Too many times, we take a supervisory position and make it unidirectional. I am not aware of any company that assigns job titles and descriptions to supervisors instructing them to just tell people who, what, when, where, how, and why to do something.

In fact, most companies have certain descriptions leaning toward quality and improvements. A supervisor must be a dynamic person who has the ability to push to achieve the corporation's goals while building future supervisors or, more importantly, leaders.

Corporate goals drive the business in the direction the shareholders want. The underlying goal is continuous improvement.

Continuous improvements do not just happen; they are the product of the workforce that made the improvements happen. If the workforce is making the improvements happen then it is reasonable to say that a better-trained and happier workforce will make more improvements happen and in a shorter time. Corporations who are moving toward lean manufacturing and have to go through major change management initiatives will especially benefit from this type of atmosphere. "Lean production systems require more from the front-line worker than traditional mass production." (Allen, Robinson, and Stewart, Lean Manufacturing: A Plant Floor Guide, 2001, p. 170)

Supervisors must be adept in problem solving, scheduling, and communication. Supervisors are the direct link from front-line employees to management. Supervisors are generally personnel who have a substantial amount of shop experience coupled with the training to execute schedules and maintain the status quo.

Shop experience is an important tool in the box when it comes to dealing with crisis issues on the shop floor. In addition, the supervisor must execute the schedule within the best possible compliance to keep the backlog of overdue maintenance actions to a minimum. Finally, the supervisor has to maintain a level of normalcy to the shift to keep employee morale at its peak. The one thing that seems to be overlooked in today's fast-paced industries is the supervisor's responsibility to form and shape the future leaders who work as his subordinates.

There are three important factors in shaping future leaders: communication, mentoring, and follow-through.

Communication is the backbone of everything done in business. Whether the communication is for direction or feedback it is a necessity for the organization to function. Every single continuous improvement program and quality management system stresses the importance of communication in all directions in an organization. In addition, the success of all these programs relies on communication.

Supervisors play an important part in the communication system by translating technical material into information needed by management, such as downtime, quality deficiencies, and project costs. Supervisors should be training the personnel working for them on the methods of communication and priorities of communication in relation to what management needs to know.

Supervisors have a great opportunity to become mentors for personnel that work for them. Mentors play a large role in the improvement of personnel by filling a key spot as advisors. The advisory role does not stop with job-specific training but also includes career planning, education planning, and life issues.

The supervisor does not have to be the direct and final advisor for these subjects. The direction a supervisor gives on whom to talk to can be just as important for the growth and morale of the personnel. Preparation says a lot about a leader and how he assesses tasks.

Finally, the follow-through demonstrated by a supervisor can display the concern and priority he has for employees. Employees generally ask questions due to some kind of genuine concern about a situation or subject. A supervisor needs to address the situation even if there is a negative response to the question. If there is not an answer available at the time, the supervisor needs to ensure he follows up on the question.

The lack of follow-through sets a bad example to employees and reduces the trust they have for the supervisor to meet their needs.

Supervisors make things happen on the shop floor and are the primary salespeople for new changes that will affect front-line workers. Effective shop floor management is essential to the success of any corporation. Communication makes shop floor management effective and fluid. The main point to remember is that the supervisor is the first line in the training of tomorrow's shop floor leaders.— Robert Apelgren