

Supervisors need to have the ability to get to know everyone. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, a good supervisor knows them.

A supervisor that says it like they see it. You don't need to shout and swear, or pretend you're a big boss and above everyone. Give respect and you get respect back.

The guys have to be comfortable with you, there needs to be honesty, and no fear. When there is no fear there is never a stupid question. That keeps guys safe.

Lead by example. They watch...they see what their supervisor does, they notice if you do something unsafe, your minimum standard is seen as acceptable.

Supervisors' leadership practices that create strong and positive safety climates and encourage safe behaviour in workgroups

August 2017

Purpose of this guide

Supervisors play a pivotal role in driving health and safety (H&S) performance in the workgroups they lead. They act as a critical link between senior managers and workers and translate the content of corporate H&S policies and procedures in the workplace. It is through supervisors that workers form an understanding of "what management really want" in relation to H&S. This guide provides insights into how supervisors' leadership styles and behaviours shape workgroup climates and influence workers' H&S related behaviours. It is based on research evidence drawn from major infrastructure project construction sites.

How to use the guide

The guide:

1. communicates key findings of the research,
2. makes suggestions for developing supervisory leadership styles that are linked to positive safety climates, and safe working practices within workgroups, and
3. identifies skills and practices that can guide the development of supervisors' H&S leadership capability.

The guide can be used by supervisors to develop an awareness of the impact of different leadership styles and practices and inform leadership development training programs for supervisors. The guide can also help workers to recognise leadership styles they could encounter in the construction field, and identify behaviours which improve H&S and other aspects of project performance.

Key findings

1. H&S compliance and participation are important, and are influenced by supervisors' leadership behaviours.

Construction can be a dangerous work environment and compliance with H&S-related procedures and rules is important. Supervisors play a key role in translating policies and procedures into H&S instructions and behaviours. Workers need to understand the reasons for procedures and rules, so that they understand why these rules need to be followed and when these procedures and rules apply. Supervisors play an important role in communicating and reinforcing this information at pre-start meetings and during their daily interactions with workers.

Construction sites can be unpredictable and physical conditions change as work progresses. Workers' participation in H&S activities is important because they put H&S procedures and rules into practice on site. Workers can often anticipate problems in applying H&S rules in some situations. Supervisors play an important role in engaging workers in H&S activities that can help to solve H&S problems before incidents occur and improve the content of written H&S procedures.

2. Supervisors adopt relationship-based and technical leadership styles in different activities or situations.

Effective supervisors are able to draw on their technical capability and good relationships with workers to foster a strong, positive H&S climate in the workgroups they lead.

Effective supervisors develop good working relationships with workgroup members and communicate the importance of H&S through their actions and words. They lead by example and are consistent in their H&S-related instructions and actions. They encourage workers to talk openly about H&S concerns and respond to suggestions about ways to improve work processes. Effective supervisors understand workers' individual needs and provide appropriate support when needed. These are features of a relationship-based leadership style.

Part of a supervisor's role is to plan work before it commences. They allocate tasks to workers, issue instructions and communicate how work will be performed in daily pre-start meetings. Effective supervisors explain how and why safety rules are in place. They monitor the way work is being performed throughout the working day, recognise when work is being done correctly and provide corrective feedback if safe work procedures are not being followed. These are features of an active technical leadership style.

3. Both relationship-based and technical leadership have a positive H&S impact.

High quality relationships between supervisors and workers have a positive impact on many aspects of group performance. The development of a trusting and collaborative workgroup environment encourages workers to look out for the H&S of their co-workers and others. When workers feel that H&S is valued and their ideas for improvement are taken seriously, they are more likely to engage in proactive behaviours that go beyond minimum levels of compliance with rules and procedures. Relationship-based leadership is focused on creating a shared commitment to H&S and increases workers' participation in H&S-related activities.

Construction work is undertaken to a tight schedule. In periods of high work intensity (for example, during a project shutdown or occupation) it is possible for messages about H&S to become mixed. When supervisors communicate H&S expectations, issue clear instructions and monitor and reinforce H&S performance they reduce uncertainty about what is important. Clear and consistent leadership maintains the focus on H&S and increases workers' compliance with rules and procedures put in place to ensure H&S.

The following diagram shows how technical and relationship-based leadership create a strong and positive workgroup H&S climate that then shapes workers' H&S behaviour.

Supervisor behaviours that positively influence the H&S climate and workers' behaviour

Both relationship-based and technical leadership are important, but relationship-based leadership is more closely related to workers' H&S participation, while technical leadership is more closely related to workers' H&S compliance.

Workgroups develop stronger and more supportive H&S climates when supervisors are central in communication networks, both giving and receiving H&S information frequently.

