

Supportive supervision: techniques for being a great leader

This resource is part of SAIF's leadership project, which is meant to help employers and leaders of organizations establish strong and sustainable safety cultures using research-based concepts and strategies.

Adapted from "Family Supportive Supervisor Behaviors" by Leslie Hammer, Ph.D., Portland State University

The Safety and Health Improvement Program is a great way to build and sustain supportive supervision. Access the training here, that includes access to tracking forms.

saif.com/learntolead

Juggling work demands and family responsibilities can cause stress, which can affect personal health, as well as job safety and quality.

Supervisors are the key to increasing worker engagement on the job, improving worker well-being, and reducing workplace injuries. Family and personal support and safety support behaviors are great ways supervisors and managers can help workers ease the stress of work and family life.

Family and personal support behaviors require supervisors to focus on specific, repeated behaviors, such as these:

Work-life support



Provide emotional support

Behaviors that demonstrate workers are being cared for and their feelings are being considered:

- Increasing face-to-face contact with employees
- Asking how employees are doing
- Communicating genuine concern about employees' work and life challenges

Model healthy work-family behaviors

Actions that show how you are taking care of your own work/life challenges:

- Discussing the importance of attending your child's school activities

- Leaving work at reasonable hours to show that you, too, have a personal life

Help workers solve schedule conflicts

Helping workers manage schedules:

- Encouraging workers to let you know if their needs change and adjustments to their schedule are necessary
- Encouraging workers to learn new job skills to increase their ability to fill different positions

Think strategically about work-life issues

Actions that support employee work-life demands:

- Knowing about and communicating your company's work-life programs (such as an employee assistance program)
- Promoting cross-training and back-up systems to cover missed shifts
- Consider the team or department as a whole; build relationships with other departments to partner on getting the job done

Safety support



Provide resources

- Ensure equipment, tools, and resources are in good repair and up to date
- Train employees on safe work practices
- Give workers adequate time to perform their job duties safely

Coach and praise employees

- Provide immediate praise for a good idea, work results, safe behavior
- Observe or inspect an employee's work and provide feedback
- Seek feedback from employees on safe working strategies

Model safe behavior

- Let your employees see you engaging in safe practices
- Wear appropriate equipment when visiting a jobsite
- Share what safe practices should look like

These behaviors really work

A study was completed using supportive supervision strategies at a large city's department of transportation and water bureau. First, they conducted a needs assessment that showed workers were under stress because of their demanding jobs and inadequate work/life balance. The researchers saw a need to develop leaders' skills and build team engagement.

The work led to the Safety and Health Improvement Program (SHIP), which trained supervisors and team leads to be better leaders with safety communication skills, ways to support work-life balance, and strategies for improving team effectiveness. This focused on training supervisors on healthy leadership skills, recognizing how to reduce work-life stress by providing support, and in turn how this impacted the safety, health, and well-being of workers.

The result? At the end of the study, researchers evaluated the workers and saw:

- Lower blood pressure
- Reduced stress and work-life conflict for employees
- Improved employee health and safety practices
- Increased team effectiveness

Activity ideas

- Use the Safety and Health Improvement Program (SHIP) to help workplace leaders improve their supportive supervision skills. Schedule regular meetings to review and discuss results. SHIP videos are available at saif.com/learntolead
- Examine workplace policies around scheduling and taking time off. Do they support your employees?
- Highlight EAP benefits and discuss how to access them in a safety meeting.