Free to Change

When organizations change, the role of the first-line supervisor must change, as well. But if change is to be beneficial, managers and supervisors must understand both old and new roles. This article offers a model of first-line supervisors' changing roles in relation to the organization.

By CARL A. BRAMLETTE, Jr.

The supervisory role has always been a role in transition, changing to meet the needs of organizations as they grew from small, entrepreneurial enterprises to more modern corporate, bureaucratic structures. But recent trends in organization management have made the transition more rapid and dramatic.

Many factors have had a direct and lasting impact on the supervisor's role. They include the move toward generalized rather than highly specialized jobs, the merging of staff and line positions, fewer levels of management with decision-making responsibilities pushed to lower levels, emphasis on group activities and accountabilities rather than individual jobs, teamwork in problem solving and implementation and the move from activity-based, skills-oriented jobs to more conceptual, knowledge-based roles.

There is no one best way to define the position of the individual responsible for coordinating and controlling the activities and production of a group of employees.

The titles *group leader, team coordinator, process manager, resource person, boundary manager* have been added to what was already a long list. Such changes in title and function have increased the uncertainty and frustration that first-line supervisors have always experienced.

Efforts to create more effective organizations through organization development, quality circles, quality of work life and work design or redesign continue to highlight the role. Because the first-line supervisor is seen as the primary source of resistance to change, he or she is often the key person in organizational design efforts, particularly those seeking to improve productivity through the greater participation of production workers.

If supervisors and organization planners are to develop adequate responses to present and anticipated changes, they must know the options that are available. There is no one best way to define the position of the individual responsible for coordinating and controlling the activities and production of a group of employees. Although the historical evolution of the position has been from leadman to resource person, the process can be reversed, depending on the skills and motivation of the supervisor and the employees, as well as changes in organization philosophies, resources and structures.

Using the following model of the first-line supervisor's changing role, those concerned can observe natural changes in organization structure and choose the

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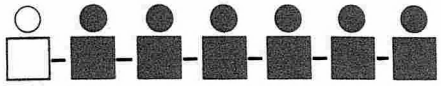
direction that makes sense for their organization (Figure 1).

The model

During a new production facility start-up, there is a need for a highly skilled worker to help get things going and serve as a model for new workers. This worker is best characterized as...

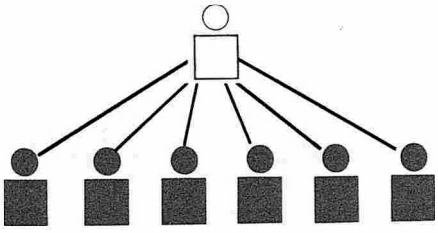


I. *The leadman*—The leadman (referred to as *man* because the position traditionally has been held by a male) has direct responsibility for the production/service functions of the organization and heavy involvement in doing the job. He or she serves as the primary model for subordinates. As the person with skill, experience and proven performance, the leadman sets the standards and the pace and is responsible for both routine functions and trouble-shooting.

In a start-up, the leadman is employed because of experience and previous performance and usually has minimal managerial functions. Planning and scheduling are done by others.

Success for the leadman and his or her employees depends on the boss's hands-on activities. Any delegation is likely to involve specific tasks for which the leadman maintains close responsibility.

Transition: As employees develop skills, the leadman can begin to assign tasks to individuals who take responsibility over longer periods. The leadman then moves on to the next stage...

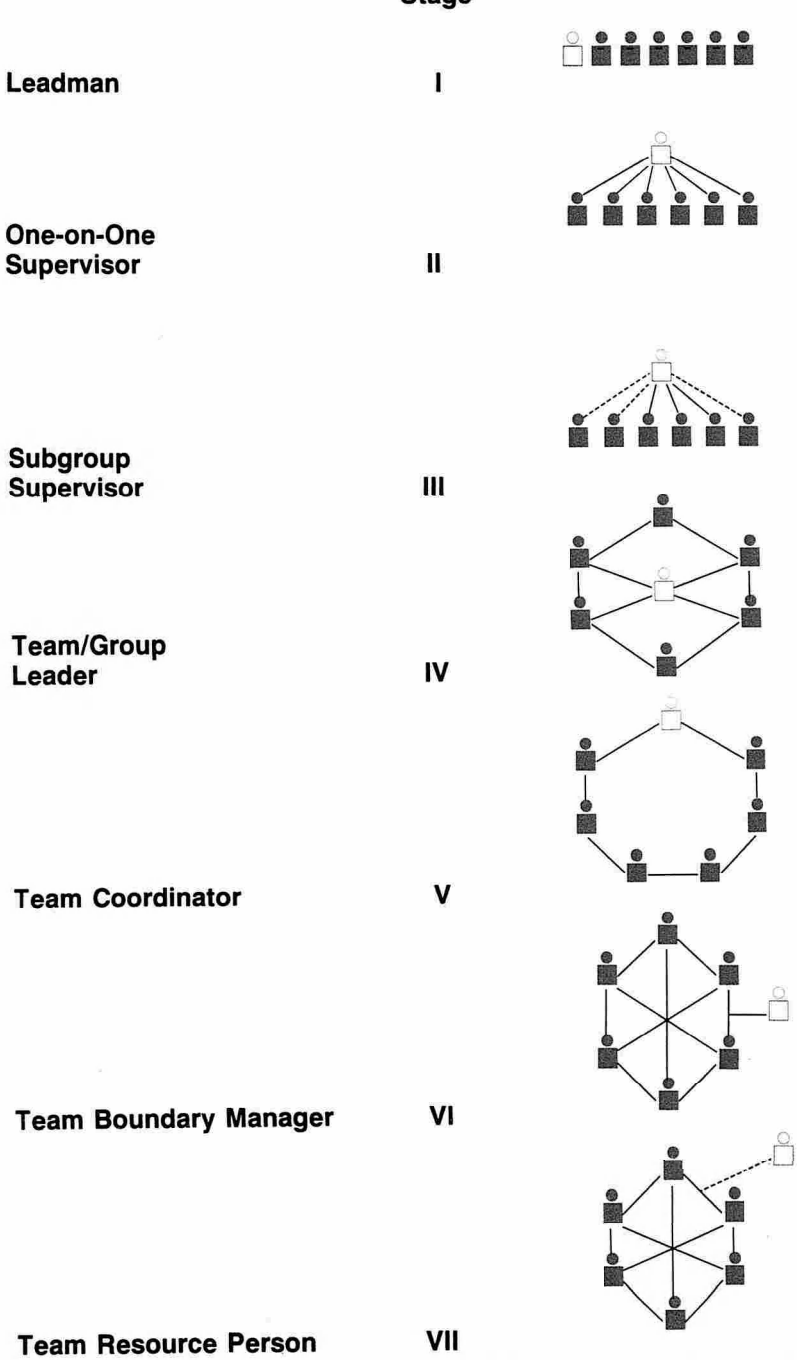


II. *One-on-one supervisor*—This is the pattern in most organizations today. A supervisor is responsible for directing and controlling a number of employees who are each assigned a part of the operation. The supervisor is responsible for the total output of these employees and, therefore, wants each job to be filled by an adequate performer.

As the supervisor moves away from the actual work, he or she expends more energy getting others to do the work. The supervisor's status and effectiveness depends highly on skills in directing, monitoring and controlling others (Figure 2). The demands of this role place severe stress on supervisors, particularly when they must manage individuals of different ability, age, race, sex and motivation.

Because of the emphasis on human relations, one-on-one supervisors are often chosen for interpersonal skills rather than technical skills. The technical expertise the supervisor is required to have and the degree to which he or she must continue to be involved in trouble-shooting, technical modifications and improvements is largely determined by the complexity of the technology.

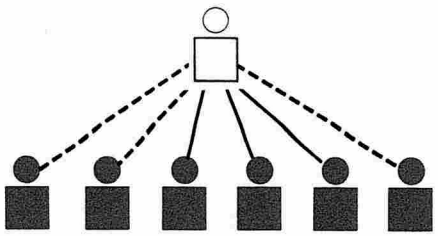
Figure 1—The Changing Role of the First-Line Supervisor A Developmental Model



Employees often view supervisors who are not technically proficient as figureheads. In fact, in many organizations such positions are initial training for future managers who thereby "get firsthand knowledge of operations." Often these future managers are in the position only briefly and the workers take on the major responsibility for operations—further undermining the supervisory role.

This model assumes that the workers have the technical skills for carrying out their tasks (Figure 3). Few assumptions are made about the workers' human relations skills; they are expected only to abide by the organization's interpersonal and cultural norms.

Transition: Several forces converge to bring about a significant role change. Developing employees need less one-on-one supervision and are able to function fairly independently. As they work together, employees begin to form informal subgroups. The supervisor becomes more involved in management functions and less involved in the work itself. He or she begins acting, often unconsciously, as a . . .



III. *Subgroup supervisor*—As the supervisor becomes aware of the subgroups' informal leadership and work norms, he or she begins to manage by communicating with the leaders, who, in turn, keep the rest of the subgroup informed. He or she also learns to work within subgroup norms and schedules. The supervisor, for example, knows which subgroup can be expected to take the needed overtime or take on additional assignments.

Supervisors usually do not initiate informal subgroups. The workers start them for both social and work-related reasons. They like each other, share rides and help each other out when the work requires it. The occasional individual who is not within the subgroup structure, the loner, must be supervised directly.

Many supervisors and their managers actively discourage the formation of informal cliques, fearing that informal leaders will challenge the power of formal leaders or that informal groups' norms and production standards will not support the organization. They may attempt to reverse the developmental process by moving individuals to other positions or forbidding employees to take breaks together or talk during their production cycles. Such efforts to reverse a natural process are often a waste of energy, but they still occur.

Other organizations train supervisors to recognize and use subgroup structures. This requires that supervisors develop additional social skills (Figure 2) and encourage workers to do so (Figure 3). As

Figure 2—Supervisor Characteristics

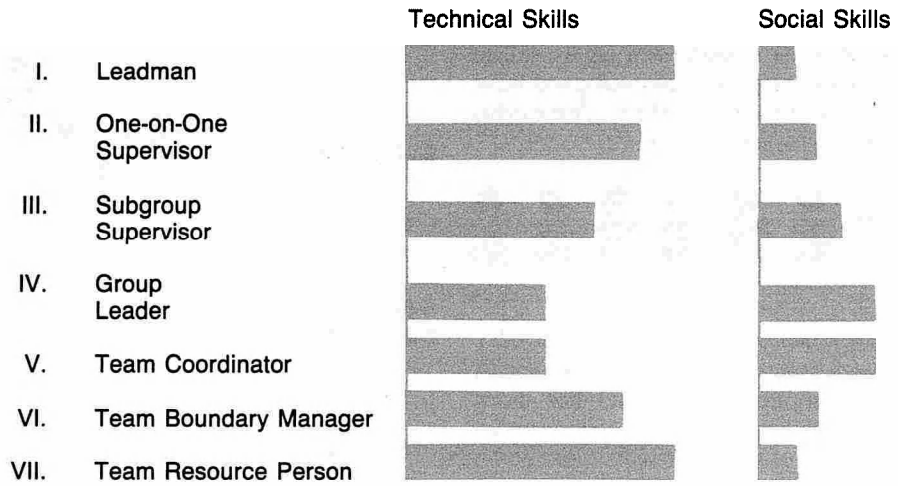
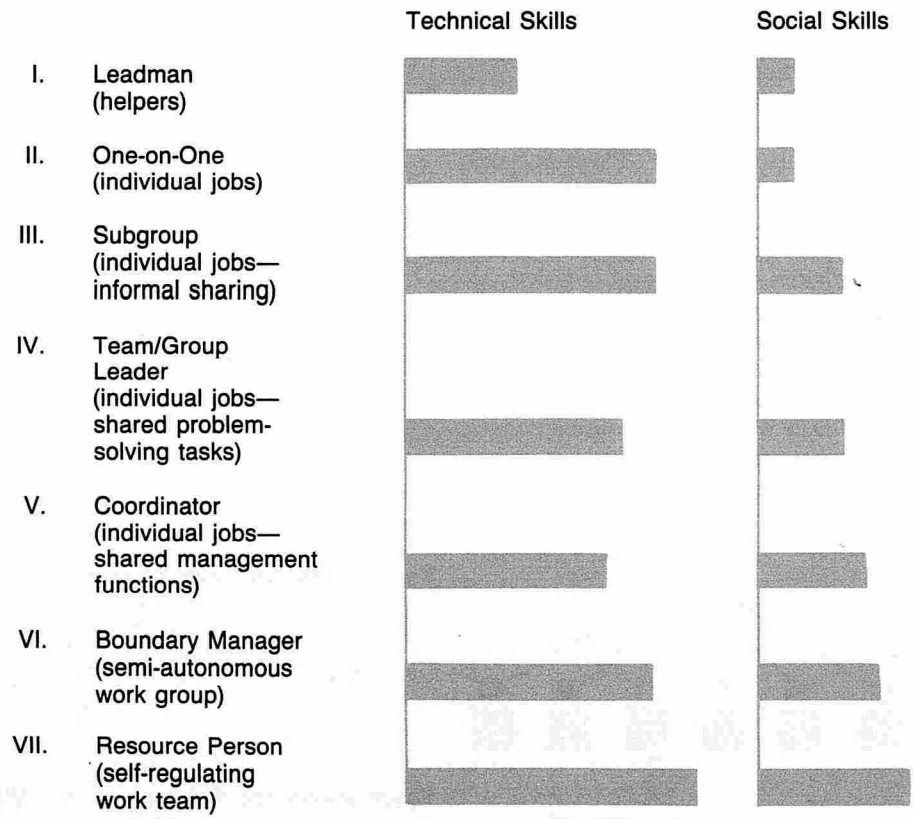
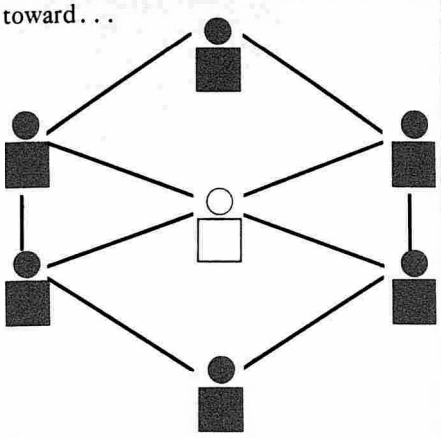


Figure 3—Worker/Group Member Characteristics



subgroups work together over long periods, the supervisor may lose contact with parts of the operation (Figure 2) while the technical skills of workers stay the same or increase (Figure 3).

Transition: As subgroups develop and individuals begin to see themselves as part of a group, the supervisor may wish to influence these groups more directly and may make the significant step toward...



IV. *Group (or team) leaders*—The leader is responsible for the activities and production of a group who share norms and goals. The group leader is the focal point for group dynamics, which he or she initiates and manages. While maintaining contact with each individual and promoting and facilitating high levels of interaction among group members, the group leader may also share control and problem-solving duties with group members. But he or she stays in the center of the circle and continues to exert influence on group activities and performance.

Even in those organizations that do not promote work teams as permanent structures, teams frequently exist on short-term bases. Quality circles, productivity improvement committees and problem-solving task forces require skilled leaders to function successfully. The facilitator, who is responsible for initiating and maintaining the group's problem-solving and decision-making *process*, is in a very important position.

The role of group leader requires significant social and group dynamics (Figure 2). Therefore, individuals selected for these positions often have interpersonal skills of a high order. They do not necessarily have technical skills since group members are expected to maintain technical expertise (Figure 3).

Transition: As the group members demonstrate acceptance of group norms, as they develop skills in maintaining production and trouble-shooting problems

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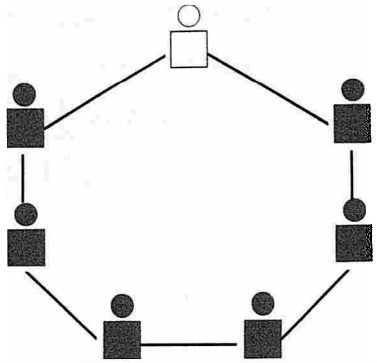
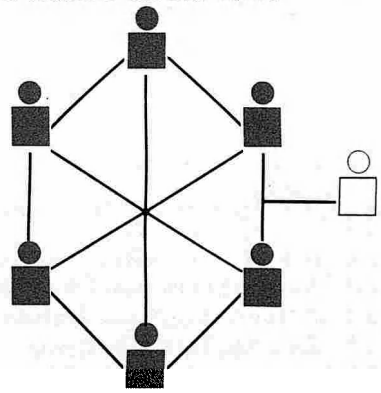
and as they begin to assume some of the group leadership functions, the group leader experiences a subtle change to...



V. *Team coordinator*—As a team coordinator, the supervisor shares a great many group leadership functions with other team members. Various team members may take on specific leadership roles—initiating, seeking, information—or consensus-testing, for example. The team coordinator manages the group primarily through coordination of their skills and activities, and uses their resources as fully as possible. In addition to responsibility for the activities and production of the team, he or she also maintains contact with other groups and becomes involved in activities and projects outside the immediate group.

The team coordinator can explore broader functions and issues in the organization. This allows the coordinator to broaden his or her managerial functions and skills and assess skills and aspirations against a wide range of career choices. The ability to do this relates directly to the ability of the team to manage its organizational responsibilities.

Transition: As the group takes greater responsibility for managing, the supervisor now finds it unnecessary to have close contact with members of the group and assumes the role of...



VI. *Team boundary manager*—The boundary manager is removed from the group and no longer has one-on-one contact with individual members. He or she manages the group as a unit while maintaining full responsibility for the group's input, activities and production. In previous structures, the supervisor had prior knowledge of team work schedules and immediate knowledge of activities; as a boundary manager, he or she has little or no knowledge of the group's activities.

The boundary manager collects data and gives feedback to the group about production. As the individual held accountable for the group's output, he or she re-enters the group when production does not meet expectations, in order to diagnose problems and make necessary modifications in work patterns.

Full understanding of and feedback on production, maintenance and growth are essential to the success of the boundary manager structure. Measures of production quantity, quality, cost-effectiveness, employee morale, employee growth and skill development, technological modifications and equipment maintenance must be in place to assure the boundary manager (and the team) that the system is functioning properly and making appropriate adjustments to changing conditions.

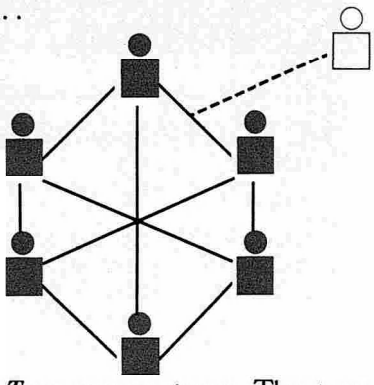
The change from team coordinator to boundary manager is difficult for some supervisors, particularly those who are accustomed to observing the immediate activities of employees. But as a group demonstrates its capacity to produce acceptably and to admit the boundary manager into its territory when necessary, organizations and supervisors can become comfortable with this new role.

A boundary manager is expected to have both technical expertise and human relations skills in order to help the group with problems. He or she becomes, in essence, the chief executive officer of the team and is responsible for managing all environmental demands (other teams, clients, etc.) to obtain the highest levels of efficiency and effectiveness. He or she is also a strong advocate for resources to meet both organizational and individual team member's goals.

Team members must experience significant increases in their abilities to manage both the technical and social systems (Figure 3) if they are to make this model successful.

Transition: As the group demonstrates its capacity to reform consistently, solve problems and readjust, and as it becomes capable of collecting its own input measures and responding appropriately to

them, the boundary manager evolves into a . . .



VII. *Team resource person*—The team resource person is available to a work group for any consultation or help that the group identifies itself as needing. The resource person can either furnish the help (technical or social) or obtain it from outside.

As a functioning organizational unit, the team has accountability for its own work. In essence, the first-line supervisory role no longer exists. Various leadership patterns may emerge within the work team, but they are the responsibility of the team and are not dependent on external power.

The team resource person must have a very high level of technical skill. In fact, such a role is more likely to exist in organizations that deal with highly complex, rapidly changing technologies. In this situation, it may be unreasonable to expect team members to acquire the necessary technical skills or keep up with changes in technology.

The team resource person may be available to help several work teams, and, in mature organizations that deal with technology of only moderate complexity, the resource person may be phased out as team members acquire total technical competence.

Implications for organizational design

No organizational structure is best for all situations. Each pattern is appropriate for meeting a different set of goals.

The leadman-helper state fits situations of rapid start-up with limited resources for pre-start-up training and development. Attending closely to the operation itself, the leadman has little time to spend on directing and supervising others, and workers may have some freedom of choice. While autocratic and authoritative supervisory styles are tolerated during start-up, the newness of the activities often leads to high worker participation in management. Generally, employee satisfaction and motivation are high during this period (Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4—Supervisory Style

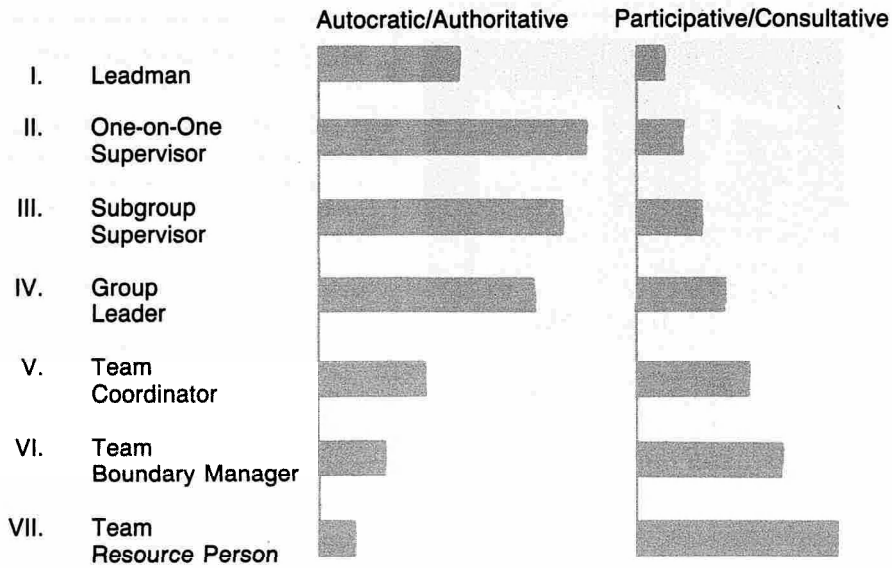
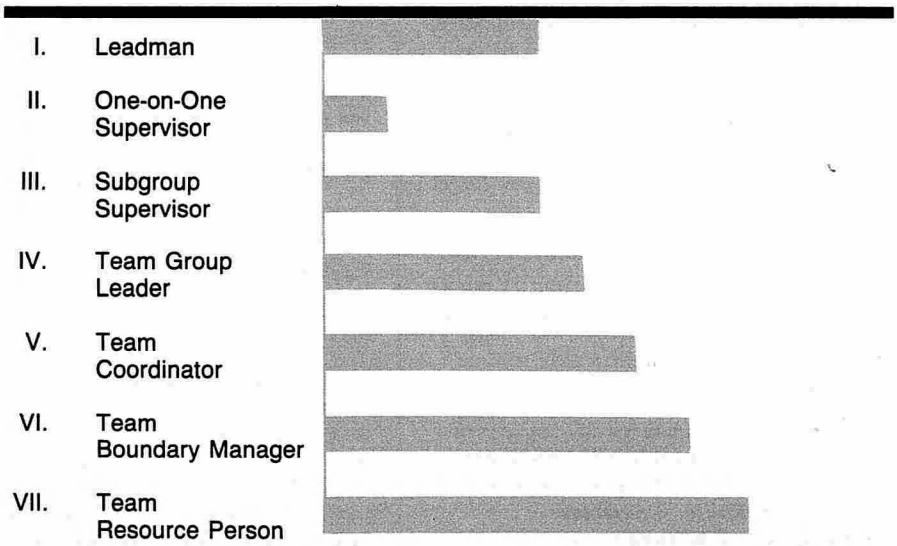


Figure 5—Intrinsic Job Satisfaction Potential (Assuming knowledge, variety, challenge, autonomy)



Because technical talent is crucial at start-up, companies often hire "suitcase" foremen during this period. In start-ups involving complex technology, this period may last longer than was originally planned, and the situation may become quite frustrating—to both the temporaries who want out and to the permanent employees who want them to leave. Managers should be prepared to deal with such frustrations.

Many organizations are frozen at the one-on-one supervisory stage. While maintaining satisfactory technical skills, the supervisor in this phase also must have social skills in directing, motivating and developing employees and in communicating.

The supervisory style is often autocratic and authoritative since all decisions about the unit's work are (appropriately) at the supervisory level (Figure 1). But the supervisor may allow

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and even promote independence in some workers.

This model has been assumed to work fairly well in mature industries requiring high degrees of specialization. It is the most prevalent supervisory pattern in industry today, and there is little doubt that it works. However, as organizations attempt to improve both productivity and morale, the lack of potential for intrinsic job satisfaction and flexibility (Figure 5) are causing serious problems. A work force with high morale at start-up may have that morale seriously diminished during this second stage, particularly if the start-up mode produced expectations of freedom or participation that are violated in close one-on-one supervision.

Subgroup supervision recognizes the inevitable consequences of long-term work units—informal groups, informal leaders, informal norms. Many organizations have stabilized successfully at this level, but do not recognize the existence of subgroups. Because the one-on-one structure is still formally in place, the supervisor is held accountable for maintaining that structure and may find it necessary to cover up even successful use of subgroup leadership and norms. Unless the supervisor has organizational support, he or she may be seen as treating individuals and subgroups differently when the organization's formal norm is to treat all individuals alike. Thus, companies may benefit from sanctioning this stage formally.

The team/group leader model requires a conceptual shift to perceiving a group or team as a functional unit, as well as a collection of individual jobs. Group leadership, norms and goals, and open communication and influence channels are recognized as legitimate and desirable.

The role requires a significant increase in the supervisor's social and group leadership skills (Figure 2). While continuing to be responsible for the group's daily production, the supervisor is willing to share information and problem-solving duties. Members of the group must also increase their interpersonal and managerial competencies (Figure 3). In this stage, the sharing and pooling of worker resources becomes probable and practical.

The team/group leader mode, a popular one for organizations that want to move from a bureaucratic to a more participative structure, requires important changes in attitude and skills for both managers and employees. To expect that people who have functioned and been rewarded for success in a one-on-one or subgroup model will accept a group leader model without retraining and support is folly. Calling a collection of individuals a *team* or renaming a foreman a *group leader* is not enough. Individuals' expectations of more participative, democratic decision making in this mode have also caused serious problems for some companies. But higher levels of responsibility, knowledgeable problem solving, flexibility of function and fewer managerial levels have been the benefits for organizations that were willing to do the necessary restructuring and retraining.

The team coordinator model has been successful in organizations with high levels of commitment to more participative and flexible environments. This includes the willingness to provide extensive technical and social skills training to employees. In highly complex or high-risk industries, a full-time coordinator should be assigned to maintain expertise and stability within the team.

Some team coordinators function primarily as technical experts, others as social system directors, depending on the skills of team members. The coordinator should be competent in both technical and social skills, but since team members are able to take on a variety of managerial tasks, the coordinator's major duties will probably be technical.

The boundary manager model violates many managers' ideas of how an organization should be run. The boundary manager is removed from the immediate time and space of the work team but maintains full accountability for the team's production. Team members' job satisfaction is potentially very high.

The team resource person model is the supreme test of a supervisor's competence and contribution to the organization. He or she is no longer a supervisor in the traditional meaning of that title. A resource person is only indirectly responsible for the team's production; the team has direct accountability.

The move to a self-regulating work team is also the supreme test of management's commitment to delegating responsibility. Team members must be capable of learning and performing all tasks and solving all problems with little outside help. The team becomes a self-contained business unit in economic interdependency with other systems, either other teams or management. The potential for job satisfaction is optimal.