

Do You Have the 'Fire-Fighting' Culture?

Summary: Front line supervisors play a critical role in the performance of an organization. However, most front line supervisors spend all their time fire-fighting unexpected problems with temporary solutions. They spend day after day dealing with the same problems: missing supplies, incorrect order specifications, employee absenteeism -- the list goes on. But don't give up hope just yet. There are several ways to counteract this phenomenon and get your front line leaders to put away their fire extinguishers for good!

Written by Scott Whitbread, April 2009.



Help your front line leaders put away their fire extinguishers

Front line supervisors play a critical role in the performance of an organization. They are the interface between workers and management; the vast majority of people in any organization directly report to them. As such they are the single biggest influence on employee motivation and performance.

However, most front line supervisors spend all their time fire-fighting unexpected problems with temporary solutions. They spend day after day dealing with the same problems: missing supplies, incorrect order specifications, employee absenteeism -- the list goes on. If they were to spend the same amount of effort addressing the underlying issues that cause these "fires" to keep reoccurring, the problems would be solved permanently. Why don't they do this?

There are three primary reasons:

- Typical management practices actively encourage fire-fighting by focusing massively on short-term performance.
- No one individual supervisor has the clout to change the fire-fighting culture, though they can see the drawbacks.
- Many supervisors lack the leadership skills required to solve underlying management issues because they have been promoted into their role solely on their strong technical ability.

But don't give up hope just yet. There are several ways to counteract this phenomenon and get your front line leaders to put away their fire extinguishers for good.

Typical management practices actively encourage firefighting

The vast majority of daily interactions between front line leaders and their superiors revolve around events taking place that day, such as delivering a hot order to a customer or getting a machine up and running after a breakdown. Anyone who has experienced these interactions can recognize the intense focus on today's performance with little regard given to what will happen tomorrow, next week, next month, or next quarter.

From the supervisor's perspective, the net sum of these interactions can be encapsulated by the phrase, *"Just get it done now, we'll worry about tomorrow later."* Naturally the supervisor responds by pulling out all the stops -- like ignoring protocols, reassigning responsibilities and performing other people's tasks for them -- in order to get the job done.

This course of action only has two possible outcomes: Either extinguish the fire or create a justifiable excuse as to why it could not be done. The first outcome is met with glowing praise from their manager for being an excellent firefighter. The second leads to questioning and a defensive position. In the supervisor's eyes, either outcome avoids a reprimand, and can therefore be called a "success."

Most managers can see that this frenzied approach is undesirable, but are often frustrated when their initial attempts to change it fail. Usually the fire-fighting culture has become so ingrained in an organization that only a radical swing in behavior will produce a lasting change.

The first step is to shift the substance of managers' interactions with front line leaders away from the day

to day and toward long term performance. Of course supervisors will still be responsible for dealing with day to day issues, but some regular time should be set aside to discuss how the performance of their department is tracking over time. The best way to do this objectively is to review performance metrics with the supervisors. If a metric is flat, or declining, then they are not doing their job -- no matter how well they scrambled to keep the department up and running yesterday. Help the supervisors understand that their job is to make their graph "go up" rather than just to make it through their shift. Compare each supervisor's performance to the other supervisors (using the same performance metrics) so they understand how their efforts are translating into results, relative to their peers.

Next, stop interrogating their excuses for poor performance. This discussion merely inspires front line leaders to come up with even more creative and robust reasons why they were unable to get the job done. It also reinforces the notion that coming up with an excuse is an acceptable tactic.

If a problem is their responsibility to solve, don't take back that responsibility by questioning their excuse. It is the equivalent of saying, *"Don't worry about figuring out how to deal with this -- I'll do it for you."* Instead put the responsibility back on them by asking questions like *"How are you going to prevent that from happening next time?"* or *"What help do you need from me to deal with that?"*

Because these changes are behavioral, have a realistic expectation about the time required. Management created the culture that fosters these behaviors; therefore it is management's responsibility to take an active role in changing it. Have the patience required for a prolonged campaign -- don't get frustrated when people don't respond immediately. The transition may require letting some fires burn a little longer. And above all, lead by example: Don't allow yourself to slip back into fire-fighting mode.

A lone supervisor cannot change the culture; help is needed

Everyone would agree that solving problems permanently is better than having to deal with them repeatedly. On an individual basis, however, supervisors believe that changing the culture is outside their power. They need help to begin operating in a new way. Let's look at an example of how this transition could happen.

Daily fires occur because something that is typically taken care of, fails to be dealt with -- by someone! For example, the order specifications were incorrect because someone made an error in the order entry process. The key to stopping this fire from ever reigniting is a robust system that ensures orders are being entered correctly, and when they're not, the individual at fault is addressed.

Putting in place such a process is outside a supervisor's scope -- a manager with greater influence must do it for them. However, once the process is established, administering it and following up with individuals that fail to meet expectations is well within the supervisor's capacity. So rather than having the supervisor just correct the specifications on today's order, she should be coaching the errant order processor to prevent future mistakes.

To help front line leaders get things under control, take the most common daily fires and establish a process for each one that:

- Sets a clear expectation for each of the key people involved.
- Makes each individual's performance, relative to their expectation, highly visible. This means producing a current, physical record of each individual's performance that the whole business will see every day. As one example, you could post a whiteboard in a common hallway showing the performance of each supervisor's crew, relative to the others, on a graph.
- Includes a regular review of each individual's performance with the supervisor.
- Has a prescribed course of action each time the expectation is not met.

Administering these processes, rather than acting as a substitute for them, should be the bulk of a front line leader's responsibilities. Auditing compliance to these processes should be part of their regular review of long-term performance with their manager (as outlined in the previous section).

Setting up these processes can be a lot of work, so don't try to address every fire at once. Start with a single type of opportunity, or work area, and get it under control -- then move on to the next one.

Great technicians and not necessarily great leaders

Most supervisors have been promoted to their role as a result of strong technical aptitude and extensive experience -- which is exactly the skill set required to fight fires! The skill set required to resolve the underlying problems that cause fires, however, is quite different. Administering and auditing processes requires the ability to gather data, interpret it and challenge individuals whose performance is not meeting expectations. In many cases, the strong technicians that get promoted do not have these skills naturally.

This imbalance of technical skills over leadership ability can be compounded by a business culture that reinforces fire-fighting behaviors. Sometimes supervisors are hired in from the outside specifically for their leadership ability (despite their gap in industry specific knowledge). They too will soon become fire fighters if management practices are not altered to encourage them to lead.

To combat this imbalance, a management team must:

- Hire and promote individuals with leadership ability as well as technical knowledge.
- Clearly articulate to the current supervisory pool that their role has changed: from a fire fighter to an "improvement process guardian." This message should be in concert with increased interactions about long-term performance, implementation of processes to manage opportunities, and assessment of the supervisors using performance data.

- Remove supervisors that refuse to get on board with the new way of working or are unable to administer the new processes effectively.

Building momentum

A business that succeeds at rectifying some of the underlying problems (via the methods outlined here) will find that daily fires become less frequent. This frees up even more of the front line leader's time to focus on additional underlying problems, and so the process snowballs.

The ultimate end state is to have the typical daily fires under such tight control that the supervisors have ample free time and mental energy to recover increasingly difficult opportunities.

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