

From Mechanic to Manager

by Mike Davis

Once upon a time, there was a carpenter named Joe. He was an excellent mechanic and the hardest working member of the crew. His productivity was the highest in the company.

When his supervisor retired, Joe was the logical choice to replace him. Joe was excited about making the jump from carpenter to foreman. It had been his dream to someday take charge and be the boss. He took his new position very seriously, and vowed to work harder than ever. To set an example for everyone else to follow, Joe started coming in early and staying late. In the first few weeks, he nearly doubled his output. So it was no surprise to Joe when, after a month at his new job, the company owner asked to meet with him. On his way to the meeting, Joe thought about how hard he had been working and concluded that he was being called in to receive a commendation for his effort. Maybe he would even get a pay raise.

At the meeting, the company owner told Joe that since he had taken over, production had plummeted. Joe was shocked to hear that his replacement would be starting Monday morning.

Where did Joe go wrong? He had taken his new job seriously, had worked long hours, and had doubled his production. What more could he have done?

The answer: Joe could have done the job he was being paid to do. Joe had been promoted to a management position that required him to supervise the work of the rest of the crew.

For every hour that Joe was working at double-speed, there were three carpenters working at half-speed because they were not getting the supervision they needed. The result was a net loss in productivity. The unsupervised workers not only cancelled out Joe's hard work, they brought the whole crew's productivity rate down.

When you are charged with supervising others, your first responsibility is to see to it that the people on your crew get the work done as efficiently as possible. As a supervisor, you are getting paid to think not just for yourself, but for your entire crew. Your job is to make sure the crew members have plenty of work in front of them, are supplied with the right materials in the proper quantities, and have the right tools and equipment for the job. Equally important, as supervisor you must constantly check to see that the crew understands what you want them to do and how you want them to do it, and you have to make yourself available to answer all of their questions. After you have attended to those issues, only then can you begin to "work" yourself.

Show and Tell

Of course, it's important for a supervisor to establish the pace for the crew and to set a good example. You can't sit around all day peering out from behind a clipboard. But doubling your own production doesn't help your crew double theirs.

One of the best examples is the supervisor on one of my first construction jobs. It was a big bridge job,

and he was in charge of a large crew of carpenters, iron workers, and laborers. He didn't have time to "work" himself — there were too many people to supervise. He spent most of his day walking from place to place answering questions and coordinating the work. But he employed a hands-on approach I call "show and tell." Instead of assuming that we all understood what he was telling us to do, he'd jump in and show us how to do it.

I remember one morning when four of us were running deck forms. The super came over and watched us for a minute, then decided we weren't getting the job done fast enough. Instead of trying to explain how we could improve our efficiency, he jumped in and started running forms with us. In a few minutes, he showed us some techniques that improved our speed, and he gradually got us to pick up the pace and do the work the way he wanted it done. Once he was satisfied we were back on track, he told us to keep up the good work, then he moved down the line to the next group. Had he stayed with us for the rest of the morning, the added manpower would have helped our productivity, but at the expense of some other crew who needed more than an extra pair of hands.

Less Is More

I didn't realize how talented that bridge-crew supervisor was until after I had gone out on my own. One of my first big jobs was a framing subcontract for about a hundred houses. At the time, I didn't have a clue about

how to run a project of that size, but somehow I muddled my way through it.

When the job was over, the general contractor, an older man named Franz Springer, asked me to stop by to see him. He had been working in construction longer than I had been alive, so I was anxious to gain the benefit of his experience.

When I arrived, Mr. Springer invited me in and asked me if I had come out okay on the job. When I told him I had, he complimented me for a few minutes, telling me that I had done a good job, that I was a good guy and a good carpenter. Then he told me how I had completely screwed up. My first mistake, he said, was strapping on my tool bags. On a job the size of that housing project, he said, there was no way I could afford to bang nails. I had 65 guys spread over 6 acres, including separate crews for pre-fab, walls, roofs, soffits, punch-out, and cleanup. If I had been smart, Mr. Springer told me, I would have spent all my time patrolling that job, nonstop. Every hour I had spent framing, he explained, I had two guys sleeping in closets somewhere. Their lack of productivity had cancelled out all of my hard work, and I was taking two steps back for every step forward. I was the supervisor

— I should have been supervising.


Mine was a common mistake. Like Joe the mechanic, I had gotten to where I was by working with my tools. Nobody ever explained to me what it meant to supervise. Because all of my past success had come while swinging a hammer, I naturally assumed that the key to my future success was to swing that hammer harder. I couldn't have been more wrong. Had I done less work myself, I would have been able to boost the productivity of my people by giving them the supervision they needed.

The concept of getting more work done by not "working" yourself is the toughest thing for a new manager to grasp, and it's the reason new managers fail. But it makes the difference between a carpenter and a foreman, between a framer and a framing crew leader. That's not to say that you shouldn't pick up a hammer once in awhile. To manage well, you need the respect of your crew, and the only way to gain the respect of hard-working people is to work hard yourself.

Whenever I promote a carpenter into a supervisory position, I try to make sure he understands what I expect from him. I tell him up front that there will be days when he doesn't drive a single

nail — and that's all right. Once he's a manager, I'm no longer concerned about what he can get done with his own two hands; I'm concerned about what he can accomplish with the many hands of his crew. I explain that a good manager can, through the proper supervision of his crew, magnify his own productivity. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

For most new managers, all it takes is a couple of good days when they can stand back and say, "Damn, we really got a lot of work done." And if a manager truly has the right stuff, he'll turn to the crew and say, "Thank you for your help."

You may not be running your own crew yet, but if you're an experienced carpenter you've probably been asked to "take the new guy and show him how to run wall sheeting." If you make sure the "new guy" has what he needs — clear instruction, the right tools and materials, and plenty of helpful guidance — you'll both get more work done. And you'll be one step closer to being ready to step into that supervisory job. 

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