Experience is Still the Best Teacher: Lessons Remembered as a First-Line Supervisor

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Recommended for Working Paper Series by Professor Poppy Lauretta McLeod

WP 98-3(3a)
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By

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April 9, 1998
Abstract

This article focuses on personal reflections and expectations of a first-line supervisor at The Procter & Gamble Company over a five year span. There is a chronological order of positive and negative experiences that contributed to "lessons remembered." Implications for today's and tomorrow's first-line supervisors and managers are shared.
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First Time As A First-Line Supervisor

Do you remember your experiences as a first-line supervisor? What were you thinking or feeling on the first day you reported to work? Did you feel prepared, nervous, excited? Did you have a definite view of how you wanted to lead and influence others? Well, if you were like me I thought that I knew what it meant to lead others due to my past leadership positions throughout my educational years. Upon reflection, while my previous experiences were great confidence builders, I really was not prepared nor did I understand what it meant to be a supervisor. Also, I did not fully understand the necessity to understand others - peers, managers, team members - on a personal basis as a way for the work to get done. I am a high achiever and really enjoy accomplishing tasks, and I believed that this was the primary way everybody wanted and did work. O.K., I was only 22 years old at the time - give me a break! I learned that performance was important, but, it was only the beginning. Since, my days as a supervisor the role and responsibilities of a first-line supervisor have dramatically changed.

The roles and responsibilities of a first-line supervisor are becoming more blurred in this age of globalization, cultural diversity, technology, and educational opportunities and constraints. First-line supervisors are responsible for managing more team members, responding to the needs of various constituents - managers, team members, suppliers, internal and external customers, peers - and serving as the “integrators” in the organization to ensure that the goods or service is provided as inexpensively and efficiently as possible. The task and role of a first-line supervisor has changed from managing people, technology, and the environment to providing leadership and facilitating individual and team self-leadership capabilities to enhance performance, learning, and developmental needs. While a great deal has been written about what a supervisor should know about her or his “new roles,” many supervisors, managers, and team members are still unsure just what a supervisor should do today - I know that I did not know.
After thinking about my supervisory experiences I came up with six "lessons remembered" to represent "defining moments" during that time. Also, they continue to serve as guiding principles for me today. I call them "lessons remembered" instead of "lessons learned" because I don't think that I have mastered them, but they serve as constant reminders of how I can enhance my ability to influence others and to influenced by others. I offer them as suggestions to managers as a reminder of your experiences as a first-line supervisor, and how you can coach and support those supervisors working with you. Also, I offer these "lessons" to aspiring and new first-line supervisors as personal sharing about the tremendous opportunities and pitfalls of becoming responsible for leading others for the first time.

**LESSON ONE REMEMBERED:**

*Know your personal values and decide what you will do, will not do, and what will be open for discussion. You need to manage yourself and others.*

I was a first-line supervisor at The Procter & Gamble Company for five years (1987-1992). I accepted their offer based upon their strong corporate culture of fully indoctrinating and training managers and supervisors. Based upon my varied and long history of leadership positions and educational background, I was ready (or so I believed) to enter the "ivory halls" of this large multinational organization to begin my first supervisory position in the Accounts Receivable (Credit) Department. I had long record of serving in student government throughout middle school to college. Also, I was a Marketing major and added a Finance minor. Procter & Gamble prides itself on interviewing, selecting, and training top-notch people - I did find this to be generally true throughout the organization. I had 6 interviews before I was extended an offer two weeks later. The noteworthy fact about the interviews was the uniformity of the interviewers asking about "real life" situations (or critical incidents) I experienced and how I managed them. I eagerly accepted their offer and moved from Morehouse College (Atlanta, GA) to The Procter & Gamble Company (Cincinnati, OH) ready for my first full-time supervisor job -- or so I thought!
As a Credit Supervisor, I was responsible for reviewing the financial documents of our trade customers in the Northeastern and Southwestern sections of the United States. These customers ranged from Wal-Mart and Kroger to small neighborhood grocery stores. I managed four team members, who were primarily responsible for contacting past due customers and getting an update. I was very eager and nervous starting my first “real job” as a supervisor. I had held several leadership positions throughout my educational life and fully believed that these experiences would prepare me for this new position, and apparently so did the company - we had a lot of learning to do. I have always been achievement-oriented, actively involved in student government, personable, and possess a strong sense of myself -- this job tested those traits fully.

After the “welcome” period, of general supervisory training, reading and digesting all of the credit training manuals, as well as trying to understand the nuances of being a Procter & Gamble employee - reality set in quickly. Initially, I began each day at 8:00 a.m. to review customer orders for the day, called “orderpass.” I had to decide which customer orders were approved and which were to be placed on “credit hold,” until further financial review could be done. The number of orders varied from day to day, but on average it took me about 2-2 1/2 hours to review the requests, make the appropriate decisions, and input the decisions into the computer. This credit process had to be completed by 10:00 a.m. so that the appropriate distribution center could load and deliver or “hold” the orders placed to our customers. Consequently, I found that I needed more time to review the data, get authorization from my manager, and input the data into the system, so I began coming to work at 7:00 p.m. -- I had always been morning person, but I really became one at this time. I would be the only one in the office at this time. The remainder of the day consisted of: reviewing credit requests, completing financial analysis, working with the team members on persistent past due accounts, and developing my technical and interpersonal skills to be an effective supervisor -- translation: taking in-house training sessions.
While I may have been unsure about my supervisory duties and responsibilities, my manager, let’s call him Benjamin, was very clear about the “Do’s and Don’ts” of managing. I remember the first day at work we met in his office and he told me that my job was to “supervise my four subordinates (I hated hearing this word and still do), review current orders for the day and make my financial suggestions for his review before 10:00 a.m., possible automobiles to consider purchasing, and in what areas of town I should consider living.” I was thinking, “Would you like to know something about me? Do you want to know my expectations of you? What type of support could I expect from you?” However, I kept my mouth shut since it seemed clear that he was not interested in what I thought was important. In retrospect, I should have made my thoughts known, but I thought that as my manager he would know what was important to discuss -- we did not manage each other well. Anyway, he rattled off a couple of Do's and Don’ts of management -- assume his guiding principles -- and our meeting ended after fifteen minutes.

A major DO: Interact with other supervisors and the managers so they could get to know me. This piece of advice seemed sound, and was critical in my development and understanding in this new environment. His major DON'T piece of advice, however was to associate with team members (non-managers) only on a professional basis. In other words, do not get “get too friendly or close.” Specifically, he said, “new young supervisors should never go to lunch with team members.” It seemed to me that he believed that managers should manage, and team members should be managed. Simple enough, right? He certainly served as an example, since I never saw him associate with team members, except with frequent joking on his way in and out of the office. I learned and used the technical skills necessary for an Accounts Receivable supervisor; but I knew my core beliefs and values of how I wanted to interact with people, was opposite to my manager’s views. As a supervisor, I wanted to develop opportunities for professional and personal development for myself and my team members. For example, I met with each of them separately to get to know them and find out what I could do to meet their professional and personal needs.
Also, I shared my background and how I wanted to learn from them. I would do some of their work to stay in touch with the negative aspects of calling people about their overdue accounts. I wanted to create an environment of mutual trust and influence - regardless of position or title. My manager did not seem interested nor provided any supportive feedback about my initiatives. Often, on my way home I would think to myself, “I can’t believe that he believes that...this is Procter & Gamble?” He had been with the company for 20 years, so I really wrestled with my earlier perceptions of the company and my current perceptions. Nonetheless, he was my first manager, this was my first job, and I wanted to make a good first impression. I wanted to be an effective supervisor and looked forward to my next assignment. I could deal with our differences or so I thought!

It is probably not surprising that this department was fairly hierarchical and conservative in its operations, structure, and processes. There were clear lines of authority, individual performance was primary, job descriptions were clear while job expectations were nebulous, and “trial by fire” was the preferred method of getting people up to speed. I received more performance, learning, and developmental feedback after-the-fact with more negative feedback given than positive information. I remember my manager asking me to time how long people were in the bathroom because “they will goof off if you don’t watch them.” Talk about Theory X management - in 1987! I thought that I was a supervisor, not a police officer. Also, it was interesting that the only color shirts I saw in the office were white with an occasional light blue with the dark blue or charcoal suits. My manager’s words were symptomatic of the larger culture within this department where legitimate power was primary and punishment was the power of preference to motivate team members, supervisors, or managers. Position was paramount and people knew their place.
My personal philosophy of managing centered on working with people based on personal interactions - not position. I strongly believed that hard work, perseverance, and commitment would be sufficient to motivate others and meet my personal goals. I soon learned that hard work, perseverance, and commitment were great first steps, and that “managing your manager” was of equal importance. My manager’s philosophy was shaped by having worked in the same department since joining the company. He seemed quite secure in his current position until retirement.

I was on the job for a month before my core personal values were really put to the test. I got to know many of the people in the department, and one day several team members asked me to go to lunch. I remember thinking about my manager’s advice as well as a comment by a long-term mentor of mine, about everybody having “defining moments” in their lives, that would determine how people perceived them. I knew that this one of my “defining moments,” and within seconds replied, “Sure, what time?” I was comfortable with my answer, but, unsure about the consequences. I knew that I wanted to do this and believed that the company’s core values supported my own, but, the company was not my immediate manager. I walked with the group to the cafeteria and saw my manager with his colleagues along the way. We smiled and went our separate ways. After returning to the office he asked how I enjoyed my lunch. I said it was fine, and thought it odd that he would ask since he never asked previously. I was nervous and pictured my promising career not being so promising. The event seemed so trivial then and now, but this was a “defining moment” as exemplified in my first lesson remembered.

**LESSON TWO REMEMBERED:**
*Every experience is a learning opportunity to replicate, reinforce, or consider for the future - no experience, regardless of how unpleasant or negative, should be disregarded or considered “useless.”*

I wanted my supervisory experiences to enhance my technical and interpersonal skills, and discovered that meaningful learning comes from positive and negative experiences.
While I had more negative than positive experiences with my manager on several issues, technical and personal, I always felt confident about how I wanted to manage myself and others. Unfortunately, I was not intentional nor explicit about this fact during this time. In retrospect, I would have met with my manager and relate why I wanted to manage in a more egalitarian manner. Also, I would have managed him better by expressing a need for his support and coaching. Alas, hindsight is always 20-20. I did not believe that my relationship with my manager suffered, but to this day I do not know what he really thought about me. We were different in many ways, but I was clear that I did not want to work and socially interact with people on an authoritarian and restrictive basis. However, I knew that my philosophy differed with his, and that I would have to work extra hard to meet his expectations.

I worked 12-14 hour days, took files home on the weekends, achieved some small successes, made many mistakes, received limited feedback, and sought every training opportunity available to enhance my technical and interpersonal skills. However, after six months I started to believe that I was not making the significant contributions I wanted to make or being developed as I had hoped. There was a definite issue with “person-organizational fit” in my current position. I knew that I wanted to influence others in the department, but, I wanted to have more informal and collaborative relationships and environment. I grew exponentially in my technical and interpersonal competencies as a first-line supervisor. I learned what “working harder and smarter” meant - I needed to work with others to get the job done, developed a higher degree of self-discipline and commitment to self, the task, and people. I certainly developed a stronger “ego” working and interacting with people who had very different styles and expectations about the definition of a successful supervisor. I learned a great deal from the very unpleasant nature of “holding” orders placed by delinquent grocery stores and talking with irate P&G salespeople to granting credit to a new business. I certainly learned the “good, bad, ugly, and uglier” nature of the work -- internally and externally.
There were times when I thought that I was back in school: I never left work before 6:00 p.m., took files home every weekend, requested to attend several training sessions on management, diversity, and team building. While I did not like everything that I did or some of the people who told me to do it, I reflect upon the importance of doing what was needed, whether I enjoyed it or not. Supervisors need coaching from managers to reinforce this lesson: Be open to all experiences, good or bad, and learn from them.

**LESSON THREE REMEMBERED:**

*Influence is a shared process. People are more willing to work with each other when they believe that influence is shared.*

This was one of the most difficult lessons for me to learn, and may be true for many supervisors. New supervisors can never be fully prepared for their responsibilities until they are in those situations. However, learning how to influence and to be influenced should not be limited to pleasant or convenient experiences. First-line supervisors, whether on the production floor or in the service arena, have to contend with people who have different expectations, beliefs, and ways of how to get work done. There were times when I doubted my capabilities as a supervisor - "why was I a supervisor?" and "what did it mean to be an effective supervisor?" These questions are probably typical of new first-line supervisors searching for some answers of how to best manage themselves and others. While there is no "best" formula for leading, the more I was clear with myself and others about my personal values and my learnings from positive and negative experiences, the less I cared about answering these questions. Sometimes, supervisors believe that managers, peers, or team members will only take them seriously if they "play" the role of a competent, take charge, and self-assured person. This "acting" generally focuses on separating managers from non-managers and a reliance on legitimate authority. Team members frequently collude in this "acting," by agreeing to be "managed."
I recall a comment from one of the team members about how she was always asked to train new supervisors and within two years they would leave for another assignment. Anyway, I felt very frustrated, stressed, and unmotivated. I did not think that my management cared about my personal or professional interests and the team members did not seem to care about getting to know me beyond my title. For eight months I computed financial ratios, reviewed balance sheets and income statements, and worked with my departmental members until, I had the opportunity to make a lateral move to another department. While I did not enjoy the conservative culture of the department, nor how I was managed, I gained a better understanding of what it meant to be a supervisor in this organization - enhanced technical skills, greater politically awareness, and a more realistic view of the company.

A DIFFERENT WORLD WITHIN

My transfer moved me from the world of credit collections to the world of transporting hazardous materials. Specifically, I became a Logistics Supervisor responsible for purchasing and coordinating the inbound transportation needs of several manufacturing sites throughout North America. This responsibility entailed moving hundreds of millions of pounds of chemicals. I managed a budget of approximately $10mm - $20mm in annual transportation costs securing the most competitive, value-added pricing, and logistics planning possible. Given the tremendous need and volume of the company, these chemicals were delivered in a variety of cost-efficient modes: tankcars, bulk trucks, barges, storage facilities or combinations. The total dollar amount of inbound transportation pale in comparison to finished product requirements in any manufacturing organization. Our department was a critical link in Procter & Gamble’s supply chain. We interfaced heavily with Purchasing, Manufacturing, Engineering, and with many transportation and chemical companies.
Our inbound transportation department had about twenty-five employees and four managers. The department had been included in a “high commitment work system” (HCWS) for the previous eight years. HCWS centered on decentralizing and de-emphasizing formal authority. Team members took more responsibility for day-to-day operations: securing competitive pricing, auditing and paying transportation invoices. Individual initiative and team work were encouraged - performing, learning, and developing were important for all. Ideas took on more importance than positions or titles. I thought to myself, “This is my kind of collaborative workplace!” We still had the titles of “managers,” “supervisors,” and “team members,” but, we worked (and played) together as colleagues and friends. We referred to each other as colleagues and team members and people felt free to give constructive feedback to others. I recall a team member responsible for computer reports coming into my office and gently scolding me for running a long report on the master printer (which she cancelled.) I was embarrassed. She asked me what information I wanted and spent about an hour with me reviewing the “current best practices” for running canned and developing new computer reports. After our training session, smilingly she said that if I ran another report like the one she cancelled, she would bring it to me and hit me over the head. I laughed and was very impressed that she felt comfortable enough with me to give me the gentle “scolding” I deserved. She worked in another section, but for the most part this example was representative of how people interacted with each other to get the work done. It did not matter that she was a team member or that I was a supervisor - the bottom line was that I needed to learn how to run reports efficiently and quickly. Well, I did run more long reports, and she kept her word. Luckily, I learned the computer system well enough to lessen the pounding my head was taking! I perceived that we refused to be solely driven by the still popular “superior-subordinate” management mentality (I offer alternatives to the demeaning yet still used word - subordinates: Team members, organizational members, employees, direct reports, associates, colleagues - you get the point!).
An interesting side note is that the word seems to be used more in academic institutions and writings than in most other organizations I know. Anyway, people believed that their success was dependent upon others. Personal and organizational needs were important - this was *The Procter & Gamble* I thought I had joined. The interesting fact was that the company was several companies, much like many large organizations, and my previous experiences were also *The Procter & Gamble*.

This egalitarian culture was reinforced throughout the department by many people, but, especially by the section manager, whom I will call him Kirk. Kirk started working in the P&G mailroom with only a high school diploma. He had aspirations to enter management and worked toward that end. He worked in several areas of inbound distribution and progressed through several levels to become a section head of the department. Kirk strongly supported an open and committed workplace where people worked together on an equal basis. He believed that this type of environment was conducive to personal growth and would meet the company's expectations.

Kirk had high expectations of himself and everybody in the department. He supported and provided opportunities for people to learn, perform, and develop as needed. People decided what training sessions they wanted (and many were encouraged to do so), team members participated in the hiring process, we rotated leadership in our section meetings (which occurred every two weeks), and each year we went off site to determine departmental just to name a few. Kirk had a tremendous influence in our department where people could openly exchange information and active involvement was encouraged and supported.

An example of Kirk's personal dedication to the HCWS was exemplified by his commitment to baking birthday cakes for each member in the section. While I appreciated this gesture, I was more impressed with management's commitment to working with the team members to create a collaborative workplace. The high intensity of the work requirements made me work harder and smarter. I still worked long hours - going to and from work in the dark and only seeing the sun during lunch.
I felt that my skills, abilities, and experiences were valued more than in my previous assignment. I wanted to learn all I could from my manager, team members, and other colleagues. I believed that I could provide some leadership to team members as well as meeting the department’s primary goals of reducing transportation expense, instituting sound and flexible transportation plans, and serving as a resource for the organization on inbound transportation matters. I am reminded of a Chinese proverb that points to the need for managers to take an active role in the professional and personal development of supervisors: *Tell me and I’ll forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I’ll understand.* Managers need to involve themselves with supervisors as soon as possible, and expect them to do the same with their respective direct reports. Too often supervisors (new and not so new) believe that managing team members is only about “telling people what to do” (even though supervisors are often unsure of how to do it). This “legitimate” base of power generally just *moves* (short-term) people to comply, but, rarely *motivates* (long-term) them in a way that fosters commitment to learning, performing, and developing the self and others. Ironically, supervisors seem to be motivated differently than how they motivate others. Most supervisors place a high value on choice, collaboration, and commitment to personal development. How then can we, in good conscience, not consider that these values may be as important to the people we desire to supervise and influence? This questions connects to another lesson:

**LESSON FOUR REMEMBERED:**

_Supervisors can a be tremendous force for working with others to create an open environment where choice, commitment, and collaboration are shared._

Our HCWS environment was viewed as a _novelty_ by other departments in P&G as well as our transportation suppliers. It was always interesting to see how impressed people outside of our department with the caliber and candor of the team members (many believed that they were the managers).
“Guests” from other departments frequently observed our rotating leadership, open communications, and ability to resolve problems in our section meetings. I invited several supervisors from others departments and quizzed them after the meetings to tell me who were the managers and team members. They always guessed Kirk and at least one other management person, but generally selected 2-3 team members as managers. I constantly tried to support our “high commitment” culture by encouraging personal leadership within team members. People knew their jobs, and I made sure that I did not get in their way. I sought feedback and input from a variety of people and found that this increased my ability to influence others - team members, supervisors, and managers. My legitimate authority was not diminished, but, rather it was de-emphasized. This participative environment was not without challenges. We continued to have disagreements about the roles and responsibilities of team members and management: some wanted more involvement and participation while some just came to do their job and went home promptly. The more noteworthy episodes involved disgruntled carriers who lost business and always complained to the team member’s manager or the section manager. These meetings were generally “listening sessions” as we were aware of the decisions beforehand of why and how the decisions were made. There were very few times where management “re-opened” the bidding process or reversed the original recommendation. Although, there was a high level of trust and sharing, each visit to a manager was time for some team members to hold their breaths. It seemed more important to be able to have these conversations than to work in an environment where you could not even question the structure or express dissatisfaction.

I recall a particular incident in a section meeting where a team member did not want to reconsider an award decision she made on a particular transportation carrier. Our section manager, Kirk, mentioned that the carrier called him and complained about not getting the business. For perspective, his type of questioning and sharing was not unusual in our section meetings, since we dealt with many of the same carriers and shared our successes and shortfalls during our section meetings.
For some reason she was upset and felt that her competence was being questioned in the section meeting. Some people supported her decision while others stated that she might want to review her decision. One of those dissenting voices was her manager. I was not directly affected, and it was a painful discussion, but, I thought it was great that she felt comfortable to challenge managers, and that we wanted to get her input. She agreed to review her decision and it remained the same. She was perceived as a thorough, detailed, and direct person, and I supported her decision - although I was glad that she agreed to publicly review her decision. This example was fairly typical of the degree of open discussion and exchange within the section, and I believe worthy of managers and supervisors to consider in their respective departments and teams.

**LESSON FIVE REMEMBERED:**

"Leading by example" is still the best teacher and reinforcer. Supervisors need to be aware of their actions and the impact their words and actions have upon others.

People expected managers' words and deeds to match and woe to any manager who was perceived as being “two-faced.” A personal and hard example involved me as a member of a project group with managers and team members. I was asked to give a progress update, and the other project group members would chime in. I don’t know what side of the bed I got up from that morning, but I was full of myself. I related what I was doing to help the project progress and what I wanted to do for the future. I was quite sure of what I wanted for the group. None of the project members chimed in, and I thought that I had done a great job presenting all of the important information. I was to find out how wrong I was! After the meeting one of the project members, who was not a supervisor, pulled me aside and I could tell she was upset. She said, “You sounded just like a manager. I thought that you were different. I don’t believe that you did that!” She turned and walked away from an open-mouthed and not quite so smug new supervisor. I should have really put my foot in his mouth, but, I would not have had any room. I walked back to my cubicle and thought long and hard about what she said.
She was right! I professed to be an “enlightened” and “participative” supervisor, and had lost some major points from her and other project members. Before the end of the day, I walked to her office and apologized. She was surprised that a supervisor would apologize to a non-supervisor, but graciously accepted it. I asked for her advice on how I could “make up” for the afternoon, and she promised to give me feedback whether I asked for it or not. We became good friends and sought each other out for advice, give praise, or suggestions for improvement. She never pulled me aside again. Supervisors need to be doubly conscious of what they say and do as people expect our words to match our deeds. They may not like what is said, but, they can respect someone staying with her or his convictions. Hypocrisy is the kiss of death for many new supervisors and recovery takes a long time or may not be possible.

Supervisors and managers can say “empowerment,” “high commitment teams,” “self-directed teams,” “collaboration,” and “participation,” but these words are meaningless unless backed up with meaningful actions. Leading still comes down to “walking the talk,” an age-old premise, but still relevant today and for the future. Although, we were in a relatively informal, collaborative, and highly participative environment, there was still a “holding of breath,” - a “wait to see” attitude - if management would actually “say and do” what had been agreed upon by the group. There were situations where the managers invoked their legitimate power, and made decisions without the input of the group. Each situation was explained and opened for discussion to resolve any lingering issues. The decisions stood, but, people felt better about getting the information and voicing their opinions. While these occurrences were rare and most team members felt the explanations were political in nature, they still appreciated the manager’s candor about why the decisions were made they way they were.

**LESSON SIX REMEMBERED:**
Supervisors should focus on the potential and skills of individuals and their ideas. We need to move from a “differences” paradigm, pitting one group against another, to one that supports a perspective of individuality and commitment to integrating personal, group and organizational goals.
The most amazing and frustrating element of my experiences at this company was the intense discussion around "diversity." I volunteered (or was volunteered) for more diversity training, programs, lectures, and seminars than I can count in my two assignments and departments. There was a commitment to providing opportunities for the "best and brightest." The company prided itself, and rightfully so, for being a leader in tapping into the full potential of its employees. In general, I admired and appreciated the company's focus on creating a global workplace that looked more like our globe stakeholders. As an African-American male, I was impressed and at the same time, frustrated at the persistent attempt to view me as being like every other African American male. While I found that people did get to know me very quickly as a unique individual with his own views, ideas, and beliefs, I resented the initial assumption some people made about what type of person I was relative to my "group." We had support groups, like many organizations, dealing with African Americans, women, gays - including a white male support group. These support groups continue to exist at the company as in many others, with a few members of each diversity group (race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) gathering to express their differences, desire for formal recognition from senior management, and developing action plans to gain legitimacy throughout the organization. I do not mean to minimize the historical necessity of these support groups in organizations. Often I was confused as to whether I was a good supervisor or a good African American male supervisor. I wanted to be a good supervisor who happened to be an African American male, but, received very little support for this perspective. I felt that I had to choose as though they were mutually exclusive.

New supervisors have tremendous pressures, but, I believe that minority supervisors must contend with the politics of diversity and take a stance almost immediately. Based upon the tremendous challenges of new supervisors, I viewed this political perspective of diversity to be unfair and regressive (and still do). I base this perceptions on countless discussions with senior and peer minority managers. The noteworthy fact is that these support groups had a small core of regular participants.
It was interesting that nobody asked me how I wanted to be supported. New supervisors should
determine how she or he wants to fit in or not in the organization whether we are talking about
diversity, corporate culture, length of memos, color of acceptable attire, etc., just like an
organization will determine short-term or long-term fit. Both parties have the right to stay
together or part ways if one is not happy with the relationship. As a new supervisor, it was
mindboggling to try to understand and place people into categories - men and women, young and
old, homosexual or heterosexual, African American, Hispanic, White, Asian and various
combinations - too many boxes to check for me. I refused (and still do) to participate in what I
view to be a demeaning and counterproductive view of the universal nature of diversity. Instead,
I treated people as people: another age-old view, but one I still firmly believe to be more
productive and sustaining. Sometimes organizational people do themselves a disservice by
inundating them with training sessions that focuses on specific group characteristics which
continue to focus on how different they are to others. People prefer to be understood and
appreciated for their individuality and their ability to contribute to the group and larger
organization, rather than as a representative of their particular “diversity” group.

This may be a prime time for an explicit example to represent my point about my
experiences of diversity. There are several incidences that come to mind, but I remember two
short episodes. First, I had just delivered a presentation to our Purchasing department about our
Inbound strategies, and felt very good about the content and process of my talk. I was
congratulated by several people. I had just returned to my office and started to work on the
computer when a manager dropped by. He gave me positive feedback about the presentation and
remarked: “Leonard, you gave a great talk. You talk just like a white man.” Initially, I was
surprised, but, I had worked with him on several projects and I had enough trust to believe that
his intentions and comments were honorable. I said, “Thanks, how can I get a raise?” We
laughed and he left. I thought about his “compliment,” and was saddened.
I knew that he had several negative experiences with minority team members, and how he had talked about being very cautious about what he said, given those unpleasant experiences. Second, I have always determined my friendships and associations based upon compatible personalities and styles. I prefer to focus on what a person says or does rather than what she or he looks like. I have been taught, worked with, formed lasting friendships with people different from me in more than just racial or gender tones. I remember a carrier salesman talking with me about his continued discomfort working with women. Most of our purchasing decisions were made by women in our department, and he longed for the old days when he called on the “transportation men.” I listened to him talk about how to deal with his discomfort. I asked him if he wanted to keep or gain business from us? He looked at me and said, “Of course!” I said, “Well, your desire to keep or gain business from us should be more important than your discomfort than working with the women in our department. If you don’t, then those salespeople who stayed focused will gain more business.” He did not want to discuss the matter further, and he changed the subject. I had little patience to focus on his inability to deal with diversity, just as I had little patience with people who wanted to define diversity for me. I strongly believe that managers can play a powerful role adhering to the fullest extent of the diversity within and between people. All individuals are diverse. All teams are diverse. All organizations are diverse. We should focus on how to expand our view of diversity to include all employees and not play the demeaning game of diversity politics. At the same time, I view The Procter & Gamble Company to be leader in this effort to focus on individual and group needs to better meet personal and organizational goals.

LESSONS REMEMBERED & STILL LEARNING

I believe that my “lessons remembered” are worth considering for aspiring supervisors, current supervisors, and managers alike. Many organizations have restructured, redesigned, and revamped their structures and processes to include a higher degree of flexibility, greater amount of collaboration and information sharing, and focus on meeting the needs of insatiable global customers.
Despite these organizational changes there will always be a need for first-line supervisors. The managers of tomorrow must focus on strategic direction while team members will take on more of the “managerial” duties of yesteryear. Future supervisors will be the “connectors” between these groups; assisting managers in the implementation of the organization’s strategic direction as well as providing the coaching and facilitation to team members for their professional and personal development. I believe that supervisors will be even more vital to the organization’s mission of balancing the needs of global stakeholders. Supervisors will need to involve more people than ever before in the decision-making process of work. Aspiring and current supervisors need to commit to themselves to do everything possible within their sphere of influence to support active participation by all, individual and group goals are achieved, and people are committed to each other’s success.

I worked in Inbound Distribution for 4 1/2 years before leaving the company for my M.B.A. I grown-up during that time and had enough faith in my management to tell them my plans a year before I left. We made a plan and I was put on special assignment to work on a longstanding project of my section managers. I still remember my last day as I was refining a final report for him. It was about 6:00 p.m. and he just shook his head and said, “It figures you would still be here. I know that it is early, but why don’t you go home while the sun is still shining. We walked out together talking about the project and my plans to enter Xavier University. We reached our cars, shook hands, and I left the parking lot for the last time.

I learned a great deal about the mutuality of leadership and followership, working in a group, gaining a greater understanding and appreciation of power and politics, and the constructive and destructive uses of power and influence. I had some tremendously high points and some really low points. I left the company a more mature, self-assured, and confident person than the one who entered nearly five years before. Although, I no longer work for The Procter & Gamble Company, I remain one of its most ardent supporters and I will always remember these lessons.
I am sure that there were many other lessons, but these are the most enduring. As an instructor and consultant these “lessons” continue to serve as guiding principles. I believe that these “lessons remembered” serve as a tremendous resource for me to give students a more realistic view of managing. For example, in undergraduate introductory Organizational Behavior courses, I ask students to develop and refine their views of leadership through constant feedback, experiential exercises, role plays, case studies, and presentations so they can enter prospective organizations with a clearer view of how they like to influence and to be influenced by others. All of the students had more concentrated time thinking about their style of leadership and influence than I had at the time. Also, as a consultant these “lessons” connect to the issues faced by supervisors and managers. I enjoy the challenges -- whether in the classrooms or cubicles -- of how to get new or aspiring supervisors to consider their philosophy and competency of managing themselves as well as others. I offer these “lessons remembered” as suggestions for new and aspiring first-line supervisors and managers seeking to better understand how they can influence each other and work together for improved performance, learning, and developmental expectations and objectives. Experience is indeed the best teacher...a lesson I have learned!