

The Work and Learning Process

What Every Worksite Supervisor Should Know

There are many ways to supervise people and get a job done. Whether a Work-Experience or an Internship, there are many ways to teach students or other learners new skills. Supervising a learning-rich task requires a supervisor who is more of a coach than a boss. Supervisor can ask themselves the following eight questions to improve the value of the experience for young workers:

What work needs doing that is of value to the organization?

Make sure that the project and its tasks have some real benefit to the company. People know when they are doing make-work. Real goals foster real effort. Real accomplishments foster and raise higher self-esteem.

How will students or other learners be directed to do the task?

The key here is to offer advice rather than answers. That advice usually comes in the form of a question, which encourages the student/learner to arrive at his/her own conclusions. As an expert, it's natural to want share all of our knowledge in our particular discipline. However, the best way for young people to learn is through exploration. This does not mean that answers are never given. However, in most cases, there are multiple options, multiple solutions, and multiple answers. The responsibility is to coach the student/learner to find solutions...not to simply provide the solution.

What should the students or other learners learn about?

In addition to learning the skills they need to accomplish the project at hand, students and other learners are acquiring skills that are applicable to a broad range of jobs. Encourage them to think about what other ways they might use the skills they are practicing at the moment. Ask them to talk with each other and their supervisors what skills they are learning in the workplace.

How will they best learn it?

We know from research that people learn best in an authentic context, that is, they learn skills by using those skills, and by reflecting on what they have done. As students or other learners progress through their work, have them reflect on their work and learning in a journal, in group discussions, and on their own.

What is the supervisor's role in this process?

There are at least two roles: the "boss" and the coach. The boss makes sure that the work gets done, and the students or other learners understand the consequences if it does not. It is important that both the supervisor and the student/learner agree on clearly articulated expectations. The second role is much more complex, and one that we suggest is a critical element to the success of both the supervisor's and young person's experience. In the role of coach, adults encourage students/learners through the process of what they are doing and learning. The coach encourages them to learn from and improve their performance. The coach asks questions to encourage thought about possible solutions rather than giving answers. If you provide all the answers, they will not learn how to find them on their own. If you give them thoughtful questions, they will learn to seek and find the information they need to produce solutions.

What will supervisors get out of the experience?

One learns a subject best by teaching or demonstrating it. Moreover, for many it provides an opportunity to acquire or improve their own supervisory skills. Last but not least, real work is accomplished by the student/learner that is valued by the organization or company.

What will the student/learner get out of the experience?

This approach yields multiple benefits for the student/learner. They develop a sense of self-worth and confidence in their ability to learn. They also get real work experience and they expand their horizons by seeing "what work looks like". In turn, they begin to see themselves as working successfully within an organization or company. Students and learners also experience the value of learning and understand that it does not stop when one enters the workplace.

What will the community get out of the experience?

The community benefits through providing opportunities for young people to become productive citizens.

Key Ingredients to Quality Work-Based Learning

- Ensure that the learning contributes to building skills and knowledge rather than simply being exposed to work. It is the nature of the work experience or internship that makes it work-based learning, not simply the "being" at a worksite.
- Ensure employer participation. This learning strategy requires that employer partners engage in at least two ways: they identify the real work that needs to get done, and they provide supervision to the students or other learners. The intensity of their involvement at work can vary – from providing the technical expertise of the content of the work with program staff being on site daily to provide the intensive coaching, to providing all supervision as a supervisor and coach.
- Ensure careful planning of what students and others will learn about and how they will learn new things. The learning opportunities involved in the work at hand must be explicitly planned for and continually recognized as "moments of learning."
- Ensure competent supervision, coaching, and mentoring by adults. Training of program staff and worksite supervisors on facilitation and coaching skills is a must. These skills are not innate and must be learned and practiced.
- Ensure assessment and documentation of learning through the actual demonstration of skills and knowledge, and the creation of authentic work products and assessments by the worksite supervisor.
- Ensure opportunities for students/learners to reflect both on the knowledge and skills they are gaining, and how to improve upon them.
- Ensure that connections are made between what is being learned in classroom settings and at work.
- Ensure school credit for work-based learning at the secondary and post-secondary levels.

Adapted from: Work-Based Learning: Learning to Work; Working to Learn; Learning to Learn, Strumpf, Center for Strategic Change