moves.

Representing the largest pool of management talent in most companies, supervisors prove critical to an organization's success. Companies that develop superior leaders in these supervisory positions can execute more effectively than their competition.

This article, *Supervising Difficult Direct Reports: Tips and Guidance for New Managers*, is based on Module #9 from [The Supervisory Basics Series](#), a 12-Part Series on Helping Individual Contributors and Seasoned, But Untrained, Supervisors Transition to Effective Leaders.

The Supervisory Basics Series consists of 12 individual yet linked two-hour modules, delivered in leader-led or eLearning formats, helping managers understand the management behaviors and tactics required to ensure their own and their company's success.



More information on The Supervisory Basics Series can be found at the conclusion of this article.

Listen to the Supervisory Basics Podcast Series: *Tips for Managers and HR Professionals on Helping Individual Contributors Transition to Effective Leaders*. [Available on iTunes](#).

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Introduction

It is an unpleasant but true fact of life that new supervisors and managers frequently deal with direct reports – or others – who deliberately try to make life difficult. Other times, an employee’s behavior, such as absenteeism, tardiness, constant complaining or violation of compliance issues will necessitate a quick, effective and firm intervention on the part of the new manager. New managers or supervisors who don’t know how to handle these difficult situations can quickly lose their credibility and effectiveness. This article will discuss:

- How to deal with persistent trouble makers.
- How to respond effectively to grievances.
- Tactics for dealing with problematic issues such as absenteeism, tardiness, sexual harassment, and outside problems.
- Handling “rush requests” and crises.
- Addressing workplace complaints.

Trouble Makers

Unfortunately, there are times when an employee may purposefully try to make a new manager look ineffective or foolish. The employee may not cooperate with the new manager’s requests or else repeatedly challenge the authority of the new manager. He or she might also complain constantly about the new manager’s competence, try to get under the new manager’s skin or try to “win” in some fashion.

The correct way for a new manager to respond to inappropriate comments or actions is to:

- Use a firm tone of voice.
- Avoid anger. Keep your “cool”.
- Allow no argument. Keep focused on the issue.
- If necessary, articulate the consequences of this negative behavior.

Usually, confronting the issue directly and in a timely fashion either stops the behavior or else drives it underground. If the negative behavior goes underground, the new manager needs to stay aware and begin formal disciplinary action when the opportunity presents itself.

An important key for the new manager to remember is not to fight, argue or play the employee’s “game”. In addition, he or she needs to deal with

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the situation, not simply hope it will go away on its own. Other employees will be watching closely to see how the new supervisor deals with these difficult situations and people. If the difficult situation is not dealt with, more difficult problems with that employee and others will arise down the road, and the new supervisor will have even less legitimate authority to deal with those problems. New supervisors may be tempted to simply transfer the difficult employee to some other department. While tempting, this is never a good solution since the new manager will have effectively been held “ransom” by the bad behavior and will have even provided a reward for bad behavior. A downward spiral begins whereby others will see the new manager as weak, and he or she will begin to cultivate a poor reputation at the company. High performers become demotivated and the performance culture suffers.

Handling Grievances

No matter what the subject or context of the grievance, there is a prototypical standard practice that new managers can follow to enhance the chances of a satisfactory resolution:

- Listen carefully and ask for clarification to make sure you fully understand the nature of the grievance.
- If the matter requires getting further information from others – let the employee know that the matter will be looked into and that a prompt response will be forthcoming. It is important to keep in mind that many times the employee putting forth the grievance is actually part of the problem. Knowing all the sides to the story is a critical part of the process.
- If the grievance is at all serious, discuss it with your boss and H.R.
- Once all the relevant information is gathered, consider all possible options for the resolution.
- Select the best option, dialogue with the direct report about that option avoiding a “this or nothing” approach.
- Implement the solution once agreement is reached. However, agreement is not required as the manager is the boss.
- Follow up later to ensure the issue has been solved.

On occasion, employees may feel uncomfortable bringing a grievance directly to the boss and would rather talk to H.R. If the employee isn't overtly attempting to undermine the supervisor's position or authority, it is appropriate to provide access to the alternative source.

Tardiness and Absenteeism

Being at work when required is a condition of employment – not a performance issue. Performance has to do with the quality or quantity of the performance that an employee completes. There is no performance when the employee is not at work. New managers need to let employees know that they must adhere to the organization's policies on time off, what to do when absent, and the policies regarding vacation time.

The simple practice of having to explain directly to a manager why someone will be late or absent often stops frivolous absenteeism.

In addition, a good personal rule to follow is to require employees to talk directly to you as the manager whenever they will be late or absent and not simply leave voice or text messages or tell co-workers. The simple practice of having to explain directly to a manager why someone will be late or absent often stops frivolous absenteeism.

Tardiness guidelines include:

- Make sure all employees know your expectations around being on time and leaving early. This should be done at one meeting so everyone has the same specific message.
- Let employees know that it is their responsibility to take measures that allow them to be on time to work and to leave on time.
- Don't ignore a tardiness or early departure. It is another defining moment and can impact a new manager's credibility with others.
- Differentiate the issue when the employee does not call or make requests about issues regarding time away from the job vs. situations where they come to the new manager for time off requests.
- If the issue is chronic, or if there is no change to the pattern, take formal action according to organizational policies.

Sexual Harassment/Hostile Work Environment

A hostile work environment is unwelcome behavior of any sort that makes an employee feel uncomfortable, fearful or powerless, or interferes with their work. Sexual harassment can happen to anyone – male or female, student or adult employee. Instances can include language, non-verbal communication or even pictures or displays that make people feel uncomfortable or self-conscious; overt, unwanted flirting; and comments regarding performance that have a gender basis.

Zero tolerance regarding sexual harassment and/or a hostile work environment should be the rule. If an issue does come up, the new manager should never attempt to cover it up. Instead, immediately inform the boss. Depending on the severity of the situation, you may want make

sure that the employee has stated that the offending behavior is unwelcome and let the offending employee know that any future behavior will result in formal action.

Outside Problems

At times, an employee's problems outside the workplace will interfere with his or her work. At that point in time, it is critical that the new manager not try to become a counselor to the employee. Instead, the new manager needs to:

- Clarify expectations and standards (in other words, what is this employee responsible for and what does good work look like?) Hold the employee accountable for normal performance expectations.
- If performance continues to slip, offer help through your organization's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) representative.
- Be willing to be flexible, to the degree possible, if the worker chooses EAP/human resource assistance.
- Take recommendations from an EAP or H.R. representative as to what can be done to help the employee get back on track.
- If the person refuses to seek assistance, the manager needs to be clear that no flexibility will be given and that there will be no tolerance for performance below an acceptable standard.
- Monitor performance closely (daily or weekly) and follow through with the organization's formal process if there is no effort to turn the performance around.

Rush Requests and Crises

There will always be situations at any organization that trump the normal work processes. However, it is incumbent on the new manager to learn the work requirements so that he/she can tell the difference between a legitimate "rush request" or emergency and requests from individuals for their personal interest. Follow the following process:

- Verify the legitimacy of the request. Who is driving the change?
- Keep the boss informed.
- Ask questions to fully understand the nature and impact of the request and why other work has to be put on delay.
- When the request comes from the boss, ask questions and let the boss know the tradeoffs.

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- If meeting the commitment requires support from others, document it in notes or email, and let those who must help meet the request know the deadlines for their support and the business consequences of failure to furnish the necessary support.
- Stay on top of progress, provide timely status reports to the boss, and be prepared to provide instant status reports at any time.

Conclusion

Any of the above situations, from persistent troublemakers to problematic issues such as absenteeism, tardiness, sexual harassment, and outside problems, can happen to a new manager. Developing the ability to skillfully handle these unwelcome situations is a valuable talent and a worthwhile undertaking.

The key points for new managers to remember are:

- Handle people who want to make him/her look bad in a firm and timely manner.
- Get the facts first regarding grievances – then handle them consistently.
- Treat absenteeism and tardiness as a condition of employment.
- Have a zero tolerance approach to sexual harassment.
- Never play counselor for an “outside problem.”
- Learn to differentiate between a legitimate emergency and someone who simply wants their work done first.

In the next article (article 10 of our 12-article series), we will discuss how to build and use your influence potential, how to build effective power bases, and use those power bases to effectively and appropriately manage employees.

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If you enjoyed this article, please [visit our website](#) to access other articles in this 12-part series on Supervisory Basics.

About the Supervisory Basics Series

The [Supervisory Basics Series](#) is based on extensive analysis of the competencies required of transitioning individual contributors and seasoned, but untrained, supervisors. This series provides the knowledge, tools and skills to immediately establish a leadership role and

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helps participants understand how to avoid the typical traps of new supervisors and managers.

The Supervisory Basics Series helps managers understand the management behaviors and tactics required to ensure their own and their company's success. The result is managers establishing themselves in a legitimate position of power, inspiring superior performance and promoting open, effective communication.

Supervisory Basics also helps beginning managers avoid common new manager traps – lack of clarity in expectations, ineffective communications, not establishing personal power and failing to move from “doer” to leader. Such negative behaviors lead to absenteeism, low morale, and lost productivity and customer loyalty, as well as increased attrition.

The series consists of 12 individual yet linked two-hour modules, delivered in leader-led or eLearning formats. Companies can choose flexible implementation, including an integrated 3-day series, stand-alone sessions, mix and match, and external facilitator or train-the-trainer options. Participants will learn to build credibility, establish legitimate position power, earn personal power, “manage up,” understand legal basics and conduct purposeful workplace discussions.

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