

# Supervising professional employees

Use these beneficial steps to obtain positive results

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**P**rofessional employees want to be recognized for their specialized knowledge and skills, as well as for their contributions to the organization. Supervising these employees is no different than supervising anyone else. It is more frustrating because of the varying personalities and expectations. Different approaches and techniques can help you be more successful in supervising professionals.

A large group of employees in companies manipulate knowledge and information instead of equipment and machines. Peter Drucker, the eminent management scholar, has called them "knowledge professionals." They include engineers, programmers, accountants, specialists, statisticians, scientists and many others. We will consider these as we discuss supervising professionals.

## KEY TERMS

**Engineer** is a person who applies scientific information to the design, construction or use of machinery, equipment and processes. They should have a degree in a recognized branch of engineering.

**Knowledge worker** is a person who applies specialized knowledge or information, usually acquired by extended study and considerable experience, to an occupation that requires a high degree of mental effort, such as reasoning, interpretation and creativity.

**Professional** is a person whose occupation requires highly specialized training and experience, legal responsibility—such as a license to practice the specialty—and prescribed standard of performance and ethics.

**Scientist** is a person whose occupation is concerned with the development of information based on a study of the facts, truths and laws that define the arrangement of the physical and material world.

The preceding definitions are from *What Every Supervisor Should Know*, Bittel, McGraw-Hill, pages 579–580.

## UNDERSTANDING PROFESSIONAL WORK

Many supervisors in the hydrocarbon processing industries (HPI) have professionals and other technical personnel reporting to them. It is important to understand the nature of the work to be done. Understanding the work will help the supervisor tailor his or her approach to the persons in these jobs.

In the manufacturing sector, professional work requires an employee to investigate problems, troubleshoot process and product problems and make individual contributions to the team efforts, while using specialized education, knowledge and skill. Professionals are involved in work that is investigative, not routine or repetitive. It requires them to use their knowledge and skill to make individual contributions to the organization.

Having professionals do routine and repetitive work is a sure way to bore them and make them unproductive. Many organizations use high-priced technical talent for tasks that should be done by someone else in the organization. An example would be using an engineer to do routine purchasing of storeroom supplies. Professionals should use their abilities on work that provides a good return on the company's investment. Of course, we all realize that all employees must be willing to pull their weight as a part of the team.

## PROFESSIONALS AND THEIR JOBS

Professional employees view their jobs differently from other employees. Although engineers are a lot like their counterparts in other professions, there are some differences in the way they approach their jobs. Understanding these differences will help us achieve maximum productivity from the technical/professional force. In general, we can say they are different because they "feel they are different." They do not want to be thought of by management as "ordinary workers," but neither does anyone else.

Engineers look at their jobs as an extension of themselves and put their whole being into the job. They look for interesting and challenging jobs and usually rate—on surveys—challenge, opportunity for advancement and salary as key motivators. Generally speaking, they feel their contributions are not totally understood by management. As a result, they will be avid readers of employment ads and are open to moves that appear lucrative to them. That is probably not too different from many other employees, but engineers believe their specialized education and experiences can always be used by someone else. The past three years have destroyed this myth in many areas.

These concerns about professionals and their jobs do not add up to "kid glove" treatment by management, but require supervisors to understand these characteristics in order to be effective with the technical force. Many managers can be very effective in supervising technical personnel and ineffective in supervising operating personnel and vice versa due to the lack of understanding the differences in the nature of the job and the way the employees view the job.

Personality profiles of engineers reveal a strong need to be right. Criti-



cism of an engineer's work is usually perceived as an attack on his/her self-esteem, professionalism, competence and intelligence. It is vital that supervisors focus discussions on ideas and objects, not people and personalities. The engineer is accustomed to dealing in quantitative data, therefore, subjective discussions may become very difficult.

Keeping technical/professional employees interested in the job is a challenge for most supervisors. Realizing that the professionals' work is an extension of themselves should encourage the supervisor to point out the importance of small successes. Solid professional careers and reputations are built over time and are the result of the cumulative effect of small successes instead of the "home run." Homeruns are nice, but singles and doubles usually win the game.

Another simple thing you can do as a supervisor is to provide as much variety as possible in job assignments. Be creative in making assignments, especially when new projects are involved. Give people an opportunity to perform in areas outside their own narrow focus or even "above their heads."

Supervisors should also be aware of the importance of creative ideas. This means that the supervisor is willing to discuss new ideas as opposed to rejecting them too hastily. Many supervisors, when approached with a new idea, start from a position of, "No, now convince me to say yes." We should be starting from, "That's interesting, let's discuss it in more detail."

When working with professionals, do not misuse their talents and abilities. Be careful to see that they are used to the maximum, and not abused with unrealistic demands or work schedules. A common complaint among engineers today is, "They've got me doing all the secretarial work as well as my technical job." Another complaint is, "Why don't they hire a mechanic, if that's what they need, instead of a mechanical engineer?"

## LEADERSHIP STYLES AND PROFESSIONALS

Most management texts and classes discuss four basic leadership styles. These are autocratic or authoritarian, democratic or participative, laissez-faire or "laid-back" and secretive or "tight-lipped."

Most professionals do not respond well to authoritarian managers. Simply stated, they do not like to be told, "this way or the highway." Instead, they like to be told the big picture and given responsibility for the job. This means that a participative style is more effective for engineers and other professionals. Supervisors who are too "laid-back" give the impression they do not care about results or people and, consequently, the professional employee usually does not perform as well. Since "knowledge workers" like to be kept informed, the tight-lipped or secretive style is difficult for them. This usually works only in life-and-death or other emergency situations.

When supervising professionals, it is important to know your leadership style, and to discuss it with employees who report to you. This helps the communications process and enhances understanding of expectations.

## TIPS FOR MANAGING PROFESSIONALS

Supervisors must enforce company policies and procedures and ensure that the technical force gets results. After all, they are paid to get results. Here are a few tips to help, but keep in mind the importance of leadership styles:

1. Be firm and forthright, yet easy to deal with.
2. Be sure to define "the work to be done"—but allow room for creativity.
3. Provide frequent positive feedback.
4. Be willing to admit your mistakes.
5. Don't try to fake a technical knowledge you don't have.
6. Don't encourage confrontations.
7. Support the people who report to you.
8. Be flexible where possible.

The true professional is usually harder on him/herself than the supervisor will ever be. In fact, professionals are usually self-supervised and discipline themselves to get results. There are exceptions, of course. Most of the time the supervisor is more of a coach and facilitator than a director.

In addition to the above eight tips, other things can help technical/professional employees be more effective and productive. They are not easy, but are important:

1. Realize the need for professionals to be acknowledged and recognized as members of their profession.
2. Recognize the need for profes-

sionals to know that top management is aware of their contributions.

3. Don't take credit for their work—give credit where credit is due.

4. Support professional development activities.

5. Use titles that give dignity to the job—nobody wants to be a "Class III Assistant" or a Junior Engineer.

6. Allow professionals to make mistakes and to correct them on their own.

## PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS

Professionals are humans, just like everyone else as a result, there will be performance problems that must be corrected. It is best to meet problems head-on but leave room for the professional to save face. Be careful to focus on specific behaviors and not personalities. Some general guidelines for dealing with performance problems:

1. Identify the specific problem and why it is a problem.
2. Define why it must be corrected.
3. Meet with the individual and outline the above two items—be prepared.
4. Ask for their ideas on how to correct the problem.
5. Agree upon a course of action.
6. Check for understanding.
7. Document the corrective action plan.
8. Follow-up in the agreed-upon time frame.
9. Discuss and document results.

These steps can be time-consuming, but are critical to getting results and retaining valuable employees for your organization.



### The author

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