

CPH News and Views

A semi-monthly column on emerging topics related to healthy workplaces

Issue #56: Supervisor Support Training Makes a Difference for Worker Well-being

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Supervisors are critical in contributing to a culture of support for employees, as supervisor support leads to improvements in employee health, well-being, and work outcomes. Supervisors have power over workers because they: provide direction on how to do the job, provide rewards for performance, and are the gatekeepers to top organizational leaders and to accessing key organizational programs and policies. However, there is little information in the literature that instructs supervisors on how to enact the actual behaviors that they should engage in to be supportive, despite the extensive evidence in the organizational sciences on the benefits of supervisor support. Human resource practitioners can leverage such power in beneficial ways by training supervisors and managers how to provide social support to their employees (Hammer, et al., 2007). Changing the workplace culture through supervisor supportive training has been shown to lead to improved workplace outcomes such as performance and retention, health, and well-being of employees, their families (e.g., Hammer, et al., 2011; Odle-Dusseau, et al., 2016).

Research on family supportive supervisor behaviors (FSSB) is based on four types of supervisor support: instrumental, emotional, role modeling, and creative work-life management support (Hammer, et al., 2009). FSSBs are defined as:

- **Emotional:** Behaviors demonstrating a worker is cared for, and their feelings are being considered. For example, having face-to-face contact with employees, asking how employees are doing, or communicating genuine concern about employees' work/life challenges.
- **Instrumental:** Behaviors helping workers manage schedules and working with employees to solve schedule conflicts. For example, helping an employee find a replacement, if absent.
- **Role Modeling:** Behaviors that show how a supervisor is taking care of her or his own work/life challenges. For example, discussing taking time out to attend a child's school activities and talking about one's own family, leaving work at reasonable hours, or showing that managers value involvement in non-work life.
- **Creative Work-Family Management:** Behaviors aimed at redesigning work to support the conflicting employee work-life demands in a manner that is a "win-win" for both employees and employers. For example, promoting cross-training and giving employees the ability to trade shifts to enable schedule flexibility and work coverage.

This supervisor supportive training has been evaluated and modified in several randomized controlled trials, demonstrating its effectiveness using rigorous research designs. The idea of training supervisors how to be more supportive of workers in different domains of work beyond work-family support has extended to domains such as veterans transitioning into the civilian workforce, workplace violence prevention, sleep quality improvement, safety communications at work, and training supervisors on more general culture of health issues.

Based on social support theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985), this is the only known approach to teaching supervisors about how they can exercise their critical role and behave in ways that better support

workers, leading to improvements in work and well-being outcomes. Social support theory suggests that social support has direct effects on stress reduction, psychological health, and physical health. In addition, extensive evidence demonstrates the benefits of supervisor social support for a number of workplace outcomes (e.g., Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011).

Supervisor support training has generally been accompanied by having supervisors track their supportive behaviors over the course of at least two weeks. In order to assist with transfer of knowledge learned into actual behaviors, supervisors tracked supportive behaviors they engaged in with their employees over a two-week period. Behavior tracking is designed based on best practices in clinical and workplace self-monitoring and has been used successfully in conjunction with the computer-based training in previous studies (Hammer et al., 2011). Thus, supervisor supportive training and behavior tracking has been developed, evaluated, and implemented for 10 years as a specific evidence-based intervention to improve worker health.

Resources

Safety and Health Improvement Program (SHIP) toolkit <https://www.ohsu.edu/xd/research/centers-institutes/oregon-institute-occupational-health-sciences/oregon-healthy-workforce-center/toolkit-kiosk/Safety-Health-Improvement.cfm>

Work, Family and Health Network toolkits <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/wfhn/toolkits-achieve-workplace-change>

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