



The - Winning Edge

*A Foreman's Guide
To Supervision*

Hal Wallace
David Heberle

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**CBI Publishing Company, Inc.
51 Sleeper Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02210**

Production Editor: Patricia Cronin
Compositor: Alexander Typesetting

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Wallace, Hal.

The winning edge.

1. Supervision of employees. I. Heberle,

David. II. Title.

HF5549.W3118 658.3'02

82-1134

ISBN 0-8436-0821-8

AACR2

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Printed in the United States of America

Printing (*last digit*): 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Introduction

Why anyone in their right mind would want to become a foreman defies logic.

This is not because a foreman's position is inherently undesirable; it isn't. On the contrary, the duties of a first-line supervisor can contribute to one of the most interesting and satisfying careers in business and industry. A foreman is not saddled to a desk all day. A foreman moves freely about the work area. A foreman does not idly lean back for weeks at a time, wondering if a decision he made yesterday will be proved right a decade later. A foreman conducts little business by mail, phone, or secretary. Rather, a foreman is out on the floor, seeing that the work gets done, standing face to face with characters that range from ideal workers and managers, to individuals who could easily have stepped from the pages of a psychiatric text. One thing that can be said for the foreman's job is that it rarely affords a dull moment.

But as interesting, challenging, and rewarding as the foreman's job can be, the sad truth is that many foremen grow to dislike, and even hate, their jobs.

Contents

INTRODUCTION	x
PART ONE: THE FIRST DAYS	2
1 Getting Started	4
2 The Policy Manual	12
3 The Supervisor's Appearance and Image	16
PART TWO: PERSONNEL COORDINATION	20
4 New Employees: Selection, Orientation, Training	22
5 Problem Employees	31
6 Terminating Employees	38
7 The Performance Review	44
8 Alcoholism	49
9 Safety	54

PART THREE: MANAGEMENT SUPPORT	60
10 Discipline	62
11 Tardiness and Absenteeism	66
12 Knowing the Contract	72
13 Grievance and Arbitration	76
 PART FOUR: WORKING WITH OTHER SUPERVISORS	 84
14 The Log Book	86
15 Lead Persons	91
16 Meetings	95
 PART FIVE: BROADENING THE SUPERVISOR'S KNOWLEDGE	 100
17 Getting off the Reservation	102
18 Buying New Equipment	108
19 Chain of Command	113
20 Continuing Education	116
 PART SIX: FINDING A BETTER WAY	 122
21 Problem Solving	124
22 Work Simplification	132
23 Work Sampling	139
24 Finding A Better Way	147
25 Installing Ideas	153
26 A Colorful Chapter	157
 PART SEVEN: UNION OR NON-UNION	 164
27 Non-Union	166
28 A Union Campaign	170

APPENDIX	177
Interviewing	177
Listening	178
Planning	182
Recommended Readings	184
Notes on Writing	188
Hiring the Mentally Retarded	189
Some Philosophy	190

Part One

Why?

One reason: they can't confidently perform what is asked of them because they lack proper training. They drift from day to day, unsure of themselves, hoping that nothing goes wrong, always on the defensive, always in a quandary.

In numerous companies they see themselves perched precariously between labor and management—caught in the middle of a hostile, adversarial situation, with two sides trying to best each other. Thus the poor foreman absorbs complaints, ill feelings, and unreasonable requests from both parties. He stands alone, neither fish nor fowl, often indistinguishable from (and paid less than) the workers he supervises, a buffer between labor and management, subject to hindsight and guesswork . . . the perfect scapegoat.

But enough harping. There is another side to being a foreman. This is the side enjoyed by those foremen who have been properly trained. The side favored by individuals who possess the knowledge, energy, enthusiasm, and positive mental attitude required of effective supervisors.

After many years of training first-line supervisors, of observing them in their departments, of swapping stories with them in hotel rooms and all-night diners, of listening to their problems and frustrations, we have found in most foremen a great untapped resource waiting and wanting to be developed.

This book has been written to lift the thousands of conscientious first-line supervisors from the doldrums they are inadvertently trapped in. It will help them take command of their positions, remove the indecisiveness from their actions, and invest some rhyme and reason into their supervising.

The many people we have been privileged to instruct are the true authors of this book. To all of them we offer our humble thanks. From their labor, from their mistakes and successes, may others learn.

THE FIRST DAYS

One

Getting Started

"You know better than that, Butler," yelled Ralph Levins through the window of the plant protection hut. "Those spaces are reserved for supervisors."

Frank Butler smiled over the top of his car from row three in the parking lot, lunchbox in one hand and an open car door in the other. "I AM a supervisor," he said. "I was promoted Friday."

"Well, nobody told me," said Levins, "and until somebody does, you can't park there. So move!" Levins jerked his thumb toward the rear of the parking lot.

Frank found an empty spot in row twenty-nine, and began the two-hundred-yard walk back to the main gate. He glanced at his watch and quickened his pace to a trot.

When Frank passed the time clock in his new department he sighed with relief. It was only 6:55, five minutes till starting time.

He entered the office he had inherited from Bill O'Neil and put his lunchbox in the refrigerator. The room was small and poorly furnished, but it was his, protected from the sounds of rumbling motors and clanking machinery.

Through a scratched plexiglass window Frank saw people gathering at the time clock. He recognized two of them: George Legard (a union steward who struck fear into the hearts of management) and old reliable Stan Waterhouse.

The whistle blew—a loud, piercing blast that sent Legard, Waterhouse, and the others to their machines. Frank drew a deep breath and stepped out onto the floor for the first time as a supervisor.

He was browsing through the time cards when Jim Grady, a machine operator, called him.

"Hey," said Grady. "Where's Bill O'Neil?"

"He's been promoted to quality control," said Frank. "Didn't you know? I'm Frank Butler, his replacement."

Grady spat chewing tobacco on the floor. "Typical," he said. "Nobody tells us nothin'."

"Bill put it on the bulletin board Friday," replied Frank.

"Who reads that crap?" said Grady. "What department are you from?"

"Warehouse," said Frank.

"You gave up a job across the street to work in this dump? You'll be sorry," said Grady.

"Maybe so," said Frank. "What did you want with Bill?"

"Oh," said Grady. "I need towels for my line."

"How many?" asked Frank.

"About fifty."

"Okay," said Frank, "where are they?"

"In the storeroom."

Frank walked to the storeroom, signed for fifty towels, and delivered them to Grady's work area.

"Here they are," said Frank.

"Wait until I get the dirty ones," said Grady. He disappeared behind his machine, then carried a bag full of soiled towels to Frank. "These go in a hamper behind your office."

Enroute to the office Frank met George Legard in front of the water fountain. Legard finished his drink then straightened up and scowled. "What the hell do you think you're doing, Butler?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" said Frank.

"Carrying those dirty towels! That violates the foreman-working rule in the contract, doesn't it?"

Frank thought he saw a hint of a smile on Legard's face. "Hey, this is my first day on the job," said Frank, "I've got to learn the ropes."

"Not in this department, you don't!" George Legard waved a finger in front of Frank's face. "You broke the contract so I'm going to turn in a grievance. Simple as that," said Legard as he walked back to his machine.

Frank stared at the time clock. Not an hour had passed and already he had caused a grievance. He watched Grady tending machine number thirteen, and wondered if the towel incident had been a setup.

When Frank entered his office the phone was ringing. He answered, "Department one seventy-four, Frank Butler speaking."

"Butler," said Cameron, the plant manager, "I've been trying to get you for a half hour. Where the hell have you been?"

"Out on the floor, checking time cards," replied Frank.

"Why didn't you answer your autocall?"

"Autocall?"

"Your beeper! The next time you hear three rings, one ring, then three more rings, it means your office phone is ringing."

"Okay," replied Frank. He noticed a beeper and a charger resting on a file cabinet.

"Listen, Frank," continued Cameron, "I only wanted to wish you good luck. If you need anything at all, feel free to call me, understand?"

"Yeah, thanks," said Frank.

"How have things gone so far?" asked Cameron.

"Fine." No need to bring up the run-in with Legard, thought Frank.

"Good," said Cameron. "For the first few weeks just take it easy. Your department will run by itself. If you have any specific

questions that I can't answer, save them for Bill O'Neil. He'll be checking on you now and then."

During the next hour Frank inspected the department's machines and introduced himself to the operators. The machines appeared in need of preventive maintenance, so Frank made a note to have maintenance develop and schedule a regular program. The men seemed aloof. Few of them had much to say—most kept working while they talked. The housekeeping was deplorable. The whole place certainly couldn't compare with his old department.

At precisely 9:15 Frank watched all of the men leave their machines for a ten-minute coffee break at the canteen. Most of them strolled back by 9:27, but Legard stood outside the canteen, coffee cup in hand, talking with another union steward until 9:35.

Well, thought Frank, the first day is no time to make a federal case out of a few minutes.

The rest of the morning went smoothly. A quality control inspector came by and told Frank the die on machine number seventeen should be ground and polished. Frank asked Stan Waterhouse for advice and Waterhouse explained how it was usually done.

At noontime, Frank entered his office and retrieved his lunchbox from the refrigerator. He sat at his desk, took a bite out of one of his sandwiches, then phoned Roger Brooks, a long-time friend who was the foreman of an adjacent department.

"Roger," said Frank, "mind if I come over and eat lunch with you? I need some conversation."

"Sure, come on over," said Roger.

Frank found his way to Roger's office.

"Looks like you survived the morning," said Roger.

"Yeah, outside of my first grievance, everything's great so far."

"Who gave you the grievance?" asked Roger. "Legard?"

Frank nodded.

"That bastard," said Roger. "What for?"

Frank explained what happened with the towels.

Roger laughed. "Legard probably won't turn one in. He'll try to make a deal with you—wait and see."

After lunch Frank reviewed the production schedule for the following day. He was writing machine assignments when Bill O'Neil entered the office.

"Hello, Frank," said Bill. "How goes the battle?"

"Okay so far," replied Frank.

"Can you spare some time?" asked Bill. "If you'd like, I could give you a rundown on your people."

"Sure," said Frank, "sounds good to me. Have a seat."

It took two hours for Frank to listen to what Bill O'Neil thought of the twenty men who worked in Frank's new department. He spoke of their strengths, weaknesses, and attitudes, all illustrated with incidents plucked from his seven-year stint as foreman of the department.

Frank took notes on each man. When Bill O'Neil left, Frank thought he had a fairly accurate idea of what to expect from all of his workers: those employees he could depend on, and those who would need watching.

At three o'clock Frank went out on the floor to check stock for the next shift's run. Fifteen minutes later, when he returned to the office, Grady caught him at the door, and motioned for him to come over to the bulletin board.

"Hey Butler," he said, "what's this mean?" He pointed at an announcement that had been posted during lunch.

It was a memo about a Blue Cross insurance policy change. Frank read it. He could explain everything except a part that said the company paid everything eighty percent over the limit.

"What's eighty percent over the limit mean?" asked Grady.

Frank shrugged his shoulders.

Grady spat. "Figures," he said. "YOU don't even know. Nobody tells us nothin around here."

At 2:50 P.M. Frank was relieved by the second shift foreman, Dan Chase.

"Hello," said Chase, "How was your first day?"

"Well, nothing blew up, no one was killed, and as far as I know, I still have a job," said Frank.

"Great," replied Chase. "Anything I should know for tonight?"

"Oh, Stan Waterhouse had to change the die on his machine so I wrote a requisition for the crib and a work order for Littlefield to grind and polish the old one."

"You catch on fast, Frank," said Chase. "That's exactly what I would have done."

Frank began the long walk past the plant protection hut to his car. He wondered if Legard was really going to write up that towel grievance.

REFLECTIONS

A notice from the Personnel Department to plant protection announcing Frank's new position, make of car, and license number would have eliminated the humiliating confrontation with the guard.

Machine operator Jim Grady would have known that Frank was the new foreman had Frank been presented at a group department meeting by the plant manager.

A proper introduction insures that ALL affected personnel are informed, and helps a new supervisor begin to build an image of being part of the management team.

Frank should have asked Grady what system Bill O'Neil used for towel distribution. Frank's desire to win approval violated a cardinal rule of foremanship—work should be done by workers, not supervisors.

10 THE WINNING EDGE

Frank should have told George Legard to go ahead with what he thought was right regarding the grievance threat, but that the offense was small potatoes, a never-to-be-repeated mistake that harmed no one.

Cameron's irate phone call could have been averted by better communication. As part of Frank's indoctrination (what indoctrination?) the auto-call system should have been explained to him.

The plant manager made the mistake of not being with Frank personally during Frank's first hours. Management by phone is destined to fail. It's impossible to know what's going on and to properly supervise from within the confines of an office.

After the 9:15 coffee break, Frank erred by not talking with George Legard when he returned to his machine ten minutes late. Even if Legard had discussed union business, permission should have been obtained from Frank to be away from the job on company time. And if that was the case, Frank might have put Legard in the position of "forgetting" to file the towel grievance—when the steward would ask for that time to conduct his business. All part of the fine art of negotiation!

The worst mistake Frank made during his first day was the time he spent with Bill O'Neil.

While Bill O'Neil could indeed be helpful to Frank in many ways, a new supervisor should form his own opinions about the people who will be working for him in the department. How a man performed for Bill O'Neil could vary one hundred and eighty degrees with the way he will work for Frank Butler.

Foremen should ALWAYS know in advance of the worker ANY information that will affect the worker or the department.

In fact, the only person who should put anything on the bulletin board is the foreman. After all, it's his department, so he should be the person to pass along company information.