Promoting Well-Being Through Healthy Supervision: Current Knowledge and Future Directions

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It was quite a shock to walk in and see my supervisor lying on a stretcher. The best boss I’d ever had was leaving our worksite in an ambulance. Was he having a heart attack? Would he be alright? Would we ever see him again?

Fortunately my boss recovered from what was diagnosed as tachycardia. I later learned that the tachycardia had come on after a shocking episode of mistreatment by his unscrupulous manager. That and other incidents sensitised me to the profound influence supervisors can have on their employees. Years earlier, I too had experienced supervisor-induced strain, though not as dramatic as my boss’s. While working for my first and worst supervisor, I spent many a Sunday dreading returning to work on Monday. And, in another organization, I worked in close quarters with a Type-A boss. During the workday my chest would inexplicably tighten while working within what I dubbed my boss’s “stress aura.” Later, as a doctoral student, I was puzzled when I noticed there was nothing in management and supervision textbooks on the effects I’d witnessed. I made it my mission to address that gap, and I’ve been working on that off and on for about ten years now.

What Have We Learned About The Health Effects Of Supervisor Behaviour?

From the earliest empirical results in the late 1970’s to the present, studies have been consistent in finding that supervisor behaviour is associated with employee well-being. Employees working for supervisors who are considerate and supportive are more likely to have good psychological health. Employees working for less considerate, less supportive, or abusive supervisors are likely to suffer from psychological and physical strain. However, it’s important to note that a broad range of supervisor behaviours is associated with employee well-being. Mundane supervisor behaviours such as organising work and providing resources are also important. Even whether supervisors admit it when they make a mistake is associated with employee stress!

Supervisors affect employees’ job stress and health in at least two ways. First, they can be a source of stress for employees. Supervisors who micromanage, communicate poorly, who are disorganised, or who show no discernable interest in their employees as human beings add to the amount of workplace stress employees must attempt to deal with. Second, supervisors can be stress moderators, helping employees cope with stressful work events or making events more stressful. An empathic supervisor who is a good listener can help an employee wind down after a stressful encounter with a customer. Conversely, the supervisor could increase the employee’s stress level by chiding the employee for not handling the situation better.

Supervisors’ influence on employee well-being is amplified by their position power. They determine who gets which work projects, who gets training, and who gets pay raises. They also—through their discussions with upper-management—affect perceptions of employees’ promotability and value to the organization. That is why—for many employees—the supervisor is the most important work factor affecting their well-being.
What We Need to Know

So this much is clear: supervisors are a potentially significant influence on worker well-being. But what else do we need to know? I’ve identified seven questions that should be answered to gain a better understanding of supervisor behaviour and its health effects.

What Categories of Supervisor Behaviour Affect Employee Well-Being?

Although a variety of supervisor behaviours have been linked to employee stress, we don’t have a good understanding of the underlying performance dimensions. What are the categories of supervisor behaviour that affect employee well-being? This is important because categories will provide more clarity than long lists of disparate behaviours. It will be easier, for example, to train supervisors about important types of behaviour they should attend to rather than to say something like “Here are 63 employee-stress-related behaviours you should be mindful of.” Fortunately several teams of researchers are currently working to identify relevant performance dimensions, and findings are forthcoming.

How Are Health-Related Behaviours Related to Overall Performance?

Once we have an understanding of the categories of supervisor behaviour that reduce stress and promote well-being, we need to establish how they are related to supervisors’ job performance. That need was highlighted during a discussion I had with a rather testy human resource manager. We’d been discussing her organization’s efforts to promote employee health. After 20 minutes of hearing about the organization’s health initiatives, I mentioned that supervisor consideration is also important for employee well-being. Apparently I touched a nerve I didn’t know was there, because it was as if an iron curtain dropped between us. The HR manager said something to the effect that “we don’t have time to be nice to employees; we’ve got production schedules to meet.” Although I attempted to raise the curtain a bit by assuring the manager that getting tasks done was certainly essential (coincident with treating employees decently), I never was able to re-establish any rapport or productive dialogue.

That incident suggests it would be worthwhile to study how well-being-related supervisor behaviour relates to supervisors’ overall job performance. For example, it would be helpful to establish that supervisors who manage in a way that has positive effects on employee well-being are also more likely to be viewed as effective by their managers. At the very least it could be helpful to show that supervisors who are “nice” to employees aren’t less effective—from an upper-management perspective—than their more hard-driving peers.

What Are the Bottom-Line Effects of Healthy Supervision?

Unfortunately some organisations won’t do much to humanize work until they’re convinced that to do so will be of benefit. For that type of organization, arguing that bad supervisors take a toll on employees’ quality of life isn’t enough; we need to show how poor supervision affects profits. This is true of all occupational-health interventions; being able to show positive financial impact will give us greater ability to persuade organizational decision makers to invest in employee-health initiatives. However, most of us have read admonishments that we need to show the bottom-line impact of what we do, so I’m wary about repeating that truism. And I feel some ambivalence because I know the kind of damage bad supervisors can do, and I don’t see why that has to be translated into dollars, pounds, or euros. Yet I would appreciate having persuasive statistics to use when needed (e.g., “employees working for poor supervisors are absent 22% more often, ill 11% more, and have 13% more accidents”). A few studies have provided those types of statistics, but more data would be helpful.

To What Degree Does Supervisor Behaviour Affect Physical Health?

It would be helpful to know more about the effects of supervisor behaviour on physical health. A clever study by Wager, Fieldman, and Hussey found that nurses’ blood pressure tended to go up when they were around a supervisor they didn’t like, and went down when they were in the...
presence of a supervisor they liked and considered fair. Findings like that are salient and bring more attention to supervisors’ effects.

**What Other Outcomes Are Affected by Supervisor Behaviour?**

It would be interesting to know how supervisor behaviour relates to some not-yet-explored outcomes. For example, nurturing supervisors who build employees’ job self-efficacy and organization-based self-esteem may also increase employees’ global self-esteem and cause long-term changes in employees’ self-concept, goals, and behaviour.

Other variables await attention. One outcome that seems worth investigating is presenteeism. Employees who have a good supervisor experience less stress, allowing them to focus more on doing their job and less on “managing stress.” Organizations presumably are interested in maximizing the percentage of employees’ cognitive energy devoted to work, so results showing that positive supervisor behaviour reduces presenteeism should be of interest.

**Can Supervisor Behaviour Be Changed?**

We are on the verge of being able to describe what healthy supervision is, but we also need to know how amenable supervisor behaviour is to shaping and improvement. Will we be able to change supervisor behaviour to make it more conducive to employee well-being? It seems likely to be difficult to change ingrained supervisory patterns, so it’s essential to know the types of interventions that will improve supervisors’ behaviour and increase employee well-being.

There are some grounds for guarded optimism. Gill and colleagues, for example, achieved some success in altering Type-A behaviour patterns through a well-planned and comprehensive intervention. Similar programs could be designed to change supervisor behaviour. However, because few organizations are likely to implement such a rigorous behaviour-change regimen, it would be good to determine how to select people who will supervise in a healthy manner. To what degree can we forecast how candidates for a supervisory position will behave once they’re in the position? This, too, needs research attention.

**What Are the Antecedents of Healthy Supervisor Behaviour?**

Supervisors don’t operate in a vacuum. They are influenced by their organization’s culture, rewards, and stressors. It’s not difficult to understand how otherwise humane supervisors could become less patient, empathic, and participative when they are experiencing a great deal of stress. So we need to know more about the antecedents and moderators of healthy supervisor behaviour. What organizational variables should be addressed to bring about the type of supervision we’d like to see? Although this could entail some intimidating research designs, supervisors themselves should be able to shed quite a bit of light on what organizational factors most influence their behaviour.

**Conclusion**

Let me conclude with a couple of observations. First, I’ve noticed that researchers focusing on other independent variables but who also include a measure of supervisor behaviour in their research often seem surprised when supervisor behaviour ends up having strong associations with their well-being-related independent variables, often stronger than their focal variables. From my vantage point, I would be surprised if supervisor behaviour didn’t have
significant effects on well-being. Second, I’ve found that there’s quite a bit of interest in the effects of supervisor behaviour. Although U.S.-based leadership researchers I talk with about the topic typically react with what amounts to a big yawn of disinterest, I’ve been gratified by the response from practitioners everywhere and from researchers outside the U.S. Although there’s still plenty of work to be done, it shouldn’t be too difficult to justify the need for more work aimed at improving supervisor behaviour. I hope some of you will join me in this work.

**Bibliography**


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