



## **A Call to Action:**

# Improving First-Level Supervision of Federal Employees



A Report to the President and the Congress of the United States  
by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board



U.S. MERIT SYSTEMS PROTECTION BOARD  
1615 M Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20419-0001

May 2010

The President  
President of the Senate  
Speaker of the House of Representatives

Dear Sirs and Madam:

In accordance with the requirements of 5 U.S.C. §1204(a)(3), it is my honor to submit this Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) report, *A Call to Action: Improving First-Level Supervision of Federal Employees*. The purpose of this report is to examine the effectiveness of Federal first-level supervisors and how well agencies select, develop, and manage them.

First-line supervisors, as the nexus between Government policy and action, are critical to productivity, employee engagement, and workplace fairness. Because a supervisor's primary responsibility is to accomplish work through others, supervisory positions—even at the first level—have distinctive responsibilities and skill requirements. Even when it is essential, technical competence alone does not enable supervisors to effectively perform critical functions such as planning work, communicating agency policies, rating employee performance, and setting pay.

Therefore, it is essential that agencies have valid selection criteria and processes, comprehensive training programs, good communication and support networks, and sound accountability mechanisms for their first-level supervisors. Unfortunately, we found continuing deficiencies in all of these areas. In particular, agencies often give too little weight to supervisory skill or potential when filling first-level supervisory positions, and too little attention to supervisory training, development and feedback afterward. The common consequence is suboptimal first-level supervision.

In addition to discussing how well Federal agencies are managing first-level supervisors, this report recommends specific measures to improve the management and performance of first-level supervisors. I believe that you will find this report useful as you consider these and other issues regarding the future of the Federal civil service.

Sincerely,

Susan Tsui Grundmann

Enclosure



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by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Federal supervisors are the nexus between Government policy and action and the link between management and employees. They ensure that the decisions made by the President and Congress are implemented through the information and services provided by employees to the American public. Organizational research consistently demonstrates that supervisory proficiency is a major determinant of individual and organizational performance and employee motivation, engagement, and retention. However, numerous studies conducted over the past three decades by both Federal agencies and nonprofit organizations have concluded that there is a strong need to improve the effectiveness of Federal first-level supervisors. Although there has been some overall improvement in employees' perceptions of their supervisors' performance in recent years, our research shows that many supervisors continue to demonstrate levels of supervisory skill substantially lower than what is needed to effectively engage employees and manage their performance.

In this report by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB), we identify and discuss specific needs for improvement in the selection, development, guidance, and management of Federal first-level supervisors. Our analysis is based on the results of the 2007 Merit Principles Survey, past studies of first-level supervisors by MSPB and others, and additional research we have conducted. Following our findings, we offer our recommendations to address each area identified for improvement. Some of those recommendations are new; others have appeared in previous MSPB reports or been made previously by other organizations. Not all of our recommendations will work for all agencies. We call upon each agency to select those recommendations that can be aligned with their goals, business strategies, and organizational cultures and act to meet the challenge of equipping its supervisory workforce to engage employees and achieve high performance. Because first-level supervisors play a vital role in the success of every Federal agency, investments in the improvement of supervision could yield enormous positive returns through improved workforce productivity and performance.

## Findings

**Current selection of first-level supervisors is heavily based on technical expertise.** The problems in supervisory selection reported over the past 30 years appear to persist. Supervisory selection is often based more heavily on technical expertise than on leadership competencies. Technical skills appear to be much more strongly emphasized than are supervisory skills in both job announcements and assessments.

**Technical experts without an interest or aptitude in leadership are often selected for supervisory roles.** Because most Federal career paths do not provide technical expert roles in which highly proficient and experienced employees are recognized with organizational status and increased compensation, technically proficient employees who have minimal interest or aptitude in managing people apply for supervisory positions. And, because the selection criteria are heavily weighted toward technical expertise, they often are selected for these positions.

**The supervisory probationary period is not consistently being used as the final step in the selection process.** Federal managers are not consistently using the probationary period as the final step in the selection process for first-level supervisors. In Fiscal Year 2009, just one half of one percent of new supervisors were reassigned or separated for failure to complete probation. In addition, in the 2007 Merit Principles Survey, only 64 percent of supervisors affirmed that they had been informed of the probationary period while fewer than half (47 percent) stated that their performance during their probationary period had been used to decide if they should retain a supervisory role.

**Supervisors need substantially more training and development.** Many new supervisors are not receiving the training and development opportunities they need both to understand the agency's expectations for supervisors and to manage their employees effectively. Less than two-thirds of supervisors said that they received training prior to or during their first year as a supervisor. Of those who received training, almost half (48 percent) received one week or less. Overall, more than three-quarters of new supervisors did not receive training in each of the basic areas of performance management, including developing performance goals and standards; assigning, reviewing, and documenting employees' work; providing feedback; developing employees; evaluating employee performance; and managing poor performers.

**Many supervisors do not receive the information they need.** Two-thirds of first-level supervisors believe they are receiving information about the goals and priorities of their organization, while half said they are satisfied with the information they receive from management about what is going on in their organization. Less than two-thirds of supervisors agree that their supervisor adequately explains the reasons for work changes before they take place. Less than two-thirds also said they were satisfied with their involvement in decisions that affect their work.

**Supervisors receive assistance from their managers, but many need more information and specific guidance.** Although three-quarters of supervisors reported that their supervisor talks with them or assists them when they need help, fewer supervisors (61 percent) stated that they receive the information and guidance they need to do a good job most or all of the time. One reason a substantial number of supervisors are saying their managers do not provide the specific information or guidance they need may be that the managers themselves are not receiving enough information about the organization to provide adequate guidance and information to supervisors. Less than two-thirds of managers said they were satisfied with the organizational information they receive from agency leadership.

**Supervisors need more coaching and feedback.** Receiving frequent feedback is a vital component of effective supervisory performance. Yet we found that just under half of supervisors (49 percent) are receiving feedback from their managers at least every two weeks. Another 13 percent receive feedback monthly. The remaining 38 percent receive feedback only quarterly or even less often, with 10 percent receiving feedback once a year or less. We also found wide gaps between supervisors' perceptions of their behavior and performance and employees' perceptions. For example, while 94 percent of supervisors said they explain work changes to employees before they take place, only 56 percent of employees agreed that their supervisors do so.

Only about half (54 percent) of the survey respondents reported that when they were new supervisors their manager provided them with coaching or feedback that helped them develop supervisory competencies. By not providing feedback and coaching, managers are sending a strong message to first-level supervisors that feedback and coaching are not important functions of supervision.

**Supervisory and managerial accountability need to be strengthened.** Stronger cultures of accountability need to be developed in many Federal agencies so that each supervisor and manager demonstrates a personal commitment to serving the public through effectively managing the performance of his or her employees. Several studies over the past 30 years have documented the need for improvement, especially in the area of managing poor performers.

## Recommendations

### For Consideration by Congress

**Provide the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) with the funding to offer predictive supervisory selection instruments to agencies without charge.** OPM currently provides off-the-shelf and custom selection assessment tools, and accompanying services such as validation, to Federal agencies on a fee basis. With additional funding, OPM could develop a set of selection instruments with a high level of predictive power for supervisory success and offer them to all agencies with no charge. The development and validation of predictive selection tools typically require substantial expertise, time, and money. However, if the tools are available to all agencies, the cost per use is greatly reduced and they become an excellent investment.

### For the U.S. Office of Personnel Management

- 1. Provide guidance to assist agencies in using competencies as a basis for supervisory selection and development.** In its recently-issued *Supervisory Qualification Guide*, OPM has identified a set of competencies that could provide Federal agencies with a standard framework for talent management for first-level supervisors. We suggest that OPM provide additional guidance to help agencies make practical use of these competencies, such as (1) operational

definitions—descriptions of how each competency is applied at the first level of supervision; (2) behavioral examples for different levels of proficiency; and (3) options for assessment and development. We note that OPM’s online Personnel Assessment and Selection Resource Center already includes relevant material, such as the *Assessment Decision Guide* and a description of proficiency levels for the leadership competencies. Guidance for selecting and managing first-level supervisors could build on, and ultimately be integrated with, this material as well as guidance related to Senior Executive Service (SES) selection and development.

- 2. Explore ways to provide alternative career opportunities for technical experts.** It is essential that Federal agencies recognize the special skills and responsibilities required by a supervisory role, provide adequate incentives for employees to accept those responsibilities, and recognize and reward those employees who carry out those responsibilities with distinction. Yet it is also essential that the Federal Government does not drive high-performing technical experts who lack the desire or ability to supervise to apply for supervisory positions for want of any other opportunity for advancement, career development, or challenging work.

Accordingly, we recommend that OPM work with Federal agencies to explore and develop career opportunities for employees who have a high level of technical expertise but are not well-suited to a supervisory role. Those opportunities might include technical career paths for occupations in which employees can contribute to their organizations in a capacity beyond the top existing level. For other occupations, those opportunities could take other forms, such as recognition and rewards, serving as a mentor, representing the agency in interagency or external task forces, taking on special projects, and developing and delivering training to less experienced employees.

We acknowledge that alternative career opportunities may be difficult to implement. First, it may require far-reaching changes to classification principles and standards, or legislation if desired changes cannot be accomplished within the existing statutory framework for Federal employee classification and pay. Second, the establishment of alternative opportunities could have significant implications for career paths in Federal agencies and compensation costs. Finally, we recognize that this recommendation might be best evaluated and implemented as part of a broader reform of Federal employee pay, classification, and performance management. For these reasons, we do not specify when or how OPM should establish the “alternative opportunities” envisioned here.

## For Federal Agencies

- 1. Base the talent management cycle for first-level supervisors on the core supervisory competencies.** Base all aspects of talent management for first-level supervisors (workforce planning, selection, development, management, and evaluation) on core supervisory competencies and any additional competencies that are essential to supervisory success in the agency.

2. **Allow adequate time for supervisory duties.** When designing supervisory jobs, carefully consider the time needed for the supervisor to effectively manage the performance of the work group. Supervisory responsibilities are time-consuming and supervisors should be allowed adequate time to discharge them well.
3. **Emphasize supervisory competencies when advertising and filling supervisory positions.** Even for first-level supervisory positions, core supervisory competencies should be a primary consideration. Use technical expertise as appropriate as an essential and important criterion for selection—but also include the assessment of supervisory competencies or potential to identify and select the candidate most likely to succeed.
4. **Provide realistic job previews for aspiring supervisors.** Provide realistic job previews for first-level supervision jobs to inform employees who are interested in a supervisory position about both the rewards and challenges of supervision. Include an explanation of the supervisory competencies needed for the job with the behavioral examples that illustrate how these competencies are applied on the job. Emphasize the demanding interpersonal situations that a supervisor faces, such as providing corrective feedback to employees, supporting performance appraisal ratings, and dealing assertively with conduct and performance problems.
5. **Provide clear information about the supervisory role in job announcements.** Communicate through job announcements that supervision is an essential component of the job. List the specific supervisory duties (rather than simply saying the job includes supervision), provide the percentages of time that are to be spent on supervision and technical work, explain the approximate number of employees who will be supervised and their occupations, and list both the technical and supervisory competencies required for the job.
6. **Use strongly predictive selection tools for first-level supervisor positions.** Every dollar invested in the development and use of sound selection tools can be returned many fold in the performance of good supervisors. Base the choice of selection instruments on their power in predicting supervisory success, rather than simply on administrative convenience, familiarity, or low cost. Use multiple assessment instruments for better prediction and fuller understanding of each candidate's strengths and weaknesses. Ensure that the instruments used after candidates are reviewed for minimum qualifications and technical competence are well-suited to assessing supervisory competencies.
7. **Provide a comprehensive training and development program for supervisors.** Create an integrated plan for how first-level supervisors will be prepared for their demanding roles through a combination of formal training, on the job learning, and other development opportunities such as job rotations, job shadowing, and mentoring. Begin with an onboarding program for new supervisors that will help them understand their new responsibilities and their role in the organization and continue with a training program that will enable them to build the core supervisory competencies. Ensure that the transfer of learning from the program to the supervisors' daily work is the top priority.

Provide additional support for new supervisors for their first year or two with a mentoring program focused on the core competencies. Offer ongoing development opportunities for all supervisors to refresh and strengthen the core competencies.

8. **Evaluate supervisors on both work group outcomes and supervisory competencies.** Communicate to supervisors their accountability for effectively managing their employees' performance in achieving work unit goals by evaluating the supervisors' performance on both the outcomes achieved by the work unit and their individual demonstration of supervisory competencies. This dual focus offers several benefits: it makes it clear to supervisors that they are judged on the performance of their work group; it emphasizes the importance of the supervisory competencies; it deters those who may seek to achieve goals at the cost of ignoring good management practices or alienating employees through unfair or disrespectful treatment; and, it helps identify supervisors' strengths and areas for development.
9. **Ensure that human resource staff has expertise in talent management and organizational development.** In order to implement the above recommendations, agency leaders at all levels will require the assistance of human resources staff with expertise in all components of talent management as well as competency in organizational development and change management. In most cases, individuals with these competencies will need to be hired rather than trained on the job because expertise in these areas takes a long time and substantial education to develop.

## For Agency Executives

1. **Share organizational information with supervisors and managers on a regular basis.** Make a concerted effort to involve first-level supervisors and their managers in leading the organization by discussing with them organizational goals, priorities, and progress as well as emerging and continuing problems, and upcoming initiatives and changes. Ask for their ideas and input. Communicate your high expectations for them and their employees and explain how you will support them. When practical, use a variety of media to communicate such as monthly or quarterly leadership meetings, weekly e-mail bulletins, annual or semi-annual supervisor conferences, and simply walking around and talking to people or calling them on the telephone.
2. **Hold managers accountable for selecting, developing, and managing the performance of first-level supervisors.** Make it clear to the managers in your organization that they are personally responsible for effectively selecting, developing, and managing the performance of the supervisors who report to them. Ensure that the managers use the probationary period as the final step in the supervisory selection process. Emphasize that managers are accountable for the results achieved by all the work units in their domain and they will be evaluated and rewarded on the basis of this performance.

3. **Model good performance management practices and hold managers accountable for them.** Model good performance management practices by working with each manager to define clear performance goals for their work units then meeting frequently with each to review their progress in achieving those goals, address any obstacles, discuss how they are managing the performance of their subordinate supervisors, and provide feedback and coaching. Ensure that each manager also implements these practices with their subordinate supervisors.
4. **Encourage managers to collect feedback about their supervisors and use it to guide their development.** Supervisors typically interact with several different groups of people in the course of their daily work: their employees, other supervisors, internal and external customers, suppliers, and perhaps higher-level leaders. Encourage managers to collect feedback on each supervisor from these groups, then share it with the supervisor to identify strengths and weaknesses and plan the behavior changes that will lead to a higher level of performance.

### For Current Supervisors

1. **Build strong working relationships with your employees.** Set the tone for the work relationship by meeting with each employee to become mutually acquainted with each other's goals, concerns, interests, communication preferences, and working styles. Meet regularly with each employee to review progress on work assignments; provide direction, feedback, and information; address obstacles or concerns; and discuss the employee's development. In addition, talk informally with each employee at least every few days to get to know them as people and to offer informal feedback and appreciation for their work. Schedule regular staff meetings to share information, build camaraderie, and encourage collaboration.
2. **Develop your leadership skills.** Strive to continuously enhance your leadership skills and enlist the help of both your manager and your employees. Take the initiative to talk with your manager about both your learning needs and your strengths using the core supervisory competencies as a guide. Ask for your manager's feedback and development advice, create a development plan, and implement it. Once or twice each year, ask your employees how you can do a better job in managing the work unit. Always express appreciation for the feedback received and explain how you plan to use it.
3. **Determine if supervision is the right career path for you.** You may discover that you are not comfortable or happy in a supervisory role because you prefer to spend your time doing technical work, you don't enjoy the high level of interaction with employees, you don't like directing other people or providing them with feedback, or you are reluctant to take the difficult actions that supervisors sometimes must take to manage performance or conduct problems. If this is the case, then admit to yourself and your manager that supervising is not for you and request a return to a non-supervisory role. Openly admitting your career interests, abilities, and limitations is a sign of personal strength.

## **For Aspiring Supervisors**

Before applying for a supervisory position, carefully consider if it is the right job for you. Being a first-level supervisor can be difficult and stressful—much more so than many people realize. Being successful in a role in which you are responsible for achieving work unit goals when you are not directly working on the tasks to achieve those goals is challenging. It requires strong organizational and communication skills as well as comfort in dealing with conflict and willingness to interact frequently with people you may find abrasive, puzzling, or difficult in other ways. Supervising requires putting the group's needs ahead of your own and spending most of your time leading others rather than doing the technical work you enjoy.

If you have not yet had leadership experience, seek out opportunities to lead others such as managing a project or leading a task force at work or leading a community group or committee. Try to find a situation in which you will need to coordinate the work of several adults to accomplish a difficult goal. This type of experience will help you understand some of the challenges of supervision. Take advantage of realistic job preview programs or materials your organization may offer. You also may want to talk to current supervisors about their jobs; ask them what they like and do not like about supervising. Reading books about supervision is also a good way to understand the job duties and challenges involved.

# A CALL TO ACTION



## Why are first-level supervisors so important?

First-level supervisors have a clear and vital role: achieve the organizational goals assigned to their work unit through the unit's employees. Simply put, their job is to do everything they can to help their employees succeed in their jobs and thereby achieve organizational goals. Federal supervisors are the nexus between Government policy and action and the link between management and employees. They ensure that the decisions made by the President and Congress are implemented through the information and services that employees provide to the American public. Because they have direct and frequent contact with employees, first-level supervisors can have a stronger, more immediate impact on employee performance and productivity than higher-level managers. Organizational research shows that supervisory proficiency is one of the most important predictors of an agency's performance,<sup>1</sup> and a review of 1,500 journal articles on performance improvement indicated that the most effective way to improve organizational performance is to improve first-level supervisors.<sup>2</sup>

Conversely, deficient supervision can be extremely costly, in terms of both productivity and public confidence in the Government. As the National Academy of Public Administration stated in a 2003 report about Federal supervisors, "It is difficult to quantify the precise cost of supervisory deficiencies, but even a small deficiency could result in the loss of billions of dollars. Data indicate that this problem involves more than 'a small percentage' and real costs could be considerably larger. Without solid programs for identifying, developing, and managing first-level supervisors, agencies pay an enormous price in several ways..."<sup>3</sup> Those ways include low-quality work performance, low morale, low productivity, grievances and complaints from employees and clients, and high employee absenteeism or turnover. Thus, deficiencies in Federal agency performance that are frequently reported in the press—and that perpetuate negative public stereotypes of Federal employees—may reflect deficiencies in supervision, such as inadequate oversight and management, more than deficiencies in the conduct or performance of line employees. Moreover,

<sup>1</sup> Gene Brewer, "In the eye of the storm: Frontline supervisors and federal agency performance," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 2005, 15, pp. 505-527. See also National Academy of Public Administration, *First Line Supervisors in Federal Service: Selection, Development, and Management*, Management Concepts, Vienna, VA, 2003; and M. Buckingham and C. Coffman, *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> James Fuller, *Performance Management with Bottom-line Results*. Presentation at the Aligning Performance Management with Business Strategy and Goals conference sponsored by the International Quality and Productivity Center, San Francisco, February 2003.

<sup>3</sup> National Academy of Public Administration, *First Line Supervisors in Federal Service: Selection, Development, and Management*, Management Concepts, Vienna, VA, 2003, p. 4.

many studies have demonstrated that a poor supervisor or manager is the most common reason for employee attrition.<sup>4</sup>

Recent MSPB research reinforces the importance of first-level supervisors for employee engagement and organizational performance in the Federal workforce. In our 2008 study, *The Power of Federal Employee Engagement*, we reported that 87 percent of engaged employees stated that their supervisor had good management skills, compared to only 14 percent of unengaged employees.<sup>5</sup> In our 2009 study based on data from the 2007 Merit Principles Survey (MPS 2007),<sup>6</sup> *Managing for Engagement—Communication, Connection, and Courage*, we found that every performance management practice we reviewed that is the responsibility of first-level supervisors (e.g., providing frequent, helpful feedback) is practiced more widely in high-engagement agencies than in low-engagement agencies.<sup>7</sup> Data from that survey also show that nonsupervisory employees who rated their supervisors' performance as "good" or better were much more likely to recommend their agency as a good place to work and to believe their talents are used well in the workplace compared to employees who had less positive perceptions of their supervisors.<sup>8</sup> The strong link between effective supervision and performance is further supported by the significant positive relationships between high employee engagement in Federal agencies and several key performance outcomes, including higher scores on the results portion of the Office of Management and Budget's Program Assessment Rating Tool, reduced use of sick leave, fewer Equal Employment Opportunity complainants, fewer cases of lost time due to work-related illness or injury, and lower rates of employee intention to leave the agency.<sup>9</sup>

## How effective are Federal first-level supervisors?

Clearly, effective first-level supervision is an essential component of high organizational performance. It also appears to be an area of relative weakness in the management of the Federal workforce. For example, a recent study reported that Federal employees rated the overall performance of their supervisors less positively than did private sector employees.<sup>10</sup> **Table 1** lists the percentages of non-supervisory Federal employees who expressed favorable views of their supervisors' basic performance management skills in the Merit Principles Surveys over the last 20 years.

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *The Power of Federal Employee Engagement*, Washington, DC, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Appendix A lists the questions from the 2007 MPS that are discussed in this report. Appendix B describes the methodology for the survey.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Managing for Engagement—Communication, Connection, and Courage*, Washington, DC, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Significant positive relationships at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) as demonstrated by Pearson correlation coefficients of 0.415 and 0.429 respectively.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *The Power of Federal Employee Engagement*, Washington, DC, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> J. Thompson, *Training Supervisors To Be Leaders: A Missing Element In Efforts To Improve Federal Performance*, Partnership for Public Service, Washington, DC, 2007, p. i; and Paul C. Light, "New survey shows a Federal workforce at risk," *The Washington Post*, Jan. 13, 2009. Accessed Jan. 14, 2009, at [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/13/AR2009011302463\\_p](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/13/AR2009011302463_p).

**Table 1.**  
**Positive Responses to Selected MPS Performance Management Items, 1986-2007**

Question	Merit Principles Survey Year						
	1986	1989	1992	1996	2000	2005	2007
My supervisor has good management skills.	48%	51%	51%	53%	47%	54%	
Overall, I am satisfied with my supervisor. <sup>11</sup>			59%	60%	57%	63%	66%
My supervisor deals effectively with poor performers. <sup>12</sup>					20%	29%	26%
My supervisor keeps me informed about how well I am doing. <sup>13</sup>	47%				46%	57%	54%
Recognition and rewards are based on performance in my work unit.			31%		30%	42%	47%

Note: Gray shading indicates the question was not asked that year.

Overall, there has been some, though uneven, improvement in employees' assessments of supervisory performance. Nevertheless, employees' most recent assessments of supervisors continue to indicate that there is substantial room for further improvement. In our recent report, *Managing for Engagement—Communication, Connection, and Courage*, we presented additional data from the 2007 MPS that shows that the performance management practices of many first-level supervisors are not conducive to employee engagement or high performance. For example, among nonsupervisory respondents:

- Only 39 percent receive feedback of any kind, formal or informal, from their supervisors every two weeks or more often (another 14 percent receive feedback monthly);
- Only 43 percent meet with their supervisors to discuss the progress of their work monthly or more often;
- Only 61 percent are receiving the information and guidance they need; and
- Fully 63 percent do more than their fair share of work due to the poor performance of co-workers.

Studies and surveys conducted over the past three decades by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the Merit Systems Protection Board, the Government Accountability Office, the National Academy of Public Administration, the Partnership for Public Service, and others have consistently supported the need to improve the effectiveness of Federal first-level supervisors, especially in managing poorly performing employees. Appendix C lists twenty of these studies.

<sup>11</sup> In the MPS 2007, this question was worded as "Overall, how would you rate your immediate supervisor's performance as a supervisor?"

<sup>12</sup> In the MPS 2007, this question was worded as "In my work unit, steps are taken to deal with a poor performer who cannot or will not improve."

<sup>13</sup> In the MPS 2007, the favorable response represents the employees who reported they receive feedback monthly or more frequently.

## How well do Federal agencies manage first-level supervisors?

In these reports, there is consistent agreement that most Federal agencies do not do a good job of selecting, developing, and managing first-level supervisors. Commonly-described shortcomings include:

- Selection processes that emphasize technical expertise over leadership abilities and aptitudes;
- Failure to use the probationary period to identify new supervisors who are lacking in supervisory skills;
- Insufficient training and development of supervisors;
- Inadequate leadership support or guidance for supervisors; and
- Failure to hold supervisors accountable for providing good supervision.

Supervisors themselves recognize these problems and desire change. For example, OPM conducted a study to assess efforts in Federal agencies to select, develop, and evaluate first-level supervisors. The supervisors and first-level managers that OPM interviewed for the study indicated that agencies:

- Overemphasized technical expertise and failed to adequately assess leadership competencies when making supervisory selections;
- Gave low priority to supervisory development;
- Did not sufficiently stress the ability to achieve work goals through people in supervisory performance appraisals;
- Ignored or provided little constructive feedback to poor-performing supervisors, while failing to provide adequate recognition or rewards to effective supervisors;
- Needed to make fuller use of the supervisory probationary period to identify those supervisors who do not demonstrate the needed leadership competencies; and
- Needed to assist supervisors to develop skills such as communication, coaching, dealing with poor performers, and resolving conflicts.

In 2001, OPM concluded that its findings “should serve as a wake-up call for agencies to take immediate action to address a serious problem that has the potential to worsen. Agencies must make the selection and development of first-level supervisors a top human resource management priority.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, taking action to build the effectiveness of the Government’s supervisors in managing the performance of the workforce has apparently not been a high priority for most Federal agencies.

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<sup>14</sup> U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Supervisors in the Federal Government: A Wake-Up Call*, Washington, DC, 2001, p. 2.

## Why has improvement in first-level supervision been elusive?

The objective of this report is to explore key reasons for the continuing problem of less than optimal supervision and issue an urgent renewed call for action to remedy the problem. Given the myriad challenges our Nation faces, the need for an effective Federal workforce is even more pressing now than nine years ago when OPM issued its wake-up call for improved first-level supervision. If the Federal Government is to provide its citizens with the services and information they need, it is essential to set a high priority on improving first-level supervision. The fastest and most direct way to strengthen Federal workforce performance is to improve the supervision employees receive.

Why does suboptimal first-level supervision continue despite the long-standing recognition that it is a major impediment to the performance of the Federal workforce? We believe the cause lies in four aspects of the management of supervisors: selection, development, guidance and support, and accountability. First, due to current selection processes, many of the employees selected for supervisory positions may lack the underlying abilities, interests, or values required for the job. Second, supervisors often do not receive the training and development opportunities they need to build good performance management skills. Third, many supervisors do not receive the guidance and support they need to drive results in their organization and improve their own performance as supervisors. Fourth, some supervisors are not held fully accountable for managing their employees and achieving work unit goals.

These four barriers to effective supervision in the Federal workforce are not new. Why haven't they been overcome? Agencies seeking to improve first-level supervision face many challenges. These may include such uncontrollable factors as inadequate funding and staff, the change of administrations every four to eight years and the concomitant change in political leaders and priorities, large spans of control, the exploding pace of change in both technology and the workplace, and complex personnel systems. In addition, change may not have occurred because agency executives have not made improving supervision a priority. Perhaps some do not fully understand the impact of first-level supervisors on organizational performance, failing to make the connection between inadequate supervisory oversight and other organizational problems. Alternatively, executives may recognize supervision as a problem to be addressed, but be unsure of how to proceed, find that their human resources staff lacks the expertise to advise them, or underestimate the effort and resources required. Finally, traditional attitudes and approaches may have become entrenched in agency culture, making them highly resistant to change.

To resolve these problems, agencies must recognize the need for widespread organizational change and summon the will needed to make that change. The transition to excellent first-level supervision across the Government may be slow. But slow, steady, carefully planned investments in first-level supervision can accrete over time and yield enormous positive returns in workforce performance. In this report, we discuss each of the four problematic factors of selection, development, guidance and support, and accountability and present corroborating data. Then, we offer recommendations to address these factors. Some recommendations are new while others have been suggested in our previous reports or in studies by other organizations. We recognize that not all of our recommendations will work for every agency or organization within an agency and that most agencies will not choose to make large changes quickly. Our goal is to encourage organizational leaders to (1) critically appraise first-level supervision; (2) identify areas for improvement; (3) develop plans for improvement; and (4) begin taking action. Even if the initial actions are small, the time to act is now.

# SELECTION OF SUPERVISORS



Competence in performance management is the hallmark of a good supervisor and should be a key criterion of selection. The implementation of this primary role of managing employees' performance to achieve organizational goals typically requires supervisors to play additional, secondary roles such as technical expert, administrator, liaison with management, and ambassador to other work units in the agency and to the public. The importance of each of these additional roles will vary with the organization and the supervisor's specific work unit. Their relative importance should be reflected in the supervisory selection process while keeping in mind that performance management is a critical role of the first-level supervisor. We define performance management as the process of planning and assigning work, setting performance expectations, developing employees' capabilities, reviewing and assessing work, providing feedback, and holding employees accountable for their work. These responsibilities may be carried out in different ways to align with organizational mission, culture, and strategies as well as the occupation of the employees but the basic tasks remain the same for first-level supervisors in all agencies.

As discussed in Chapter 1, numerous reports by both Federal agencies and non-profit organizations highlight the contribution of flawed selection processes to the suboptimal quality of first-level supervision in many agencies. Supervisor selection is often more heavily based on technical expertise than on leadership competencies. Although a high level of technical proficiency may be essential to success in a supervisory position—for example, to enable the supervisor to review work and establish credibility with employees—it is seldom sufficient by itself. In some cases, candidates' supervisory skills or potential are not assessed at all. The unsurprising outcome of such selection processes is the frequent referral and selection of candidates with strong technical skills, although they may not have always been the best choices for the job. Although this misalignment of selection criteria and job requirements has been recognized for many years, agencies have made few changes.

For example, in MSPB's 1992 study *Federal First-Line Supervisors: How Good Are They?*, we reported that very few agencies had created selection processes specifically for supervisors. Instead, many Federal organizations used the selection processes built on technical knowledge and skills for both supervisory and nonsupervisory positions and, consequently, often promoted their best technicians to supervisory positions without assessing supervisory skills. In 2003, the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) reported that only 29 percent of Federal supervisors agreed that their agency does a good job of selecting supervisors and managers and concluded that "...most supervisory jobs require technical competence, but

technical abilities usually far outweigh leadership competencies as a selection factor. Too often, leadership potential is not even considered in the equation.”<sup>15</sup> Finally, a 2007 report by the Partnership for Public Service confirmed the continuation of the problem, stating that “...within the federal sector, individuals are selected as supervisors largely on the basis of their technical qualifications. Unfortunately, those with the best ‘hard,’ technical skills do not always make the best leaders. Of equal, if not greater importance, are ‘soft’ skills such as communication, team-building and conflict resolution.”<sup>16</sup>

## Review of Current Supervisory Selection Practices

In July 2009, as a quick check of current selection practices for first-level supervisory positions in Federal agencies, we reviewed a systematic sample of 100 job announcements for first-level supervisory jobs posted on USAJOBS, the Government’s online job board. That sample included jobs advertised by all cabinet-level departments and independent agencies with 1,000 or more employees. In our review, we excluded postings in which applications were restricted to current Federal employees or employees within a specific agency or agency subdivision. Thus, for the positions we reviewed, managers would not be familiar with many of the applicants. In each case, we reviewed the description of duties; the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) listed as required for the job; the number and occupations of employees to be supervised; and the assessment methods to be used to further evaluate candidates who pass a preliminary screening for minimum qualifications before they are referred to the hiring manager. Appendix D provides a full description of how we selected and reviewed these job announcements.

**Table 2** lists the percentage of job announcements we reviewed that included the specified types of information for descriptions of supervisory duties, the KSAs required for the job, and the number and types of employees to be supervised.

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<sup>15</sup> National Academy of Public Administration, *First Line Supervisors in Federal Service: Selection, Development, and Management*, Management Concepts, Vienna, VA, 2003, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> J. Thompson, *Training supervisors to be leaders: A Missing Element in Efforts to Improve Federal Performance*, Partnership for Public Service, Washington, DC, 2007, p. 1.

**Table 2.**  
**Summary of July 2009 Job Announcement Information**  
**for First-Level Supervisors**

<b>Information: Description of Supervisory Duties</b>	
Detailed – lists specific supervisory duties	14%
Brief – summarizes supervisory duties	42%
Minimal – merely states “will supervise”	15%
None – no mention of supervisory duties	29%
Note: Only one job announcement (1% of the 100 reviewed) indicated percentages of time for technical and supervisory duties.	
<b>Information: Description of KSAs Required</b>	
Supervisory only	4%
Technical and supervisory	54%
Technical only	10%
None – no KSAs listed	32%
<b>Information: Description of Employees Supervised</b>	
Number only	3%
Number and type	5%
Type only	20%
None – no information provided	72%

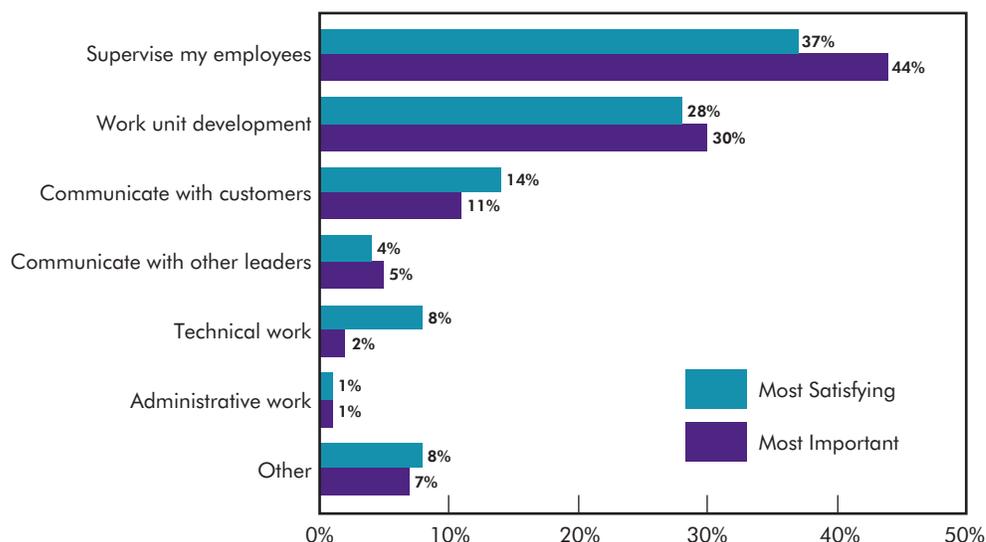
**Description of Supervisory Duties.** A clear and comprehensive description of job duties is an important feature of a job announcement. The duties description both informs applicants about the content and level of the job as well as communicates what is important in the job. In the description of job duties in the job announcements we reviewed, the technical responsibilities were usually much more heavily emphasized than the supervisory responsibilities. The majority of the announcements provided very brief descriptions of supervisory duties or simply stated that the job included supervision. Supervisory duties were not mentioned at all in 29 of the 100 announcements. For many jobs, it required close reading to determine that the job was indeed a supervisory position other than the fact that “supervisory” was included in the job title. Just 14 postings provided detailed descriptions of the supervisory responsibilities comparable to the level of detail in the explanations of technical duties. Only one of the announcements explained the relative importance of technical and supervisory responsibilities for the position by citing the percentage of time to be devoted to each.

**Description of Required Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.** A listing of the KSAs important for success in a job helps potential applicants decide if they will be good candidates for the job and emphasizes the competencies valued by the hiring organization. Both technical and supervisory KSAs were described as important for job success in just over half (54) of the announcements, while 10 announcements provided only technical KSAs and four listed only supervisory KSAs. No KSAs at all were given for almost one-third (32) of the 100 announcements.

**Description of Employees Supervised.** The number and type of employees to be supervised is important information for candidates for first-level supervision positions. For example, supervising two or three employees is much less demanding than supervising 10 or more. Also, the occupation of the subordinates makes a difference in the type and extent of supervision required. We found that only five of the 100 jobs indicated the number and type of subordinates the new supervisor would be supervising. Twenty postings described only the occupation of the potential subordinates and three provided only the number. Almost three-quarters of the job announcements provided neither the number nor type of supervisees.

The description of duties, KSAs, and information about potential supervisees in the job announcements we reviewed indicates that agencies typically emphasize technical responsibilities over supervisory responsibilities. That emphasis may imply that supervision is only a small, and relatively unimportant, part of the first-level supervisor’s job. However, survey data from first-level supervisors indicate otherwise. In the MPS 2007, we asked first-level supervisors to identify the components of their job (job tasks) they considered most important and most satisfying, and to indicate what percentage of work time they devote to those job tasks. Supervisors’ responses are shown in **Figure 1**.<sup>17</sup> We also asked supervisors to indicate the percentage of their time they devote to those job tasks.

**Figure 1.**  
**Supervisors’ Most Satisfying and Most Important Tasks**



As shown in Figure 1, only 2 percent of first-level supervisors reported that technical work was their most important task. Moreover, for most Federal supervisors, technical work occupies relatively little work time. On average, supervisors spend less than 15 percent of their work time doing their own technical work. More than two-thirds (68 percent) of first-level supervisors reported that they spend 15 percent or less of their work time doing their own technical work, and almost 90 percent

<sup>17</sup> The job task “Supervise my employees” was defined as reviewing work, providing feedback, and discussing assignments, development, or performance with employees. The job task “Work unit development” was defined as strategic hiring, development, management, and retention.

spend 25 percent or less of their time on technical work. As we discuss later in this report, technical competence is essential to supervisory credibility and effectiveness. Nevertheless, the primacy of technical duties and capabilities in supervisory job announcements does not appear to be warranted by “facts on the ground”—what supervisors actually do.

**Assessment Methods.** For any supervisory position,<sup>18</sup> supervisory skills or potential is an essential qualification. Accordingly, only those candidates who demonstrate evidence of both the technical and the supervisory skills required for the job should be referred to the hiring manager. Therefore, it is important that secondary assessments assess supervisory skills rigorously and reliably.

**Table 3** lists the assessment strategies and methods that agencies stated they would use to assess applicants who passed minimum qualifications screening. Typically, agencies use these secondary assessments to assign numerical scores to candidates or to place them in ranked categories (e.g., Qualified, Better Qualified, Best Qualified). Agencies then use those scores or categories to refer candidates to the hiring manager for consideration and selection.

**Table 3.**  
**Pre-Referral Assessment Methods for First-Level Supervisor Jobs**

Assessment Method	Strategy and Method(s) Used										Percent
Self-rating questionnaire	✓	✓				✓	✓				59%
Review of narrative (KSAs)		✓		✓	✓		✓			✓	45%
Review of resume or application			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			34%
Structured interview									✓		1%
Autobiography										✓	1%
Writing sample								✓			1%
<b>Percent</b>	32%	22%	16%	12%	10%	4%	1%	1%	1%	1%	100%

Note: An agency may use more than one pre-referral assessment method. A check mark in a row indicates use of the listed method; the check mark(s) in a column indicate the assessment “strategy”—the method or method(s) to be used for pre-referral assessment. For example, 59 percent of the announcements reviewed indicated that a self-rating questionnaire would be used, either alone or in conjunction with other assessments. Twenty-two percent of the announcements reviewed indicated that the pre-referral assessment would be based on a self-rating questionnaire and a review of narrative KSAs.

Unfortunately, the methods that agencies use to identify the candidates who are most qualified for further consideration are often not effective approaches to accurately identifying the candidates who are most likely to succeed in a supervisory role. As shown in the table, Federal agencies rely heavily on assessments of training and experience (T&E) such as self-rating questionnaires, review of narrative KSAs, and review of resumes to make these judgments. Even if those T&E assessments were appropriately focused on supervisory competence, which is not necessarily the case, that reliance is problematic.

<sup>18</sup> In our view, “any” means “any.” Even if supervisory duties do not account for a majority of work time, we believe that those duties are too important—both to the organization and to the employees supervised—to be treated as incidental or secondary.

First, the T&E methods that are most convenient for the applicant and employer, such as review of a resume, are poor predictors of proficiency (i.e., job performance).<sup>19</sup> The low validity of convenient, “low-end” T&E methods<sup>20</sup> reflects both a fundamental problem and a practical problem. The fundamental problem is that “training and experience” cannot be equated with proficiency or potential. For example, participation in a leadership training program does not mean that an applicant can apply what was learned or even that the person learned anything at all. The practical problem is that low-end T&E assessments rely on self-reported—which is to say, applicant-provided—descriptions of training, experience, and skills. Applicants are not disinterested providers of information. An applicant may hire a professional writer to prepare his or her resume or other application documents. (A quick search of the Internet or a commercial telephone directory will show that this service is readily available.) An unscrupulous applicant may provide false information or exaggerate his or her experience and achievements to make them appear more job-relevant or impressive than they actually are.<sup>21</sup> Misreporting or misrating is also a risk for honest applicants: research has demonstrated that people tend to significantly and consistently overestimate the level of their performance.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the validity of “fast and cheap” T&E assessments cannot be assumed, and selection processes based on such assessments may refer dishonest or mediocre applicants, while eliminating top performers or promising applicants. Such an outcome is not merely inconvenient for the Federal agencies; it offends honest and talented applicants and employees, and is antithetical to a merit system that aspires to base selections “solely on the basis of relative ability.”

Second, although there are “high-end” T&E methods that are capable of making useful distinctions among applicants, those methods also have significant drawbacks. Those drawbacks include:

- Vulnerability to misreporting. Although these methods are less vulnerable to misstatement or exaggeration than resumes or multiple-choice training and experience questionnaires, “less vulnerable” does not mean “immune”;

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<sup>19</sup> The most commonly used training and experience ratings are estimated to account for only about 1 percent of the variability in job performance for jobs of moderate complexity. See Frank L. Schmidt and John E. Hunter, “The validity and utility of selection methods in personnel psychology: Practical and theoretical implications of 85 years of research findings,” *Psychological Bulletin*, 124(2), 1998, pp. 262-274.

<sup>20</sup> Typical characteristics of a “low end” T&E method include: a low level of structure; a low level of detail; no or minimal verification of information; an implicit (rather than explicit) link between application format and the qualifications, skills, or competencies required by the position; and low effort (minimal time required to submit or evaluate an application). The characteristics that make an assessment convenient or “user-friendly” from the applicant or employer perspective also tend to make it “low end”—less able to predict job performance and to provide a sound basis for applicant sorting and referral.

<sup>21</sup> We are not implying that a significant percentage of applicants are dishonest. However, the consequences of exaggeration or dishonesty are serious, even if the occurrence is rare. Exaggeration or misstatement can create considerable difficulty for HR staff and hiring managers. Moreover, the selection of even one dishonest applicant can do serious damage to productivity, morale, and the credibility and integrity of the hiring process.

<sup>22</sup> Top performers tend to accurately estimate the quality of their own performance, but underestimate how well they perform compared to others. See D. Dunning, C. Heath and J.M. Suls, “Flawed self-assessment: implications for health, education, and the workplace,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 2004, 5(3), pp. 69-106; and George C. Thornton, “Psychometric properties of self-appraisals of job performance,” *Personnel Psychology*, 1980, 33(2), pp. 363-271.

- Demands on the employer. Behavior-based (“behavioral”) T&E assessments, such as ratings of narrative KSA descriptions and accomplishment records, in which applicants describe how they applied job-related competencies to actual tasks, situations, or assignments, can provide moderately good prediction of job performance.<sup>23</sup> However, to attain that “moderately good prediction,” an agency must invest substantial time, cost, and expertise in both development and application;<sup>24</sup> and
- Applicant burden. KSA narratives and accomplishment records require thought and time to prepare and to evaluate. That makes them unattractive to employers (or applicants) who value “ease of application.” Thus, ongoing initiatives to simplify and speed Federal hiring may make such methods less common, rather than more common, in the initial stages of the hiring process. Indeed, these initiatives have been driven, at least in part, by widespread dissatisfaction with the common practice of requiring applicants to submit behavioral descriptions of training and experience (such as KSA narratives) as part of an initial application for employment.<sup>25</sup>

In summary, longstanding deficiencies in supervisory recruitment and assessment persist. Specifically:

1. Technical skills are much more heavily emphasized than supervisory competencies in the information provided about the jobs, implying that supervisory skill is much less valued than technical prowess.
2. Self-report assessment tools that are known to be problematic in terms of accuracy are heavily employed in identifying the most qualified candidates.
3. Assessment tools that are not capable of accurately evaluating supervisory competencies are being used to refer finalists for first-level supervisory positions to selecting officials.

Consequently, it is likely therefore that many candidates referred to hiring managers as “well qualified” or “best qualified” for supervisory positions applications may not actually be suited to a supervisory role.

<sup>23</sup> Rigorously developed and scored KSA narrative tools are estimated to account for about 20 percent of the variability in job performance for jobs of moderate complexity. Frank L. Schmidt and John E. Hunter, “The validity and utility of selection methods in personnel psychology: Practical and theoretical implications of 85 years of research findings,” *Psychological Bulletin*, 124(2), 1998, pp. 262-274.

<sup>24</sup> We could not determine, from our review of job announcements, whether agencies that used review of a KSA narrative had made this investment. However, previous MSPB studies indicate that both investment and expertise are frequently lacking. Therefore, review of KSA narratives, although a “high end” method on paper, may become a “low end” method in practice. See U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Reforming Federal Hiring: Beyond Faster and Cheaper*, Washington, DC, September 2006, pp. 20-21, and U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Assessing Federal Job Seekers in a Delegated Examining Environment*, Washington, DC, December 2001, pp. 27-30.

<sup>25</sup> For example, proposed legislation (S. 736, the Federal Hiring Process Improvement Act of 2009) would require agencies to develop application processes that “allow applicants to submit a cover letter, resume, and answers to brief questions...to complete an application” and that “[do] not require lengthy writing requirements such as knowledge, skill, and ability essays as part of an initial application.”

There are several possible explanations for the continuing overemphasis on technical skills and the accompanying inadequacy in assessing supervisory potential and skills. All seem to reflect a flawed understanding of the relationship between effective supervision and workforce performance or the proper role of assessment in hiring. For example, some agency leaders or human resources staff may believe that the technical components of the job are most critical and that supervision is a collateral responsibility. Others may believe that a first-level supervisory position is not very demanding, or that most people can adequately learn good supervision skills on the job, rendering it unnecessary to assess applicants for good supervisory potential. Finally, it may be that managers or HR staff choose the cheapest, fastest ways of assessing candidates, such as self-rating questionnaires, believing that those methods are as effective as alternatives or that considerations such as administrative convenience, past practice, or conserving resources should take precedence over rigorously identifying the best candidates.

## Steps to Improve the Cadre of First-Level Supervisors

### 1. Define the Supervisory Role

The first step in any selection process is to clearly define the role the position will play in the organization and the specific responsibilities the incumbent will have. For supervisory roles, it is important to define both the performance management responsibilities and any additional technical, advisory, or administrative roles the individual may also be asked to play. It should be clear approximately how much of the supervisor's time is to be devoted to each type of duty. For a position to be classified as supervisory, OPM guidelines require that at least 25% of the position's work time must be devoted to directing other employees in the accomplishment of work; i.e., planning, assigning, directing, reviewing, and evaluating the work of employees.<sup>26</sup>

### 2. Identify the Competencies Required for Supervisory Success

When the supervisor's responsibilities and the percentage of time to be devoted to each have been defined, the next step in the selection process is to identify the competencies required for each duty. For all first-level supervisor positions, it is essential to fully document the competencies that are needed to effectively manage the performance of employees.

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<sup>26</sup> U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Evaluation Guide for First- and Second-Level Supervisory Positions*. Draft issued in July 2009 and accessed on Oct 29, 2009 at <http://www.opm.gov/fedclass/drafts/DraftEGforFirst-andSecond-LevelSupervisoryPositions.pdf>.

### About Competencies and Competency Models

Competencies are measurable human capabilities that are required for effective performance. They are the building blocks of effective work performance. Competencies may consist of knowledge, skills, abilities, or other characteristics (KSAs or KSAOs) or a cluster of these. The successful completion of most work tasks requires the sequenced or simultaneous demonstration of multiple competencies.<sup>27</sup> Appendix E provides an example of a supervisory competency, including an operational definition and behavioral examples of three levels of proficiency.

A set of competencies identified as important for successful performance in a particular job role is often labeled a “competency model.” A competency model can establish a common language for the organization, clarify expectations for the job, and provide a map for success in the organization. A competency model is most valuable when each competency is defined in action-oriented, operational terms to make its meaning and application clear. Behavioral examples of how each competency can be demonstrated on the job at different levels of proficiency also help clarify the competencies and increase their usefulness in selection, development, and management.

OPM has developed a *Supervisory Qualification Guide* that “prescribes general guidance when determining requirements for supervisory positions in the General Schedule (GS) or equivalent at grades 15 or below.”<sup>28</sup> In that guide, OPM defines 10 foundational competencies that are “considered as most important for successful performance of Federal supervisory work” and 4 additional competencies. These competencies, listed in the table below, could serve as the basis for a core competency model for all first-level supervisors.

**Table 4.**  
**Competencies in OPM’s Supervisory Qualification Guide**

Foundational Competencies	Additional Competencies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Accountability</li> <li>● Customer Service</li> <li>● Decisiveness</li> <li>● Flexibility</li> <li>● Integrity/Honesty</li> <li>● Interpersonal Skills</li> <li>● Oral Communication</li> <li>● Problem Solving</li> <li>● Resilience</li> <li>● Written Communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Human Capital Management</li> <li>● Developing Others</li> <li>● Conflict Management</li> <li>● Teambuilding</li> </ul>

<sup>27</sup> Anne Marrelli, Janis Tondora, and Michael Hoge, “Strategies for developing competency models,” *Administration and Policy in Mental Health*, 32(5/6), 2005, pp. 533-561.

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Supervisory Qualification Guide*. Accessed on June 2, 2009 at <http://www.opm.gov/Qualifications/standards/Specialty-stds/gs-supv.asp>.

Use of such a competency model could serve to clearly identify requirements for first-level supervisors in all agencies and provide a strong foundation for their selection, development, management, and evaluation, as well as agency workforce planning. It would be most helpful if each core competency is clearly defined in terms of how it is applied at the first-level of supervision and includes behavioral examples for several levels of proficiency.

Agencies could add additional competencies to the model as needed to support organizational mission, strategies, and desired culture. For example, if an agency is seeking to encourage higher levels of creativity in the organization, it would be wise to include the assessment of Creativity and Innovation in the supervisory selection process. Agencies could also develop their own behavioral examples for each core competency to reflect how they wish the competencies to be demonstrated on the job.

For many first-level supervisory positions, the 10 foundational competencies will be particularly useful for selecting first-level supervisors because they are essential for effective performance as a supervisor, yet applicants without supervisory experience should have had the opportunity to develop and apply these competencies in previous positions or life experiences. When a first-level supervisory position requires supervisory experience, the additional core competencies may be used in selection.

Those competencies will, almost certainly, be technical as well as supervisory. However, as discussed below, technical skills should generally be a prerequisite for consideration and referral, and supervisory skills (or demonstrated potential to develop those skills) should generally be the deciding selection factor.

### 3. Focus on Supervisory Potential and Competencies

Technical competency and expertise also have a legitimate place in supervisory hiring, for several reasons. Most supervisory tasks—such as reviewing work, evaluating performance, and coaching—require the supervisor to understand, in some depth, the nature of the work that employees do and the challenges they encounter. Also, the credibility of a supervisor may depend on his or her technical accomplishments and background, not only his or her integrity or supervisory potential. Finally, hiring criteria and decisions do not only fill positions; they also send messages about an organization's values. A hiring process that disregards or devalues employees' technical contributions and competence would seriously undermine leadership claims that the organization values and rewards high performance. Nevertheless, there are several reasons why technical expertise should not be the sole or primary consideration when filling supervisory positions.

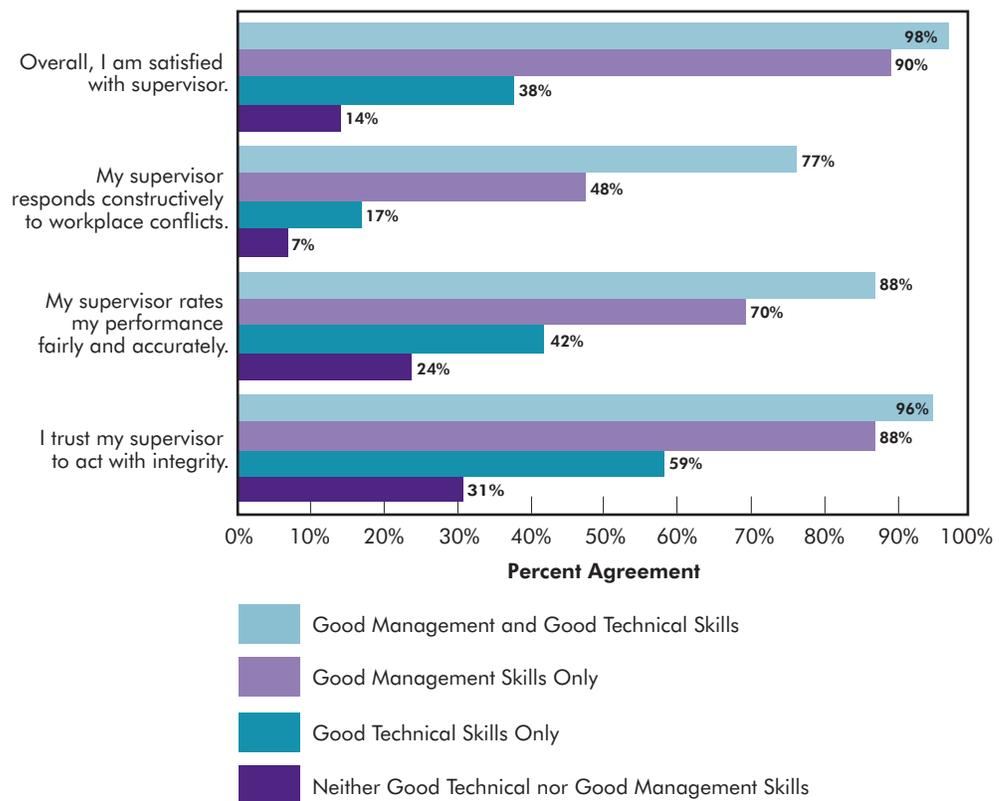
#### *Technical Expertise Alone is Not Sufficient*

The first reason is the job itself. A certain degree of technical expertise is often necessary to the effective exercise of supervisory skills and authority. Yet the roles of a line (nonsupervisory) employee and the supervisory employee are fundamentally different. A line employee's success is defined in terms of his or her own performance; a supervisor's success is defined in terms of the performance of

other employees. Consequently, supervisory positions require competencies distinct from those required by nonsupervisory positions.

We acknowledge that supervisory and managerial positions in the career Federal service may, on average, have greater technical demands than typical supervisory positions in private industry. Much Federal work is nonroutine “knowledge work”; Federal programs are often staggeringly complex; and Federal agencies are often headed by executives who are new to the agency and rely heavily on senior-level executives to explain, operate, and manage those programs. Yet data from MSPB surveys strongly supports our view that the effectiveness of Federal supervisors depends primarily on their supervisory skills. As shown in **Figure 2**, although both types of skills are essential, a deficiency in management skills appears to be much more harmful to employee trust and satisfaction than is a lack of technical skills.<sup>29</sup>

**Figure 2.**  
**Employee Perceptions of the Supervisor, by Perceived Skills of the Supervisor**



The second reason is trainability. As we have discussed, agencies should not assume that outstanding technical skills can compensate for poor supervisory skills. Agencies should also not assume that it is possible, or practical, to create supervisory potential or confer good supervisory skills through training. Supervisors should indeed be trained: training can help supervisors understand their role, provide necessary

<sup>29</sup> Source: U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2005 Merit Principles Survey. In the chart, employees are grouped based on their responses (agreement or non-agreement) to two survey questions: “My supervisor has good technical skills” and “My supervisor has good management skills.” For example, the group “good technical skills only” includes employees who agreed that their supervisor had good technical skills, but did not agree that their supervisor had good management skills.

knowledge, and help supervisors learn and practice important skills (such as assessing employee performance and providing performance feedback). Unfortunately, many of the foundational competencies that are so critical for the success of first-level supervisors are not readily amenable to development through training or on-the-job learning. Therefore, it is essential to identify and select individuals who already possess these underlying abilities and personal characteristics.

For example, accountability is an essential characteristic that enables a supervisor to accomplish difficult tasks such as addressing poor performance.<sup>30</sup> Research consistently demonstrates that accountability<sup>31</sup> is a potent predictor of successful job performance and that people differ greatly in this characteristic due to innate tendencies, upbringing, and life experiences.<sup>32</sup> Yet it is not easily developed through either formal or on the job training.

The third reason is succession management. First-line supervisors form the talent pool for managerial and higher-level positions. The importance of technical expertise tends to diminish at higher levels, because managers and executives must work across both occupational and organizational boundaries and can (and often should) delegate many technical tasks, such as close review of individual work products, to subordinate supervisors or staff. Also, it is simply not possible for an executive to maintain authoritative expertise in all the fields or issues under her or his direction.

The final reason is assessment. Obviously, assessments should focus on important competencies. Less obviously, assessments should also provide hiring managers with new insights, rather than duplicate prior assessments or confirm what is already known. It is comparatively easy to screen candidates for technical skills and—particularly when dealing with internal candidates—to assess their technical knowledge and technical contributions. But a hiring manager who is filling a supervisory position also needs insight into candidates' supervisory skill or potential—and such insight will be lacking unless the hiring process is designed to provide it.

### *Using Competencies to Assess Supervisory Skill or Potential*

As discussed above, it is essential to rigorously assess supervisory skill or potential when filling supervisory positions. Fortunately, it is quite possible—if challenging—to do so. Foundational competencies can help. **Table 5** provides examples of how foundational competencies relate to supervisory responsibilities. Those responsibilities can provide a starting point for evaluating the potential of candidates for first-level supervisory positions.

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<sup>30</sup> OPM defines accountability as: “Holds self and others accountable for measurable high-quality, timely, and cost-effective results. Determines objectives, sets priorities, and delegates work. Accepts responsibility for mistakes. Complies with established control systems and rules.”

<sup>31</sup> Accountability, as defined by OPM, is commonly labeled “conscientiousness” in research and in other competency models.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, D.S. Ones, S. Dilchert, C. Viswesvaran, and T.A. Judge, “In support of personality assessment in organizational settings,” *Personnel Psychology*, 60, 2007, pp. 995-1027; T.A. Judge and R. Ilies, “Relationship of personality to performance motivation: A meta-analytic review,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87, 2002, pp. 797-807; and G.M. Hurz and J.J. Donovan, “Personality and job performance: The Big Five revisited,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85, 2000, pp. 869-879.

**Table 5.**  
**Foundational Competencies and Supervisory Responsibilities**

Foundational Competency	Sample Related Supervisory Responsibilities
<b>Accountability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working with employees to define specific performance goals</li> <li>• Meeting with employees to review their progress on assignments</li> <li>• Working with employees to resolve obstacles</li> <li>• Promptly addressing low or poor performance</li> </ul>
<b>Customer Service</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishing and communicating high performance expectations</li> <li>• Ensuring the work group delivers high-quality products and services</li> <li>• Planning and implementing continuous improvement processes</li> <li>• Seeking feedback from customers and acting on it</li> </ul>
<b>Conflict Management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging open discussion of ideas</li> <li>• Actively listening to all parties involved in a conflict</li> <li>• Resolving disagreements and conflicts within the work group</li> <li>• Helping employees learn how to resolve problems with others</li> </ul>
<b>Integrity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting commitments</li> <li>• Admitting mistakes</li> <li>• Honestly sharing information with employees</li> <li>• Assigning employees the performance ratings they have earned</li> </ul>
<b>Interpersonal Skills / Oral Communication</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing feedback and coaching</li> <li>• Leading staff meetings</li> <li>• Sharing organizational information with employees</li> <li>• Conducting performance discussions</li> </ul>

For example, to assess the competency of customer service in a structured interview, candidates could be asked to give an example of how they ensured that a challenging work goal that involved several other employees was achieved on time and within budget. To assess the competency of conflict management, which is important for a supervisor in constructively resolving disagreements in the work group, the candidates could be asked to describe a situation in which they played a significant role in resolving a conflict at work. To evaluate candidates' oral communication skills, a competency vital to providing useful feedback and coaching to employees, candidates could be asked to describe a situation in which they delivered unwelcome news to a co-worker or leader.

#### 4. Provide Realistic Job Previews (RJPs)

Federal agencies need to clearly communicate the responsibilities of first-line supervisors as well as the interests, values, and competencies needed to effectively execute the role so that employees better understand what supervision entails before they apply for a supervisory position. It is especially important to emphasize

the responsibilities that many supervisors find challenging, such as providing both positive and corrective feedback to all of their employees, managing poor performers, and managing conflict. A realistic job preview (RJP) of a supervisory position (a “supervisory RJP”) can help limit the candidate pool to individuals who are at least partly aware of the challenges of supervision and have considered their qualifications in relation to the requirements for success. The cost of developing and implementing a supervisory RJP program is a good investment. Preventing just one “hiring mistake” each year could pay for the cost of a program.<sup>33</sup>

Two good examples are programs offered by the Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to employees who consider applying for a supervisory position. DOT’s nine-week “So, You Want to Be a Leader” program offers employees the opportunity to participate in coursework and team projects that will help them understand the role of a leader. EPA offers a two-day workshop, “Stepping Up to Leadership,” in which employees participate in hands-on activities based on specific supervisory competencies. Less expensive forms of supervisory RJP can also be helpful. These include printed booklets, an online mini-course, and two or three-hour briefings or teleconferences that clearly define the job responsibilities of a first-level supervisor and the competencies required to succeed, provide examples of the challenges they face first-level supervisors, and outline the advantages and disadvantages compared to non-supervisory positions. Agencies could make such guides and meetings available to external candidates.

In addition to developing a pool of candidates who have a basic understanding of the job, supervisory RJPs can serve several other purposes. They can reduce potential problems such as allegations of unfairness in selection. Employees are usually more willing to accept that they are not ready for a supervisory position if they make the decision themselves rather than finding they were not selected for a supervisory position for which they believed themselves to be well qualified. Supervisory RJPs can also provide a developmental experience for groups that are often underrepresented in management roles, such as minorities and women, by informing them of the competencies needed for a supervisory position and helping them plan how to develop those competencies. Also, many employees develop a better appreciation for their supervisors when they learn more about the challenges they face. They are more likely to understand some of the choices and decisions their supervisors make.

## 5. Employ More Predictive Assessment Tools

First-level supervisors (as well as higher-level managers and leaders) are too important to tolerate second-rate selection processes and assessment methods. Federal agencies that do not use highly predictive assessment tools are at increased risk of hiring the wrong people and overlooking excellent candidates. For that reason, the choice of selection tools needs to be driven by the objective of identifying the candidates most likely to succeed in a supervisory role, not by administrative convenience, comfort, or conformance to precedent.

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<sup>33</sup> Corporate Leadership Council, *Selecting and Onboarding Frontline Supervisors*, Washington, DC, 1999.

Fortunately, there are assessment methods for first-level supervisory jobs that can, if properly developed and implemented, differentiate among candidates and offer useful insight into which candidates are most likely to be effective supervisors. **Table 6** lists several of these methods; Appendix F provides a fuller description of each method.

**Table 6.**  
**Sound Assessment Methods for First-Level Supervisors**

Assessment Method	Description
<b>Situational Judgment Tests (SJTs)</b> <sup>34</sup>	An SJT presents a series of work scenarios to the applicant. The applicant then chooses responses from several alternatives listed. The applicant may be asked to indicate which of several actions they would be most likely to take; which actions they would be most and least likely to take; what is the best option; what are the best and second-best options; or which is the most likely result of a specific action.
<b>Simulations</b>	A simulation places the applicant in situations similar to those that he or she would face on the job. The applicant takes actions to respond to those situations. The applicant may also be asked to articulate the issues or problems involved in the situation before taking actions.
<b>Structured Interviews</b> <sup>35</sup>	In a structured interview, each applicant is asked the same set of prepared questions, with each question keyed to a specific competency. The question may be followed with probing questions to obtain complete information from the applicant. Generally, the number of questions related to a competency is based on the competency's relative importance to job success. A predeveloped scoring key with behaviorally anchored sample responses for each point value is used to evaluate candidates' responses. Interviewers must be trained in interviewing and scoring techniques.
<b>Accomplishment Records – Behavioral Consistency Method</b> <sup>36</sup>	Candidates are presented with a series of questions, each focused on a key function of the job. The questions are based upon a rigorous job analysis and the collection of critical job incidents. In response to each question, candidates submit a narrative that describes past achievements that demonstrate their ability to successfully perform the job function. These achievements are not restricted to work experience; they may include unpaid activities such as chairing a school committee. As in a structured interview, responses are rated against behaviorally anchored scales. Candidates are also asked to provide a reference (an individual familiar with the achievement) so that their achievements can be verified.
<b>Measures of Personal Characteristics</b>	A psychometrically sound assessment of one or more important characteristics, such as conscientiousness or integrity, is administered to applicants. Such assessments are typically developed by, or purchased from, an organization that specializes in psychometrics and employment testing.
<b>Assessment Centers</b>	Assessment centers consist of several different types of assessment tools that are administered sequentially to candidates. The assessments are designed to yield complementary information about the candidates, to provide a broad perspective on their potential. Common components of an assessment center include a simulation, a structured interview, a cognitive ability test, a leadership or personality test (i.e., measure of personal characteristics), a written exercise, and a group interaction exercise.

<sup>34</sup> See U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Job Simulations: Trying Out for a Federal Job*, Washington, DC, September 2009. The report also provides information on simulations and assessment centers.

<sup>35</sup> See U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *The Federal Selection Interview: Unrealized Potential*, Washington, DC, February 2003.

<sup>36</sup> For further information on accomplishment records, from both an employer and applicant perspective, see U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Assessing the Assessments: An Overview of Accomplishment Records," *Issues of Merit*, 13(3), Washington, DC, July 2008 and U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Listen to the Exam Coach: How to Do Well on an Accomplishment Record Assessment," *Issues of Merit*, 14(1), Washington, DC, February 2009.

These methods have two important advantages over methods based on candidates' reports of their experience, training, and education. First, they can assess supervisory competencies more directly and reliably. Second, they can minimize or eliminate biases against underrepresented groups that can result from differences in socioeconomic background (including education and work opportunities) that are related only indirectly, if at all, to actual ability. Another potential benefit is that these methods can serve as developmental opportunities for all candidates, if the hiring agency provides candidates with post-assessment feedback. Accordingly, agencies should consider using one or more of these assessment methods in place of, or in addition to, the questionnaires and application or resume reviews currently used.<sup>37</sup> These selection tools are well worth the cost for development and administration, especially because they can be used for almost all first-level supervisory jobs in an agency. The cost of bad supervision is much higher than the cost of sound selection methods.

As with any effective selection tool, these methods must be based on a thorough job analysis, developed by persons with expertise in selection in collaboration with management, and implemented with care. Also, novel approaches or assessments should be carefully examined and thought through before adoption. The accompanying discussion provides some cautions about two particular approaches to hiring: using the Internet to administer tests and using performance appraisals to select employees.

### *The Internet, Performance Appraisals, and Federal Hiring: Look Before You Leap*

Much has been written about bringing the Federal Government into the Internet Age and about holding Federal agencies and Federal employees accountable for their performance. Those ideas have merit—but agencies should take care when applying them to hiring processes and decisions. Below, we offer some cautions for agencies that may be exploring “cutting edge” use of the Internet or performance appraisals in their hiring processes.

#### *Testing and the Internet*

It is one thing to use the Internet to advertise jobs and accept resumes. It is entirely another to use the Internet to deploy tests that were traditionally administered in paper-and-pencil format in a controlled environment. Agencies considering the latter use should proceed very carefully, if at all. There has been much discussion among psychologists who are experts in Internet testing about the validity of such tests. The majority agree that using unproctored Internet testing (UIT) alone is never acceptable for high-stakes situations such as making employment decisions. The primary concern with

<sup>37</sup> More information about assessment options is available through OPM's online Personnel Assessment and Selection Resource Center. The center provides explanations of 13 different assessment tools and advice about their application, a decision tool for selecting assessment tools, professional and legal guidelines, and a variety of other useful resources. As of February 2010, the resource center was available at <http://apps.opm.gov/ADT>.

UIT is based on the many possible avenues for cheating.<sup>38</sup> The International Test Commission Guidelines on Computer-Based and Internet-Delivered Testing state that in moderate- and high-stakes assessment such as job recruitment and selection, applicants who earn qualifying scores should be required to complete a supervised test to confirm the accuracy of their scores.<sup>39</sup>

### *Performance Appraisals in the Hiring Process*

It might seem logical for an organization to base selection and advancement, in addition to awards and pay increases, on performance. After all, research has indicated that past behavior (i.e., performance) can, indeed, be a good predictor of future performance. However, it does not follow that performance appraisals can be used mechanically to make hiring decisions. Simply stated, performance appraisals are not an acceptably reliable indicator of future performance. There are too many differences among jobs, performance standards, rating scales, and raters (both organizations and individuals)—and too many non-performance factors influencing ratings—for performance appraisals or ratings to be considered valid for purposes of selection.<sup>40</sup> For example, an applicant who was rated as “Fully Successful” by one organization may actually be a better performer, and a more promising candidate, than an employee who was rated “Outstanding” by another organization.

## 6. Use More than One Assessment (the Multiple Hurdle Approach)

In all selection processes, including those for first-level supervisors, hiring managers face the challenge of balancing cost and efficiency with thoroughness and accuracy. Although hiring managers want to identify the best candidates, staff time and resources—not to mention applicant patience—are limited. Especially when there is a large number of applicants, it may not be practical to initially employ the assessment methods that are most likely to accurately identify the candidate with the highest chance of success in the job, because these methods tend to be more costly as well as more time- and labor-intensive.

The multiple hurdle approach, in which a series of successively more predictive assessment methods is used with increasingly smaller number of candidates, can improve selection quality while using scarce resources wisely. If there is a large pool

<sup>38</sup> Nancy T. Tippins, “Internet alternatives to traditional proctored testing: Where are we now?,” *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 2(1), March 2009, pp. 2-10.

<sup>39</sup> Dave Bartram, “The International Test Commission Guidelines on Computer-Based and Internet-Delivered Testing,” *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 2(1), March 2009, pp. 11-13.

<sup>40</sup> For example, factors unrelated to performance that can affect ratings are: supervisors’ inability to separate individual performance from the impact of organizational processes, systems, and events; whether the supervisor personally hired the employee; the similarity of the employee to the supervisor in personal characteristics; pressures to distort ratings; and the degree to which the supervisor and employee “connect.”

of applicants, it may be necessary to use an inexpensive method as a preliminary assessment to initially distinguish between candidates who appear to have a plausible chance of success and those who do not. More predictive, albeit costly, methods can then be used to identify successively smaller, better qualified groups of candidates.

For example, candidates for a first-level supervisory job who meet minimum qualifications could be asked to submit a resume and an accomplishment record in which they are asked to write a brief narrative (e.g., one page) explaining how they have demonstrated one or two core supervisory competencies such as Conflict Management and Accountability. The resume would be used to determine if the candidate has the technical expertise and experience needed while the accomplishment record would be used to determine if the candidate provides evidence of foundational competencies needed to be a good supervisor. Specific instructions would be given to candidates so that they supply the information needed. For the resume, for example, they could be instructed to briefly list their accomplishments and actual work performed for each job, instead of providing a general summary of their responsibilities (as in a position description). The candidates who provided evidence in their resume and accomplishment record of having the potential to be effective supervisors would then proceed to the second hurdle, a situational judgment test or a structured interview that assesses both technical and supervisory capability. The candidates who score highest on the second hurdle would then proceed to a panel structured interview and a work sample or role play exercise for a more in-depth, final assessment of supervisory capability. In this multiple hurdle approach, candidates who are not likely to succeed are screened out in the first hurdle based on assessment methods that do not require a large investment of resources by either the agency's or the candidates. In successive hurdles, the costlier but more predictive methods provide a more in-depth perspective of the candidates' qualifications and potential.

## 7. Hold Managers Accountable for the Selection of Supervisors

Equally important to choosing selection tools with good predictive power in identifying supervisory candidates who are likely to succeed on the job, is ensuring that the managers who select supervisors are well trained in the selection process. Managers need to learn to identify the competencies needed for effective supervisors, to ensure that these are assessed, to conduct thorough interviews and rate candidates fairly, and to use the results of selection tools to identify the most competent of the final candidates.

Human resources staff can assist and guide managers but managers should be heavily involved in and held accountable for each step of the supervisory selection process from identifying the competencies needed for the job, drafting the job announcement, and choosing predictive assessment tools to judiciously using candidate information collected to make the final selection.

## 8. Use the Probationary Period to Make the Final Selection

No matter how carefully the selection process is planned and implemented, it cannot perfectly predict success on the job. That is why the supervisory probationary period, which we describe in more detail in the accompanying discussion, is vital.

### *Supervisory and Managerial Probation: An Overview*

A current Federal employee who is appointed to a supervisory or managerial position for the first time in the competitive service is required to serve a probationary period. During that period, if the appointee (employee) does not perform satisfactorily, the agency should remove the employee from the supervisory or managerial position and return the employee to a position of no lower grade and pay than the previous position. That return is not generally appealable.

#### *Important Facts*

- Agencies have delegated authority to determine the duration of the supervisory probationary period. The duration must be reasonable and fixed, appropriate to the position, and consistently applied. An agency may establish different probationary periods for different occupations or use a uniform period for all.
- Supervisory probation and managerial probation are distinct. An agency may require a managerial probationary period even for individuals who have successfully completed a supervisory probationary period.
- Similar to the probationary period that applies to most new appointments in the Federal service, prior service may be creditable toward the completion of supervisory or managerial probation.

Thus, the applicability and duration of a supervisory or managerial probationary period depends on both agency policy and the appointee's employment history. Accordingly, supervisors should consult with HR staff to determine whether, and for how long, supervisory or managerial probation applies in any given situation.

*References:* 5 U.S.C. § 3321 and 5 CFR 315.901-905.

First, the probationary period gives the agency the opportunity to observe a new supervisor actually performing the job and to act on that observation. Second, it gives a new supervisor time to assess success and satisfaction with the supervisory role. A supervisor who concludes that he or she is not performing well—or simply finds the challenges of supervision more stressful or less rewarding than anticipated—may request a return to a position at their former grade level.<sup>41</sup> We recognize that the request and return may be difficult and painful: the request

<sup>41</sup> An employee may not demand return. The decision rests with the agency, and an agency that considered an employee's performance acceptable could deny the employee's request.

requires an implicit admission of failure or error, and the return may entail demotion and a loss of status.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, we encourage any supervisor in this situation to consider the long-term costs of remaining in a position that is a poor fit. Diminished performance and job satisfaction are an extremely high price to pay for whatever status and pay a supervisory position may afford.

Data from OPM's Central Personnel Data File indicates that Federal managers are making little use of the probationary period. For example, in Fiscal Year 2009, Federal agencies hired approximately 31,000 new supervisors, but took fewer than 200 actions due to new supervisors' failure to successfully complete the probationary period. Because hiring occurs throughout the year, and the length of a probationary period can vary, we cannot directly compare the percentage of new supervisors who failed probation in any given year with the number hired. Some supervisors who were reassigned or separated may have begun their probationary period in the previous year or two. However, the number of actions taken each year can supply us with a rough estimate of the percentage of new supervisors who do not pass probation and it appears to be very low. For FY 2009, approximately one half of one percent of new supervisors were either reassigned to a non-supervisory position or were separated.

It is unlikely that so small a percentage of new supervisors would be unsuccessful in a leadership role. This role differs so greatly from a technical position that even most the highly skilled technicians may not perform well as supervisors. Several studies of the success of new leaders in a wide range of organizations have found that 20 percent or more fail. For example, a recent survey found that more than one-third of new leaders are unsuccessful because of inadequate leadership skills.<sup>43</sup> The extremely low probationary failure rate among Federal supervisors suggests that many agencies are allowing many novice supervisors to continue in a supervisory role despite observable evidence that they will not be successful in that role.

Failure to use the supervisory probationary period as intended is a continuing concern. Two decades ago, in our 1989 report *First-Level Supervisory Selection in the Federal Government*, based on data furnished by the Office of Personnel Management, we estimated that the probation failure rate for 1986-1987 was two-tenths of one percent. As shown in **Table 7**, which shows estimated rates of failure of new Federal supervisors to successfully complete probation 1999 through 2009,<sup>44</sup> little has changed. The probationary failure rates are steady, ranging from approximately three-tenths of a percent to five-tenths of a percent for all years except for 2003.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> We note that the agency may also find it difficult to place the employee making the request, especially if the agency has filled or eliminated the employee's previous position.

<sup>43</sup> P. Ketter, "One size does not fit all," *Training and Development*, March 2009, p. 50.

<sup>44</sup> Estimates based on data from OPM's Central Personnel Data File. The new supervisors include both individuals new to Federal service who were hired into a supervisory position and current Federal employees who appeared to be new to supervision. Probationary actions include both actions taken for failure to successfully complete a supervisory probationary period under 5 CFR 315, Subpart I and actions taken for failure to complete a competitive service probationary period under 5 CFR 315, Subpart H or a comparable excepted service probationary or trial period.

<sup>45</sup> Two agencies that had high levels of hiring in fiscal years 2002 and 2003 accounted for the vast majority of fiscal year 2003 probationary actions.

**Table 7.**  
**Federal Agency Actions for Failure to Complete Supervisory Probation**

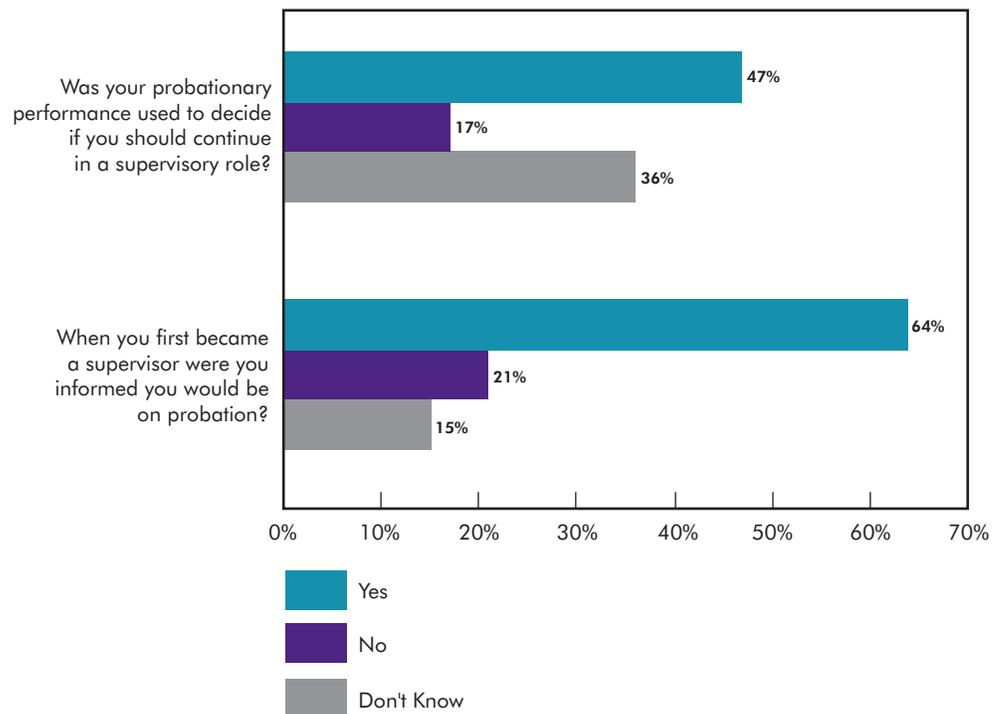
Fiscal Year	Number of New Supervisors	Probationary Actions	
		Number	Percentage
1999	18,269	63	0.34%
2000	19,414	56	0.29%
2001	20,264	67	0.33%
2002	24,378	125	0.51%
2003	24,192	379	1.57%
2004	25,118	124	0.49%
2005	24,019	99	0.41%
2006	25,414	99	0.39%
2007	28,742	116	0.40%
2008	32,620	121	0.37%
2009	31,541	168	0.53%

Also, agency use of the probationary period to make decisions about the suitability of new supervisors remains lower than its use for the workforce overall. In our 2005 study on the use of the probationary period for all new employees, we reported that somewhat less than 2 percent of competitive service employees are removed in their first year.<sup>46</sup>

Survey data provide additional evidence of failure to use the supervisory probationary period as a final, substantive step in the selection process for supervisors. All new supervisors should clearly understand that they must successfully complete a probationary period as part of the selection process. By law, their probationary performance must be used to make the final selection decision. In our 2007 Merit Principles Survey, we asked first-level supervisors if they had been informed when they first became a supervisor that they would be required to serve a probationary period. We also asked them if their performance during their probationary period as a supervisor was actually used to decide if they should continue in a supervisory role. Their responses are shown in **Figure 3**.

<sup>46</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *The Probationary Period: A Critical Assessment Opportunity*. Washington DC, 2005.

**Figure 3.**  
**Supervisors' Responses to Probationary Period Questions**



Only 64 percent of supervisors affirmed that they were informed of the probation period, while fewer than half (47 percent) of supervisors stated that their performance during their probationary period was used to decide if they should retain a supervisory role. These results also provide further evidence of the broader difficulty that Federal leaders have in addressing and resolving poor performance, as discussed in our recent report *Managing for Engagement—Communication, Connection, and Courage*. In that report, we cited data from the 2007 MPS which showed that only 30 percent of employees at all levels and 26 percent of non-supervisory employees believe that their leaders take action to manage poor performers.

Agencies need to hold managers accountable for using the probationary period wisely as the final step in the selection process. Performance appraisals for managers should include their use of the probationary period as the final step in selection. Managers must understand that they are responsible for the effectiveness of their supervisors. There is no point to having a probationary period if it is not used.

There are several possible explanations for infrequent use of the probationary period to remove ineffective supervisors. The first possibility is the agency's conception of the supervisory role. An agency may seek a technical expert and view supervision as secondary. If so, the agency may accept poor performance in the supervisory role. A second possibility is closely tied to the use of inappropriate selection criteria. Because the selection process is typically heavily weighted toward technical expertise, managers often select their best technical person for first-level supervisory jobs. When the technical expert does not demonstrate good supervisory capabilities during the probationary period, the manager may be understandably reluctant

to hold the new supervisor accountable for failure to demonstrate skills that the agency failed to explicitly require or properly assess. Finally, a manager may be loath to return the new supervisor to a technical position, which would constitute an admission of error in selection and could humiliate an employee who had performed at a high level in a technical capacity for many years. These difficulties are compounded if the new supervisor's previous technical role has been filled with another employee and the manager has no suitable position available for the new supervisor.<sup>47</sup>

## 9. Evaluate the Supervisory Selection Strategy

Agencies should periodically evaluate the success of their selection strategy. In addition to identifying ineffective supervisors, the probationary period also offers an excellent way to evaluate the predictive power of the selection tools applied to select new supervisors before the probationary period begins. The probationary period can offer clues about the weaknesses and strengths of these tools. What are the areas of weakness new supervisors are demonstrating during the probationary period? For example, are they experiencing difficulty in planning and assigning work, communicating with employees, addressing poor performance, or evaluating performance? If there are consistent areas of weakness, the selection tools need to be revised so that they identify these weaknesses in candidates. Conversely, what are the areas of strengths new supervisors exhibit? The selection tools are probably working well for these areas.

## 10. Prepare Human Resources Staff to Guide Managers

Most managers lack the time or resources to develop expertise in selection and must depend on their human resources staff for guidance. For example, although managers should be able to describe the capabilities and behaviors they want first-level supervisors to demonstrate, they may need assistance in labeling these competencies and identifying the best ways to assess them. Therefore, it is important for every Federal agency to ensure that expertise in selection is resident in their human resources staff. That expertise should consist of in-depth knowledge and skill in the development and implementation of job analysis, competency identification, and assessment methods; a basic "follow the manual" level of knowledge does not suffice.

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<sup>47</sup> Our analysis of probationary actions supports the idea that agencies find it particularly difficult to demote or otherwise reduce the status of a current employee with a history of good service. Action under a supervisory or managerial probationary period was much less common than action under a competitive service probationary period or excepted service trial period.

## 11. Explore Alternative Paths for Advancement and Recognition

Often a supervisory position is the only route to promotion and increased pay for experienced employees. Federal career paths rarely include technical expert roles in which highly proficient and experienced employees are recognized with organizational status and compensation comparable to that of a supervisory role.<sup>48</sup> Thus, many technically proficient employees who have minimal interest or aptitude in managing people apply for supervisory positions because they see no other way to earn more money or be promoted to a position of greater prestige. And, because the selection criteria are heavily weighted toward technical expertise, they often are selected for these positions. In a survey conducted in 2002, the National Academy of Public Administration asked 1,500 supervisors, managers, and executives from 23 Federal agencies if they would remain in a leadership role even if they could earn their current salaries in a non-managerial role. Fifty-six percent of the first-level supervisors said they would retain a managerial role while 44 percent said they would not.<sup>49</sup> Those results suggest that many supervisors remain in a supervisory role for reasons of pay or prestige rather than an interest in supervising or leading employees.

Alternatives need to be developed for high performers who have little interest in or aptitude for supervision but see no other path to advancement. In occupations in which employees with a very high level of expertise can contribute to the organization beyond the top non-supervisory position, as in scientific or professional jobs, developing high-level technical career paths should be considered. For other types of positions, encouraging lateral movement within or outside the agency may give employees the satisfaction and excitement of new experiences and the opportunity to share their knowledge and skills with others while the new organizations benefit from these individuals' expertise. Other possible opportunities for high performers are serving as a mentor, representing the agency in interagency or external task forces, taking on special projects, and developing and delivering training to less experienced employees. These alternatives to supervisory positions can perhaps be accompanied by monetary bonuses, salary increases, or other forms of recognition.

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<sup>48</sup> For example, under the General Schedule classification system, supervisory positions are typically classified at least one grade level higher than the highest-graded subordinate position. Although there are exceptions, the GS classification system, in its current form, does not encourage or facilitate the establishment of "dual career tracks" in which many, or most, nonsupervisory positions are classified to the same grade level as the supervisory position to which they report. We caution that this discussion is highly simplified, and that readers seeking a fuller discussion of General Schedule classification should refer to OPM guidance and standards.

<sup>49</sup> National Academy of Public Administration, *First Line Supervisors in Federal Service: Selection, Development, and Management*, Management Concepts, Vienna, VA, 2003.

## Summary

Deficiencies in selection processes for first-level supervisors have long been recognized, yet little progress has been made in correcting or eliminating them. These selection processes are often flawed both in terms of the competencies assessed and the instruments used to assess applicants. Selections are typically more heavily based on technical expertise than on leadership competencies and often, candidates' supervisory skills or potential are not assessed at all. Assessment instruments such as self-report questionnaires and ratings based on applications or resumes that are not reliable predictors of supervisory performance are prevalent. The outcome has been that people with the strongest technical skills are often selected for first-level supervisory roles, even if they lack the "people management" skills or potential needed to perform the job well.

Agencies that seek to hire truly qualified supervisors must clearly define: (1) the role the position will play in the organization; (2) the position's specific duties and responsibilities; and (3) the competencies needed to successfully perform those responsibilities. Many of the competencies that are critical for the success of first-level supervisors are not readily amenable to development through training or on-the-job learning. Therefore, it is essential to select individuals who already have the underlying abilities, values, and interests and can enhance or build the specific supervisory skills needed. We have suggested foundational competencies and assessment tools that can help agencies improve their selection processes.

The managers who select supervisors must be well trained in the selection process and assume personal responsibility for the selection of supervisors. Managers must learn to: (1) identify the competencies needed for effective supervisors; (2) ensure that those competencies are assessed; (3) conduct thorough interviews and rate candidates rigorously and fairly; and (4) use the results of selection tools to identify the most competent of the final candidates. Managers' responsibility includes using the probationary period as the final step in the selection process. From the data we reviewed, it appears that few managers are taking advantage of the probationary period to expeditiously remove supervisors who are not performing as well as they should.

Managers cannot, and should not, do all this on their own. Agencies should ensure that their human resources staff have expertise in selection so that they can provide managers with guidance in developing and implementing sound selection processes for first-level supervisors.

Agencies also need to consider, and possibly reexamine, career paths and incentives for their most competent and valuable technical employees. Because most Federal career paths do not provide technical expert roles in which highly proficient and experienced employees are recognized with organizational status and compensation comparable to that of supervisors, many technically proficient employees who have minimal interest or aptitude in managing people apply to supervisory positions.



# DEVELOPMENT OF SUPERVISORS



Many Federal career paths are designed so that employees who begin at the entry level routinely participate in training and development activities that help them build the competencies they will need to successfully perform their jobs. Supervision is a career path and employees starting out on that path also need training and development to be effective. The complexity of supervisory responsibilities also requires that more experienced supervisors be given the opportunity to continually enhance their skills.

Several of the previous reports on Federal first-line supervisors noted in Chapter 1 discuss the inadequacy of preparation for this important role. For example, the National Academy of Public Administration strongly stated that agencies need to do a better job of developing and training supervisors.<sup>50</sup> As in the selection of first-line supervisors, the concern is longstanding. In MSPB's 1992 study *Federal First-Line Supervisors: How Good Are They?*, we noted that despite the criticality of training, especially for first-time supervisors, many supervisors are placed in situations without the skills they need to successfully perform their jobs. We also noted the problem that many Federal organizations use self-selection for first-level supervisor training so that supervisors are enrolled in courses upon their request. There are often large gaps between individuals' views of their learning needs and what they really need to learn to be effective supervisors.

Six years later, in 1998, we reported in our study, *Federal Supervisors and Strategic Human Resources Management*, that if supervisors do receive formal training (and many do not), it often consists of an overview of their responsibilities without explaining the importance of these responsibilities and how they affect the performance of the work unit. In addition, the emphasis on processes and procedures rather than hands-on management makes the training more useful for an administrative role than for managing employees. In 1999, the Office of Personnel Management reported that supervisors typically receive a general introduction to the regulations and procedures regarding handling poor performers during initial supervisory training but that supervisors are nearly unanimous in saying this approach is almost useless.<sup>51</sup> In their 2001 report, *Supervisors in the Federal Government: A Wake-up Call*, OPM found that only four of 20 agencies surveyed had formal internal leadership development programs that prepare employees to become effective first-level supervisors. In a study released the following year, MSPB

<sup>50</sup> National Academy of Public Administration, *First Line Supervisors in Federal Service: Selection, Development, and Management*, Management Concepts, Vienna, VA, 2003.

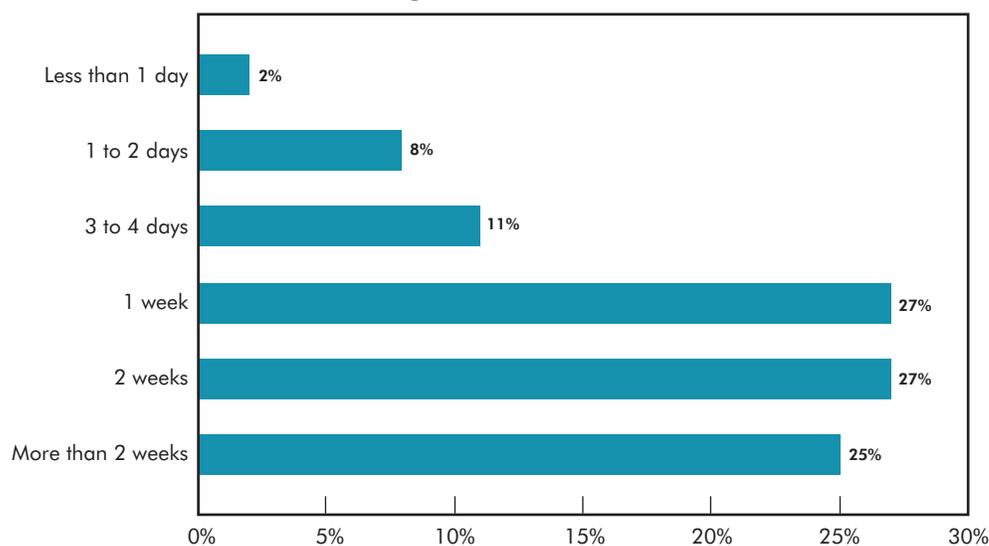
<sup>51</sup> U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Poor Performers in Government: A Quest for the True Story*, Washington, DC, January 1999.

stated that “The Government’s management capacity problems are compounded by the lack of comprehensive management development and succession plans in many agencies. A Board survey found that 2 of every 10 managers believe they haven’t received the training they need to perform their jobs. And, one of three managers said they needed more training to perform their job effectively. Far too many managers and supervisors have not been given the training or work opportunities that would help them develop their managerial abilities.”<sup>52</sup> We recommended that agencies establish supervisory and managerial mentoring programs and that managers should make it their ongoing responsibility to continuously develop their subordinate supervisors.

## Training for New Supervisors Is Often Inadequate

The results from the 2007 MPS confirm that the inadequacy of the training and development provided to new supervisors is a continuing issue. We asked first-level supervisors about the learning opportunities they had received as new supervisors, both through formal training and other modes of development. Fewer than two-thirds of supervisors (64 percent) said that they had received supervisory training preceding or during their first year as a supervisor. Given the complexity and impact of supervisory jobs, all new supervisors need training both to learn how to manage their employees effectively and to understand the agency’s expectations for supervisors. Many Federal supervisors are apparently being expected to function effectively without preparation. Even among those who are receiving formal training, most are not receiving substantial amounts of training. As illustrated in **Figure 4**, of the 64 percent of supervisors who received training, almost half (48 percent) received one week or less of training.

**Figure 4.**  
**Amount of Training Received by the 64 Percent of New Supervisors Who Received Formal Training**



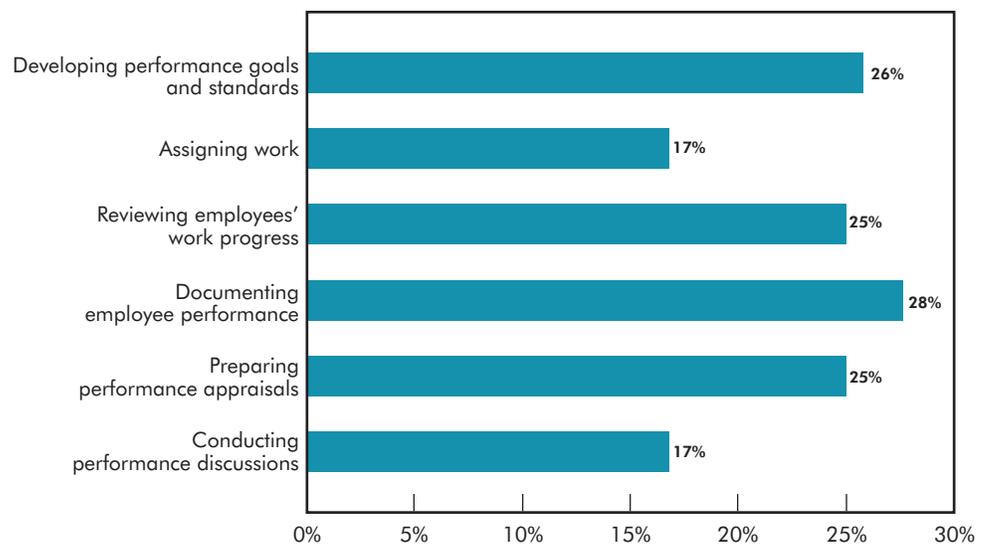
<sup>52</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Making the Public Service Work: Recommendations for Change*, Washington, DC, 2002, p. 12.

Although the amount of training says nothing about the quality of training or transfer of learning to the job, it is unrealistic to expect that anyone could learn even the fundamentals of the complex job of supervision in a week or two. In any discipline, would we expect a professional with no prior experience to learn what they need to learn to be proficient in a week or two? From this perspective, it seems highly unlikely that the majority of new supervisors have received adequate training.

A review of the areas in which new supervisors were formally trained provides further evidence of inadequacies in supervisory training and development.

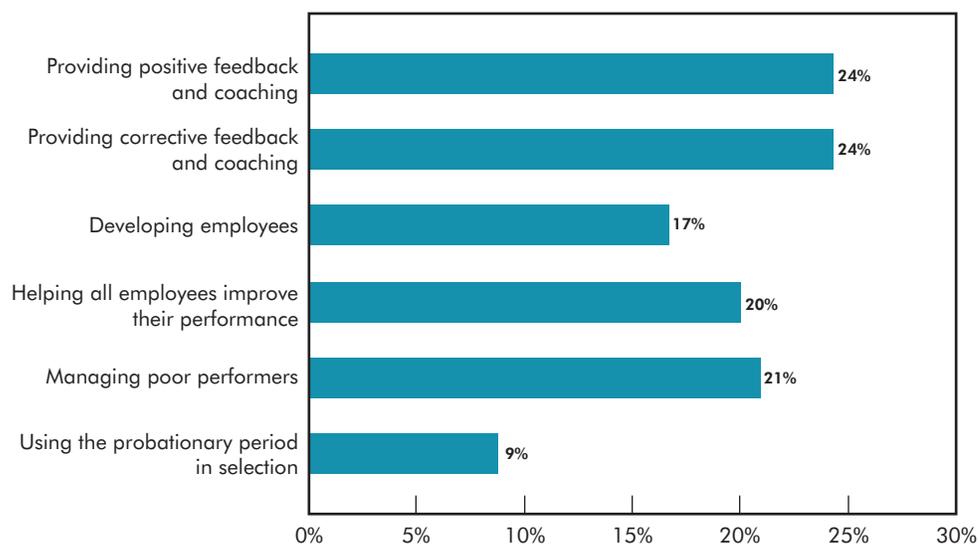
**Figures 5, 6, and 7** depict the percentages of supervisors who reported in the 2007 MPS that as new supervisors they received training in the three domains of Assigning and Reviewing Work, Managing Performance, and Work Unit Leadership.

**Figure 5.**  
**Training Received by New Supervisors—Assigning, Reviewing, and Evaluating Work**



Assigning and reviewing work, documenting performance, and conducting performance discussions are critical responsibilities of supervisors. They are essential for effective work group functioning. Yet, only small minorities of supervisors received training in how to effectively perform these functions.

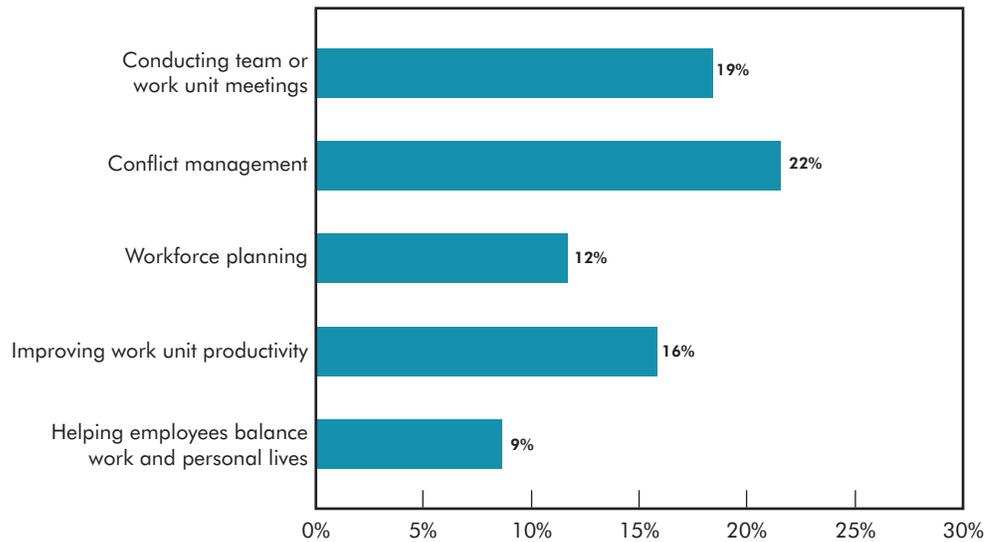
**Figure 6.**  
**Training Received by New Supervisors—Managing Performance**



Providing feedback and coaching, developing employees and helping them improve their performance, and managing poor performers are also at the heart of supervision. They are essential for employee engagement and high performance. Yet, the survey results show that just a quarter or fewer of new supervisors received training in these areas. Unfortunately, the complex, sensitive tasks involved in managing performance often cannot be quickly learned on the job. For most new supervisors, good training is essential to competence.

As we noted earlier, the management of poor performers is a perceived problem in the Federal Government, with only 26 percent of non-supervisory employees believing that their supervisors manage poor performers effectively. Our survey results provide at least a partial explanation for this perception as just 21 percent of new supervisors received training in managing poor performers. Even worse, only nine percent received training in how to use the probationary period as the final step in the selection process, an important avenue for dealing efficiently with poor performers by separating new employees who have not demonstrated they can succeed. Although there are certainly non-training factors that result in some supervisors' failure to manage poor performers, such as organizational culture and personal characteristics, lack of training can leave new supervisors without a basic grounding for dealing with difficult employees.

**Figure 7.**  
**Training Received by New Supervisors—Work Unit Leadership**



Strong work unit leadership is also important for high performance and employee engagement. Again, the survey results show that only a minority of new supervisors (22 percent) are receiving training in conflict management, an important responsibility to ensure smooth work group functioning. Fewer than 20 percent received training in each of the other supervisory responsibilities that contribute to an engaged and productive work unit.

Based on the MPS results for all three topic domains of first-level supervisory training, many new supervisors are not receiving the training they need to successfully perform their responsibilities. In our recent report on performance management, *Managing for Engagement—Communication, Connections, and Courage*, we highlighted several areas in which data from the MPS 2007 indicate that many supervisors are not adequately executing their performance management responsibilities, including:

- Working with their employees to develop accurate performance goals;
- Providing frequent feedback to employees;
- Holding employees accountable for results;
- Managing poor performers;
- Accurately assessing employee performance;
- Recognizing employees for their contributions; and
- Working with employees on their professional development.

These are all key areas of performance management. Federal agencies cannot expect their first-level supervisors to effectively manage the performance of their employees and foster employee engagement if they do not provide supervisors with essential training.

Readers may be unfamiliar with the type of training we are discussing that is explicitly tied to each supervisory responsibility because many existing first-level supervision courses seem to provide only a broad overview of responsibilities and emphasize regulations and rules over day-to-day hands-on management and interaction with employees. One example of the focused supervisory training that we believe is needed is a program developed for a division within the Department of the Interior. This training program was originally intended for new supervisors but was also delivered to experienced supervisors and managers because they had never received adequate training in people management. The curriculum included classes in the following topics:

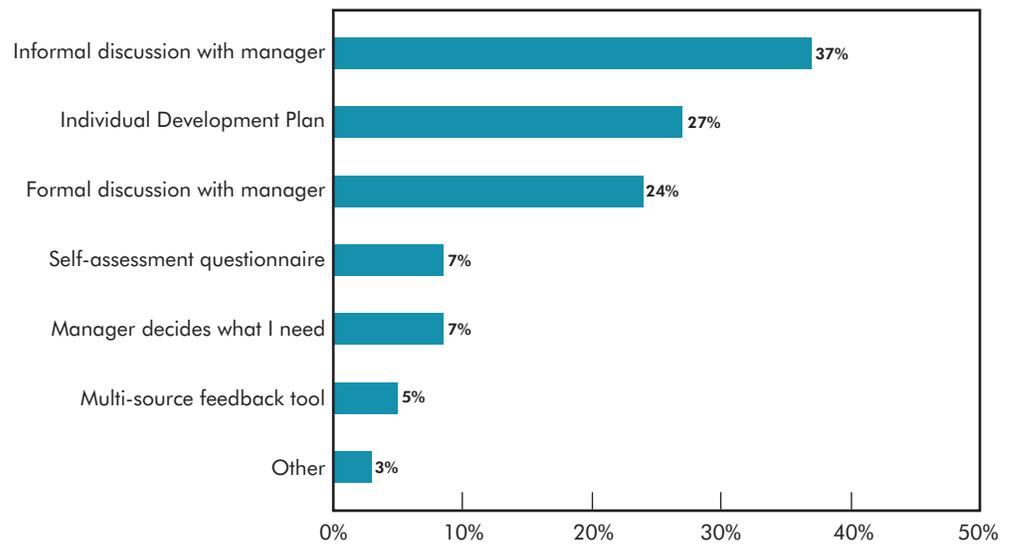
- Preparing performance standards;
- Assigning work and communicating performance expectations;
- Individual development planning for employees;
- Conducting individual update meetings with employees;
- Reviewing employees' work and promptly addressing inadequate performance;
- Providing feedback and coaching;
- Recognizing good performance;
- Documenting employee performance;
- Rating employee performance;
- Writing narrative performance summaries; and
- Conducting performance discussions.

The curriculum included pre-class, post-class, and follow-up exercises to increase the transfer of classroom learning to the job. In addition, parallel courses were provided for employees so that employees learned how to define performance standards, create an individual development plan, prepare for progress meetings with their supervisors, accept and apply feedback, and write summaries of their accomplishments.

## Need for Continuous Learning for Supervisors

Supervision is a demanding job that requires continuous learning to develop and hone the complex, demanding competencies that are essential to engage employees and lead work groups to high performance. In the 2007 MPS, we asked first-level supervisors if their current training needs are assessed. About half (51 percent) agreed that they are. Universal assessment of development needs is important to ensure that all supervisors have the opportunity to build the skills they need. Among supervisors who reported that their training needs are assessed, the most common method of assessment was an informal discussion with their manager. Other frequent approaches were the creation of an individual development plan and a formal discussion with one's manager. **Figure 8** shows the needs assessment methods used. Note that a few supervisors selected more than one option so the total is more than 100 percent.

**Figure 8.**  
**Methods Used for Assessment of Supervisors' Training Needs**



The formal and informal discussions with one's manager as well as the individual development plan, if reviewed by the manager, and the multi-source feedback tool can all be effective ways to assess training needs. However, the self-assessment questionnaire and the manager deciding what the supervisor needs can be problematic. If the self-assessment questionnaire is used as a tool for discussion between the supervisor and manager, it can be a valuable approach. If the questionnaire is used on its own, without input from the manager, the supervisor may inaccurately assess his or her own development needs because many people do not necessarily recognize all their development needs. A manager identifying the supervisor's development needs without discussion with the supervisor can lead to the supervisor's lack of commitment and interest in addressing the training need.

There are four key characteristics of sound assessment that can help ensure the accurate and comprehensive identification of training and development needs:

1. **Job-relatedness.** The assessment should be anchored in the responsibilities that the supervisor is asked to perform and the competencies identified as those required to execute these duties as noted in the job analysis;
2. **Balance.** Both the strengths and weaknesses of the supervisor are discussed and prioritized for development;
3. **Joint development.** Both the supervisor and the manager participate in the process and mutually agree on development needs and how they will be met; and
4. **Periodic review and updating.** The assessment is reviewed at least annually to gauge progress and identify new needs.

## Supervisors' Training "Wish List"

In the 2007 MPS, we asked supervisors to tell us what type of supervisory training they wished that they had received early in their career as a supervisor but did not. Apparently, many new supervisors are not receiving formal, foundational training in the basics of supervision and leadership, because this was the most commonly expressed omission. The five most frequently cited specific topics, ranked in order of frequency, were:

1. Managing people and their performance;
2. Managing marginal and poor performers;
3. Managing difficult or problem employees;
4. Providing coaching and feedback; and
5. Conflict management and resolution.

This list indicates the areas in which supervisors are often not trained early in their careers, but have discovered are important to effective functioning as a supervisor. The survey results clearly show that the most needed topics are the people management component of supervision, the most challenging area of working with employees to produce results. The supervisors' indications of the learning opportunities they missed align closely to the areas of greatest weakness we identified in our former report on the performance management of the Federal workforce, including not effectively managing poor performers, providing insufficient feedback and coaching, not holding employees accountable for results, and not recognizing good performance.

It may be true that some supervisors can learn how to manage people on the job and structured training is not required for them to be an effective supervisor. However, because good supervision is so closely linked to high levels of employee engagement and performance, it is too important to leave to chance and time. A new supervisor may or may not have a manager who models effective supervisory behaviors and can coach the supervisor. New supervisors can and do learn from experience but at what cost if they do not happen to learn what they need to know before they need to manage a serious conflict or cope with a poor performer or conduct problem?

Carefully planned training provided to all supervisors provides a base from which new supervisors can continue to learn. It is much more reliable and efficient than serendipitous learning. For example, good interpersonal communication is a critical competency for supervisors. It is a competency that new supervisors need before they are hired but it is also a competency that can be substantially enhanced through training when people possess the basic ability to interact well with others. A training course that helps supervisors understand the differences in communication styles among people that are influenced by such factors as their gender, ethnic background, and the part of the country in which they grew up and how these differences can be interpreted in the workplace can help supervisors better manage their employees,

resolve conflicts among team members, and more fairly evaluate employees' performance.<sup>53</sup> It is possible that supervisors who are sensitive to individual differences may over time learn on their own how to understand and manage different communication patterns among their team members. However, some will learn these lessons very slowly or not at all and many supervisors will not have a manager who can coach them on this topic. Formal training can help all supervisors at least be aware of individual differences in communication and supply them with the basic knowledge and skills to successfully cope with difficulties that arise.

## Need to Define the Supervisor's Role

Not only is the inadequacy of training a major impediment to supervisory skill development but without training, many supervisors may not fully understand their roles. A major positive outcome of training for supervisors is the clarification of agency expectations for supervisors. When we asked supervisors to tell us what training they wished they had received as new supervisors, many replied that they would have liked to have known what they were supposed to be doing as supervisors. They made comments such as, "I would like to have been told what my job actually was." Each organization needs to decide how they will define the first-level supervisor job and then communicate these expectations to all supervisors. Training is a great way to communicate this information because a consistent message can be sent to all supervisors in the organization. Individual managers can then work with their subordinate supervisors to discuss special requirements based on the particular work unit supervised. Continued coaching, feedback, and mentoring by managers and periodic meetings with executives will help supervisors further understand their roles and build their skills.

## Base Training on the Core Supervisor Competency Model

Training and development efforts will be most effective when they are based on a core supervisory competency model, a consistent set of competencies established as critical for first-level supervisors. As we discussed in the preceding chapter on selection, we are advocating that each agency adopt a core competency model for all first-line supervisors and add additional competencies as needed to support the agency's mission, strategies, and culture. Also as noted previously, foundational competencies that are difficult to develop such as Accountability, Integrity, and Flexibility should be used to select candidates for supervisory positions. Once supervisors are on the job, competencies that are more specific to the supervisory role, such as Human Capital Management or Developing Others can also be used for their development and management. The competency model will help supervisors understand the competencies they are expected to develop and demonstrate on the job as well as how they will be evaluated. The model also provides a framework for managers to provide feedback and coaching to augment training and development activities.

<sup>53</sup> For more information on this topic, see: Deborah Tannen, *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work*, Harper Collins, New York, 2001.

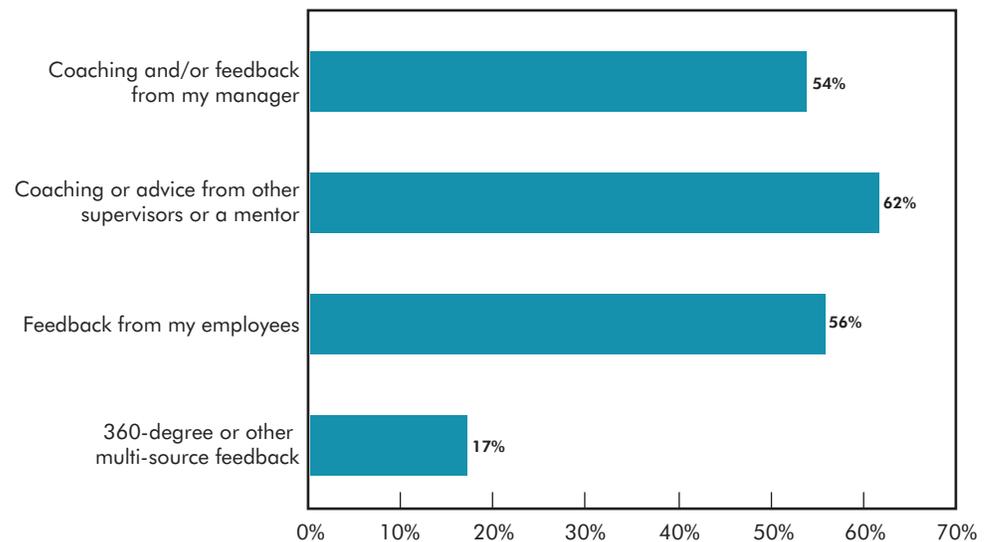
## Involve Managers and Executives in Supervisory Training

Another critical success factor for effective supervisor training is involving organizational leadership both in its planning and delivery. Many organizations have found that training for leaders at all levels is most effective when higher level leaders participate in delivering the training. When they do so, they are both showing that they place a high value on good supervision and communicating what they expect from their supervisors. It is also effective to have managers and experienced supervisors share the challenges and rewards that they have experienced as supervisors. The benefits of having executives, managers, and other supervisors co-teach training classes can be well worth the investment of their time. A good approach is to have professional instructional designers work with managers and executives to develop supervision training courses and materials. The actual training delivery can be shared by a professional trainer and managers, executives, and current supervisors. The trainer oversees all the scheduling and logistics and works with the leaders to prepare for teaching the course. In class, the trainer presents key ideas and concepts then the leaders can participate for an hour or more to explain how the concepts are implemented in the agency, share stories of their experiences, and offer advice. Participation in person is ideal but videoconferencing or videotapes also work well if this is not feasible.

## Need for Informal Development

Informal development complements the formal training that defines clear expectations for the supervisor's role in supporting the agency's mission and business strategies and that transmits practices proven to be effective. On-the-job learning helps supervisors apply, strengthen, and expand the competencies developed in these structured learning experiences. In the 2007 MPS, we asked supervisors to tell us about the informal development they participated in to build their supervisory knowledge, skills, and abilities during their first year as a supervisor. The results are shown in **Figures 9** and **10**.

**Figure 9.**  
**New Supervisors' Participation in Informal Development Activities—**  
**Coaching and Feedback**



Most striking is that only about half (54 percent) of the survey respondents reported that their manager provided them with coaching or feedback that helped them develop supervisory competencies. This is a concern for two reasons. First, many supervisors may not be receiving the assistance they need to improve their skills. Day-to-day coaching has a strong positive impact on performance.<sup>54</sup> Second, and perhaps even more importantly, many managers may not be modeling good supervisory behaviors. By not providing feedback and coaching, they are sending a strong message to first-level supervisors that these are not important functions of supervision.

Sixty-two percent of supervisors received help from other supervisors or a mentor in developing their skills. Whether more supervisors could have benefitted from advice from other supervisors or a mentor is unknown but it is possible that an increased focus on mentoring programs for new supervisors could offer substantial benefits in preparing new supervisors for their challenging roles. Just as new classroom teachers in elementary and high schools are assigned master teachers to guide the novices in their first year or two, each new supervisor could be paired with a highly skilled, experienced supervisor or manager. The mentor could talk through problems with the new supervisor, share his or her experiences including what worked and did not work, provide development advice, and offer encouragement to supplement the coaching provided by the supervisor's manager. For example, the Department of Education provides new supervisors with a year-long mentoring program that is integrated with training seminars. It includes the creation of an individual development plan, individual mentoring sessions, and shadowing the mentor. Similarly, the National Labor Relations Board requires the pairing of new supervisors with experienced supervisors for six to 12 months of mentoring and on the job training.

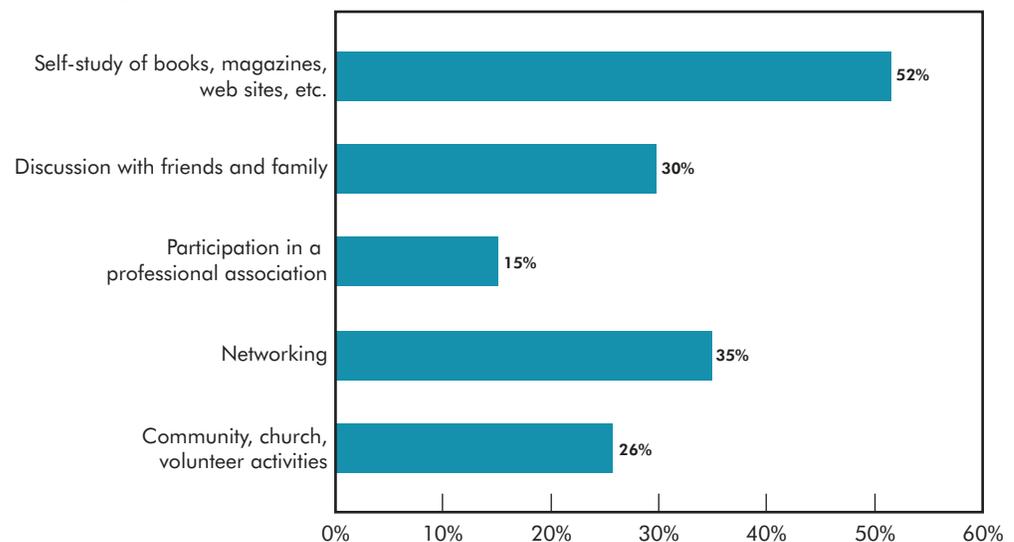
<sup>54</sup> Ken Blanchard and Garry Ridge, *Helping People Win at Work*, FT Press, New York, 2009.

Mentoring programs offer much opportunity for development at a very low cost. They also offer the mentor the satisfaction of contributing both to the new supervisor's success and the success of the organization. Mentorship facilitates the transfer of knowledge and could be an especially appealing role for those nearing retirement.

Fifty-six percent of supervisors also said they applied feedback received from their employees or other sources. This type of feedback can be especially valuable to new supervisors in providing them with new insights about their behaviors and identifying areas for improvement.

**Figure 10** shows that more than half of new supervisors took the initiative to learn on their own from books, journals, magazines, web sites, and other sources, an indication of their desire to build good supervisory skills. About a third also used networking and discussions with friends and family members to build their skills. Other non-training developmental activities included community, church, and other volunteer activities and participation in a professional association.

**Figure 10.**  
**New Supervisors' Participation in Other Informal Development Activities**



These results indicate that many supervisors are actively seeking ways to develop and improve their performance.

## Provide a Comprehensive Training and Development Program for Supervisors

First-level supervisors can best be prepared for their demanding roles through an integrated program of formal training, on the job learning, and other development opportunities such as job rotations, job shadowing, and mentoring. Beginning with an onboarding program for new supervisors will help them understand their new responsibilities and their role in the organization. It is important to include an explicit definition of their responsibilities and the supervisory practices they are expected to follow, e.g., meeting bi-weekly with each employee, quarterly formal performance reviews, documenting employee performance at least monthly. Scheduling a series of meetings for the new supervisors with the people in the organization with whom their work intersects will help them build professional networks and learn how the organization operates. These meetings may include support staff, other supervisors, functional managers, executives, and key customers.

In conjunction with the onboarding program, providing a multi-faceted development program will enable all supervisors to build the core supervisory competencies through classroom instruction, small group exercises and projects, and on the job learning. The training should enable the supervisors to build skills in every aspect of performance management including selecting employees; assigning work; reviewing work; providing feedback and coaching; developing employees; evaluating performance; recognizing good performance; and managing low or marginal performance. As they learn how to execute each of these responsibilities, the supervisors should also be strengthening the foundational competencies, e.g., communication skills, required to successfully discharge these responsibilities. The transfer of learning from the program to the supervisors' daily work should be a focus of the program. The supervisors' managers should be involved in the development program by leading or participating in some of the training sessions and following up at least weekly with the supervisors to discuss how they have applied their learning. Executives should also participate by welcoming supervisors to the initial session, leading one or more of the training sessions or by providing examples at several sessions of how the competency appears in action in the organization.

After initial formal training, additional support can be provided to new supervisors for their first year or two through a mentoring program focused on the core competencies. In addition, ongoing support for all supervisors can be offered through communities of practice and agency supervisory conferences. Communities of practice are small groups of supervisors who meet regularly in person, online, or via telephone to share their experiences and solicit suggestions for challenges they are facing. The objective is to have the supervisors build confidence through solidarity with their peers and hone their skills by learning from each other. Annual or semi-annual supervisory conferences communicate to supervisors that they are valued and play an important role in the success of the organization while providing excellent opportunities for defining agency expectations for supervisors and skill building through training sessions and networking with other supervisors. The conferences, which can be simple, low-cost events, also offer a venue for senior leaders to connect and communicate with supervisors by sharing organizational information and personal leadership experiences and learning.

## Recognition of the Need for Supervisor Training

Recent events indicate that the vital importance of providing first-level supervisors with the development they need to manage employees well is being recognized and acted upon. For example, in December 2009 the Office of Personnel Management issued final regulations to implement the supervisory training and development requirements in the Workforce Flexibility Act of 2004 (Public Law 108-411).<sup>53</sup> The regulations require Federal agencies to: provide training within one year of an employee's initial appointment to a supervisory position and follow up periodically, but at least every three years, by providing further training on actions, options, and strategies to (1) mentor employees; (2) improve employee performance and productivity; (3) conduct performance appraisals in accordance with agency appraisal systems; and (4) identify and assist employees with unacceptable performance and provide training when individuals make critical career transitions to supervisor, manager, or executive. In March 2009, Senator Daniel Akaka introduced Senate Bill 674, the Federal Supervisor Training Act of 2009, to require all Federal agencies to provide new supervisors, within their first year on the job, with training on developing performance expectations with employees and evaluating employees' performance.<sup>56</sup>

However, legislation and regulations will only make an impact if each Federal agency devotes the resources and energy needed to implement well-designed training for all supervisors and ensures that the training is transferred to the job. Federal agencies need not develop their own programs although for large agencies it may be most cost effective to do so. The Office of Personnel Management and the Department of Agriculture both offer training programs for supervisors in all agencies. In addition, some Federal agencies make their internal training programs available to employees in other agencies. OPM maintains an online catalog of Federal leadership development programs.<sup>57</sup> Some programs are available to employees in all agencies; others are restricted to specific agencies. Numerous offerings are also available from non-profit organizations and commercial vendors.

If an agency chooses to send supervisors to a program developed by OPM, another Federal agency, or an external vendor, it is important for the agency to consider doing four things. First, carefully review the training to ensure that the content aligns with the agency's best practice approach to supervision. Second, to the extent possible, customize the program so that agency guidelines for supervisors are clarified and integrated into the training. Third, invite agency leaders to participate in delivering the training. If leader participation is not practical within a program sponsored by another agency or provided by an external vendor, the agency can conduct supplemental sessions with their supervisors to reinforce the key concepts and explain their application in the agency. Fourth, ensure that the training is well designed and emphasizes the application of the information presented. Optimally,

<sup>53</sup> See Training; Supervisory, Management, and Executive Development, Final Rule, 74 FR 65383-65390, December 10, 2009 (to be codified at 5 CFR Parts 410 and 412).

<sup>56</sup> As of March 2010, S. 674 had been referred to the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia for review.

<sup>57</sup> As of April 2010, this database is located at [www.opm.gov/fedldp](http://www.opm.gov/fedldp).

the training should incorporate exercises with practice and feedback as well as on-the-job follow-up activities that will facilitate transfer of learning to the job.

There are several excellent leadership programs within the Federal Government but the agencies who have these programs are in the minority. Every agency should focus on leadership development to adequately prepare their people for supervisory and other leadership roles. Agencies that do not yet have established leadership development programs can profit from exploring the programs of other Federal agencies to identify valuable content, methods, and curriculums. **Table 8** briefly summarizes the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Leaders' Academy as an excellent example of a comprehensive, competency-based leadership development system. It is designed to provide agency leaders and potential leaders with training and development opportunities for the full spectrum of leadership competencies.

**Table 8.**  
**The Nuclear Regulatory Commission Leaders' Academy**

Component	Description
<b>Goal</b>	Provide contemporary management and leadership training and continued development to current, future, and potential NRC leaders so they have the tools necessary to lead the NRC in accomplishing its mission with excellence.
<b>Foundation</b>	Based on NRC's Leadership Philosophy, which reads in part: "Leadership at NRC is the process of people working together toward common goals that bring about positive change. The effectiveness of leadership is based on trusting relationships. Through this exchange, people influence one another's thoughts and actions. By harnessing and incorporating the diverse skills and viewpoints of others, individuals are empowered and group energy is mobilized to pursue collective goals. Decisions are made and actions are taken."
<b>Structure</b>	The Academy is built upon seven leadership levels with a separate curriculum for each level that is designed to develop a specific set of target competencies.
<b>Curriculum</b>	<p>The programs for each level of leadership are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Situational Leaders, for employees who manage projects or programs</li> <li>● Leadership Potential Program, a 12-month competitive program to prepare high-performing employees to be selected for team leader, supervisory, or other positions that require leadership skills</li> <li>● Team Leader Development Program, a 12-month program to develop team leaders for supervisory or other leadership positions</li> <li>● Supervisor Development Program, a 24-month program required for all supervisors within their first two years</li> <li>● Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Program, an 18 month competitive program to prepare employees at grade GS-14 or above for SES positions</li> <li>● Executive Managers for managers who supervise supervisors</li> <li>● Senior Leaders for employees in Deputy Office Director or higher level positions.</li> </ul>
<b>Learning Methods</b>	A wide variety of learning methods are employed including classroom and online courses, self-assessments, 360-degree feedback, learning development plans, rotational assignments, leadership briefings, mentoring, coaching, and teaching opportunities.

In addition to investigating leadership programs in other Federal agencies, it may be worthwhile to review supervisor training programs in state and local government and the nonprofit and private sectors for fresh ideas. Some of the material may need to be adapted to apply more specifically to Government supervisors, but with a little imagination the underlying ideas and training techniques can be easily applied to the Federal context.

## Summary

Many new supervisors are not receiving the training and development opportunities they need both to understand the agency's expectations for supervisors and to manage their employees effectively. This problem has long been recognized and is confirmed by the results of the 2007 Merit Principles Survey. Of the 64 percent of supervisors who said that they had received training prior to or during their first year as a supervisor, almost half (48 percent) received one week or less. Overall, more than three-quarters of new supervisors did not receive training in each of the basic areas of performance management including defining performance goals and standards; assigning, reviewing, and documenting employees' work; providing feedback; developing employees; evaluating employee performance; and managing poor performers.

Federal agencies cannot expect their first-level supervisors to effectively manage the performance of their employees and foster employee engagement if they do not provide supervisors with essential training. Supervising people is a tough job and it does not come naturally. It requires consciously acquiring, through both formal and informal development, a set of complex skills. As we noted previously, these skills are much more easily developed if the new supervisor possesses prerequisite foundational competencies such as good interpersonal communication skills and the other competencies discussed in the preceding chapter on the selection process.

Informal development complements structured training by giving supervisors multiple opportunities to apply, strengthen, and expand the competencies developed in structured learning experiences. The MPS 2007 results showed that many supervisors are participating in informal development activities. This is clearly a positive step. More managers need to provide helpful feedback and coaching to supervisors both to help them improve their effectiveness in managing their work groups and to communicate through their actions that feedback giving is an important function of supervision. The more widespread implementation of mentoring programs for new supervisors would also be an effective approach to preparing new supervisors for their demanding role.

New regulations from OPM and pending legislation indicate that the need for providing supervisors with training in managing employees' performance is being recognized. Each agency needs to make a commitment to supervisor development. There are several excellent leadership programs within the Federal Government but survey results suggest that these programs are not reaching enough supervisors. Every agency should provide a development program to prepare employees for supervisory and other leadership roles. Agencies that do not yet have established leadership development programs can profit from exploring the programs of other Federal agencies as well as programs in state and local government and the private and nonprofit sectors.

# GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT OF SUPERVISORS



The effective management of supervisors' performance is a key ingredient for their success. However, many managers and executives may not be providing the management support first-level supervisors need to effectively drive results and engage their employees. The National Academy of Public Administration concluded in their 2003 study of Federal supervisors that: "A poor selection process, coupled with insufficient performance management (particularly of newly-minted leaders), help to explain the genesis of many leadership cadre shortcomings. Even employees with good leadership potential can fail because they are not routinely provided expectations of performance, and feedback and consequences for success or failure."<sup>58</sup>

In the introduction to this report, we identified four areas as likely contributors to suboptimal first-level supervision in the Federal Government: selection, development, guidance and support, and accountability. The preceding two chapters discussed supervisors selection and development. This chapter discusses the guidance and support that first-level supervisors receive. The following chapter will focus on accountability.

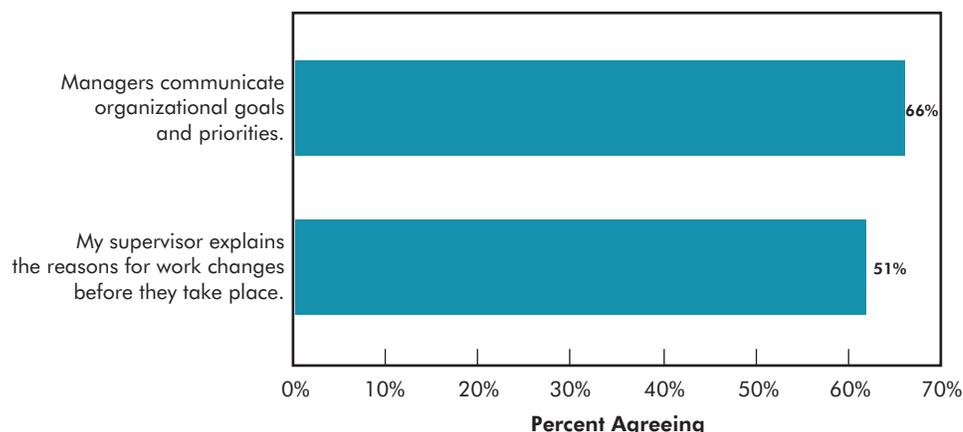
## Information

To effectively lead a work unit, supervisors need to thoroughly understand the organization's mission, goals, and strategies. They need information about the organization's progress and problems in implementing the strategies and achieving the goals. They also need to know about upcoming changes and how they may affect their work group. This information creates a big picture context within which the supervisor can make the best decisions for the work unit and guide employees. Whenever possible, supervisors need to be involved in decisions that affect their work unit to both promote their acceptance of the decisions and their effective implementation of them.

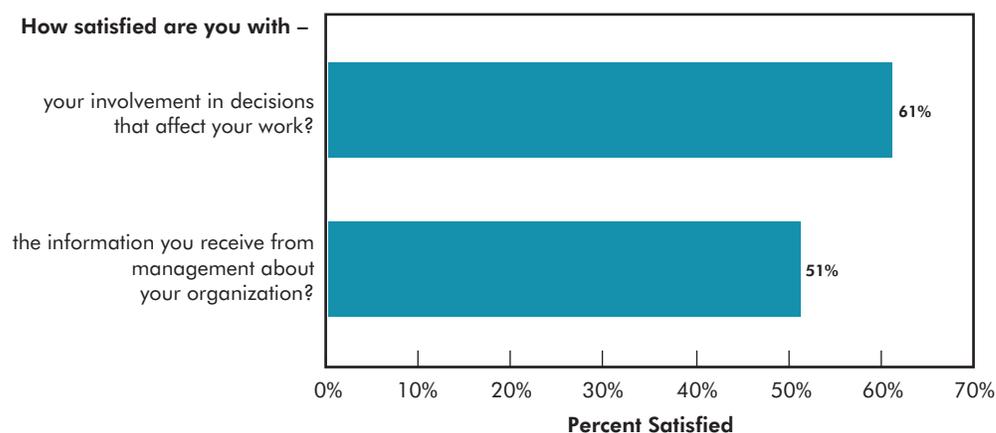
In the MPS 2007, we asked supervisors four questions about the information they receive about their organizations. **Figures 11** and **12** illustrate their responses.

<sup>58</sup> National Academy of Public Administration, *First Line Supervisors in Federal Service: Selection, Development, and Management*, Management Concepts, Vienna, VA, 2003, p. 3.

**Figure 11.**  
**Supervisors' Perceptions of Organizational Information**



**Figure 12.**  
**Supervisors' Satisfaction with Organizational Information**



As shown, two-thirds of first-level supervisors agreed that their managers communicate organizational goals and priorities; fewer than two-thirds (62 percent) of supervisors agreed that their supervisor explains work changes before they take place; and only a bare majority of first-line supervisors—just 51 percent—indicated that they were satisfied with the organizational information that management provides. Thus, it appears that many Federal supervisors suffer from an “information deficit.” That deficit should concern agency leaders for two reasons. First, an ill-informed supervisor will find it difficult, if not impossible, to plan for changes in goals, priorities, or work processes. Second, a supervisor who cannot keep employees informed or provide timely, credible explanations for workplace changes will be hard-pressed to create the “positive work environment” that is essential to employee engagement.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>59</sup> See U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *The Power of Federal Employee Engagement*, Washington, DC, September 2008. That study identified “a positive work environment with some focus on teamwork” as one of six factors in employee engagement. This factor was based on the level of agreement with three survey questions related to communication and cooperation: (1) “I am treated with respect at work;” (2) “My opinions count at work;” and (3) “A spirit of cooperation and teamwork exists in my work unit.”

Survey data also suggest that many higher-level managers may suffer from an “input deficit.” As illustrated in Figure 12, fewer than two-thirds (61 percent) of supervisors said they are satisfied with their involvement in decisions that affect their work. From their perspective, many supervisors do not receive adequate opportunity to provide input into agency decision-making. That can result in both suboptimal decisions and reduced supervisory understanding of (and commitment to) those decisions. Agency leaders who do not involve subordinate supervisors in decisions directly affecting their work units are losing an enormous amount of expertise and creativity. Because supervisors often understand their work better than do higher-level leaders, they can provide essential insight into the implementation and consequences of potential decisions.

Agencies that expect supervisors to act with authority and responsibility in leading their work units must treat their supervisors as leaders. That is, supervisors must be trusted to participate in decision making; must be given information about the organization’s progress and problems; and must have a strong voice in the organization. Supervisors must see themselves as part of the leadership team to garner the commitment of their employees to achieving organizational goals. Because of the political nature of top agency leadership and the sometimes differing goals and perspectives of political leadership and career employees, the inclusion of first-level supervisors in high-level discussions and decisions may not be deemed appropriate. However, supervisors can be productively involved in division or bureau-level decision making and information sharing. This level of involvement will give supervisors a voice and the understanding of organizational goals, strategies, and issues they need to lead their work units.

## Guidance and Support

In the preceding chapter, we discussed the importance of providing learning and development opportunities for first-level supervisors. In addition to training, to function effectively supervisors need ongoing guidance and support. Simply sending new supervisors to training does not relieve managers of their responsibility to assist supervisors in developing their supervisory skills. To ensure a strong return on the investment made by enrolling supervisors in development programs, managers need to support supervisors in practicing the new behaviors they learn. They also need to provide coaching to help the new supervisors further develop their skills. And, perhaps most importantly, managers need to model good supervision skills. As Albert Schweitzer said, “Example is not the main thing in influencing others, it is the only thing.”<sup>60</sup> What managers do is far more persuasive than what they say.

Many new supervisors may be unsure of what is expected of them day to day on the job. Some may be simply dropped into the supervisory role as if parachuted into a foreign land and left to chart a course without a map. As with all other employees, supervisors need specific performance expectations. Agency leaders cannot assume

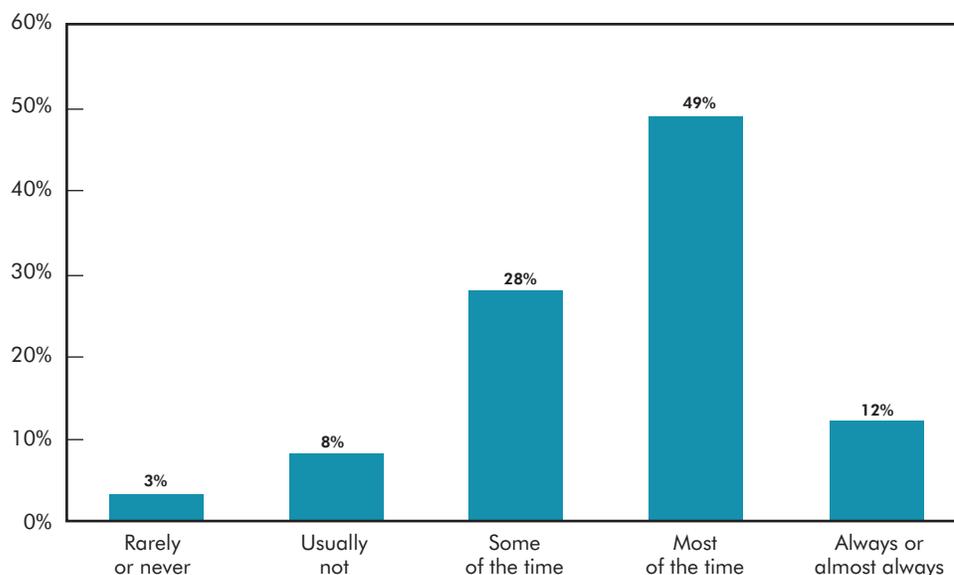
<sup>60</sup> Accessed on August 21, 2009, from <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/34600.html>. Dr. Albert Schweitzer, winner of the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize, was a French missionary, physician, philosopher, and musicologist.

supervisory duties are self-evident; they need to clearly outline for supervisors the performance management behaviors that will enable the organization to achieve its goals. Supervisors need to know, for example, that they are expected to frequently review employees' work and provide feedback. They need to understand that they are expected to promptly address poor performance. And they need to know all the other supervisory behaviors expected of them. Supervisors play too important a role in the success of the organization to leave their performance to chance.

In addition to being given clear performance expectations for their supervisory role, supervisors need ongoing guidance and support from their managers. In the MPS 2007, three-quarters of supervisors stated that their manager talks with them or assists them when they need help. So, it appears that most managers are investing significant effort in guiding their subordinate supervisors.

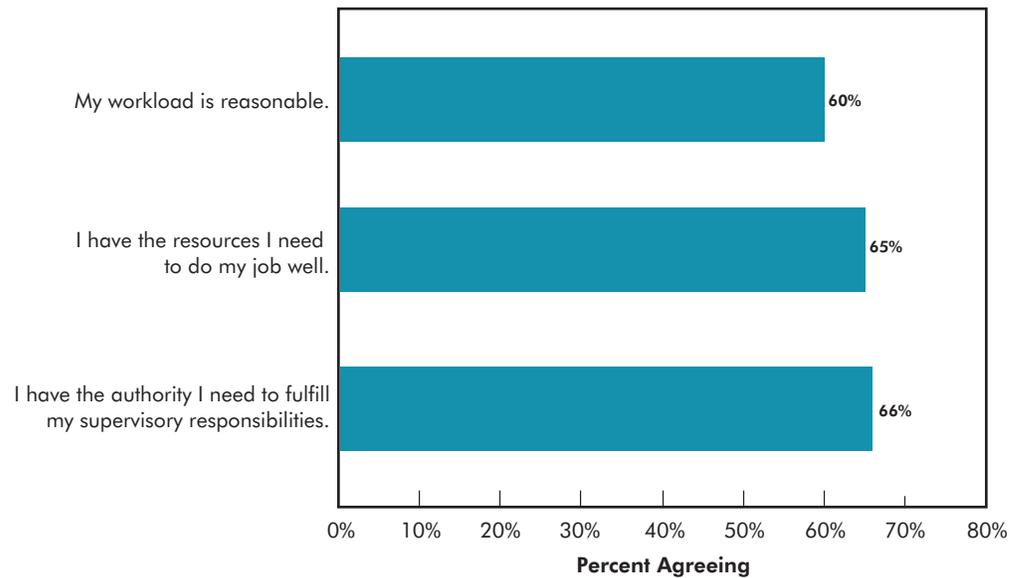
However, as illustrated in **Figure 13**, somewhat fewer supervisors (61 percent) reported that they routinely receive the information and guidance they need to do a good job. Perhaps most managers are taking the time to talk with supervisors and help them, yet are not providing supervisors with sufficient information or guidance. One possible explanation is that the managers themselves are not adequately informed. Fewer than two-thirds of managers (65 percent) said that they routinely received the organizational information they needed.

**Figure 13.**  
**Supervisors' responses to: How often do you receive the information and guidance you need to do your work efficiently and effectively?**



Organizations support supervisors not only by providing information and guidance, but also by providing adequate resources, time, and authority. Supervisors' perceptions of the support they receive are illustrated in **Figure 14**.

**Figure 14.**  
**Supervisors' Perceptions of Support**



About 60 percent of supervisors told us that their workloads are reasonable. Slightly more (65 percent) reported that they usually have the resources they need to do their jobs well. Two-thirds believe they have all the authority they need to fulfill their supervisory responsibilities. Thus 60 to 66 percent of supervisors believe they receive the support essential to perform well in terms of time, resources, and authority. This is definitely a good start but what about the other third? How is their apparent lack of support affecting their performance and the performance of their employees?

## Feedback

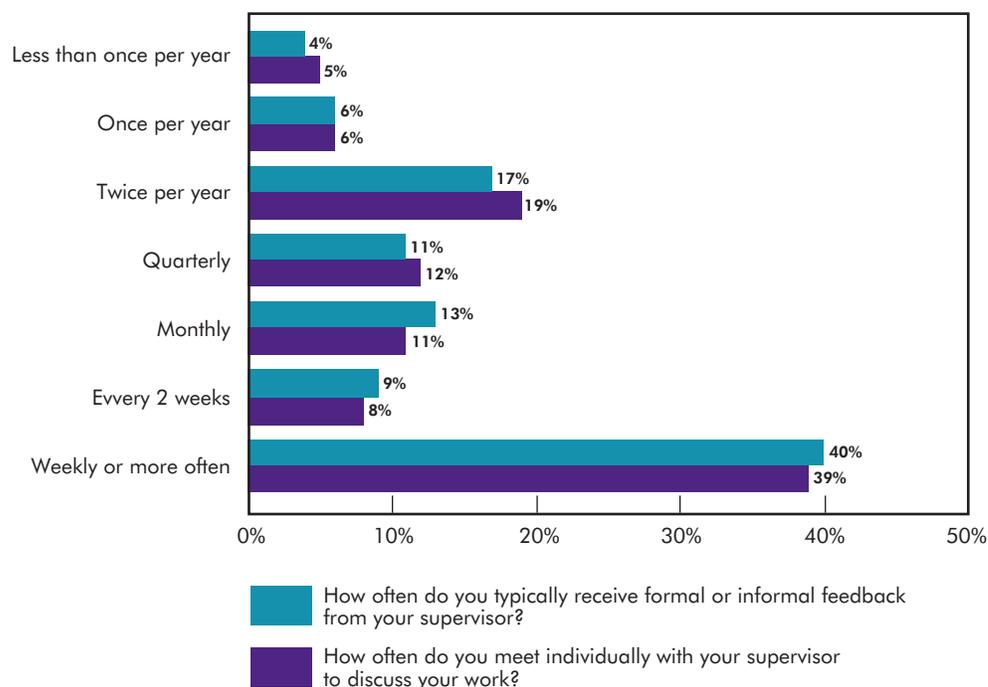
Frequent feedback is vital to effective supervisory performance because it helps supervisors understand what they are doing well and what they can improve. Human beings routinely overestimate their personal performance<sup>61</sup> and this is precisely why feedback is so important. In addition to helping supervisors improve their performance, feedback provides acknowledgement of accomplishments and thus fills the basic human need for recognition.

**Feedback from Managers.** We asked supervisors how helpful they find their manager's feedback. A large majority (79 percent) said their manager's feedback is very or somewhat helpful. This is excellent news. When managers provide feedback, it does help supervisors strengthen their performance. As shown in **Figure 15**, the challenge may be to persuade some managers to provide more frequent feedback to their subordinate supervisors. This figure shows how often supervisors receive feedback from their managers and how often they meet individually with their managers to discuss the progress of their work units in achieving their goals. The

<sup>61</sup> D. Dunning, C. Heath, and J.M. Suls, "Flawed self-assessment: Implications for health, education, and the workplace," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5(3), 2004, pp. 69-106.

closeness of the percentages for the two questions probably indicates that managers are providing feedback in individual progress meetings.

**Figure 15.**  
**Frequency of Performance Feedback and Progress Review Meetings**

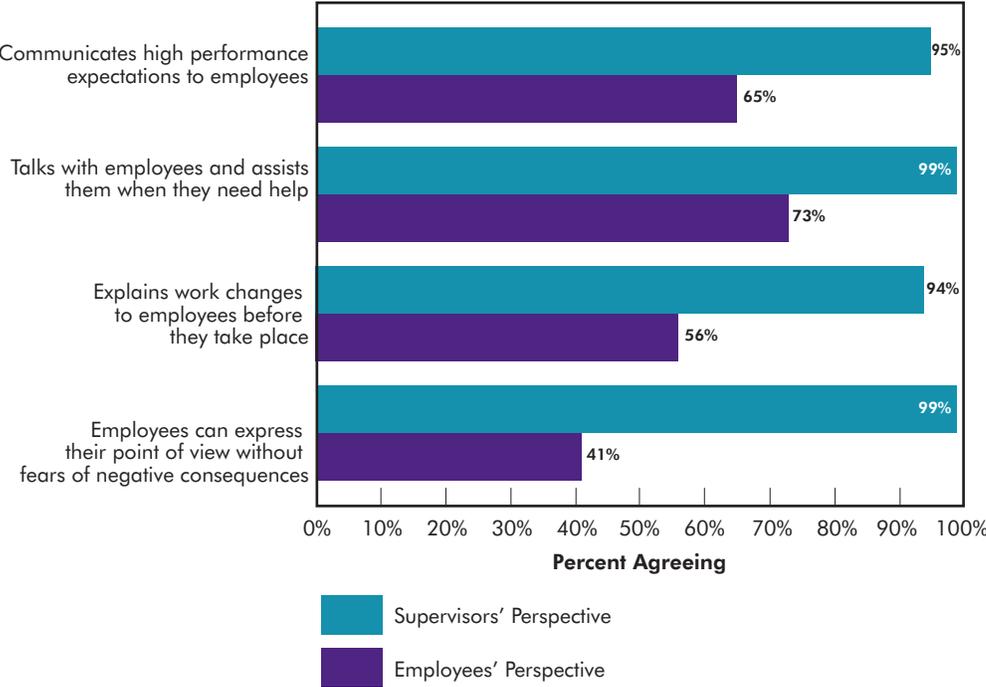


It is encouraging to see that 49 percent, almost half, of supervisors are receiving feedback from their managers at least every two weeks and that 47 percent are meeting with their managers for progress reviews with comparable frequency. These frequent interactions with their managers are providing supervisors with the opportunity to gauge the progress of their work unit and discuss it with their managers frequently enough to make mid-course corrections. Of special concern are the supervisors who receive feedback and meet with their supervisors only quarterly or even less often. The managers of these supervisors may be failing to provide the supervisors with the feedback they require to properly manage their employees and achieve a high level of performance. Because supervisors’ performance heavily impacts the performance of their employees and thus the organization, it is doubly important for managers to provide ample feedback to supervisors.

Managers should regularly meet with each supervisor to discuss the progress of the supervisor’s work unit in achieving its goals, to address any obstacles that might be blocking or delaying progress, to discuss how the supervisor is managing the work unit, and to provide both positive and corrective feedback to the supervisor. They should also discuss the supervisor’s development and any special concerns. This is also a good time to share information about the organization and any upcoming changes. Because supervisors have such a strong impact on the organization, we recommend that managers meet with supervisors at least monthly to keep abreast of progress and events in the unit and to provide support in preventing potential problems and facilitating high performance. In many cases, weekly or bi-weekly feedback and meetings will be advantageous.

**Feedback from Employees.** Employees are also an important source of valuable feedback for supervisors. Employees usually work more closely with supervisors than their managers do and, of course, have a different relationship with supervisors. They are much more aware of the daily performance management actions of the supervisor. Employees therefore can provide a unique perspective when they offer feedback. Employees will be able to make suggestions to their supervisors about how they can make the work unit a better place to work and help the employees do their best. In the MPS 2007, we asked supervisors a series of questions about their own performance. We asked non-supervisory employees the same questions about their supervisors’ performance. The results are depicted in **Figure 16**.<sup>62</sup> There are large gaps between supervisors’ perceptions of their performance and employees’ perceptions of that performance. Supervisors have a much more favorable views, most notably in their belief that employees can express their point of view without fear and their belief that they proactively inform employees of work changes.

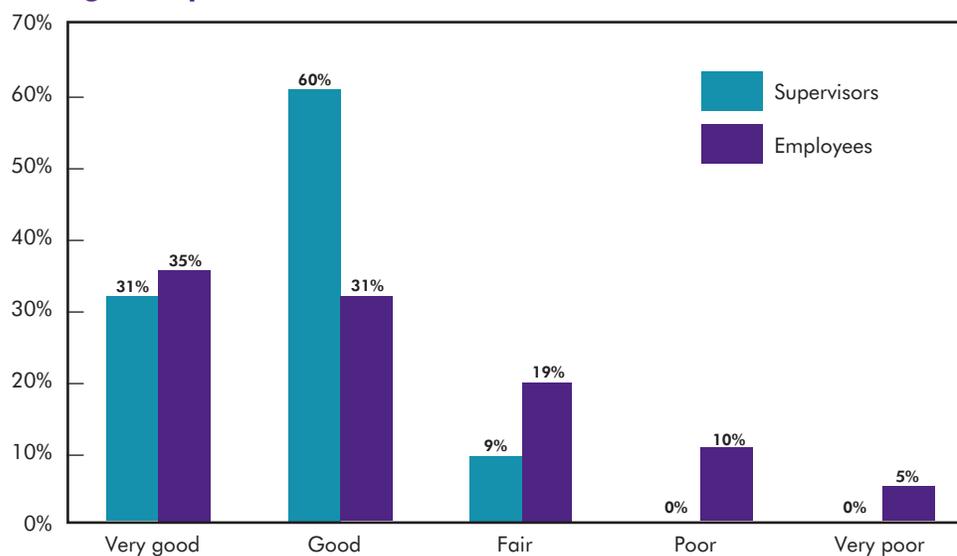
**Figure 16.**  
**Perceptions of Supervisors’ Behaviors**



There are also marked differences between supervisors’ views of their overall performance and employees’ views. We asked supervisors, “Overall, how would you rate your performance as a supervisor?” We asked employees, “Overall, how would you rate your immediate supervisor’s performance as a supervisor?” The results are shown in **Figure 17**.

<sup>62</sup> We did not match individual supervisors with their employees. These figures represent the responses of all first-level supervisors combined and all non-supervisory employees (individual workers and team leaders) combined.

**Figure 17.**  
**Ratings of Supervisors' Overall Performance**

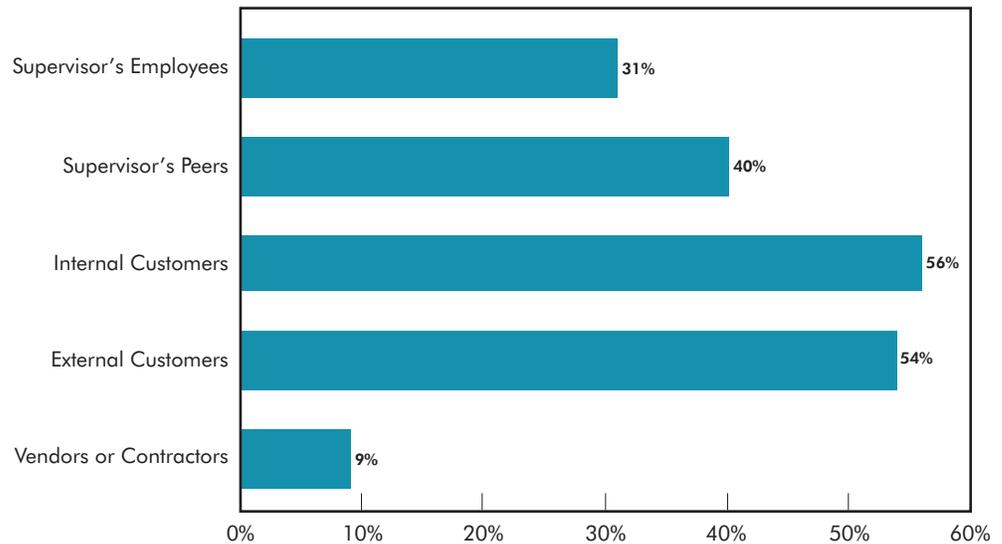


Clearly, Federal supervisors, as a group, view their performance as supervisors much more favorably than do the employees they supervise. This disparity cannot be fully explained by the fact that an effective supervisor has responsibilities—such as enforcing work rules, allocating undesirable or unrewarding assignments, and holding employees accountable for acceptable performance and conduct—that may conflict with subordinate employees’ desires or interests. It is not plausible, for example, that none of the supervisors who responded to our survey are performing poorly as supervisors. The disparities have at least one other source: the documented tendency of people—including Federal supervisors—to overrate their own performance.<sup>63</sup> However, research also shows that people can estimate their own performance more accurately when they receive specific feedback. Thus, the disparity also suggests that Federal supervisors could benefit from receiving more feedback from their own employees, both to more accurately understand how well they are (or are not) doing and to help them become better supervisors.

One of the questions in the MPS 2007 asked managers from whom they collect feedback to help them determine how well their employees, i.e., first-level supervisors, are performing. **Figure 18** shows the percentages of managers who indicated that they solicit feedback from each source listed.

<sup>63</sup> See D. Dunning, C. Heath, and J.M. Suls, “Flawed self-assessment: Implications for health, education, and the workplace,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5(3), 2004, pp. 69-106. Top performers are an exception to this general tendency; they usually rate their own performance accurately, but underestimate how well they are doing in comparison to others.

**Figure 18.**  
**Managers' Sources of Feedback about Supervisors**



The more than two-thirds of managers who are not collecting feedback from supervisors' employees about their performance as a supervisor are not taking advantage of a valuable source of information. Helping supervisors strengthen their performance management skills is an important part of a manager's job. The supervisor's employees are in the best position to know exactly how the supervisor is managing. The input the employees provide will enable managers to identify areas of strengths and development needs for each supervisor that they can use in coaching. There are many ways that managers can collect feedback from the employees of their subordinate supervisors. Some approaches that can work well include:

- Upward feedback or 360-degree feedback tools;
- Asking the employees to write their answers to a set of prepared questions. Possible questions include (1) What should your supervisor stop doing? ... continue doing? ...start doing?; (2) What does your supervisor do that helps you do your best work?; and (3) What does your supervisor do that makes it difficult for you to do your best work?;
- A live meeting or teleconference with the employees as a group;
- "Skip level" meetings in which the manager meets individually with each employee;
- A focus group conducted by a facilitator; and
- Asking the employees to write a brief narrative about what they see as their supervisor's strengths and weaknesses.

The written forms of feedback of course allow employees to submit their comments anonymously but they also allow employees not to take ownership of their comments and perhaps to make thoughtless or irresponsible comments. Also, because the manager does not know who provided each comment, he or she cannot ask for clarification. If there is a high level of trust in the organization and a strong culture of feedback giving is developed, managers can collect the information from employees in person or by name.

**Feedback from Peers and Others.** Supervisor's peers are another valuable and underused source of feedback. They can supply pertinent information about the supervisor's interactions with them; 360-degree feedback tools or written narratives (not anonymous) are typically the most appropriate approaches for this group.

About half the managers are collecting feedback from internal and external customers. Whenever possible, this is a good way to get feedback about the supervisor's behaviors outside the work unit. And, if the supervisor works with vendors or contractors, they too, can supply helpful information. The wider the scope of the feedback collected, the more information the manager will have to assist the supervisor in identifying strengths and working on challenges.

**Feedback from Observations.** Another way that managers can collect information about supervisors' performance is to observe them and their employees in action. If subordinate supervisors' employees provide direct services to clients, managers can occasionally sit unannounced among waiting clients. Managers can listen to what the clients are saying about the service and observe how they are treated by employees. This is a good way to evaluate the quality and extent of supervision the employees are receiving. It may also be possible to observe how the supervisors handle issues and problems that may arise between the employees and their clients.

**Using the Feedback Received.** When managers collect feedback about supervisors from their employees, peers, customers, or suppliers, it is important to evaluate the quality and credibility of the information received and balance it with their own observations and additional information about the supervisor. This feedback should be used only for development, not evaluation. Employees, peers, customers, and suppliers do not have the qualifications, experience, broad perspective, or motivation required to evaluate the performance of supervisors.<sup>64</sup> In addition, the source of the feedback should be shared with the supervisor only by naming broad groups; e.g., "This feedback came from your employees."

## Summary

Many supervisors believe that they are not receiving the guidance and support they need to execute a difficult role well. Only two-thirds of first-level supervisors believe they are receiving information about the goals and priorities of the organization while just half said they are satisfied with the information they receive from management about what's going on in their organizations. Fewer than two-thirds of supervisors agree that their supervisor explains the reasons for work changes before they take place. Fewer than two-thirds also said they were satisfied with their involvement in decisions that affect their work. For supervisors to act with authority and responsibility in leading their work units, they need to be treated as leaders; i.e., they should be trusted to participate in decision making, they need to be supplied with information about the organization's progress and problems, and they should have a voice in the organization.

<sup>64</sup> Elaine Pulakos, *Performance Management: A New Approach for Driving Business Results*, Wiley-Blackwell, West Sussex, UK, 2009.

Receiving frequent feedback is a vital component of effective supervisory performance. We found that 49 percent of supervisors are receiving informal or formal feedback from their managers at least every two weeks and 13 percent receive feedback monthly. The remaining 38 percent receive feedback only quarterly or even less often with some receiving feedback less than once a year. It is important for managers to understand that supervisors cannot be expected to effectively execute their responsibilities if they do not receive the frequent feedback that will enable them to regulate their performance and the performance of their employees.

Employees are also an important source of valuable feedback for supervisors. We found wide gaps between supervisors' own ratings of their performance and employees' ratings. For example, while 94 percent of supervisors said they explain work changes to employees before they take place, only 56 percent of employees agreed that their supervisors do so. While 91 percent of supervisors said their overall performance as a supervisor was good or very good, just 66 percent of employees agreed.

The input that employees can provide can assist supervisors' managers in identifying areas of strengths and development needs for each supervisor. Yet, we found that only 31 percent of managers collect feedback from the employees of their subordinate supervisors. We encourage more managers to request feedback from employees, peers, and customers about their subordinate supervisors for use in developmental coaching for the supervisors.



# ACCOUNTABILITY



For Federal employees, accountability is demonstrating a personal commitment to serving the public by diligently investing individual resources of competency, time, and energy to produce the outcomes valued by their organization. In supervisory and managerial roles, accountability is taking responsibility for both one's own performance and the performance of one's employees. It is taking the actions that will engage employees and build a strong connection between them and their work so that as many of them as possible choose to dedicate their best efforts to serving the public. It also means maintaining an ongoing dialogue with each employee so that their work progress is discussed and potential obstacles are identified early so they can be addressed and resolved before they become problems.

The role of the supervisor is to work with all employees at all levels of ability to maximize their contributions to the success of the organization. Supervisors need to understand that their job is to provide every employee—whether a star performer, a moderate achiever, or a straggler—with the guidance, feedback, encouragement, resources, and other support needed to perform his or her best. Several of the previous reports about first-level supervisors that we mentioned in Chapter 1 and our own research indicate that some agency cultures are not actively supporting this role for the supervisor. For example, in a 1999 study, we reported that some agency cultures “permit supervisors to view management of performance problems as time-consuming detours from their regular work, rather than as an intrinsic and essential part of the job.” In these agencies, supervisors are not held responsible for dealing effectively with problem performers and senior leaders may give tacit approval to moving unacceptable workers from unit to unit, counting on the better performers to bring productivity up to necessary levels.<sup>65</sup> Results from the MPS 2007 described in our previous report, *Managing for Engagement—Communication, Connection, and Courage*, provide examples of several areas in which some first-level supervisors do not seem to be helping employees achieve their best by working with them to define clear, written performance goals, providing guidance and feedback, and recognizing their achievements.<sup>66</sup>

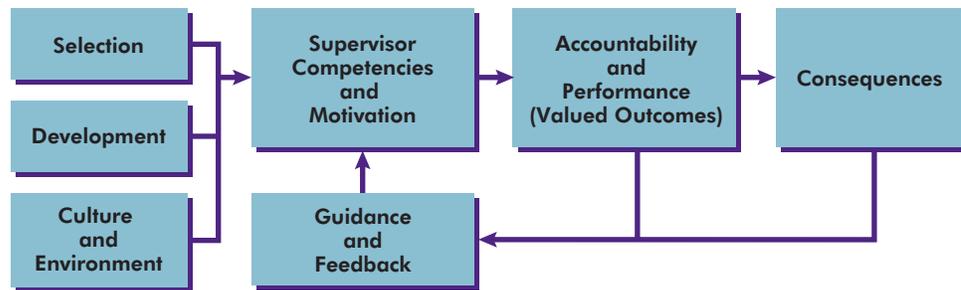
<sup>65</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Federal Supervisors and Poor Performers*, Washington, DC, 1999, p. 32.

<sup>66</sup> U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Managing for Engagement—Communication, Connection, and Courage*, Washington, DC, 2009.

## The Impact of the Organization on Supervisory Accountability

How can Federal agencies strengthen accountability for first-level supervisors? That is, how can they foster the conscious decision by every supervisor each day to do the best possible job of helping employees perform successfully? Accountability is developed through a complex interaction of the supervisor and the organization. The behavior of each individual is a function of the interaction between the person and the work environment. Restated, organizations are systems, in which accountability and work performance are the result of the interaction of the individual performer and organizational factors such as policies, processes, practices, and culture (both explicit and tacit).<sup>67</sup> This concept is illustrated in **Figure 19**.

**Figure 19.**  
**Supervisory Accountability Model**



To begin strengthening accountability, agencies need to consider the organizational system within which supervisors operate. The forces that support and encourage accountability should be strengthened while the forces that discourage it should be eliminated. Beginning with supervisor selection, it should be clear that accountability for the work of one’s team is the defining characteristic of a supervisor. Accountability should be a key competency that is thoroughly assessed in the selection process and reinforced in all training and development programs. These programs should both communicate to new supervisors that they are accountable for their work units and equip them with the knowledge and skills they need to effectively manage their work groups and hold employees accountable for their performance.

The organizational culture should foster accountability through communication, modeling, and support by higher level leaders that reinforces the content of the supervisor training and development programs. For example, managers and higher level leaders should make it clear in communications to employees that personal accountability for timely, high-quality, and efficient work is both expected of all employees and highly valued in the organization. Managers then should follow their words with action by engaging in ongoing dialogues with supervisors about their roles and how they are managing their work units, providing guidance and feedback,

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Brethower, D.M., “Specifying a human performance technology knowledgebase,” *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 8(2), 1995, 17-39; Langdon, D.G., *Aligning performance: Improving people, systems, and organizations*, Jossey-Bass-Pfeiffer, San Francisco, CA, 2000; and Gilbert, T.F., *Human competence: Engineering worthy performance* (2nd ed.), International Society for Performance Improvement, Silver Spring, MD, 1996.

and promptly addressing potential or existing obstacles. They should provide both the practical support and encouragement supervisors need to do a tough job well.

Thus, careful selection of supervisors, well-planned training and development, a supportive culture, and ongoing feedback and guidance result in supervisors who have both the capability and motivation to lead their work units to achieve the outcomes needed to meet organizational goals. As these valued outcomes are achieved, the organization needs to ensure there are positive consequences such as praise, formal recognition, increased opportunities, or rewards. In addition to the personal satisfaction felt by the supervisor, these organizational incentives reinforce good performance and further strengthen commitment to work. Conversely, if the supervisor's management of the work unit does not result in valued outcomes, the manager and executives need to make it clear that this level of performance is not acceptable through clear discussions with the supervisor of the inadequacies demonstrated and the impact on the organization. The manager should work with the supervisor to develop a plan for improving the work unit's performance that includes measurable goals and checkpoints.

In previous chapters of this report, we discussed the current status of: (1) supervisory selection; (2) training and development for supervisors; and (3) guidance and support provided to supervisors. We concluded that people with the strongest technical skills are often selected for supervisory roles although they may lack the people management skills or potential needed to perform the job well. We found that many new supervisors are not receiving the training and development they need both to understand the agency's expectations for supervisors and to manage their employees effectively. The 2007 MPS results also showed that many supervisors believe that they are not receiving the guidance and support they need and many are not receiving adequate feedback that they can apply to enhance their performance. It appears then that three of the factors that promote accountability and high performance are not fully operational in Federal agencies for first-level supervisors. Now, let's look at the consequences factor and see how it is supporting accountability for first-level supervisors.

## Consequences for Performance

**Performance Goals.** Specific performance goals clearly state the accomplishments for which supervisors are accountable and provide supervisors with a road map to lead the efforts of their work units. In the 2007 MPS, 76 percent of first-level supervisors reported that they have written goals that define the results they are expected to achieve and, among these supervisors, 85 percent agreed that goals accurately defined performance expectations. That is a promising beginning. The remaining 24 percent of supervisors who did not say they have written goals may or may not have unwritten goals. However, committing goals to writing has several benefits. First, it reduces the risk of confusion, memory lapses, or disagreement about the content of the goals. Second, written goals can help focus attention on achieving outcomes rather than on activities and processes. Finally, written goals can be shared with employees and posted to serve as a reminder of the work group's objectives. Written goals for supervisors can provide a solid foundation for the

development of individual employee goals. Finally, written performance goals can provide a more reliable basis for evaluating the supervisor’s performance than the manager’s memory of what the supervisor was orally asked to accomplish and, if a supervisor is not performing well, provide a firm basis for discussion, remediation, and if necessary, disciplinary actions.

**Consequences for Achieving Work Results.** In the 2007 MPS, we asked supervisors if they believed they are held accountable for achieving their goals in two ways: First, if they experience positive consequences for achieving expected work results, and second, if they experience negative consequences for not achieving expected work results. Positive consequences could include anything the supervisor perceives as desirable, such as praise from one’s manager, a monetary award, time off, or the respect of peers. Negative consequences could include anything the supervisor perceives as undesirable, such as receiving a low performance rating, no monetary award, a decrease in the manager’s trust, or a loss of reputation. The survey results are shown in **Table 9**.

**Table 9.**  
**Supervisors’ Perceptions of Consequences**

MPS 2007 Question	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I am held accountable for achieving results in the sense that if I achieve the expected work results, I experience positive consequences.	70%	19%	11%
I am held accountable for achieving results in the sense that if I do not achieve the expected work results, I experience negative consequences.	65%	24%	11%

Seventy percent of supervisors agreed that they experience positive consequences for achieving expected outcomes while 11 percent disagreed. A somewhat smaller proportion, 65 percent, agreed that they experience negative consequences for not achieving expected results while 11 percent disagreed. It is difficult to definitively interpret the remaining neutral responses. One possibility is that the respondent believed that they were held accountable only some of the time. Another possibility is that the consequences were minor or ambiguous. Alternatively, the supervisors may have disagreed with their supervisor about the extent to which they achieved expected work results and therefore dismissed any consequences that ensued as not warranted. In any case, because consequences are important in reinforcing accountability, higher levels of agreement that the quality of one’s work results in clear positive or negative outcomes are desirable.

**Recognition.** We also asked supervisors about recognition for their work. Their responses are summarized in **Figures 20** and **21**.

**Figure 20.**  
**Supervisors' Perceptions About Recognition**

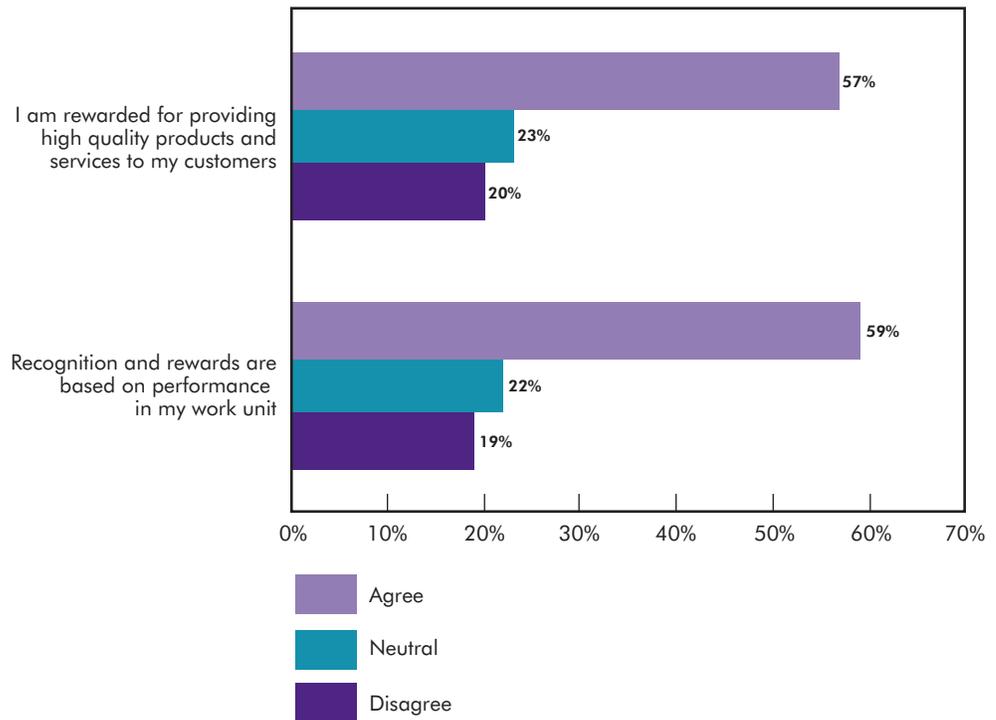
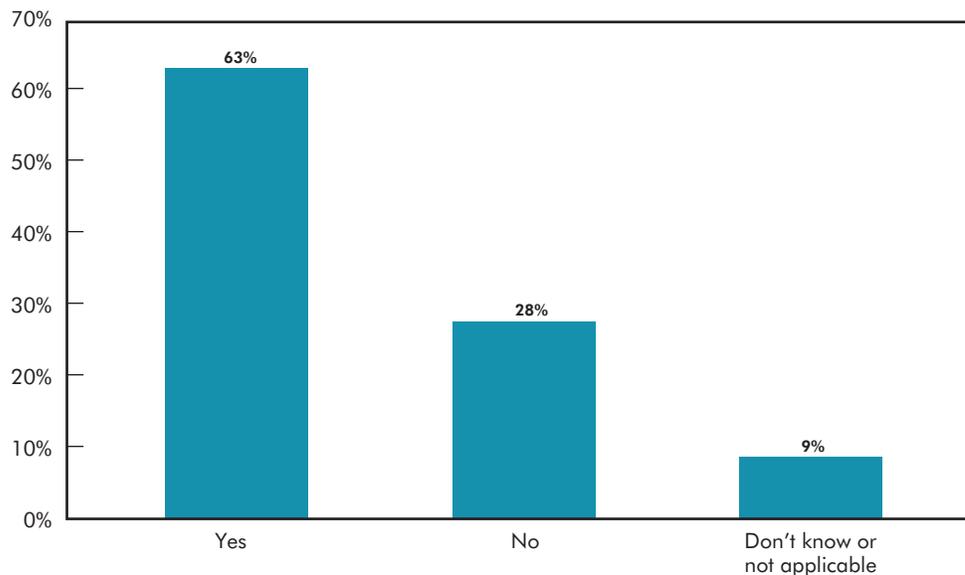


Figure 20 shows that 57 percent of supervisors believe they are rewarded for providing high quality products and services to their internal or external customers. The remainder either take no position or disagree that rewards are linked to good customer service. Supervisors' perceptions of the link between personal recognition and performance in their work units are very similar. Figure 21 shows that the majority of supervisors believe they have been treated fairly in the past two years in awards, yet a substantial minority (28 percent) believe otherwise.

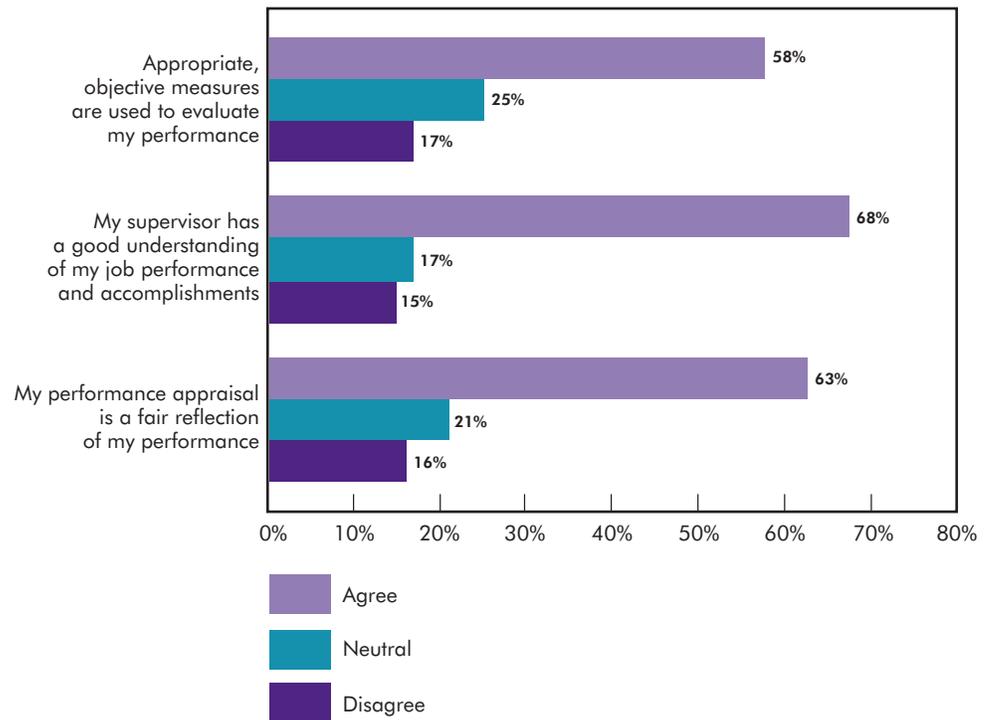
**Figure 21.**  
**Have you been treated fairly in the past 2 years in awards?**



It is possible that greater accountability among first-level supervisors could be promoted by strengthening the connection between performance and rewards. This could be done by developing and heavily communicating to employees at all levels a program that tightly links recognition to good work through both formal and informal acknowledgement of employees’ contributions. Recognition can take many forms and need not be constrained by available funds. It is essential that monetary rewards be given only to those who have truly earned them rather than spreading limited award money among a large number of employees.

**Performance Appraisals.** Performance appraisals can also be a useful tool to facilitate accountability if they are well designed and implemented. **Figure 22** shows that a small majority, 58 percent, of supervisors agreed that appropriate, objective measurements are used to evaluate their performance—but 25 percent were neutral and the remaining 17 percent disagreed.

**Figure 22.**  
**Supervisors’ Perceptions of Performance Appraisals**



The value of performance measurements in promoting accountability can be increased if managers work with supervisors to select and define mutually acceptable measurements for each performance goal at the beginning of the performance period. For many supervisory jobs, it will be difficult or impossible to define purely objective measures. However, carefully planned goals and measures can increase the level of objectivity by providing managers with more accurate information on which to base an evaluation. Numerical values are not necessary. If the factors used to assess goal achievement are stated clearly enough to facilitate reliable discriminations among meeting, not meeting, or exceeding the goals, they are measurable goals because different values can be meaningfully assigned to different levels of performance.<sup>68</sup> Defined measurements can also increase supervisors' perceptions of the fairness of performance evaluations.

While over two-thirds (68 percent) of supervisors agreed their managers have a good understanding of their job performance, the remaining 32 percent disagreed or chose a neutral response. The manager's understanding of a supervisor's job performance is essential for fostering accountability. If a manager is not closely familiar with the work supervisors are accomplishing, the manager will not be able to provide coaching and feedback to help the supervisors succeed. It will also not be possible to fairly evaluate the supervisors' work and recognize their accomplishments.

While close to two-thirds of Federal supervisors (63 percent) agreed their performance appraisal is a fair reflection of their performance, approximately one-sixth (16 percent) disagreed. These results are consistent with supervisors' perceptions of the objectivity of performance measurements and their managers' understanding of their accomplishments. If the way performance is measured is seen as fair and if managers are viewed as being knowledgeable of their subordinates' performance, performance appraisal is more likely to be seen as reflective of actual performance. Doubts about managers' ability to objectively assess performance lead to distrust of performance appraisals which in turn decreases their usefulness in supporting accountability. As noted earlier, the accuracy and fairness of performance appraisals is a complex issue because there are multiple factors unrelated to performance that may affect performance ratings. However, the fairness and objectivity of performance appraisals, and hence their usefulness as a consequence in fostering accountability, can be improved to the extent that managers are able to work with supervisors to define clear, measurable goals and engage in continuing dialogues with supervisors about their progress to assure that they are fully aware of the supervisors' accomplishments.

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<sup>68</sup> William J. Liccione, "Goal commitment," *Performance Improvement*, 48(7), 2009, pp. 26-30.

## Summary

Supervisors are too important for agencies to leave their success to chance. More Federal agencies need to operate in terms of personal accountability for employees at all levels, and especially for those in supervisory and managerial positions. Accountability for first-level supervisors needs to be embedded in the organizational culture through selection, development, guidance and feedback, and consequences for work unit performance. Supervisors need to be engaged in the missions of their agencies so that commitment to excellent supervision is built into the everyday fabric of work as a normal expectation.

Continual open dialogue and demonstrated support and appreciation from the manager and executives are essential for developing and maintaining supervisor accountability. Even people with high levels of conscientiousness and internal motivation can eventually become disengaged if they believe that their efforts are not supported or recognized by the organization.<sup>69</sup> Supervisors who invest thought and effort in managing their work units should be rewarded for their efforts. Their performance management capabilities should be recognized and applauded because they result in enormous benefits to the organization in increased employee engagement and performance. These committed supervisors need to be encouraged and supported by their managers and higher level leaders.

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<sup>69</sup> William H. Macey, Benjamin Schneider, Karen M. Barbera, and Scott A. Young, *Employee Engagement: Tools for Analysis, Practice, and Competitive Advantage*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2009.

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



First-level supervisors are vital to the success of every Federal agency. Numerous studies conducted over the past three decades by both Federal agencies and nonprofit organizations have provided strong support for the need to improve the effectiveness of Federal first-level supervisors. Although there has been some overall improvement in employees' perceptions of their supervisors' performance in recent years, there is still much work that can be done to improve first-level supervision. Key areas for improvement are selection, development, guidance and support, and accountability. Each of these are essential elements of a successful talent management strategy and each needs to be integrated with and support the other three.

We present here our conclusions about the specific needs for improvement in these areas based on the results of the 2007 Merit Principles Survey, past studies of Federal first-level supervisors, and other research we have conducted. Then we offer our recommendations to address each of the four areas identified for improvement. Some recommendations are new and others have been suggested in our previous reports or elsewhere. Not all of our recommendations will work for all agencies. Each agency needs to select those recommendations that can be aligned with their goals, business strategies, and organizational cultures and take positive actions to meet the challenge of equipping its supervisory workforce to engage employees and achieve high performance. Although it may be difficult for many agencies to make large changes in their talent management strategies for first-level supervisors, every agency can make at least a few small, well-planned changes. Investments in the improvement of first-level supervision can, over time, yield substantial positive returns in improved workforce performance.

## Conclusions

**Current selection of first-level supervisors is heavily based on technical expertise.** The problems in supervisory selection reported over the past 30 years appear to persist. Supervisory selection is often based more heavily on technical expertise than on leadership competencies. Technical skills appear to be much more strongly emphasized in job announcements and assessments than are supervisory skills.

**Technical experts without an interest or aptitude in leadership are often selected for supervisory roles.** Because most Federal career paths do not provide technical expert roles in which highly proficient and experienced employees are recognized

with organizational status and increased compensation, technically proficient employees who have minimal interest or aptitude in managing people apply for supervisory positions. And, because the selection criteria are heavily weighted toward technical expertise, they often are selected for these positions.

**The supervisory probation period is not consistently being used as the final step in the selection process.** Data from the Central Personnel Data File and the 2007 MPS indicate that Federal managers are not consistently using the probationary period as the final step in the selection process, as required by law and regulation. In Fiscal Year 2009, just one half of one percent of new supervisors were either reassigned or separated for failure to complete probation. It is unlikely that so few new supervisors would be unsuccessful during the probationary period. This extremely low probationary failure rate among Federal supervisors indicates that many new supervisors are probably being allowed to continue in a supervisory role despite marginal or unsatisfactory performance during the probationary period. In addition, in the 2007 MPS, only 64 percent of supervisors affirmed that they had been informed of the probationary period while less than half (47 percent) stated that their performance during their probationary period had been used to decide if they should retain a supervisory role.

**Supervisors need substantially more training and development.** Many new supervisors are not receiving the training and development they need both to understand the agency's expectations for supervisors and to manage their employees effectively. The continuation of this longstanding problem is confirmed by the results of the 2007 MPS. Fewer than two-thirds of supervisors said that they received training prior to or during their first year as a supervisor and of those who received training, almost half (48 percent) received one week or less. Overall, more than three-quarters of new supervisors did not receive training in each of the basic areas of performance management, including developing performance goals and standards; assigning, reviewing, and documenting employees' work; providing feedback; developing employees; evaluating employee performance; and managing poor performers. These are all areas which the survey results indicated are targets of opportunity to improve supervisory performance.

**Many supervisors do not receive the information they need.** Two-thirds of first-level supervisors believe they are receiving information about the goals and priorities of their organization, while half said they are satisfied with the information they receive from management about what's going on in their organization. Fewer than two-thirds of supervisors agreed that their supervisor adequately explains the reasons for work changes before they take place. Fewer than two-thirds also said they were satisfied with their involvement in decisions that affect their work. For supervisors to act with authority and responsibility in leading their work units, they need to be treated as leaders; i.e., they should be trusted to participate in decision making, they need more information about the organization's progress and problems, and they should have a voice in the organization.

**Supervisors are receiving assistance from their managers but many need more information and specific guidance.** Although three-quarters of supervisors reported that their supervisor talks with them or assists them when they need help, fewer

supervisors (61 percent) believed that they routinely receive the information and guidance they need to function effectively. One reason that a substantial number of supervisors reported that their managers do not provide the specific information or guidance they need may be that the managers themselves are not receiving adequate information or guidance. Fewer than two-thirds of managers said that they were satisfied with the organizational information they receive from agency leadership.

**Supervisors need more coaching and feedback.** Receiving frequent feedback is a vital component of effective supervisory performance. Yet we found that just under half of supervisors (49 percent) are receiving feedback from their managers at least every two weeks. Another 13 percent receive feedback only monthly. The remaining 38 percent receive feedback only quarterly or even less often, with 10 percent receiving feedback once a year or less. Supervisors cannot be expected to effectively execute their responsibilities if they do not receive the frequent feedback from their managers that will enable them to regulate their performance and the performance of their employees.

Employees are also an important source of valuable feedback for supervisors. We found wide gaps between supervisors' own ratings of their performance and employees' ratings. For example, while 94 percent of supervisors said they explain work changes to employees before they take place, only 56 percent of employees agreed that their supervisors do so. And, while 91 percent of supervisors said their overall performance as a supervisor was good, just 66 percent of employees rated their supervisor's performance as good. The input the employees provide can enable managers to identify areas of strengths and development needs for each supervisor. Yet, we found that less than one-third of managers collect feedback from the employees of their subordinate supervisors.

Only about half (54 percent) of the survey respondents reported that as new supervisors their manager provided them with coaching or feedback that helped them develop supervisory competencies. This is a concern in two respects. First, the supervisors may not be receiving the feedback they need to improve their skills. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, managers are not modeling good supervisory behaviors. By not providing feedback and coaching, they are sending a strong message to first-level supervisors that feedback giving and coaching are not important functions of supervision.

**Supervisory and managerial accountability need to be strengthened.** Stronger cultures of accountability need to be developed in many Federal agencies so that each supervisor and manager demonstrates a personal commitment to serving the public through effectively managing the performance of his or her employees. Several studies over the past 30 years have documented the need for improvement, especially in the area of managing poor performers. We found that some of the tools that promote accountability such as clear performance goals and consequences for performance are not being widely used in all organizations. When supervisors themselves are not held accountable for their work unit's performance through clear expectations, ongoing dialogue with their managers, and support for good performance management practices, it is unrealistic for their managers to expect supervisors to hold their employees accountable for their work.

## Recommendations

### For Consideration by Congress—

#### **Provide OPM with the funding to offer predictive supervisory selection instruments to agencies without charge.**

OPM currently provides off-the-shelf and custom selection assessment tools, and accompanying services such as validation, to Federal agencies on a fee basis. With additional funding, OPM could develop a set of selection instruments with a high level of predictive power for supervisory success and offer them to all agencies with no charge. The development and validation of predictive selection tools typically require substantial expertise, time, and money. However, if the tools are available to all agencies, the cost per use is greatly reduced and they become an excellent investment. Examples of these tools include:

- Structured interviews that include questions for important supervisory competencies;
- Job simulations, such as role-playing exercises, in-basket exercises, situational judgment tests, work samples, and video or online simulations;
- Assessments of conscientiousness and integrity; and
- Assessment centers.

Several equivalent forms of each tool should be developed to maintain security and allow for re-testing when needed. The tools should be developed so that they can be customized for specific agency needs. Guidance in appropriate use of the tools and instructions for implementation should accompany the instruments.

### For the U.S. Office of Personnel Management—

1. **Provide guidance to assist agencies in using competencies as a basis for supervisory selection and development.** In its recently-issued *Supervisory Qualification Guide*, OPM has identified a set of competencies that could provide Federal agencies with a standard framework for talent management for first-level supervisors. We suggest that OPM provide additional guidance to help agencies make practical use of these competencies, such as (1) operational definitions—descriptions of how each competency is applied at the first level of supervision; (2) behavioral examples for different levels of proficiency; and (3) options for assessment and development. We note that OPM's online Personnel Assessment and Selection Resource Center already includes relevant material, such as the *Assessment Decision Guide* and a description of proficiency levels for the leadership competencies. Guidance for selecting and managing first-level supervisors could build on, and ultimately be integrated with, this material as well as guidance related to Senior Executive Service (SES) selection and development.

2. **Explore ways to provide alternative career opportunities for technical experts.** It is essential that Federal agencies recognize the special skills and responsibilities required by a supervisory role, provide adequate incentives for employees to accept those responsibilities, and recognize and reward those employees who carry out those responsibilities with distinction. Yet it is also essential that the Federal Government does not drive high-performing technical experts who lack the desire or ability to supervise to apply for supervisory positions for want of any other opportunity for advancement, career development, or challenging work.

Accordingly, we recommend that OPM work with Federal agencies to explore and develop career opportunities for employees who have a high level of technical expertise but are not well-suited to a supervisory role. Those opportunities might include technical career paths for occupations in which employees can contribute to their organizations in a capacity beyond the top existing level. For other occupations, those opportunities could take other forms, such as recognition and rewards, serving as a mentor, representing the agency in interagency or external task forces, taking on special projects, and developing and delivering training to less experienced employees.

We acknowledge that alternative career opportunities may be difficult to implement. First, it may require far-reaching changes to classification principles and standards, or legislation if desired changes cannot be accomplished within the existing statutory framework for Federal employee classification and pay. Second, the establishment of alternative opportunities could have significant implications for career paths in Federal agencies and compensation costs. Finally, we recognize that this recommendation might be best evaluated and implemented as part of a broader reform of Federal employee pay, classification, and performance management. For these reasons, we do not specify when or how OPM should establish the “alternative opportunities” envisioned here.

### For Federal Agencies—

In selecting, developing, and managing their supervisory workforce, agencies should consider the following recommendations.

1. **Base the talent management cycle for first-level supervisors on the core supervisory competencies.** Base all aspects of talent management for first-level supervisors (workforce planning, selection, development, management, and evaluation) on core supervisory competencies and any additional competencies that are essential to supervisory success in the agency. Train managers in how to apply these competencies in the selection, development, management, and evaluation of first-level supervisors.
2. **Allow adequate time for supervisory duties.** When designing supervisory jobs, carefully consider the time needed for the supervisor to effectively manage the performance of the work group. If well implemented, supervisory responsibilities are time consuming and supervisors need to be allowed adequate time to discharge them.

- 3. Emphasize supervisory competencies when advertising and filling supervisory positions.** Even for first-level supervisory positions, core supervisory competencies should be a primary consideration. Use technical expertise as appropriate as an essential and important criterion for selection—but also include the assessment of supervisory competencies or potential to identify and select the candidate most likely to succeed.
- 4. Provide realistic job previews for aspiring supervisors.** Provide realistic job previews for first-level supervision jobs to help employees who are interested in a supervisory position better understand both the rewards and challenges of supervision. Include an explanation of the supervisory competencies needed for the job with the behavioral examples that illustrate how these competencies are applied on the job. Emphasize the demanding interpersonal situations a supervisor faces, such as providing corrective feedback to employees, supporting performance appraisal ratings, and dealing assertively with conduct and performance problems. Also, explain the supervisory administrative duties and paperwork required in your agency.
- 5. Provide clear information about the supervisory role in job announcements.** Communicate through job announcements that supervision is an essential component of the job. List the specific supervisory duties (rather than simply saying the job includes supervision), provide the percentages of time that are to be spent on supervision and technical work, explain the approximate number of employees who will be supervised and their occupations, and list both the technical and supervisory competencies required for the job.
- 6. Use strongly predictive selection tools for first-level supervisory positions.** Every dollar invested in the development and use of sound selection tools can be paid back many fold in the performance of good supervisors. Base the choice of selection instruments on their power in predicting supervisory success rather than simply on administrative convenience, familiarity, or low cost. Use multiple assessment instruments for better prediction and fuller understanding of each candidate's strengths and weaknesses. Ensure that the instruments used after candidates are reviewed for minimum qualifications and technical competence are well suited to assessing supervisory competencies. Instruments to consider include structured interviews; situational judgment tests; accomplishment records; and simulations, such as work samples, role-playing exercises, and in-basket exercises.
- 7. Provide a comprehensive training and development program for supervisors.** Create an integrated plan for how first-level supervisors will be prepared for their demanding roles through a combination of formal training, on the job learning, and other development opportunities such as job rotations, job shadowing, and mentoring. Involve experienced supervisors, managers, and executives in designing the training and development program. Their involvement will both ensure the content is useful and stimulate their enthusiasm. Begin with an onboarding program for new supervisors that will help them understand their new responsibilities and their role in the organization and continue

with a multi-faceted training program that will enable them to build the core supervisory competencies through classroom instruction, small group exercises and projects, and on-the-job learning. Ensure that the transfer of learning from the program to the supervisors' daily work is the top priority. Provide additional support for new supervisors for their first year or two with a mentoring program focused on the core competencies. Offer ongoing development opportunities for all supervisors to refresh and strengthen the core competencies.

8. **Evaluate supervisors on both work group outcomes and supervisory competencies.** Communicate to supervisors their accountability for both results and effective management of employees. That communication should be reinforced by the formal performance appraisal system. Accordingly, agencies should design supervisory performance appraisals to include sections focused on (1) work group goal achievement and (2) demonstration of the core supervisory competencies needed to manage the work group and achieve goals. This dual focus offers several benefits: it makes it clear to supervisors that they are judged on the performance of their work group; it emphasizes the importance of the supervisory competencies; it deters those who may seek to achieve goals at the cost of ignoring good management practices or alienating employees through disrespect or unfair treatment; and it helps agencies and supervisors identify supervisory strengths and areas for development.
  
9. **Ensure that human resources staff has expertise in talent management and organizational development.** In order to implement the above recommendations, agency leaders at all levels will require the assistance of human resources staff with expertise in all components of talent management as well as competency in organizational development and change management. Often, agencies may find it necessary to hire individuals with these competencies, rather than train current employees, because expertise in these areas takes a long time and substantial education to develop.

### For Agency Executives—

1. **Share organizational information with supervisors and managers on a regular basis.** Make a concerted effort to involve first-level supervisors and their managers in leading the organization by discussing with them organizational goals, priorities, and progress as well as emerging and continuing problems, and upcoming initiatives and changes. Ask for their ideas and input. Communicate your high expectations for them and their employees and explain how you will support them. When practical, use a variety of media to communicate such as monthly or quarterly leadership meetings, weekly e-mail bulletins, annual or semi-annual supervisor conferences, and simply walking around and talking to people or calling them on the telephone. The key objective here is to establish and nurture personal connections and involve your supervisors and managers in the operation of the organization so that they think and behave like a proactive leadership team.

- 2. Hold managers accountable for selecting, developing, and managing the performance of first-level supervisors.** Make it clear to the managers in your organization that they are personally responsible for effectively selecting, developing, and managing the performance of the supervisors who report to them. Ensure that managers use the probationary period as the final step in the supervisory selection process. Emphasize that managers are accountable for the results achieved by all the work units in their domain and they will be evaluated and rewarded on the basis of this performance. Follow through by providing frequent feedback and coaching and accurately evaluating managers' performance.
- 3. Model good performance management practices and also hold managers accountable for them.** Model good performance management practices by working with each manager to define clear performance goals for their work units then meeting frequently with each to review their progress in achieving those goals and addressing any obstacles, discuss how they are managing the performance of their subordinate supervisors, and provide feedback and coaching. Ensure that each manager also implements these practices with their subordinate supervisors.
- 4. Encourage managers to collect feedback about their supervisors and use it to guide their development.** Supervisors typically interact with several different groups of people in the course of their daily work: their employees, other supervisors, internal and external customers, suppliers, and higher-level leaders. Encourage managers to collect feedback on each supervisor from these groups, then share it with the supervisor to identify strengths and weaknesses and plan the behavior changes that will lead to a higher level of performance.

### For Current Supervisors—

- 1. Invest in building strong working relationships with your employees.** There are many ways you can build strong, effective working relationships with your employees. For example, you can set the tone for relationship building by meeting individually with each employee to become mutually acquainted with each others' goals, concerns, interests, communication preferences, and working styles. You can ask employees to answer a set of questions in writing before the meeting or simply discuss the questions during the meeting. These questions may include topics such as: What are your interests? How would you describe your working style? How do you like to receive information? How do you prefer to share information? How would you like me to work with you? What are some concerns you have? In what direction would you like to see our team go? Are there any changes you would like to recommend? In addition, you would share information about yourself, such as your career so far, your leadership style, goals for the work unit and any challenges you see, and your preferred modes of communication. If some of your expectations and preferences do not align with the employee's, you can discuss how to approach these differences.

Meet individually with each of your employees at least monthly to review their progress on work assignments; provide direction, feedback, and information; address obstacles or concerns; and discuss the employee's development. In addition, talk informally with each employee at least every few days to get to know them as people and to offer informal feedback and appreciation for their work.

Schedule regular staff meetings to build camaraderie and facilitate collaboration among employees in the work unit as well as to share organizational information. The frequency of the meetings will vary with the type of work your group does and their schedules but a good rule of thumb is to hold these meetings at least monthly. Plan and distribute an agenda before the meeting to facilitate efficiency but allow time for employees to bring up additional topics of concern or interest.

- 2. Develop your leadership skills.** Strive to continuously enhance your leadership skills and enlist the help of both your manager and your employees. Take the initiative to talk with your manager about both your learning needs and your strengths using the core supervisory competencies as a guide. Ask for your manager's feedback and development advice, create a development plan, and implement it. When people formulate specific goals and put them in writing, they are much more likely to work toward achieving those goals than if they are not documented. If you are finding managing your employees' performance to be difficult or frustrating, ask for your manager's or mentor's help. You can also seek advice from your human resources staff. It is a mistake to flounder on your own because difficulties will multiply if they are not addressed.

Once or twice each year, ask your employees how you can do a better job in managing the work unit. You can collect their feedback simply by asking them individually or in a group meeting, or if you have not yet developed the level of trust at which employees are comfortable sharing their feedback directly with you, ask them to submit it through an upward feedback tool or anonymously in writing. For example, you can ask employees to write their answers to a set of prepared questions. Two options are: (1) What should I stop doing? ...continue doing? ...start doing?; (2) What do I do that helps you do your best work? What do I do that makes it difficult for you to do your best work? Always express appreciation for the feedback received and explain how you plan to use it. Then, follow through and apply the information to change your behaviors, and report back to your employees about the changes you have made. If it is not feasible to use the feedback, explain why.

You will benefit not only from the feedback itself but your employees will see you that you are serious about becoming an excellent leader and they are more likely to rally around you. In addition, you are modeling the behavior of seeking and using feedback that is essential for everyone who wants to perform at their best.

- 3. Determine if supervision is the right career path for you.** You may discover that you are not comfortable or happy in a supervisory role because you prefer to spend your time doing technical work, you don't enjoy the high level of interaction with employees, you don't like directing other people or providing them with feedback, or you are reluctant to take the difficult actions that supervisors sometimes must take to manage performance or conduct problems. If this is the case, then admit to yourself and your manager that supervising is not for you and request a return to a non-supervisory role. There is no shame in deciding that supervision is not for you. In fact, supervision is not for the majority of people. If you are not content in a position, it is difficult for you to do an excellent job. So, you are doing your employees, your manager, your organization, and the public a great service by moving to a role in which you can be optimally productive. Openly admitting your preferences is a sign of personal strength.

### For Aspiring Supervisors—

Before applying for a supervisory position, carefully consider if it is the right job for you. Being a first-level supervisor is much harder and more stressful than many people realize. Being successful in a role in which you are responsible for achieving work unit goals when you are not directly working on the tasks to achieve those goals is challenging. It requires strong organizational and communication skills as well as comfort in dealing with conflict and willingness to interact frequently with people you may find abrasive, puzzling, or difficult in other ways. Supervising requires putting the group's needs ahead of your own and spending much of your time leading others rather than doing the technical work you enjoy.

As you consider if a supervisory position would be a good fit for you, ask yourself questions such as the following:

- Are you willing to spend much of your work time interacting with other people and doing administrative work rather than accomplishing your own technical work?
- Are you interested in helping other people develop?
- Are you conscientious? For example, do you promptly complete onerous or unrewarding tasks, or do you procrastinate? Will you do what needs to be done even if it is difficult or you don't want to do it?
- Do you strive for excellence in your work? Are you willing to influence other people to do so?
- Can you take a stand and support people or programs you believe in even if there is personal risk to you?
- Are you willing to be accountable for the work of others?
- Can you give candid feedback to people even if it is not positive?
- Can you objectively evaluate someone else's performance and support your evaluation if they disagreed?

- Are you comfortable dealing with conflict?
- Could you suspend or terminate a long-time acquaintance or friend if it was necessary for the good of the organization?

Mostly “yes” answers indicate you may be suitable for a supervisory role; mostly “no” answers indicate that a supervision role is probably not for you.

If you have not yet had leadership experience, seek out opportunities to lead others such as managing a project or leading a task force at work or leading a community group or committee. Try to find a situation in which you will need to coordinate the work of several adults to accomplish a difficult goal. This type of experience will help you understand some of the challenges of supervision. Take advantage of realistic job preview programs or materials your organization may offer. You also may want to talk to supervisors; ask them what they like and dislike about their jobs. Reading books about supervision is also a good way to understand the job duties.



# APPENDIX A: 2007 MERIT PRINCIPLES SURVEY QUESTIONS DISCUSSED



The data presented in this report are based on the responses of first-level supervisors to the following questions, except where noted in italics following the question. In questions that refer to the respondent's supervisor (e.g., "My supervisor has a good understanding of my job performance and accomplishments."), the supervisors reported on the behaviors of their supervisor of record, i.e., their manager.

## Supervisory Selection

- When you first became a supervisor, were you informed that you would be on probation for a year?
- Was your performance during your probationary period as a supervisor actually used to decide if you should continue in a supervisory role?

## Training and Development

- My training needs are assessed.
- How are your training needs assessed?
- Did you receive formal supervisory training prior to or during your first year as a supervisor?
- What were the topics of the formal supervisory training you received prior to or during your first year as a supervisor?
- How many total hours of supervisory training did you participate in prior to and during your first year as a supervisor?
- What types of informal development did you participate in to help you build your supervisory knowledge, skills, and abilities during your first year as a supervisor?
- What type of supervisory training do you wish you had received early in your career as a supervisor but did not?

## Information and Guidance

- How satisfied are you with your involvement in decisions that affect your work?
- My supervisor explains the reasons for work changes before they take place.
- How satisfied are you with the information you receive from management about what's going on in your organization?
- Managers communicate the goals and priorities of the organization.
- How often do you receive the information and guidance you need to do a good job?
- My supervisor talks with me or assists me when I need help.
- About how often do you meet individually with your supervisor to discuss the progress of your work?

## Feedback

- How often do you typically receive formal or informal feedback from your supervisor?
- How helpful is your supervisor's feedback in helping you to enhance or improve your performance?
- My supervisor has a good understanding of my job performance and accomplishments.
- From whom do you collect feedback to help you determine how well your employees are performing? (*Asked of the managers of first-level supervisors*)

## Supervisor's Performance

- I communicate high performance expectations to my employees.
- I talk with my employees or assist them when they need help.
- I explain the reasons for work changes to my employees before they take place.
- How would you rate your overall performance as a supervisor?
- My supervisor communicates high performance expectations to employees. (*Asked of the employees of first-level supervisors*)
- My supervisor talks with me or assists me when I need help. (*Asked of the employees of first-level supervisors*)
- My supervisor explains the reasons for work changes before they take place. (*Asked of the employees of first-level supervisors*)
- How would you rate your immediate supervisor's overall performance as a supervisor? (*Asked of the employees of first-level supervisors*)

## Resources and Authority

- Do you have all the authority you need to fulfill your supervisory responsibilities?
- How often do you have the resources you need to do your job well?
- My workload is reasonable.

## Accountability

- Do you have written individual performance goals that clearly define the results you are expected to achieve during the performance period?
- Have your individual performance goals been updated or reviewed for the current performance period?
- Are your individual performance goals clearly linked to organizational or work unit goals?
- Do your individual performance goals accurately define what is expected of you?
- I am held accountable for achieving results in the sense that if I achieve the expected results, I experience positive consequences.
- I am held accountable for achieving results in the sense that if I do NOT achieve the expected results, I experience negative consequences.
- I am rewarded for providing high-quality products and services to my customers (internal and external).

# APPENDIX B: 2007 MERIT PRINCIPLES SURVEY METHODOLOGY



The Merit Systems Protection Board conducts studies of the Federal civilian workforce to determine if the workforce is being managed effectively, efficiently, and in accordance with the Federal merit system principles. One way we fulfill this responsibility is by periodically conducting the Governmentwide Merit Principles Survey (MPS) and reporting the results. The 2007 Merit Principles Survey (MPS) methodology is described below. The MPS questions discussed in this report are listed in Appendix B.

## Interpreting Survey Results: Perceptions vs. Facts

It is important for readers to remember that survey data are based on the perceptions and beliefs of participants rather than on verified facts. However, people's perceptions shape their behavior. For example, if employees say they cannot freely express their views to management without fear of negative consequences, this perception affects the choices they make in the workplace. Employees will be hesitant to speak out if they believe there will be negative consequences, regardless of how management may actually respond upon hearing their views.

## Survey Administration

The MPS 2007 was administered in the fall of 2007 to 68,789 Federal employees in the 30 departments and agencies listed below. It was distributed via the Internet to most employees; 500 employees who did not have access to the Internet received a paper copy of the survey.

## Participating Departments and Agencies

- Department of Agriculture
- Department of Commerce
- Department of Defense
  - Air Force
  - Army
  - Navy
  - Other Defense
- Department of Education
- Department of Energy
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation

- Federal Energy Regulatory Commission
- Department of Health and Human Services
- Department of Homeland Security
- Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Department of the Interior
- Department of Justice
- Department of Labor
- Merit Systems Protection Board
- National Aeronautics and Space Administration
- National Archives and Records Administration
- Nuclear Regulatory Commission
- Nuclear Waste Technical Review Board
- Office of Personnel Management
- Smithsonian Institution
- Department of State
- Securities and Exchange Commission
- Social Security Administration
- Department of the Treasury
- Department of Transportation
- Department of Veterans Affairs

### Survey Sample

A representative, random sample of employees from each participating agency was selected from the population of 1.6 million full-time, permanent, nonseasonal Federal employees who were working in executive branch agencies as of December 2006. For most agencies, a sample of 2,000 employees was selected including 1,000 nonsupervisory employees (individual workers and team leaders) and 1,000 leaders (supervisors, managers, and executives). Nonsupervisors and leaders were separately sampled to allow analyses of differences between these two groups.

### Participation and Response Rate

Participation was voluntary. There was a 60 percent response rate (41,577 employees completed the survey).

## Survey Versions

Two versions of the 2007 MPS were administered: (1) an annual survey version that included all questions required by the Office of Personnel Management for the mandated annual agency employee surveys in addition to the MPS questions; and (2) a standard version that included only the MPS questions. The annual survey version was administered to the employees in the 15 agencies that had contracted with MSPB to administer their annual surveys embedded in the Merit Principles Survey. The annual survey questions were included to allow the employees in these agencies to complete both their agency's annual survey and the Merit Principles Survey in one administration. Both versions included all the questions discussed in this report.

## Survey Question Response Categories

Five response choices were provided for most of the survey questions; e.g., Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. When five choices were offered, in most cases we report the results by combining the two favorable choices as if they were a single positive response and combining the two unfavorable choices as if they were a single negative response. For example, for the question, "Managers communicate the goals and priorities of the organization," participants who selected either "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" are reported as agreeing while participants who chose "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree" are reported as disagreeing. This practice helps us more easily analyze and report the data.

## Weighting

Weighting eliminates over or under representation of a group in the survey results. When combined results are reported for all employees in all agencies, the results are weighted for both agency size and supervisory status. When results are reported separately for nonsupervisors and leaders, the results are weighted for agency size. The responses for questions are weighted by agency according to the number of survey respondents from each agency compared with the actual population proportions of employees who work in each agency. The responses to the questions are weighted for supervisory status according to the number of survey respondents compared with the actual population proportions for supervisory and nonsupervisory employees as provided in the Office of Personnel Management's Central Personnel Data File.

## Margin of Error

A confidence level and confidence interval, or margin of error, provide an indication of the reliability of survey responses. These are based on the number of randomly selected employees who responded to the survey questions compared with the population of Federal employees. For the MPS 2007, we have an overall 99 percent level of confidence that the responses given by the employees who answered the survey questions can be generalized to all Federal employees in our population with a margin of error of less than 1 percent. For example, if 83 percent of the responding employees agreed that their workload is reasonable, we can be confident that 82 to 84 percent of all Federal employees, if given the opportunity to answer this question, would also say that their workload was reasonable. The 1-percent margin of error is a good indicator for the Federal workforce overall. However, the margin of error for each individual agency will vary with the survey sample size for that agency compared with the agency's population. Because the confidence level and margin of error are dependent on sample size, the confidence level decreases and the corresponding margin of error increases as the sample size decreases relative to the population of employees.

# APPENDIX C: SELECTED REPORTS ON FEDERAL FIRST-LEVEL SUPERVISION, 1978–2008



Year	Title	Organization
1978	A Management Concern: How to Deal with the Nonproductive Federal Employee	Government Accountability Office
1982	The Other Side of the Merit Coin: Removals for Incompetence in the Federal Service	Merit Systems Protection Board
1989	First-level Supervisory Selection in the Federal Government	Merit Systems Protection Board
1990	Performance Management: How Well Is the Government Dealing with Poor Performers	Government Accountability Office
1992	Federal First-level Supervisors: How Good Are They?	Merit Systems Protection Board
1995	Removing Poor Performers in the Federal Service	Merit Systems Protection Board
1998	Federal Supervisors and Strategic Human Resources Management	Merit Systems Protection Board
1998	The Changing Federal Workplace: Employee Perspectives	Merit Systems Protection Board
1999	Poor Performers in Government: A Quest for the True Story	Office of Personnel Management
1999	Federal Supervisors and Poor Performers	Merit Systems Protection Board
2001	Supervisors in the Federal Government: A Wake-up Call	Office of Personnel Management
2001	Organizations Growing Leaders: Best Practices and Principles in the Public Service	The PriceWaterhouseCoopers Endowment for The Business of Government
2002	Making the Public Service Work: Recommendations for Change	Merit Systems Protection Board
2003	First Line Supervisors in Public Service: Selection, Development, and Management	National Academy of Public Administration
2005	Issues Related to Poor Performers in the Federal Workplace	Government Accountability Office
2005	The Probationary Period: A Critical Assessment Opportunity	Merit Systems Protection Board
2007	Training Supervisors to be Leaders: A Missing Element in Efforts to Improve Federal Performance	The Partnership for Public Service
2007	Federal Human Capital: The Perfect Storm	The Partnership for Public Service
2008	Elevating our Federal Workforce	The Partnership for Public Service
2008	The Federal Government: A Model Employer or a Work in Progress?	Merit Systems Protection Board



# APPENDIX D: PROCESS FOR REVIEW OF SUPERVISORY JOB POSTINGS



We reviewed a systematic sample of 100 first-level supervisory job announcements posted in USAJOBS in July 2009 and open to the public. The key word “supervisory” in the job title was used as a search term to request current job announcements. (In a pilot study, we had also used “supervisor” as a search term but it elicited very few postings.) We searched for job announcements by agency, including all cabinet-level agencies and all independent agencies with 1,000 or more employees. For each agency, we reviewed the first five job announcements listed in order of closing date. If fewer than five were posted, we reviewed all the announcements for that agency. After we had searched for jobs in all the agencies and reviewed 90 job announcements, we returned to the agencies in alphabetical order and reviewed one additional posting for each agency. If no additional posting existed, we proceeded to the next agency until we had reviewed 100 job announcements. Supervisory positions from GS-7 through GS-15 levels or the equivalent were included in the sample of jobs we reviewed.

The following categories of jobs were excluded from review:

- Jobs that did not mention supervisory responsibilities in any way, even though they were labeled as supervisory positions;
- Jobs that appeared, on review, to be team leader or project manager positions without true supervisory responsibilities;
- Second-level supervisory (managerial) positions;
- Temporary, part-time, and seasonal positions;
- Jobs for which multiple appointment types in terms of permanent, seasonal, or temporary work were possible;
- Jobs that were not open to both the public and to Federal employees;
- Jobs that were open for less than two weeks;
- Duplicate jobs at different locations or shifts in the same agency; and
- Positions that required applicants to join the National Guard or the Army, Navy, or Air Force Reserve.

For each job, we reviewed the entire announcement and documented the following information:

- Agency;
- Job title;
- General Schedule (GS) grade level or equivalent
- KSAs;
- Number and type of employees to be supervised;
- Description of supervisory duties; and
- The method(s) used to evaluate candidates who passed the screening for minimum qualifications to assign them a numerical rating or place them in ranking categories (e.g., Qualified, Better Qualified, Best Qualified) for referral to the hiring manager.

# APPENDIX E: EXAMPLE OF A SUPERVISORY COMPETENCY



In this report, we recommend the development and use of competency models for supervisory selection, development, and management. This appendix provides a sample supervisory competency, with an operational definition and behavioral examples at three levels of performance.

<b>Competency:</b>	Developing Employees
<b>Definition:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works with employees to identify their strengths and development needs.</li> <li>• Ensures that each staff member creates and implements a professional development plan.</li> <li>• Identifies development opportunities for employees.</li> <li>• Continuously encourages employees to learn and grow.</li> </ul>

Behavioral Examples		
Excellent Performance	Satisfactory Performance	Unsatisfactory Performance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works with each employee to identify their unique strengths and development needs.</li> <li>• Provides to employees specific examples of their performance in areas that need improvement and areas of strength.</li> <li>• Discusses with employees their long and short term career goals and suggests possible options.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works with each employee to identify their unique strengths and development needs.</li> <li>• Discusses with employees their long- and short-term career goals.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Occasionally meets with the team as a group to identify common development needs.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works with each team member to create or update an Individual Development Plan (IDP) by the close of the first month of the performance year.</li> <li>• Reviews the IDP implementation on a monthly basis with the employee.</li> <li>• Provides customized coaching to help team members overcome obstacles in achieving development goals and increase success.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works with each team member to create or update an IDP by the close of the third month of the performance year.</li> <li>• Reviews the plan implementation on at least a quarterly basis with the employee.</li> <li>• Provides general advice on how to overcome obstacles and increase success.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires team members to prepare their own development plans with no assistance. Does not review the plans.</li> <li>• Development plans are not completed by all employees.</li> <li>• Does not follow up on plan implementation.</li> </ul>

**Appendix E: Example of a Supervisory Competency**

Behavioral Examples		
Excellent Performance	Satisfactory Performance	Unsatisfactory Performance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Actively seeks development opportunities for each employee.</li> <li>Develops new opportunities for employees to learn on the job by making assignments that specifically address their developmental needs.</li> <li>Creates and shares with all employees lists of resources and learning opportunities internal and external to the agency.</li> <li>Incorporates a learning activity into each weekly staff meeting.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As comes across development opportunities, informs employees</li> <li>Identifies opportunities for team members to learn on the job as they arise.</li> <li>Informs employees of learning opportunities within the agency.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does not help team members identify new opportunities to learn on the job.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strongly encourages employees to take on new challenges and provides support.</li> <li>When providing constructive feedback, focuses on behavior, not personal characteristics.</li> <li>Helps team members view mistakes or setbacks as opportunities to learn.</li> <li>Rewards development efforts as well as accomplishments.</li> <li>Models continuous learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourages employees to take on new challenges.</li> <li>When providing constructive feedback, focuses on behavior, not personal characteristics.</li> <li>Praises development efforts as well as accomplishments.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discourages employees from deviating from the tried and true on the job.</li> <li>Criticizes and reprimands team members for mistakes and setbacks.</li> <li>Does not acknowledge development efforts.</li> </ul>

# APPENDIX F: POSSIBLE ASSESSMENT METHODS FOR SUPERVISORY POSITIONS



This appendix describes assessment methods that may be particularly good alternatives or supplements to traditional training and experience-based assessment methods. The table provides a brief description of each method, with illustrations, information on validity, and practical considerations.

Assessment Method	Description	Comments
<b>Situational Judgment Tests (SJTs)</b>	<p>Applicants are presented with a series of work scenarios. They choose responses from several alternatives listed. They may be asked to indicate which of several actions they would be most likely to take; which actions they would be most and least likely to take; what is the best option; what are the best and second-best options; or which is the most likely result of a specific action.</p> <p>For example, a scenario may be based on managing a poor performer. Candidates may be asked to indicate which of five different actions they would take to help the employee improve his performance.</p>	<p>Economical for administration to large groups of applicants. May be administered in print, via video or DVD, or online.</p> <p>SJT questions and alternatives are usually based on actual job critical incidents and the scoring key is developed by job experts.</p> <p>The average predictive validity of SJTs is estimated to be 0.34, i.e., they predict 12 percent of the variability in performance.<sup>70</sup></p>
<b>Simulations</b>	<p>Candidates are placed in situations similar to those they will face on the job and are asked to demonstrate their response. Candidates may also be asked to articulate the issues or problems involved in the situation before they take appropriate actions. Types of job simulations, in addition to SJTs, include:</p> <p><b>Work Samples</b> – Candidates are asked to complete one or more tasks that are part of the job. For example, candidates are given background material on a new organizational program. They then orally explain the new program as they would to employees.</p> <p><b>In-basket Exercises</b> – Candidates are given memos, complaints, employee requests, work schedule plans, and other documents typically processed by supervisors. Candidates then prioritize the issues and respond in writing.</p>	<p>May be administered live, via video or DVD, or online.</p> <p>The average predictive validity of work sample tests is estimated to be 0.33, i.e., they predict 10 percent of the variability in performance.<sup>71</sup></p> <p>For further information about situational judgment tests and simulations, please see our recent report, <i>Job Simulations: Trying Out for a Federal Job</i>, available at <a href="http://www.mspb.gov">www.mspb.gov</a>.</p>

<sup>70</sup> Michael A. McDaniel, Frederick P. Morgeson, Elizabeth Bruhn Finnegan, Michael A. Campion, and Eric P. Braverman, "Use of situational judgment tests to predict job performance: A clarification of the literature," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(4), 2001, pp. 730-740.

<sup>71</sup> Philip L. Roth, Philip Bobko, and Lynn A. McFarland, "A meta-analysis of work sample test validity: Updating and integrating some classic literature," *Personnel Psychology*, 58 (4), 2005, pp. 1009-1037.

**Appendix F: Possible Assessment Methods for Supervisory Positions**

Assessment Method	Description	Comments
<p><b>Simulations</b> (continued)</p>	<p><b>Role-playing Exercises</b> – An actor plays the part of an employee in a typical workplace situation and candidates take the role of a supervisor and act out an appropriate response in an interactive dialogue. Candidates may be given background material to prepare them for the role play. For example, an actor may pose as an employee who has been having difficulty meeting deadlines. Candidates coach the “employee.”</p>	
<p><b>Structured Interviews</b></p>	<p>All candidates are asked the same set of carefully prepared questions based on specific competencies. Additional probing questions are asked as needed to encourage the candidate to provide complete information. The number of questions related to each competency is usually based on the competency’s relative importance to job success. A scoring key with behaviorally anchored sample responses for each point value is used to evaluate candidates’ responses. Interviewers must be carefully trained in interviewing and scoring techniques.</p> <p>Types of structured interview questions include:</p> <p><b>Situational-Behavioral</b> – Candidates are asked to describe what they did and said in specific situations in the past. Based on the theory that past behavior predicts future behavior. Question example: Describe a time when you provided guidance to a less experienced co-worker.</p> <p><b>Situational-Hypothetical</b> – A typical work situation is briefly described to candidates. Candidates explain how they would react in the situation. Question example: You overhear one of your employees making a disparaging remark about a certain ethnic group. What would you do?</p>	<p>The average predictive validity of structured interviews is estimated to be about 0.51; i.e., they account for about 26 percent of the variability in performance for jobs of moderate complexity.<sup>72</sup></p> <p>Situational interviews typically have higher predictive validity than job knowledge interviews.<sup>73</sup> However, job knowledge interviews are useful for assessing technical knowledge.</p> <p>Behavioral situational interviews generally have higher mean predictive validity than hypothetical situational interviews. The average predictive validity of behavioral interviews is 0.63, compared to 0.47 for hypothetical interviews.<sup>74</sup></p> <p>Best when conducted by a panel of three or more interviewers so that several perceptions are obtained. Increase predictive power by having candidates interview independently with multiple interviewers.<sup>75</sup></p>

<sup>72</sup> Frank L. Schmidt and John E. Hunter, “The validity and utility of selection methods in personnel psychology: Practical and theoretical implications of 85 years of research findings,” *Psychological Bulletin*, 124(2), 1998, pp. 262-274.

<sup>73</sup> Michael A. McDaniel, Deborah L. Whetzel, Frank L. Schmidt, and Steven D. Maurer, “The validity of employment interviews: A comprehensive review and meta-analysis,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 79(4), 1994, pp. 599-616.

<sup>74</sup> P. Taylor and B. Small, “Asking applicants what they would do versus what they did do: A meta-analytic comparison of situational and past behavior employment interview questions,” *Journal of Occupational & Organizational Psychology*, 75(3), 2002, pp. 277-294.

<sup>75</sup> Frank L. Schmidt and Ryan D. Zimmerman, “A counterintuitive hypothesis about employment interview validity and some supporting evidence,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 89(3), 2004, pp. 553-561.

Assessment Method	Description	Comments
<p><b>Structured Interviews</b> <i>(continued)</i></p>	<p><b>Job Knowledge</b> – Questions that assess candidates’ technical knowledge are asked. For a supervisory position, these are phrased in terms of how candidates apply their knowledge in supervising. Questions can be behavioral or situational. Question example: What guidance would you provide to new employees who will be conducting their first program audit?</p> <p>An interview may include all three types of questions. For more information about structured interviews, please see our 2003 report <i>The Federal Selection Interview: Unrealized Potential</i>, available from our web site: <a href="http://www.mspb.gov">www.mspb.gov</a>.</p>	<p>In addition to interviews conducted by the hiring manager and higher level leaders, interviews may be conducted by a panel of supervisors or employees the new supervisor will supervise. A panel can produce a more well-rounded view of candidates and promote acceptance and integration of new supervisors.</p>
<p><b>Accomplishment Records – Behavioral Consistency Method</b></p>	<p>Candidates are presented with a series of questions, each focused on a key function of the job. The questions are based upon a rigorous job analysis and the collection of critical job incidents. In response to each question, candidates write a narrative describing their past achievements that demonstrate their ability to successfully perform the job function. These achievements are not restricted to job experience; for example, they may include community activities, such as chairing a school committee. Candidates are also asked to provide contact information for an individual familiar with each achievement so that their accomplishments can be verified.</p> <p>The responses are rated against behaviorally anchored scales developed and validated by job experts using actual examples of job behaviors for each item. Question example: Describe the most difficult interpersonal situation you have faced at work. Summarize the situation and then explain what you did and said.</p>	<p>May be administered in print or online.</p> <p>The predictive validity of accomplishment records is estimated to be 0.45 for jobs of moderate complexity, i.e., performance on an accomplishment record accounts for about 20% of the variability in performance.<sup>76</sup></p>
<p><b>Measures of Personal Characteristics</b></p>	<p>A psychometrically sound assessment of conscientiousness or integrity is administered to candidates in print or online. Typically, the assessment is purchased rather than developed in-house.</p>	<p>The personal characteristics of integrity and conscientiousness have been found to be good predictors of successful job performance.</p> <p>The predictive validities of integrity and conscientiousness tests are estimated to be 0.41 and 0.31 respectively.<sup>77</sup></p>
<p><b>Assessment Centers</b></p>	<p>Assessment centers consist of several different types of assessment tools that are administered sequentially to candidates. They often include one or more simulations, a structured interview, a leadership or personality test, and a group interaction exercise. They may also include a written narrative exercise related to the job’s content and a cognitive ability test. The tools are intended to provide complementary information about the candidates so that a broad perspective of their potential is obtained.</p>	<p>The predictive validity of assessment centers varies with the specific types and combinations of assessment tools used.</p>

<sup>76</sup> Frank L. Schmidt and John E. Hunter, “The validity and utility of selection methods in personnel psychology: Practical and theoretical implications of 85 years of research findings,” *Psychological Bulletin*, 124(2), 1998, pp. 262-274.

<sup>77</sup> *Id.*

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