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SUPERVISION: ITS INFLUENCE ON PRODUCTIVITY

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The supervisor is in a unique position in the pursuit of productivity. He translates the objectives of the enterprise into the means of accomplishment through the employees. Although a member of management, the supervisor is also an intermediary. He, or she, represents the directions of management to the employees; he also represents the needs of his employees to higher management. In this gatekeeper position, the supervisor is one of the basic controls of productivity.

The new supervisor is an enthusiastic supporter of company objectives and the cause of productivity, at least at the start. Promotion to supervisor is perhaps the strongest motivator any company has to offer. Of my various promotions, added responsibilities, growth opportunities, and rewards, none compares faintly with the excitement of my first promotion to supervisor. I've seen this same high level of motivation in many other new supervisors as well.

There is a long step, however, from initial enthusiastic determination to ultimate demonstrated competence as a supervisor. For a variety of reasons, many supervisors don't succeed. Enthusiasm wanes under continued stress. Pressure of time erodes attention to quality and detail.

Without exception, every supervisor commits abundant blunders as he learns. The test is in learning to enjoy the challenge of job problems. Productivity is just one measure of a supervisor's success in growing into his job.

The supervisor is involved in all five management functions: planning, organizing, directing, controlling and innovating. Without carrying the comparison too far, I think of the supervisor as a small businessman. That is, he is operating his own small "company" within the environment of the larger organization. He is equipped with products or services, capital facilities, and "customers." This comparison lets the supervisor ask himself: "If the people who use my products or services could go to someone else for them, would they? Or would they continue to do business with me because my quality, service, and costs are right?"

There are no statistics that I know of for supervisory failures. But let's extend the comparison with the small businessman. The Small Business Administration reports that half of all newly established businesses are sold or liquidated within 2 years. Chances are 1 in 3 that it will live to the age of 4 years, and about 1 in 5 that it will last 10 years. Now I don't think that supervisory failures reach anywhere near

80%. Neither do I think that mere survival in the position is a sign of success. Dun & Bradstreet analyzed more than a million business failures spanning 100 years up to 1957. Ninety percent of those failures were due to lack of managerial experience and aptitude.

Fortunately for many of us, the large company environment is considerably more forgiving in that it is able to absorb several months of bumbling, and even some costly errors, by a new supervisor. By investing expensive training and patience, the company hopefully generates more good supervisors than bad, more ultimate successes than failures. We do indeed operate "small businesses" within a larger organization, but our situation is designed to avoid that 80% failure rate.

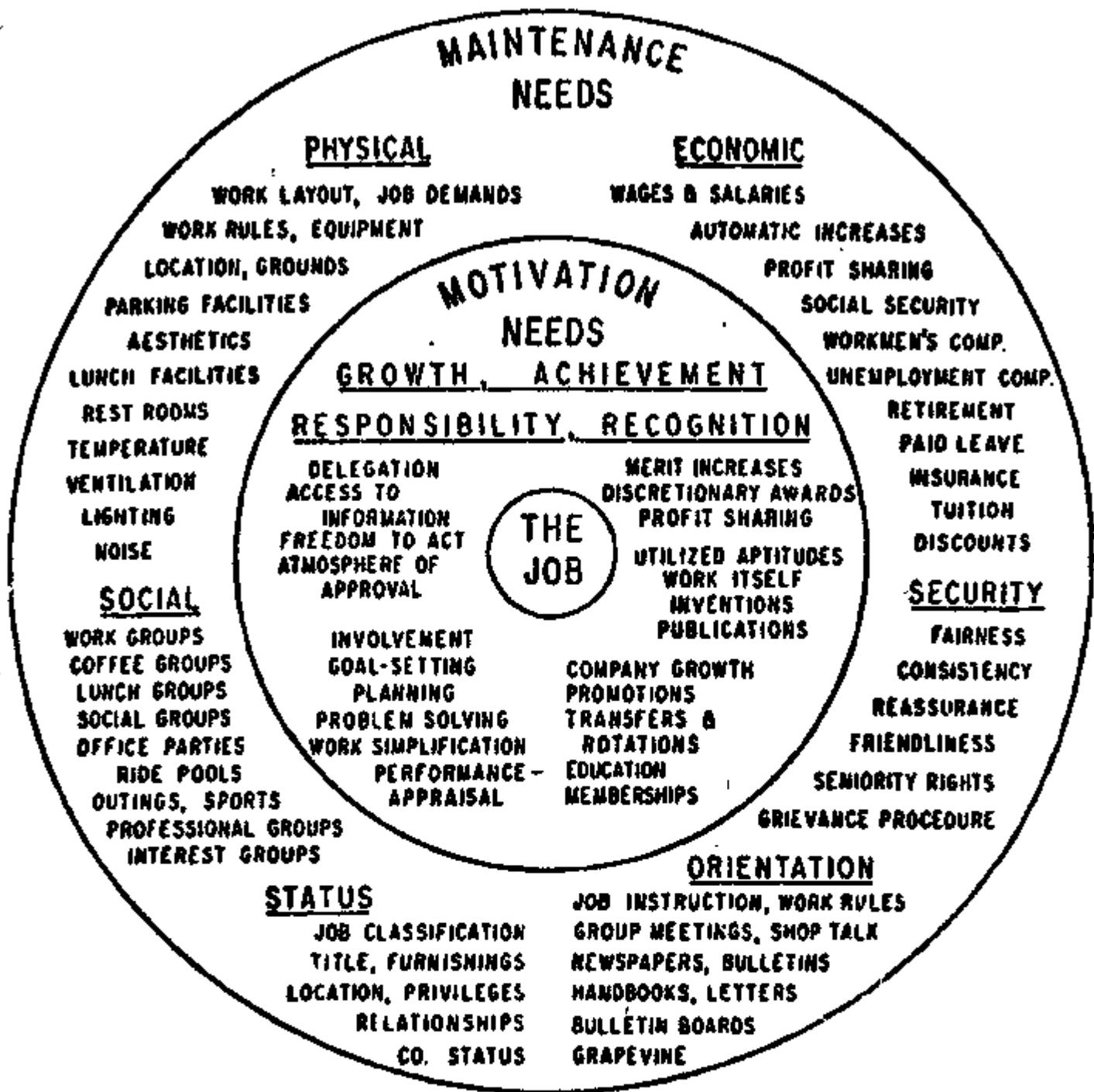
It is beneficial for a supervisor to be protected from disaster by the cushioning resources of the company, but he can be lulled into the belief that survival means success. Survival may be one measure of success to a small company, but it has little meaning to the supervisor in a larger organization. In good times, weak supervision may be overlooked. Under tight budgets, low profits, and tough internal or external competition, weakness is exposed. Suddenly, the weak supervisor finds himself accountable for his group's productivity--his contribution to the company's success.

Why does the supervisor have so strong an influence on productivity? What is the nature of his influence? The behavioral scientists say that a person acts to satisfy needs. According to behavioral scientist A. H. Maslow, we are motivated by a hierarchy of five types of needs:

1. Physiological needs,
2. Safety needs,
3. Need to belong; need for love,
4. Esteem needs,
5. Self-actualization needs.

The physiological needs are the most basic; that is, they must be satisfied to a large extent before a person is motivated by safety needs. So it continues up the hierarchy. After the first four sets of needs have been satisfied, they no longer motivate. Then, the individual is motivated to satisfy his self-actualization needs. Individual productivity is a function of motivation to produce. Consequently, we must understand something about human motivation.

In reality, all five types of needs function to some degree at all times in every individual. Herzberg grouped the needs into two areas for practical application to the job situation. We have also modified his concepts slightly for use in our in-house management training at Monsanto (see the illustration on the following page):



Employee Needs: Effective job performance depends on the fulfillment of both motivation and maintenance needs. Motivation needs include responsibility, achievement, recognition and growth, and are satisfied through the media grouped in the inner circle. Motivation factors focus on the individual and his achievement of company and personal goals. Maintenance needs are satisfied through media listed in the outer circle under the headings of physical, social, status, orientation, security, and economic. Peripheral to the task and usually group administered, maintenance factors have little motivational value, but their fulfillment is essential to the avoidance of dissatisfaction. An environment rich in opportunities for satisfying motivation needs leads to motivation seeking habits, and a job situation sparse in motivation opportunities encourages pre-occupation with maintenance factors.

Maintenance
Needs

Physical
Economic
Social
Security
Status
Orientation

Motivation
Needs

Growth
Achievement
Responsibility
Recognition

Herzberg's theory suggests that the maintenance needs are not motivators; they only have the power to make the worker dissatisfied if these are not fulfilled. These maintenance needs are more basic in the hierarchy proposed by Maslow. The real motivators--the ones that make the employee want to increase his own productivity--are further up on the hierarchy. They provide self-actualization, or the opportunity for the individual to realize his fullest range of personal abilities.

To what extent does the supervisor control the satisfaction of the maintenance needs and the motivators?

Let us look in more detail at just one of the maintenance needs--the economic factors. The satisfaction of economic needs--ignoring incentive compensation--is set predominantly by company policy. The supervisor's authority is closely limited within company policy. The same situation of limited authority applies as well to the other five maintenance-type needs.

On the other hand, the supervisor has great authority to influence the satisfaction of the true motivational needs. These are the needs that, when met, tend to encourage people to strive for greater achievement, greater productivity.

Look, for example, at the factors that tend to satisfy the need for responsibility. The supervisor delegates. He is the transmitter of information. He permits action to proceed, and so forth. The responsibility needs are predominantly satisfied through the implementation of the supervisor. The recognition, achievements, and growth needs are also satisfied through the help of the supervisor. Company policy may be influential, but the initiative belongs to the supervisor if he will take it.

Looking at both maintenance and motivational needs, it becomes clear why the supervisor is so important to motivation of the employee. As you can see from the lists of motivational factors, supervision influences every important facet of the job. That is both good and bad news. The good news is that a strong supervisor has dozens of tools to tune up his operation. The innovative leader will never run out of avenues to greater

productivity. The bad news is that the weak supervisor can reduce productivity in even more ways. Without even being aware of it, the inept supervisor can squelch the strongest desires in his employees to improve their work.

Let's look at some of the obstacles that weak supervision can throw in the way of productivity. These weaknesses exist in relationships with the company, upper management, coworkers, subordinates, and "customers." Weakness in supervision covers an entire range of possibilities. Even the best supervisor has blundered in ways that have hurt productivity. However, the ultimate test of success is not in the number of errors made, but in the total productivity of the group as well as its ability to continue producing and improving.

The Supervisor and the Employee

In this relationship lies the key to productivity. This sensitive relationship must be developed carefully over a period of months and years. A new supervisor soon becomes aware that his promotion only provided him a title and some money. Delegated authority is of limited value in building a productive team. The influence of able leadership and the authority of respect must be developed carefully through experience and effort.

The greatest weakness of supervision in this relationship is the attempt to manage employees by standard procedure. A supervisor who is unable to deal with his employees as individuals loses in two ways. In attempting to standardize individuals, he overlooks the special abilities that each person has to offer. These special abilities are a key source of increased productivity and of continued job interest. In losing the benefits of the individual, the supervisor also demotivates, by withdrawing the opportunity for personal growth and achievement.

In order to develop and maintain a sensitivity to the concerns and abilities of the individual, the supervisor must also strike a working balance between the needs of the worker and the requirements of the job. The better he is able to integrate the two sets of goals the higher will be the productivity. The solution lies in the study of human behavior through self-education, and in development and demonstration of a sincere respect for the individual.

Poor communication with his employees is another problem of the weak supervisor. This is so broad a topic that it has been discussed separately. I would like only to offer four of my own maxims in regard to communication:

1. The purpose of communication is not the exchange of information. Effective communication always aims to change attitudes or initiate action.
2. Always act in communication--listening, speaking, or demonstrating--as if you personally are 100% responsible for the success of the interchange.
3. Communication is not complete until there is feedback. In your communication, always work to incorporate some means for feedback.
4. Example is one of the most powerful forms of communication. Make certain your actions reinforce your words.

Because the supervisor is between upper management and the workers, he will frequently find himself in the position of mediator of two points of view. The weak supervisor may succumb to this double set of stresses by throwing his entire loyalties to one side or the other. Unfortunately, the supervisor who turns his entire sympathies to his employees loses his influence with his management and deprives his people of their "ear" to the company. Conversely, the weak supervisor who turns his back to his employees weakens his own ability to positively influence their behavior.

This weakness is understandable. Before his promotion, the supervisor had been praised or criticized only for his own efforts. As, in all likelihood, he was a good worker, the praise far outweighed the criticism. As a supervisor, he quickly learns that he now shares, or even suffers the bulk of, any criticism leveled at anyone in his group. The more problems there are in the group the more likely the weak supervisor will be willing to abdicate his position as first whipping boy. If the number of mistakes stays within reason, this problem can eventually be solved by development of competent management techniques, experience, a tough skin, and a philosophical attitude.

One further point is that lack of supervisory loyalty toward subordinates will also kill innovation from within. New ideas are extraordinarily sensitive to criticism. If an employee knows that he has a dependable supervisor on his side, he will be more willing to risk exposure of his creative thoughts.

A final area of this relationship is training. A weak supervisor may take lightly the responsibility for properly training a new employee. The simplest method is to turn the new man over to the oldest employee to "learn the ropes." If the trainer himself is poorly motivated and does the job

incorrectly in any way, the supervisor has multiplied his own problems. Employee training is a solemn responsibility of the supervisor. It can be used to improve productivity, to instill good work habits and attitudes, and to build positive working relationships. Continued training through good downward communication is equally important to maintaining productivity through a motivated team.

The Supervisor and His Company

The new supervisor enters his position highly motivated and ready to support company policy and objectives to the last page of the manual. After the initial enthusiasm has worn off, the supervisor reviews his own goals in comparison with the company goals. In his position as implementor of policy, a supervisor will occasionally find that he is expected to enact rules with which he personally disagrees. Most supervisors can accommodate a reasonable amount of internal conflict, and recognize the proper time to resist and the time to acquiesce to the needs of the enterprise.

A supervisor who cannot accept the internal conflict must reexamine his own objectives and those of the company. Unfortunately, the supervisor who finds himself in irreconcilable conflict with the company or its objectives is frequently too weak to leave under his own direction. In the meantime, his example to the group is a demotivator in every way. As a salesman of company policy to his people, by his own word, he is offering a bad product. Such an attitude can make the best of work plans look unworthy of earnest effort. This individual is always the ultimate loser. His attitude is a highly visible label that is remembered at reorganization and lay-off time.

The supervisor must find within himself the ability to integrate the organization's goals with his own; otherwise he should get himself into another company or position that he can honestly accept. A careful examination of the two sets of objectives is necessary for the supervisor. This is a recurrent prerequisite for continuing self-development.

It is fine if a supervisor finds that he is sincerely able to accept every company policy and objective without reservation. However, a supervisor can be fully effective even if he has strong objections to some parts of the corporate mind. First and last he must be his own man, with his own code of ethics. There will be times when the policy or its application is just plain wrong; the supervisor has a responsibility, as part of management, for the successful operation of the business. Optimally, a supervisor confronted with bad policies should work vigorously and intelligently to change them, at the same

recognizing that a wild reaction on his part can cause as much damage as the bad policy.

The Supervisor and His Management

The points made with regard to the supervisor's relationship to the company also apply to his relationship with his management. He must have a strong sense of loyalty to his management as well as to his employees. A supervisor who loses his ability to influence and negotiate with his upper management has damaged his effectiveness beyond repair. The supervisor can avoid being drawn from his middle position simply by accepting the fact that he must be a respected representative to both employees and his management in order to be of value to either. It may be of help for him to keep in mind that, though rarely voiced, both his employees and his management do expect him to protect both interests simultaneously.

Communication is the critical area in the relationship with upper management. The supervisor's management must depend on him to initiate any necessary upward communication, especially where production and productivity are concerned. He must also keep himself available for information flowing down to him. Remember the four principles of communication stated previously.

The Supervisor and His Co-workers

An individual worker can accomplish a great deal of his job on his own, assuming he has his materials and resources. Whether he has the cooperation of a wide range of workers in other groups may be largely unimportant. However, the supervisor who attempts to carry over a one-man method of operation will find himself blocked in a short time. He must negotiate for cooperation without the authority to require it. He is helped somewhat by his position which enables him to bring more resources to a problem than can a nonsupervisory employee. A potential danger for the weak supervisor is that he may lack the skill to negotiate successfully for the assistance that he needs. He also faces the hazard of forcing solutions "at all costs," thus destroying the potential for future cooperation.

The Supervisor and His "Customers"

To return to the comparison with the small businessman, all supervisors have "customers." They may be upper management, or the next group on the production line, or the entire plant population, in short, whoever uses his products or services. A supervisor should think of his operation as geared to satisfy a customer's need. This concept will help the supervisor avoid the common trap in a large organization of turning out a product

or a service that no one needs. He should avoid the misconception that hard work is productive work. Think, for example, of the "firefighter," who runs his group along the brink of disaster, too busy averting catastrophe to waste time on management and planning. By paying attention to the people who use his product or service, the supervisor can adjust his quality, quantity, and priorities precisely to the real need.

The Supervisor and the Job

Of the various weaknesses possible in supervisors, actual technical job knowledge is rarely a problem. On the contrary, the supervisor is frequently the most technically competent person in the group. Where skill and technical expertise are lacking, it is possible to hire the help.

Ability to manage the whole job is another story. The supervisory job places a wide range of demands on the individual. A weak supervisor may have one or more serious problem areas within that range. For example, a supervisor may be a good leader in that he can enlist cooperation easily; however, he rarely directs his own or the group's efforts in productive directions.

Another type is the supervisor who knows the job to be done, but blocks his own people with restrictions and demotivating actions. His very ability to do the job better than anyone else in the group may prevent him from delegating work or praising good work.

Strength in several areas of the supervisory position may not be sufficient to overcome deficiencies in another area. Like the small businessman, the supervisor must attend satisfactorily to all areas of his job. Weakness in any one of several key areas, such as customer relations, planning, or cost control, can result in failure for the supervisor.

As a result of my own job problems, I developed a generalized action plan that would enable me to control all areas of a supervisory position, regardless of the product or service of the group. The supervisor's job can be encompassed completely by careful attention to the following nine areas:

1. Quality of products and services.
2. Quantity of products and services.
3. Time schedules.
4. "Customer" relations (the small businessman comparison).
5. Cost control.
6. Relations with your boss.
7. Work systems.
8. Personnel (subordinate) development.
9. Self-development.

By determining what is currently expected in each of these areas, a supervisor can set standards of productivity. By comparing what is actually being done in each of these areas, he can expose all problem areas. Then, by determining what management will want and what is possible in each area, the supervisor can set longer-range objectives for overall improvement of group productivity. The details of this approach were published in Supervisory Management (see the Reading List).

The Supervisor Himself

Leaders are made, not born. Almost any man or woman of intelligence and self-discipline, with a strong desire to share in the management of an enterprise, can develop the skills and gain the knowledge to become a competent supervisor.

Several characteristics at least are common to the able supervisor:

1. The individual has definite goals for himself and his work. A productive person knows what constitutes productivity and works toward it.
2. He has a strong sense of individual responsibility, which lets him perceive the job to be done, the importance of the job, and his personal obligation for accomplishing it. This sense is the regenerator of personal motivation.
3. He has an individual integrity that permits him to function effectively as representative of upper management and employee, fairly protecting the interests of both.
4. He is achievement-oriented, with the courage to act on his decisions, as well as the ability to make decisions worth acting on.
5. He strives enthusiastically to improve his own ability as a supervisor.

Without these attributes the supervisor has neither the personal resources nor the interpersonal abilities necessary to achieve the best level of productivity attainable through the best efforts of others.

Diagnosing and Treating the Problem of Weak Supervision

There are clearly many degrees and forms of weak supervision. Nearly all of them can hurt productivity, directly or indirectly. However, it is possible to diagnose and treat a problem in your own supervisory technique as well as in the techniques of supervisors who work for you.

First, define all the responsibilities of the supervisory position and of the group. Write them down. State what is being done to meet each responsibility, and decide whether it is satisfactory performance. Define the problem areas, and make a plan of action for correcting each problem. Finally, decide what would constitute good or outstanding performance for each responsibility. Then set goals for improvement in all areas of the job. When you have developed a set of goals and plans, share them with your management and your employees for their input and support. To assure your continued health as a supervisor, make this personal performance review an annual event.

As assistance in this study, you may find it helpful to read some of the many books on management, behavioral research, motivation, and self-development. Several worthwhile books are named on the reading list. Since a supervisor is as much an individual as any of his employees, it is best to avoid espousing any single theory or program completely. I prefer an eclectic approach, selecting worthwhile ideas from every school of thought, but tailoring all of them to my personal style of management.

In Summary

The supervisor is the man on the spot in making the productivity connection:

1. The supervisor is the link between management, who make the decision to meet specific customer needs, and the workers, who are the means for meeting that need.
2. Like the small businessman, the supervisor must be fully responsible for all facets of his "business" and for all the managerial functions: planning, organizing, directing, controlling, and innovating.
3. The supervisor is the single most influential factor in helping to determine the motivation of his employees to be productive. His influence is strong in helping to meet maintenance needs; he essentially controls the true motivators.
4. In his relationship with his employees, the supervisor, while recognizing the personality of the group, must be sensitive to individual needs.
5. Communication is critical for all the supervisor's relationships. Communication never takes care of itself. The supervisor must actively work at it.

6. The supervisor must be able to integrate his personal goals with the goals of his company in a manner acceptable to his own personal code of ethics and to the needs of the organization.
7. The supervisor's relationship with upper management is summed up in a word: communication. He must work to keep those lines of communication open, so that he can be aware of the needs of the company and so that he can feed upward the needs of the group.
8. In his relationship with his co-workers, the supervisor needs to be a cooperative partner and intelligent negotiator.
9. By treating the users of his group's products or services as "customers," the supervisor can help to maintain a realistic concept of his part in the organization. It will prevent him from providing a product or service that no one in the organization needs.
10. The supervisor, first and last, must be an individual of integrity. That is, he must be able to draw the best from his people, to enlist the support of his management, and to use the available systems today, without losing his ability to work with them tomorrow.

In closing, there is one final trait necessary to the supervisor who makes the productivity connection. It is from Malcolm McNair:

"To look is one thing,
"To see what you look at is another,
"To understand what you see is a third,
"To learn from what you understand is still something else,
"But to act on what you learn is all that really matters."

READING LIST

The following works will serve the purpose of opening up a wide range of literature, which the reader can explore to his own satisfaction.

GENERAL REVIEWS OF MANAGEMENT AND SUPERVISORY TECHNIQUES

Peter F. Drucker, The Practice of Management, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, 1954, 404 pp.

Lester R. Bittel, What Every Supervisor Should Know, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., New York, 1959, 451 pp.

Elton T. Reeves, So You Want To Be a Supervisor!, American Management Association, Inc., New York, 1971, 133 pp.

PRODUCTIVITY AND MOTIVATION

John D. Staley and Irving A. Delloff, Improving Individual Productivity, American Management Association, Inc., New York, 1963, 207 pp.

Douglas MacGregor, The Human Side Of Enterprise, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., New York, 1960, 246 pp.

Chris Argyris, Integrating the Individual and the Organization, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York, 1964, 330 pp.

A. H. Maslow, Motivation and Personality, Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., New York, 1954, 411 pp.

SELF-DEVELOPMENT

Peter F. Drucker, Managing for Results, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, 1964, 240 pp.

James T. McCay, The Management of Time, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1959, 176 pp.

Maxwell Maltz, Psycho-Cybernetics, Pocket Books, New York, 1969, 282 pp.

Gerard I. Nierenberg, The Art of Negotiating, Cornerstone Library, New York, 1971, 192 pp.

Robert A. Benson, "Job-Control Tactics for the New Supervisor," Supervisory Management (April 1973), pp. 2-10.