

## Becoming an effective pharmacy supervisor

If you are the only pharmacist on a shift and have one or more pharmacy technicians working with you, then you are a supervisor, even if you do not have that official title. All pharmacy operations in all kinds of health care settings need good supervision.

Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians choose their workplace for many reasons—to serve patients or have a satisfying career or because of wonderful hours, a terrific salary, a great boss, or the opportunity for professional growth. But why do employees leave their positions? The answer is that supervision has been poor. What does it take to be a good supervisor?

Do you have the desire and capacity to be a good boss? Are you a team player? Do you listen to others? Are you likable? Do you help people solve their problems? Do you get things done? Are you honest and trustworthy in the minds of other people? Do you give respect and sincere compliments for duties and functions well done? If you have answered yes to these questions, you have qualified to be a good supervisor at least on one count.

Supervision is the first level of management in the organization. It involves encouraging the members of a work unit to contribute toward accomplishing the organization's goals and objectives. Most of the time, the supervisor is not performing the actual tasks but rather is seeing that they are accomplished through the work of others. This may sound simple, but in reality the job is complex. The supervisor must learn to make good

decisions, communicate well, organize proper work assignments, delegate, plan, train, motivate, appraise performance, and deal with specialized professionals in other departments.



The work of supervision can be broken down into several functions: planning, organizing, staffing, motivating, and controlling. Although some of the functions may be most applicable to formal supervisors, all pharmacists can use the concepts on their shifts or in their clinical practice.

*Planning* involves determining the most effective means for achieving the work of the pharmacy operation.

*Organizing* involves distributing the work among the pharmacists and technicians in the group and arranging the work so that it flows smoothly.

*Staffing* is obtaining, developing, and scheduling good people.

*Motivating* involves getting members of your pharmacy team to put forth maximum effort in doing their jobs.

*Controlling* involves measuring performance to determine how well the work is being done compared with what was planned and then taking any corrective action that is necessary.

The important functions of supervision can be viewed as links in a chain. If planning, organizing, and staffing are not done properly, it is difficult to motivate people. When one function is out of balance, the remainder of the functions will not go as smoothly, and your staff will suffer.

**Traits of successful supervisors.** Supervisors who succeed have several important characteristics.

*Ability and willingness to delegate.* Most pharmacy supervisors have been promoted from operations positions, where they perform the duties themselves. An essential skill that is often difficult for supervisors to learn is delegating work to other pharmacists and technicians.

*Ability to set a good example.* All employees expect fair and equitable treatment from their supervisor. The group expects the supervisor to set an example. Inconsistency and favoritism in the treatment of employees have no place in today's busy hospital pharmacy.

*Knowledge of when to use authority.* Some supervisors may let their newly acquired authority go to their heads. Learning when *not* to use authority is a

*The Success Skills column provides practical advice to help pharmacists become more effective in their professional and personal lives. Installments are contributed by and reflect the views of Sara J. White, M.S., FASHP, Pharmacy Leadership Coach, Mountain View, CA.*

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vital skill. The supervisor cannot gain the support and cooperation of fellow pharmacists and technicians simply by exercising authority. Using one's authority improperly is a sure way to damage relationships.

*Desire for the position.* The desire to be a supervisor is necessary for success in the position. It is that desire that encourages a person to develop skills in human relations, administration, and decision-making. If you are one of the many pharmacists with no desire to supervise others, don't become a supervisor.

*Recognition of the change in role.* A pharmacist promoted to supervisor must recognize that he or she is in a new role and is no longer "one of the gang." Supervisors may have to make unpopular decisions. They are in a position to connect employees to upper management and must learn to represent both groups.

*Professional focus.* A pharmacy supervisor must model professionalism and a focus on quality in serving the needs of patients. Although the philosophy of the pharmacy director sets the tone, the supervisor also needs to remember that quality comes from adherence to policies and procedures. And policies and procedures emanate from standards such as the ASHP best practices.<sup>1</sup> The standards, guidelines, and technical assistance bulletins that outline best practices should form the foundation of the pharmacy operation. The supervisor's professional focus should include adherence to the pharmacy's and the organization's mission, vision, philosophy of patient service, and values.

*Positive attitude.* A good pharmacy supervisor always judges the glass to be half full, and that positive outlook will spread to others.

*Persistence.* The pharmacy supervisor needs to consistently support members of his or her group and remain constantly attentive to providing quality services.

*Thirst for supervisory knowledge.* A strong desire for feedback for continuous improvement in your role as a supervisor is absolutely necessary. With an abundant supply of books, CDs, and journal articles on improving "people

skills" available, the new supervisor can continue to learn.

*Commitment to team building.* All parts of the pharmacy operation are a team. Team building not only within groups but between work areas and shifts is vital.

**New responsibilities.** Often, pharmacists and technicians are promoted to supervision because of their strong technical expertise—expertise in filling orders or providing clinical services. Suddenly, the new supervisor is charged with a whole new range of responsibilities that may have little to do with technical or pharmaceutical care competency.

Supervisors deal with both paperwork and people. Although paperwork may be tedious, it's predictable. People aren't nearly as predictable. They have moods, illnesses, career expectations, and crises in their family lives that must be dealt with by you, the supervisor.

The new supervisor must become familiar with and take responsibility for enforcing a wide range of rules and regulations. The supervisor is accountable for signing timecards, authorizing overtime, granting compensation time, dealing with performance problems, developing job descriptions, following hiring procedures, dealing with grievances and reviews, and conforming to a complicated pay system. It can be difficult to adhere to the many employee laws, rules, and regulations and at the same time fill a large volume of orders or ensure the provision of clinical services. But you *can* do the job. After all, many other pharmacists before you have learned to be good supervisors.

**Time management.** No matter how many courses or degrees new supervisors have completed, they're often surprised that supervisory and management activities are so hectic and demanding. No matter how thorough the planning, supervisors rarely get to spend much time on any one activity. The workday of almost all supervisors, whether new or seasoned, is full of interruptions. Any unexpected event in the work or lives of employees can place a sudden demand on the supervisor. New supervisors of-

ten want to know everything that goes on in their group. They don't want to encounter any surprises. So they spend time reading, thinking, planning, and communicating with employees. A new supervisor may spend well over 45–50 hours a week on the job. Still, many don't feel they have enough time to do the job right. But with practice, the new supervisor's time management skills improve.

**A sometimes lonely position.** Each supervisor has a unique role in the pharmacy operation. Every organization is different, and there may be no clear procedures for dealing with the numerous challenges of management. Often faced with a great deal of pressure, little time, and continuing demands from other people, the new supervisor can feel quite alone.

The supervisor is responsible for acting as an advocate both for the organization and for the employee. For example, if the organization implements an unpopular new policy, the supervisor is often responsible for communicating and justifying that new policy to employees. Frequently, management expects the supervisor to present and support the new policy, and employees vent their frustrations to the supervisor. On the other hand, when the supervisor wants to reward or promote an employee, the supervisor represents the employee's case to the rest of management. The supervisor is often in the middle. The new supervisor wants to come across as having deserved the position and as being in control of the situation. It can be difficult to seek help from others in the organization; even when there is someone to talk to, it can be hard to fully explain the situation, because the new supervisor may not understand how things got to the current state. With communication skills, teambuilding, and persistence, the new supervisor can overcome difficulties and enjoy the reward of a smooth operation.

**Dealing with stress.** The new supervisor is responsible, perhaps for the first time, for the activities of another pharmacist or a pharmacy technician. The supervisor must ensure that the employee

knows his or her job responsibilities, has the resources to carry them out, and does so effectively. Until new supervisors develop a feeling for their area of responsibility, they often deal with the stresses of supervision by working harder rather than smarter.

The new supervisor may miss the comfort and predictability of the previous job. Stress and loneliness of the new role can bring out the worst in a person. The new supervisor may retreat to his or her office and close the door, or may become angry and unreasonable with the employees. New supervisors who are used to getting strong praise and high marks will work harder and harder until their jobs become their lives. Don't let that happen to you. Get help from your pharmacy director, assistant director, or the person to whom you directly report.

**Seeking support.** Courses in supervision, delegation, time management, stress management, and the like are important but may not be enough. New supervisors need ongoing coaching and support from their bosses. They need someone in whom they can confide. Ideally, they have a mentor in the organization who remembers what it's like to be a first-time supervisor, is available for support, and understands the climate and culture in the pharmacy.

As you become successful as a first-time supervisor and find the position fulfilling, you can begin growing toward becoming a progressive, supportive manager, assistant director, pharmacy director, or higher-level executive.

**Developing a supervisory system.** Much is demanded of you as a supervisor. You must guide, support, and assist your staff to do the best job they can. You must motivate them, manage any conflicts, resolve problems and emergencies, and do your best to meet your performance objectives. You must help your employees to meet their performance objectives so that your entire area of control will also meet its goals. How can you accomplish all this?

Every area, program, or department needs a supervisory system, that is, a set of principles and rules to follow. Such a

system guides supervisors in planning, directing, and controlling the performance of their employees. The system describes how the supervisor's tasks will be carried out, whether through supervisory sessions with one or more employees or through written or telephone communication. It includes a supervisory schedule and meeting plan and a system for performance appraisal (which is generally provided by the human resources department of the organization).

A supervisory system will allow you, the supervisor, to schedule and plan future supervisory sessions or staff meetings and will help you to keep track of most of the activities and employees that you are responsible for. You should hold supervisory sessions (staff meetings) with all the employees you supervise.

If the people you supervise are working near you and you see them almost every day, you will get regular feedback on their technical and interpersonal capabilities. Issues, particularly personal ones, can be dealt with as soon as they arise. You can base the time you spend with individual staff members on their needs and what the work situation allows. Some supervisory functions are easily performed, such as monitoring the volume and quality of the work that has been done, reaffirming the mission of the organization (by personal example), and being able to represent the organization and support the staff members on personal issues. Because you see these staff members every day, it may be difficult to look at their training and staff development needs from a long-range perspective. To overcome this difficulty, the supervisor must set up regular meetings for longer-term reviews of the work and for discussing the guidance, assistance, and support that staff members should have.

Every supervisor should make a schedule for periodic discussion sessions that specifies subjects to be discussed and the dates, times, places, and people involved. A supervisory schedule is important because it

- Provides advance notice of the supervisory session to staff members at all locations and allows them time to prepare,
- Makes it possible for supervisors to coordinate their visits in a convenient and economical manner when resources are limited,
- Helps ensure that all supervisory sessions will have a definite purpose and will not be a waste of time, and
- Helps the supervisor to review in advance the necessary materials for the supervisory session. In this way, each new supervisory session effectively builds on previous ones.

During a supervisory session, the supervisor should

- Ask the pharmacists and technicians what they want to discuss,
- Listen to what the team members are saying,
- Review the work of the team and how it is being carried out,
- Discuss the work in the context of a time frame that gives a sense of perspective to the job being done (e.g., three to six months),
- Look ahead to future plans,
- Provide a positive atmosphere for discussion, and
- Ask staff members what issues are impeding the workflow.

The aim here is neither a review of each work activity undertaken in the last period nor a detailed work plan for the next period; these occur during the scheduled performance appraisal sessions. Rather, the supervisory session offers the opportunity for

- The staff members to express their concerns,
- An overview of recent progress and problems,
- Learning from specific recent work experiences (both successes and failures),
- Foreseeing potential difficulties and preventing them,
- Helping your employees to gain perspective on the job as a whole,

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- Getting the employees' commitment to meeting the program's targets, and
- Identifying what support or help the staff may need to get the job done properly.

Failure to meet a target or goal should be discussed only from the viewpoint of why the failure occurred and how it can be prevented in the future. No judgment or blame should be given.

Effective and thorough supervision requires planning. Your time is limited, and it is impossible to supervise everything all the time. The key is to supervise selectively. Identify critical activities to supervise routinely and other activities to supervise less often. As you observe and talk with your team members, decide which activities you will observe and what information you will collect during the supervisory session. Your plan should involve frequent observation of the core tasks. To identify core tasks, ask the following questions:

- Which tasks are indispensable for success?
- Which tasks are new?

- Which tasks are the most difficult for the staff?
- Which set of tasks will give the best picture of the overall quality of services and interactions with nurses, physicians, and patients?
- Which services and staff members are the source of the most complaints?

**Conclusion.** As a supervisor, you need to communicate clearly, encourage feedback, and offer recognition to all those you work with up and down the chain of command. You also need to help your employees see the big picture for the pharmacy department and the organization. You need to create an environment of constant learning for your people and to have fun serving patients. Remember—after all is said and done, patients are our primary purpose.

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