

Good Supervision is a Good Defense

Lots of companies spend lots of time worrying about legal strategies when they should be paying attention to the quality of supervision in their company. Here's a better strategy.

Jerry Pounds, writing on the Management-Issues web site recently put out an interesting piece called: "Litigation awaits for insensitive employers." Here's a key passage.

"Judges and juries are linking musculoskeletal disorders, cardiovascular disease, psychological disorders, suicide, cancer, ulcers, impaired immune function and workplace injuries to a wide spectrum of emotional workplace stressors."

Ultimately, in our litigious society, there's no way to assure that you won't get sued or that you'll win if you do. The good news, though, is that there are some basic things you can do to improve your odds.

The best defense against a claim that you were an unfair boss is to be a fair one. Sounds simple, huh? But lots of companies spend lots of time worrying about legal strategies when they should be paying attention to the quality of supervision in their company.

Bottom line: it's the immediate boss that matters. If you doubt that, try this test.

Find someone who works outside the home and who has kids. Ask the kids if they know their parent's boss's name. They almost certainly will.

Ask them if their parent's boss ever makes a difference in their mom or dad's mood. They'll almost certainly say, "Yes."

Or, don't try that experiment. Just read this quote from GE's CEO, Jeff Immelt. Immelt's father worked on the line at GE for more than twenty years.

"I always tell our leaders that they're GE to the people in this company. When I would sit around the kitchen table with my dad, I never knew who the CEO of GE was. I knew my dad's boss. When he had a good boss, he was pumped. The frontline folks are critical to how the company does."

The immediate boss, not the one at the top of the organizational chart is the one that makes the most difference. When a work team is productive and morale is high, it's usually tied to the behavior of the boss. When a worker claims to have been abused, or ridiculed, or treated unfairly, those charges are usually tied to the behavior of their immediate supervisor, too.

So, the problem for your company is to [improve the quality of supervision at every level](#). The solution has three parts.

First, promote folks who will do a good job of supervision. Not every good worker will make a good supervisor. Not everyone who wants to be a supervisor will be good at it. When in doubt, try a person in short-term leadership assignments to see what happens.

Next, help newly promoted supervisors make the transition. That starts with basic training.

Next, provide training and support in key areas that new supervisors will have to know. That includes company policies and procedures as well as basic supervision and communications skills.

Help them identify role models and mentors. Most new managers learn the ropes more from watching and talking to others and not from classroom work.

Provide just-in-time help. That can be job aids, reference materials or a more experienced manager that the new manager can go to for advice.

Give them a way to talk to other supervisors about supervisory work. In my book *Performance Talk*, I tell the story of Karen, a newly promoted manager. She learns about the real world of supervision by participating in a roundtable. You can organize these locally.

Make sure that training becomes a lifetime proposition. The thing about leading others is that you will never learn all there is to know.

Finally, hold leaders at all levels accountable for their leadership. The leader, whatever the level, has two key objectives: accomplish the mission and care for the people.

Make sure your performance evaluations for bosses measure their performance as bosses. [Reward good performance](#). Correct poor performance.

That's not easy, and in most companies, it won't be quick. But doing a good job in the first place is a whole lot better than defending a bad job later. And there's a bonus. In addition to not getting sued, you'll probably be more profitable.