



LAES has developed a series of immigrant issue instructional modules entitled "Tierra de Oportunidad" for orientation to our complex society.

INSTRUCTIONAL AREA

Advancing Work And Career

MODULE 24

Supervisors and Teamwork

Overview

The industries in which most immigrant workers are employed are very different than those of mainstream American business. Farmwork, restaurant work, construction, construction cleanup, house cleaning, janitorial work, the garment industry, and low-end manufacturing operations are all workplaces where, aside from low wages, working conditions are difficult, sometimes due to conflicts with supervisors.

Many supervisors in small, informal businesses like restaurants may care deeply about the people who work for them and treat them like family. But many other supervisors abuse workers psychologically, treating them arbitrarily and unfairly, getting angry with them for reasons unrelated to the work, because the supervisors are themselves inexperienced or untrained, or, in some cases, because a company's strategy for controlling the workers is to intimidate them.

Immigrant workers are generally quite experienced in dealing with poor supervision, even so, they may benefit from additional reflection and information-sharing about how to deal with ineffective supervisors. At the same time, they need to know what they can expect from effective supervisors and how their efforts to build good working relationships with supervisors and co-workers can pay off in the form of advancement into more personally satisfying jobs and, eventually, into upward career mobility.

Immigrant workers also need to be introduced to the idea of workplaces structured on the basis of teams which are responsible for managing their own work, for making suggestions to improve the way work is done, and then, implementing them. On the one hand, the idea of mutualism, people pitching in to work and make things better for everyone is a traditional and familiar one, but many immigrants may think they left this kind of cooperation behind when they came to the United States.

It is also important to introduce learners to the idea that the kind of informal teamwork which plays such a large role in family life is a sound basis for practicing and strengthening the skills needed to work productively and successfully in many

U.S. workplaces and participating successfully in community life.

Effective teamwork in larger companies involves building good communication, concern about others' well-being and progress, and cooperation which takes place in well-functioning families. However, team work in many companies does often involve more competition than within the family. One way in which workplace teamwork is like the familiar sports team is that it focuses on the "bottom line" -- some form of winning against adversaries.

Good workplace teamwork requires that everyone on the team take initiative and pitch in to make things work out. It also anticipates that workers willingly assume leadership while, at the same time, respecting the authority of supervisors, managers, and others in the workplace community. Showing leadership and a willingness to work with others to solve problems are important ways for employees to stand out and show their employers that they are good candidates for promotion. Like extended families and small towns, co-workers in many companies get to know each other well, and one's good reputation counts.

As telecommunications technology increases, workplace teams involve people working with other people who are located at a distant site, perhaps in another city or even in another country. Also, as teamwork becomes a more integral part of the workplace the size and diversity of teams increases. An important skill for all workers, in these organizations, is to be able to get along well and work closely with people very different from them.

One of the challenges of new modes of teamwork is that not all coordination rests on personal communication, such as talking and planning with co-workers. Some teamwork communication takes place via memos, e-mail, company policies, and periodically reviewing plans about priorities, goals, and processes for getting one or another thing done. Thus, increasing skills are needed in recognizing the implications of each of these different modes of communication.

Adult education classrooms can themselves be structured to build and reinforce class members' skills as productive team members. Organizing classroom activities to maximize the amount of time class members can spend in team roles such as discussing problems, comparing, contrasting and rating possible solutions, coaching, counseling each other, and assuming individual responsibility for what happens to the group are powerful strategies for building teamwork skills.

The adult education classroom can also usefully adopt some of the staff development principles from contemporary corporate training research. For example, in setting up teams, instructors can be sure that everyone is nudged to try out different roles. In the same way, students can explore how best to balance their own self-interest with concern for others by discussing and negotiating activities in the classroom-- what to focus on, tradeoffs, and mutual expectations.

Basic Skills Development

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| <i>Basic Skills</i> | using both oral and written modes of communication for problem-solving and exchanging information, understanding the implications of different types of organizational communication, e.g. memos, handbooks, bulletin boards, team meetings. Practice active and expressive communication: questioning, discussing, critiquing, counseling, coaching, paraphrasing, explaining. |
| <i>Thinking Skills</i> | identifying and discussing problems, comparing alternative competing solutions, testing potential strategies, evaluating how well different strategies work, choosing one, or several, approaches which work best for a team; recognizing differences in individual perspectives and objectives, practicing harmonizing objectives to achieve "win-win" solutions wherever possible. |
| <i>Uses Resources</i> | building on home country and family experience with cooperation, recognizing and valuing positive character traits, recognizing the value of time in a stressful environment, valuing personal support and social networks, utilizing human resources to help solve problems which affect an entire group. |
| <i>Interpersonal Skills</i> | recognizing family interactions as involving teamwork, considering the different roles of each individual in a team, recognizing each different team member's needs for support from others in the team, expanding team membership to include outsiders, changing competitive relationships into cooperative partnerships. |
| <i>Uses Information</i> | critically assessing information from different sources, comparing, contrasting, and evaluating different opinions and personal perspectives, discussing the pros and cons of proposed solutions. |
| <i>Works With Systems</i> | understanding the differences in the structure of workplaces with informal, traditional, supervision, and those with formal, systems for supervising employees, understanding team-based workplace management as an alternative, understanding how co-workers and supervisors can help one's career advancement. |
| <i>Uses Technology</i> | selects and uses the appropriate technology for the task, including computers and online systems. |

Teaching Points

Differences Between Supervision in Different Kinds of Workplace

1. **Supervisors, including owners who supervise their employees directly, in industries employing immigrants tend to have a broader scope of absolute authority than in mainstream workplaces.** In these kinds of informal workplaces in immigrant-dominated industries, getting along requires probably more flexibility than in other workplaces but it still may not pay off because, even though supervisors have a great deal of authority over those they supervise, they may not have much authority to change the ways things are done. In contrast, supervisors in the mainstream

industries can often do a great deal to promote workers, transfer them to new assignments which take advantage of their skills, or, otherwise, help a worker get ahead.

2. **Supervisors in smaller industries employing immigrants often know the workers they supervise better than supervisors in larger industries. This has benefits and disadvantages.** In mainstream companies, workers should try systematically to get their supervisors to recognize them and recognize that they are effective workers, not assuming this is obvious. In informal workplaces, workers should try hard to keep personal relationships and family alliances, from negatively affecting relationships at work, and foster such off-work relationships that may help relations at work.
3. **Supervisors in small industries employing immigrants usually become supervisors because they are, experienced workers, or they have a good personal or family relationship with the company owner, or they have been at the firm a long time. Usually they do not have experience in supervising.** They may, for example, supervise workers as though the workers were their children, treating them in an authoritarian way and rewarding or punishing them. In many, but not all, mainstream industries, the company spends some time and money in teaching supervisors how to supervise well.
4. **Many mainstream companies have formal policies about what is effective supervision and ineffective supervision and what rights workers have when they feel their supervisors treated them unfairly,** in contrast to immigrant-dominated industries. However, although these policies give workers in mainstream workplaces more rights, a worker who considers complaining informally or filing a formal complaint should know that the company presumption is usually in favor of the supervisor, not the worker they supervise.
5. **At companies where workers are covered by a union contract, workers have legally specified rights to file grievances and a union representative will be available to advise them of their rights and to help them in a conflict with their supervisor.** However, even in this situation, workers should very carefully evaluate whether it is to their benefit to rock the boat. Surely, it is sometimes worthwhile but not always.
6. **While companies which have only informal supervision are adamantly opposed to any kind of worker organizing, the reality is that such companies do bend to pressure from workers.** A group of workers, who is planning to exert this kind of pressure must recognize that these situations are seldom resolved easily and that they will need to work systematically and hard with co-workers to bring about improvements in workplace supervision. This effort is, nonetheless, often worthwhile because it can make such a difference in the level of stress workers experience and their sense of

well-being. These kinds of informal worker organizing usually do not work at larger, more formally structured companies, although organizing efforts specifically oriented toward forming a union are very strongly protected by law.

Getting Along and Ahead with Mainstream Supervisors

7. **In the mainstream workplace, supervisors are expected to be teachers or coaches**, helping the workers they supervise do a better job and become more productive workers. It is reasonable to expect some level of help from supervisors in dealing with new problems, in learning to work smarter. An important way for workers to advance in their careers is to demonstrate their skills as learners. Initiating talks with supervisors about wanting to get ahead is a practical way to start the process.
8. **In the mainstream workplace, supervisors are often held accountable for how well the unit they are supervising is doing**, for example, the incidence of defects in modules their team is assembling, numbers of customer complaints, hotels' survey of customer satisfaction, or unit output. It is useful for workers to fully understand what worries or motivates supervisors and communicate their awareness of those concerns and their willingness to pitch in to make things work better.
9. **In the mainstream workplace, company policies spell out the duties of supervisors and of workers.** Workers should be aware that, in most cases, supervisors are expected to regularly evaluate the performance of the employees they supervise. Workers should be introduced of the idea of being evaluated on the basis of explicit criteria and become familiar with those being used where they work, if there is such a process. Workers should be aware that one objective for periodic formal performance review is as a learning experience.
10. **In the mainstream workplace, supervisors are expected to have some flexibility in responding to individual workers' needs.** There are some areas where flexibility may be possible e.g., flex-time and trading schedules when a child is ill, and some where it may not be e.g., workplace dress and grooming. Before they broach the issue of accommodating an individual concern, workers should learn what supervisors can do and what they can not do. Workers should learn to justify their requests, taking into account what they know about supervisors' concerns.
11. **In the mainstream workplace, the way to get ahead may be to move horizontally into another work area**, where one's skills are more applicable, where one likes the work more, or where there are more opportunities for upward career mobility.

Getting Along and Ahead in a Team-based Workplace

12. **The companies which have adopted a team-based approach to structuring work have usually done so because the particular kind of work they are involved in goes better** when workers work in a coordinated way or when there is a bonus on problem-solving, innovative, or creative solutions to challenges at work. So, not surprisingly, there are superior communication skills, analytical thinking, and interpersonal skills in this sort of workplace.
13. **In team-based workplaces, teams are often expected to be self-managing, that is team members become their own supervisors.** They should recognize, then, that they must focus on building their own skills in self-evaluation, in helping others to learn and to learn oneself from others, in negotiating solutions to conflicts. They should also recognize that they are, as a group, accountable for how things are going and that the group has the right to expect every member of the team to do their fair share and, consequently, the need to help less-skilled, less-cooperative, or less-productive workers do better.
14. **To acknowledge everyone's values is a fundamental principle in teams' group discussions,** particularly those which are oriented toward problem-solving. The team members admit everyone's values and perspectives and recognize everyone's contributions while, at the same time, advocate one's own point of view.
15. **Another fundamental principle in team-building is that each member of the team has their own role and responsibility but that roles may, at times, need to be interchangeable.** Particularly, if there is a role which no one wants to play, e.g., notes-taker or coach, then it may be desirable for people to rotate through that role. Instructors should point out that the existence of a team does not necessarily mean that every team member has the same level of authority and responsibility. Being together in a team does, however, mean that people need to consult and communicate with each other even if they are not equal within the organization.
16. **Teams work best when people help each other out.** However, they only continue to work well when some team members do not become chronic takers leaving others to be chronic givers. Team members should be sensitive to the number of chips they may accumulate or spend by helping others out or asking for help and try to even things out. This is a familiar concept to Mexican immigrants as a similar kind of mutualism is the basis of compadrazgo.

In General -- Building Skills in Teamwork

17. **People's experience working cooperatively in a family, toward a common goal, is a solid basis for learning how to work collaboratively as part of a team with strangers.** However people should not bring poor habits from their family relationships into the workplace, i.e., being

constantly demanding, arguing, being overly critical, being bossy. Strangers will not respond as predictably as family members.

18. **People's experience working cooperatively in civic organizations is also a solid and even more advanced foundation for understanding how to work cooperatively in the workplace.** Learners should be urged to reflect carefully on what kind of experience they have had in the past in working cooperatively, e.g., in church activities, the PTA, in community projects in their hometown, and how these can translate into career advancement in the United States.
19. **Building teamwork skills can lead to increasing supervisory responsibilities and, eventually, into management, even in a workplace where there is no official recognition of teams.** It is an effective first step on a career path. As companies focus more and more on being "learning organizations", experience in teaching, counseling, and coaching co-workers is increasingly marketable as a skill.

Sample Learning Activities

** Note -- Some of these exercises may involve students discussing sensitive information. Before initiating such exercises, it would be wise to discuss with the class, the principle that the classroom is a "safe place" and that all information which comes up in class should be considered entirely confidential*

1. Poll the class asking how each rates their current supervisor and tabulate behaviors people think make for effective or ineffective supervision. Remind the class that supervisors include the homeowners whose houses they may clean, whose garden they may tend, contractors who hire workers at drive-by street corners, and family members in family run businesses. Share information about strategies class members have developed to get along with ineffective supervisors. Also list the kind of work each class member does. Are there any conclusions the class can draw about supervision in one kind of workplace or industry as contrasted with another?
2. Ask each class member to describe the most effective supervisor they worked for and why that person was the best supervisor; and also describe the least effective supervisor they worked for and why they were rated as being ineffective. Then, ask the students to discuss whether they think they took full advantage of what the effective supervisors had to offer and how they could have benefited more from working with them.
3. Ask each class member to discuss what they would do differently if they were to change roles with their current supervisor. Are there any common themes which emerge from this discussion?
4. Ask class members to discuss whether they feel that they work as a team with co-workers where they work. To decide whether their workplace is like a team or not they might compare it to a soccer team in terms of -- assigned

roles, encouraging each other, coordination for a common goal, good days and bad days, etc. For workers who do not feel that their workplace is based on teamwork, would working as a team make any difference in how well things went -- for them as workers? for the customers, for the company manager or owner?

5. Invite a panel of three personnel officers from medium to large local employers, including the school itself, to discuss the basics of personnel management, what they seek as the characteristics of effective and ineffective supervisors, and what they do to improve the ability of supervisors to supervise. After the discussion on their approaches, you might ask the panelists to present how their duties, priorities and strategies differ and explain why that might be.
6. Invite a local union business agent or other representative to talk to the class about the kinds of procedures their contract has to cover conflicts between supervisors and the employees they supervise, how the grievance process works, and the sorts of problems they most commonly face as union business agents in connection with supervision.
7. Invite a manager from a large local company to talk to the class about the kinds of career pathways there are within their own company and others with a particular emphasis on horizontal transfers. If possible, invite a manager from a company which organizes its workplace on the basis of teams.
8. Invite three supervisors from local businesses in leading local industries (preferably those which have a large immigrant workforce, but not from a company where any of the class members work) to talk to the class about what they look for in an effective worker, the kinds of problems they face as supervisors, and how they resolve those problems. After the guests have left ask the class to discuss how these supervisors' perspectives compare to those of their own supervisors.
9. Invite a conflict mediation specialist, either a volunteer working with the local bar association or a lawyer specializing in conflict mediation, to talk to the class about the principles of conflict mediation.
10. Set up a role-playing exercise in which class members pair off -- with one playing the role of supervisor, one the role of the employee. Ask the class member playing the role of supervisor to fill out the sample performance review form (see resources below) to rate their classmate. The sample form should be filled out by the mock supervisor reflecting upon how he or she would rate himself/herself. The mock supervisor will then present the evaluation form to the mock supervisee who responds by going through a series of questions how they might best demonstrate a willingness to learn and do better. The mock supervisor will then provide suggestions and advice for improvement. Ask other class members to advise the role-playing duo how they could do better as supervisor or supervisee.

Resources

1. Sample performance review form.

There are many management and organizational structure books available in most bookstores. Instructors might prepare for doing this module by reviewing one or two of these books which look particularly interesting to them.

2. Studs Terkel, **Working**
3. Anthony Carnevale, **Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want**, American Society for Training and Development/U.S. Department of Labor, 1991.
4. Anthony Carnevale, **America and the New Economy**, American Society for Training and Development/U.S. Department of Labor, 1991.
5. The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, **Teaching the SCANS Competencies**, U.S. Department of Labor, 1993.
6. The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, **Learning a Living: A SCANS Report for America 2000**, U.S. Department of Labor, 1992.

Commercial Textbooks

Attitudes on the Job, Educational Design, Inc.
Ch. 4, Accepting Orders On the Job
Ch. 5, Getting Along With Others On the Job

Building Success, Steck-Vaughn
P. 35, Who's the Boss

ESL For Action, Addison - Wesley
Unit III, Talking With Co-Workers, Talking With the Boss
Unit IX, Working With Americans

Job Survival Skills, Educational Design, Inc.
Ch. 3, Cooperation with the Employer
Ch. 4, Cooperation with Co-workers

Ready to Work, Contemporary Books
Ch. 10, Succeeding At Work

The Working Culture, Prentice Hall
Ch. 3, Together and Separate: Living and Working in a Multi-cultural Country

150 Ways to Keep Your Job, J. Weston Walch
P. 29, Being Part of the Team
Ch. 3, Getting Along With Your Boss

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