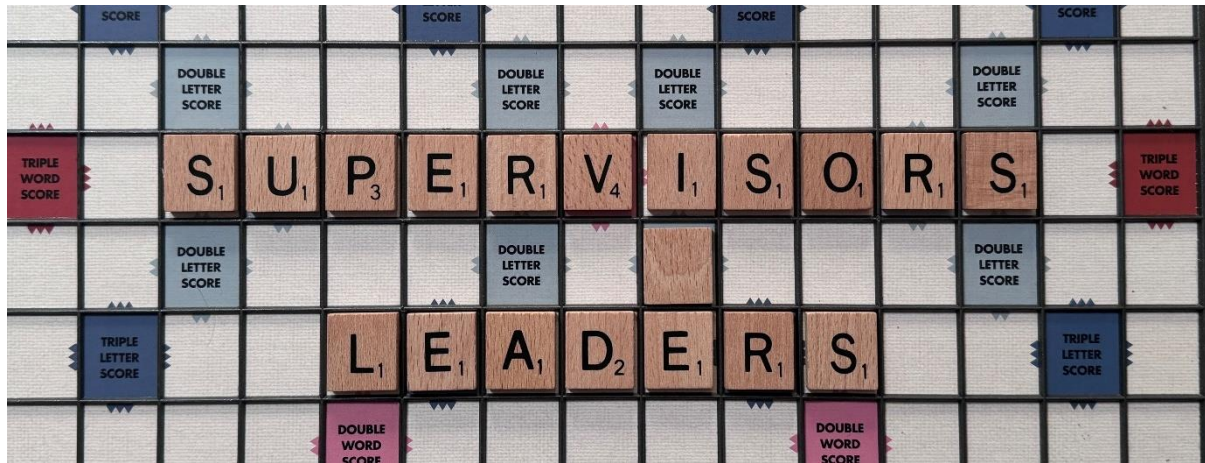# When Do We Need Supervisors or Leaders as Managers?

Shôn Ellerton, September 16, 2024

In this piece, I discuss when it is appropriate to have a supervisor or a leader as a manager.

A question that pops up from time to time is this.

When do our managers need to be *leaders* or *supervisors*?

One could argue that managers need to be both leaders *and* supervisors, but this is not generally the case. It largely depends on the kind of role the manager is taking and what kind of people they are managing.

I think all of us would agree that managers are there to manage their staff. Good managers are there to ensure that, not only business requirements are met, but the staff's welfare and safety is suited for, to intervene only when necessary, and, in general, to maintain harmony within the unit.

So, what are leaders and what are supervisors?

The definitions may vary from individual to individual, but allow me to share my opinion on what they mean and stand for.

The role of the s*upervisor* is essentially simple and straightforward. To direct the team on what to do. To pass down policy information to staff. To divvy out work across the team. Supervisors are not expected to seek counsel from staff whether it is to collect knowledge to improve the business or gain valuable insights on how to deliver projects more efficiently. Supervisors work one way, from top down, with instructions adhered to at all times.

The world of the supervisor is dictated largely by policy and policy alone. In other words, by the book.

Now, at first glance, this could be perceived as a bad thing, but let's explore some examples in which the world of the supervisor is eminently fit for.

The obvious examples tend to be where safety is of paramount concern. For example, the police force and health services. A manager of a nursing outpatient unit will be of a supervisory capacity. Nurses are simply told what to do or what not to do. Another example might be the PICOW (person in charge of works) during maintenance or some civil engineering project where engineers and workers are working in a live railway corridor. Having done PTS (personal track safety training) myself during a former career, I know full too well how dangerous these environments are. PICOWs are well-known for barking orders and are not to be questioned. And for good reason. The safety of the team relies on this supervisory role.

The scope of the supervisor is not to think of the 'big picture' or get involved with strategy. In the above examples, it wouldn't be appropriate to assign any other role *but* one of a supervisory nature. A supervisor must be laser-focussed on the task at hand to ensure that requirements are met, even if resorting to micromanagement.

As with leaders, which I will discuss next, not everyone is cut out to being a supervisor. Supervisors are, by and large, policy people, and follow a set of codes with the utmost loyalty and without question, even if logic and context is flawed in the decision process. It's the old, 'Hey, I don't make the rules' ploy.

Supervisors, however, tend to fail miserably when managing white-collar workers in strategic or solution-finding roles. Moreover, they also fail in establishing effective roles in the military during warfare for the one reason that, in war, there are no real rules. In warfare, leaders are required, because policy can be thrown straight out of the window during situations of uncontrolled conditions.

Let's move on to *leaders*.

What distinguishes leaders and supervisors?

Simple.

Leaders are people-oriented. Supervisors are policy-oriented.

To be an effective leader, that person must be able to think outside of the box and not blindly follow a set of processes without thinking contextually.

Why?

Because leaders are required in strategic positions, being the vehicle to pass knowledge both ways from workers to upper management. This is why managers with supervisory characters fail to be effective managers in corporate management. They are not meant to be in these roles because they are unable or unwilling to learn from their employees because they are so doggedly tasked with pushing policies and instructions from top to bottom.

Take, for example, an IT consultancy, a good example of a white-collar strategic environment. IT consultants are hired by clients to devise and implement solutions to remedy IT-related problems. In such problems, there is usually no right or wrong, but rather, best fit compromise solutions. Arriving at these solutions often requires a complex set of thinking skills.

In these situations, a manager with supervisory characteristics will be a total disaster, especially one without the skills possessed by his or her staff. However, a leader, even a leader *without* any of the skill sets of the staff, will exhibit the ability to think strategically, passing knowledge *both ways* in the business.

Now, let's move on to *leaders*.

Leaders will back up their team to the best of their abilities, whereas supervisors will simply dictate policy and issue instruction without being challenged, even if the challenge is worthy of noting for the improvement of the group or organisation. Leaders are also required to manage in those environments in which hardened rules and policies may no longer apply, for example, in a wartime or some other survival situation. Leaders in these situations must be able to make important decisions on the fly but in order to do this, they may have to set policies aside and think intuitively and act resourcefully. Those with a supervisor mindset are *not* the kind of people who can fill the shoes of a leader.

Managers who are leaders tend to be highly respected within their teams and units. Leaders want others to take carriage of their own leadership skills. Equally so, employees who are under the management of a good leader will earn respect from the leader by being able to display leadership and resilience.

Leaders are openly very secure people who are not easily drawn into the toxic world of micromanagement. They are comfortable in their role and only tend to intervene in day-to-day matters when required. They are the 'transparent glue' that binds the team with the organisation, an important function that works both up and down the hierarchy in passing valuable insights and knowledge for the betterment of the group. Leaders are not afraid of being challenged by the team and the team placed under the leader is not intimidated or bullied into suppressing valuable feedback within the team.

A leader also shows courage by challenging and asking questions to upper management should the need arise. Those in upper management who do not like to be challenged, or those possessing the mindset of a mere supervisor, generally tend not to stick around for long in those organisations which are successful with staff retention and employee satisfaction. Supervisor-type managers unable to think outside the box in very high positions are a threat to the stability of any organisation. Their unfortunate rise to such positions often comes about from nepotism or next-in-line transition much like some of our not-so-successful world leaders past and present.

My experience as a first-time manager in an engineering consultancy gave me some valuable self-reflection on the way I perceived others and how others perceived me. My first gut-reaction, and one that most newbie managers make, is to go down the supervisory route. I had displayed traits of needing the team's approval, a common trait shared by insecure or newbie managers. However, I quickly learned that this approach would have been a total disaster in a team run by engineering consultants.

To conclude this piece, we need to appreciate the differences between managers of a supervisory and a leadership-type role. In society, we need both types, however, it is especially important to choose the *right* one depending on the requirements of the role.