

SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISION: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is Supportive Supervision (SS) and why does it have greater impact in supply chain management?

One brief definition is “a non-hierarchical and empowering supervisory strategy that places greater responsibility and ownership on staff to get greater impact.” In many ways it is the opposite of traditional systems of supervision. It contrasts strongly with the direct orders in the military and academia, for example. It has greater impact because people are given authority to use their own solutions to problems they face in their work. They discuss the solutions with their supervisor, but they implement the action. The management principle is that since they know their own work on a day-to-day basis better than anyone else, they have better insights. After consultation and guidance with the supervisor, they take the next steps.

See the “Ten Commandments of Supportive Supervision” below for more detail.

Isn't it about the same as being polite and respectful to the people you supervise?

No, though respecting people is always important. But respect and courtesy are not enough. You have to work with them so that they identify what needs to be done in their work and they want to move forward and do it. They have to own the process. The solutions or next steps are not just whatever the supervisor tells them to do.

What are some specific examples of greater impact in supply chain management?

There are many. Here are three brief ones from supply chains:

- 1) If seasonality is a factor in the demand for antimalarial drugs, staff should be trained in methods for calculating larger orders for the high season. But since the staff know the seasonal demands around their own clinic better than a district supervisor would, they should have reasonable leeway in determining the stocks they need for their own high season.
- 2) If local staff have to recruit and train Community Based Distribution agents for contraceptives, the supervisor can offer suggestions and ideas, explain any regulations involved, and give a job description of what exactly should be expected of these agents. But the local staff, who know the community so much better, need to have the responsibility of selecting their agents.
- 3) If staff have been trained in the principles of good storage for health commodities, they know how best to apply the principles in their own storage space that they use nearly daily. It is their storeroom. For best results, the supervisor should mostly let them do the application in their own place so long as the principles are applied effectively.

What does empowerment mean, and how does SS do it?

Empowerment is a management term that simply means to give power and responsibility to someone. Instead of doing it the boss's way, the person is given reasonable power to do it in his or her own way, according to the person's best professional judgement. Simply put, the boss says to get the job done, but leaves it up to the person to pick the best way.

Does this mean that everybody gets to do whatever they want?

Not at all. They are able to pick a good way to get it done, based on their duties and their work experience. They may consult with the boss or with colleagues to get ideas if needed and to weigh the pros and cons, but they have to get the job done! They may not blindly follow what the boss says, because the boss does not supervise them with detailed steps.

Of course in many operations there are Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and they must be followed. But even with SOPs, there can be reasonable flexibility to help the job get done effectively according to the needs of the work site and staff work styles.

It says in the “Ten Commandments” below that you have to listen more than half the time. Why?

So that you know what is really going on. You can't learn anything if you do all the talking. People have to feel free to explain what is happening and what they are facing. There has to be a back and forth discussion. The supervisor is more like a colleague or consultant or resource person. The supervisor can't possibly know what the day-to-day situation is of all the people he or she supervises.

In many traditional approaches to supervision, the supervisor is supposed to be all-knowing and the source of all solutions for all situations. This is not realistic.

Why does SS stop at just the priorities?

In almost any management situation, there are high priorities that must be addressed if success is to be reached. If the priorities are addressed, and staff are successfully empowered, then there is time for other actions, if the other actions have not already taken care of themselves.

How about the cultural context?

Culture can be really important. Some cultures are very hierarchical and have a great respect for age and authority. Men are given higher status than women. This makes SS harder to practice. The supervisors probably have very traditional practices. And the staff may even prefer to do the “safe” thing and just completely obey whatever the supervisor says, even if it is not efficient or does not make good sense. In cases like this, it takes training and practice to phase over to a different system. Once people start to use SS, however, they usually like it a lot.

What if the people you supervise are not used to making the decisions?

As the supervisor, you have to help them to change. This cannot be done overnight. Sometimes it takes starting with small things as first steps. And you also have to tell staff why you are doing this. It can be frightening to people who know only one system. They are afraid of making mistakes. They don't want to take chances. Staff training on the topic of SS and how they are responsible can be very helpful. Rather than theory, the training needs lots of real world examples that are based on the common responsibilities they have. With good training, staff can see how the new system works and be highly motivated to phase into it.

What are the challenges in using SS in supply chain management?

There are several. It takes effort for many supervisors to give up their old ways of supervising, which is often the same way they were supervised. It takes some time and resources to orient and train supervisors. And the supervisor of the supervisors has to take the lead by role modelling how the supervisors in turn should supervise. You have to "walk the talk."

Because of heavy workloads, there can be a temptation to save time and "just tell them what they need to do." But this is no time savings if what you tell them is not efficient or would not work in their situation and if they do it only because you said to. It can be a step backwards.

But supply chain management is one of the settings where the advantages of SS seem to outweigh the challenges.

Why isn't SS better known by supervisors in Supply Chain Management?

Well, it varies by country. Some countries have invested time and money in training supervisors in SS and have noticed a positive impact. Ethiopia, for example, has trained thousands of supervisors working in the Ethiopian Contraceptive Logistics System.

But one of the reasons that SS is not better known is that many people working in supply chain management are trained in pharmacy, medicine, public health, nursing, or other specialties, but not in management. They have to do management work, but they have never had any training. This means that their default management style is often just the way they were managed. In many countries, that means a traditional management approach.

SS is not just for site visits?

That's right. SS is recommended for all supervisor tasks does – daily contact with staff, work planning, presentations, meetings, and even interactions by phone and e-mail. Supervision is a cross-cutting part of a job. Though it can be important in site visits, it is not just for site visits.

Do you have to be trained in SS to use it?

Not really, but training can help. For somebody who has been supervising in a traditional way, it takes real personal behaviour change to phase over to SS. This is not always easy, and there could be times when it is not well done, but it is worth the impact. Many men and women who have made the transition say they would never go back.

Where can you get more information about SS?

There is a vast amount of management literature available, over the internet. But applications to supply chain management, especially in the context of Developing Countries, are rare or non-existent. So the managers have to grasp the principles and then apply them in the work they do.

Suggested resources include:

Uganda MOH and USAID | DELIVER PROJECT Encourage Supportive Supervision. 2010.

EngenderHealth. Facilitative Supervision Handbook. 2001.

JHPIEGO. Supervising Healthcare Services: Improving the Performance of People. 2004.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISION FOR SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT

Supportive Supervision is “the process of guiding, helping and encouraging staff to improve their performance so that they meet the defined standards of performance of their organizations.” The principles of Supportive Supervision for supply chain management are the same as for other types of Supportive Supervision.

The reason to use Supportive Supervision is that it has greater impact than other personnel management systems.

Supportive Supervision helps keep staff commitment high. When supervisors offer their support, staff know that what they are doing is important. It is said that in any successful logistics system, logistics technology is 20% of the success and people in the logistics system are 80% of the success.

This means that even if you have a perfectly designed system but the people in the system have no commitment, the system will fail. The people will not use the design. There will be stock outs, over stocks,

and other problems. You will have many wasted resources. You will not increase your number of clients served and the health of the population.

Here are some basic practices to make the most of Supportive Supervision in contraceptive logistics. They have been called “Ten Commandments of Supportive Supervision.”

The emphasis is on being a member of a team. Everyone is working toward the same goals.

1. Think of yourself first as a colleague, then as a boss. Show respect for the staff the same way you show respect for other supervisors and for your own boss. Communication is usually more effective among members of a team than it is up and down a hierarchy.
2. Listen more than you speak. This is very hard for many supervisors. It means that they can speak less than half of the time. Often, we think of supervisors as people who tell people what to do. But you can't supervise if you don't listen to find out what is going on. Once you have an idea what is going on, listen again. Ask staff what they think should be done. Help them do their own problem solving by asking probing questions, and then listening again.
3. Use two-way communication. This practice relates to both points above: acting like a colleague and listening more than you speak. You are not really communicating with staff unless they feel they are communicating with you. A supervisor who still has traditional supervisory ways of behaving will not succeed.
4. Assume that the staff know more than you do. This is also hard for many supervisors to do. Some people assume that supervisors always know more. But the fact is that except for staff who may be rather new, the staff at a site know more about the site and the local conditions than a supervisor who comes in from some other place. Supervisors may have lots of experience, and they may have picked up ideas from

various sources, but they will communicate best when they realize that the local staff are the local experts.

5. Bring good news and updates from other places. It is important for people to know what is going on in other places in the programme. The supervisor should bring updates and success stories. They could be from other sites or from the higher level. It helps staff to be motivated if they see how their work contributes to the big picture, and they also get good ideas from other places.
6. Look for the good things first. It is true that supervisors need to look out for problems, but the Supportive Supervision approach is more than looking for problems, and it has a better impact. Mentioning good things first helps the communication and the problem solving. You must recognize the often difficult conditions that the staff work under. You need to see the changes they have made. You need to notice the progress they have made. If you don't mention them, the good things might not continue. Make your visit the way you wish your boss would visit you.
7. Don't take away staff responsibility. Your solutions belong to you. People may use them, but they do not feel committed to the outcome. It is more effective when staff propose their own solutions or you develop solutions collaboratively with them. Then the staff have more ownership of those solutions and the outcomes. The staff are responsible and committed. And there is the advantage that staff know the local conditions better and the solutions will be more appropriate for the local situation.
8. In general, staff want the same thing that supervisors want: better service to more clients. Of course supervisors often have to offer technical expertise if staff do not have it, but explanations should be collegial, and it is important to help staff explore options. What they do when you are not there is more important than what you say while you are there.
9. Focus on the priorities. Use your time with staff to ask questions about what really matters, such as stock outs, consumption rates, and record keeping. You will always want to spend a lot of time going over logistics records, stock cards, and copies of reports or order forms. Ask them to explain, and then listen attentively to what they say. Ask key questions about their data, and then help them find answers. For site visits, a Supportive Supervision checklist of a few pages will help you and the staff focus on the priorities. Remember, you will not have time to go into every detail.

WHAT SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISION IS NOT

Supportive Supervision is very positive, but it is also very honest. It does not pretend that everything is fine and that there are no problems. Supportive Supervision has better impact because it deals with problems in a different way. It uses clear, calm, communication about problems. It is not emotional, and it is not personal. Offering support also means telling people the truth. Telling the truth in a professional way is an important part of a supervisor's job.

10. Do not let lack of resources stop improvement. It is easy to say that you can't do something because you don't have the resources. For example, you can't improve storage because there is no money to buy new shelves. The fact is that there will always be a lack of resources in some way. Your responsibility, and the responsibility of staff, is to either find another way to do something or to do something else entirely. When you discuss agreements for next steps with staff, make sure that there are few or no resources needed.

11. Leave with a limited number of specific agreements. It is better to agree on a few things that matter instead of having a long list that covers many topics. Your visit is not really about the past as much as it is about what will happen in the future. The last part of the visit should focus on questions like these: What action do you want to take about the three things you want to change? Are these high priority things that will help prevent stock outs and serve clients better? How will you do that? Is it something you can do with little or no resources? When will you be able to do it? Is there anything you need from me?