

## Supervisory Power



**My ranch foreman was selling beer and sodas at a high profit margin. He would coerce workers into buying from him. I don't drink alcohol so I asked for a soda. "The sodas are for the women," he informed me. "You will have to buy a beer." I refused. When the farm owner took a week's vacation, the foreman retaliated and fired me.**

### Central Valley Farm Worker

The term *supervisor* has two connotations: (1) a specific level in the management hierarchy, usually somewhere between the farm manager and the foreman; and (2) any person who has responsibility for directing and facilitating the performance of one or more persons—regardless of their management level. In this and the next few chapters, we will focus on the latter.

Organizational charts are useful in illustrating working relationships in an

organization. Organizational dynamics are seldom limited by official line boundaries, though. Some farming operations are small enough to be operated by a single person or by a partnership where both persons are equally accountable to each other. Figure 12–1 represents a simple organization with a farmer who supervises three workers with no intermediate supervisory levels. Figure 12–2 shows a larger agricultural

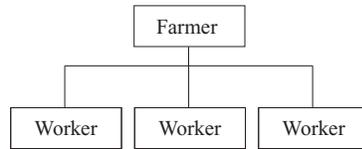


FIGURE 12-1  
Simple organization.

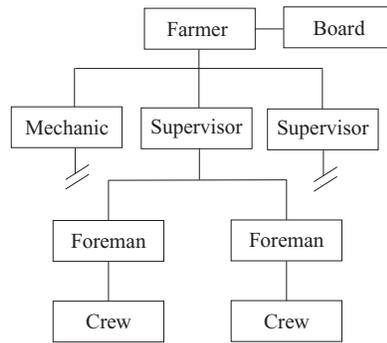


FIGURE 12-2  
Multi-level organization.

enterprise with three levels of supervision. Changes in complexity are most abrupt when an organization expands to one layer of supervision from none, and from one layer to two layers of supervision. Additional layers of supervision also add complexity.

How successfully supervisors facilitate the performance of others

*For supervisors to be effective, responsibility and power must be balanced.*

depends on their ability to influence subordinates. Regardless of the management responsibilities delegated to supervisors, the issue of matching responsibility with power is always relevant. We begin with a brief overview of the sources of supervisory power. Next, the power held by a supervisor as he acts as an interpreter, or communicator, between organizational levels is explored. We conclude by discussing abuse of power and measures to prevent abuse of authority.

## SOURCES OF POWER

Supervisors and workers alike bring a certain amount of power to the job. Powerful supervisors are more likely to be able to influence subordinates. But where does this power come from?

A supervisor's power is affected by the perceived value of a host of factors, contributions, or *inputs*,<sup>1</sup> such as a person's:

- leadership position
- education
- seniority
- skill, ability, and knowledge
- friendliness and interpersonal skills
- charisma
- gender
- race
- nationality
- attractiveness

Organizational scholars<sup>2</sup> often divide these factors into (1) *organizational* and (2) *personal* power bases.

*Organizational Power.* Supervisors have several tools available to facilitate and manage the performance of others. In theory, supervisors play a role in every aspect of labor management, including job design, employee selection, evaluation, pay, orientation, training and development, worker involvement and discipline. In practice, high-level managers may not take advantage of the full array of options to manage employees (such as the right to use practical tests in the selection process). At lower levels, supervisors may be more limited. For instance, a crew leader may be allowed to hire workers but not permitted to fire them



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without first checking with higher management.

For supervisors to be effective, responsibility and power must be balanced. It is difficult to hold a supervisor responsible if she does not have the authority to reward superior work or discipline poor performance. Many supervisors feel as if they have to act with one hand tied behind their backs. At the other extreme, unchecked organizational power can lead to a potentially more serious problem—abuse of power.

*Personal Influence.* Personal power is brought to the job by the incumbent rather than given to the supervisor by the organization.

## THE SUPERVISOR AS AN INTERPRETER

With added layers of supervision, the role of the supervisor becomes more complex. Communication challenges may increase. Essential information passes through agricultural supervisors. It may be directed up or down the organization toward the farmer or employees. The supervisor is placed in a

powerful position as he acts as an interpreter between organizational levels. The proper handling of messages can make a difference between a smooth running operation and one full of conflict.

Messages sometimes get distorted in the process. A communication game you have probably played consists of quickly passing a message along from one person to the next. One person makes a statement and whispers it to her neighbor who, in turn, passes it on. The final message seldom bears any resemblance to the original. The greater the number of people a message must travel through, the greater the chances of distortion. While in the game the outcome is often comical, message distortions are seldom amusing in an organizational context.

Language barriers may be an additional source of possible distortions (see Sidebar 14-2). Consider the sign at a national park warning backpackers of dangerously swift waters. A deadly waterfall lies meters away. In English, the sign admonishes those with any doubts to throw a leaf into the water to check the velocity of the current. The same sign, translated into Spanish, says:

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*When the supervisor is angry at the grower, mistrusts him, or feels his main loyalty is to the workers, he is more likely to misrepresent the farmer. Supervisors also may misrepresent messages arising from an unpopular employee, or one that threatens the supervisor's sense of power or control.*

“Danger: to see how fast the water is flowing, throw yourself as if you were a leaf into the water.”

When carefully crafted, written communication may help reduce distortions. Official bulletins or newsletters can often dispel unwanted rumors. Providing all communications to workers in writing is seldom a practical option, however. Also, upward flowing communication is less likely to be put in writing.

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Supervisors often “take the heat” that farmers and workers direct at each other. Some supervisors handle the job of “interpreter” between organizational levels better than others. Let us look at a few examples of how messages may get distorted as they pass from one level to another.

#### Case # 1

Miyoko is the owner of a peach orchard. Last year she had to pay a premium piece rate because of the sparse fruit set. This year there is a bumper crop and workers can make substantially more per hour if they work at the same pace—even if the price per bucket is lower. Miyoko explained this situation to her foreman Pete who, in turn, must transmit the information to the crew.

“The boss says this year you guys get 50 cents less per bin,” Pete told crew members as they showed up to work. When the pickers did not move, he told them, “You heard me,” and then under his breath, but still audible, “I only work here.” Pete clearly did not communicate the message Miyoko had intended the workers to receive.

#### Case # 2

Bárbara Gutiérrez was the only one in her family with a driver’s license. When her daughter had an upcoming

doctor’s appointment, Bárbara approached Rojas, the foreman, and asked for permission to leave early on the day of the appointment. Rojas was less than enthusiastic in representing Bárbara’s need to the grower. Not surprisingly, the permission was not granted. On the day of the appointment, Bárbara worked harder than usual and finished the day’s assignment early, assuming permission had been approved. She found out her request was denied as she prepared to leave.

#### Case # 3

Larry, a dairy farmer, went into the milking parlor. The milker, Arturo, was not post-dipping the cows’ teats. When Larry found the herd manager, his displeasure was clearly visible: “Arturo is worthless. I just won’t be able to keep him if he doesn’t shape up . . . let him know I’m pretty upset with his work.”

There are multiple ways a supervisor could transmit the message from the dairy farmer to the milker:

1) *The way it happened*: “Arturo, the boss came in here quite upset and said he had had it with you because you were not teat dipping. The boss said you would be worthless to him if you don’t shape up.”

2) *Adding spice*: “Arturo, you should’ve seen the boss!” (The herdsman pauses for effect and grins.) “He came in here screaming that you were a no-good worthless milker ‘cause you don’t teat dip.’ Boy, you should’ve seen his face. It looked like his new [red] pickup.”

3) *Subtracting a little spice*: “Arturo. The boss came in to speak to me. He asked that I convey his displeasure because you are not teat dipping. If this happens again, he will probably have to suspend you or let you go.”

4) *Subtracting too much*: “Arturo. The boss was upset again because you weren’t teat dipping. You know how he is, though, he’ll probably forget about it by tomorrow.”

Which of these four approaches is the most accurate reflection of the farmer’s message to the worker? Probably the third approach. The milker

found out the dairy farmer was upset, yet the message was changed from a personal attack (Arturo is worthless) to a depersonalized issue—one addressing performance expectations and outcomes. Message #4 was not only watered down, it was almost an apology. Message #1 might have been accurate but was more descriptive than it needed to be. Message #2 was an outright exaggeration.

Farmers can take active steps to prevent communication problems by giving supervisors a thorough job orientation and regular guidance thereafter. Supervisors need to understand (1) they are part of management; yet (2) loyalty to management does not mean being unfair to workers. It is vital that supervisors feel comfortable representing both farm employer's and farm worker's perspectives to the other. When this is the case, foremen are less likely to either minimize the importance of, or apologize for, the messages transmitted. Along with this training, first-line supervisors need to be treated as part of management and exposed to upper management's integrity firsthand. Also, supervisors should not be put in a position of communicating to workers information they themselves do not totally understand, or of always communicating "the bad news."

## ABUSE OF POWER AND AUTHORITY

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Society, as well as an organization, could not function without at least some level of obedience and compliance. There is, however, great variation in the levels of compliance—and levels of authoritarianism—shown by individuals.

No discussion about power is complete without a warning to those who hold it: When power is abused, sooner or later it is lost. This may happen gradually or be expedited by a sense of social justice. Ironically, the best way of preserving power is by valuing those inputs held by others (also see Chapter 14). The supervisor who wants to preserve the benefits of both

organizational power and personal influence must use his power for the common benefit of the workers and the organization.

In an organizational context, abuse of authority may be narrowly defined as the use of organizational or personal power to (1) belittle, abuse, or take advantage of another, or (2) influence people to do what they may later regret.

*First-line supervisors need to be treated as part of management and exposed to upper management's integrity firsthand.*

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*Workers value being treated with 'respeto' (respect) and good manners. Anything short of this can easily turn into an abusive incident or relationship.*

A broader definition of abuse of power may encompass undue pressure or influence to obtain even admirable results through coercion. Thus, supervisors who have achieved excellent organizational results may not be respected if their methods are not sensitive to worker needs.

You will have little difficulty thinking of historical settings, as well as organizational ones, where individuals have abused the power they held. Abuse of power by a supervisor may include abusive behavior, sexual or racial harassment, showing favoritism to

friends or family members, and stealing from workers.

Workers value being treated with *respeto* (respect) and good manners. Anything short of this can easily turn into an abusive incident or relationship. It is so important to catch abuse of authority situations before they get out of hand, when farm employers have more choices to make. Possible measures may include offering training or counseling. Once these situations have progressed too far, the choices may narrow to the point that the only viable alternative calls for employee termination.

*Abusive behavior*<sup>3</sup> is a broad category that may include verbal, emotional or physical violence. Some foremen try and build distance from the workers by humiliating or devaluing them, or by attempting to appear superior. The latter is sometimes accomplished through insults. For example, a female supervisor offended some of the men who worked for her by questioning their masculinity. Another supervisor told a woman, "You must be a really good cook!" "Not really, why do you say that?" she cheerfully inquired. "Because you certainly are no good as an employee," he retorted. Yet another worker was told, "Why do you ask for a break, don't you know Cesar Chávez is dead?" One foreman would keep his people moving by waiting until they almost finished the row, and when they were close to the bathrooms and the water that were hooked up to the pickup, he would move the pickup to the opposite end of the row.

Often workers may not say anything to a supervisor who has offended them. A supervisor told an employee to shut up if he wanted the job. After four weeks the worker quit. Another worker quit, even after his supervisor apologized about how he corrected him. One supervisor explained that in her youthful inexperience she scolded one of the Mexican employees in front of the crew. This turned into a nasty verbal exchange and eventually the worker would not talk to her anymore. The grower suggested a public apology, which worked out well. This case had a

positive ending, as eventually they ended up being good friends. More importantly, this and other supervisors reported that they had learned not to be so verbally explosive.

Other workers are more direct in expressing their feelings. “I talked to [my foreman] right away without bad language but with a firm voice, and he did listen.” Sometimes it was tit-for-tat loudness. “I told him not to embarrass me in front of other workers. He asked me to follow him away from the crew and told me that people would not respect him otherwise. I told him this was his problem and that we should get the manager involved, to which he refused.” By offering this as a suggestion, the worker was telling the supervisor that he felt he had a source of power, if reason alone was not sufficient to put the problem to rest.

Workers prefer to be spoken to in a calm way (slower speed, low volume). They are offended by scolding, harsh words, shouting, angry, quick speech and finger snapping. They dislike foremen who come to work in a surly or bad mood, or use vulgar, profane or foul language. Workers are also hurt when they are corrected through put-downs, criticized about trivial details, or threatened. Criticism is especially painful when it is considered unfair, when workers feel they do not have control over results, or when action is taken against them without the opportunity to give an explanation. Poor supervisors may be impatient, rush through explanations, or dislike being asked questions. Furthermore, workers are concerned about possible foreman reprisals. It has been suggested that farm employers exercise care in selecting foremen and that these foremen be trained to treat workers well, give orders properly, avoid acting superior, not shout at or scold workers, and know how to perform the job well themselves.

*Sexual harassment* involves unwanted sexual attention. It may be directed towards men or women by someone of the opposite (or even the same) sex. Sexual harassment is often classified as either (1) *quid pro quo*

harassment, or (2) hostile work environment.

*Quid pro quo* means to interchange something for something else, such as sexual favors in return for a job or for a raise. A *hostile work environment* may involve anything from a poster display of skimpily clad females, to jokes or physical contact of a sexual nature, to leering.

Kurt would not be guilty of sexual harassment for asking Tamara out to a dinner date or a movie, even if he is refused. It becomes sexual harassment if Kurt insists, despite the rejections. The term *unwanted* means, in theory, the person receiving sexual attention shares in the responsibility of letting others know what is offensive.

Sexually explicit jokes, obscenity, and revealing posters, however, are *always* in bad taste—even if no one seems to object (the same can be said of profane, sexist, or racist language). Nor should anyone assume it okay to solicit, or sexually touch another, or to act in an immoral way—because they have not been told it is unwanted.

A good management policy is to ask employees to leave romantic interests for after work hours. A special danger exists where a supervisor dates a subordinate. It is almost impossible to avoid appearances of favoritism. If the relationship breaks up, it is too easy for supervisors to retaliate—or give the impression of doing so.

*Favoritism* involves giving preferential treatment to family members, friends or employees from the same region in Mexico, for example, in hiring, assigning jobs, payment, or handling other employment decisions.

*Dishonesty*. There are many forms of dishonesty, including directly or indirectly stealing from the farmer or workers. As an example, recall the foreman who made workers buy beer or soda from him (in the chapter introduction). Some foremen have been known to charge employees for the job, either to be paid on a one-time or ongoing basis. Foremen can also be victims of abuse of authority that comes from higher up in the organization.

Why is it so many people, unlike the farm worker who refused to buy the beer, obey when they feel coerced? Social psychologist Stanley Milgram researched the effect of authority on obedience. He concluded people obey either out of fear or out of a desire to appear cooperative—even when acting against their own better judgment and desires. Milgram’s classic yet controversial experiment (such human subjects experiments would not be allowed to be carried out today, Sidebar 12–1) illustrates people’s reluctance to confront those who abuse power.<sup>4</sup>

Groups can also exert peer pressure on individuals and urge them into compliance. Under what circumstances have you felt vulnerable to peer pressure?

You may think it is easier to challenge authority when several people stand together against injustice. Yet, in some instances, research shows each individual feels her responsibility to act is diluted, “Why doesn’t someone do something?” Thus, many may witness an abusive event while hoping someone

else will put a stop to it. The larger the group, the more paralyzed people may feel.<sup>5</sup>

## PREVENTING ABUSE OF POWER

A point worth repeating is that power is not static. A person’s authority is always in a state of flux. One who abuses either organizational or personal power will eventually lose it. Unfortunately, before losing power, a person may cause much damage to individuals and to the enterprise he works for. Managers who demonstrate they will not abuse their power often obtain a greater following.

Action against abuse of power can be taken from the perspective of the organization, the supervisor, or the individual. Policies put into action to minimize abuse of power infractions can do much to safeguard the morale of an organization. In the specific case of sexual harassment, farmers who have not developed a policy guarding against

### SIDEBAR 12–1

#### Obedience to Authority<sup>6</sup>

Milgram recruited subjects for his experiments from various walks in life. Respondents were told the experiment would study the effects of punishment on learning ability. They were offered a token cash award for participating. Although respondents thought they had an equal chance of playing the role of a student or of a teacher, the process was rigged so all respondents ended up playing the teacher. The learner was an actor working as a cohort of the experimenter.

“Teachers” were asked to administer increasingly severe electric shocks to the “learner” when questions were answered incorrectly. In reality, the only electric shocks delivered in the experiment were single 45-volt shock samples given to each teacher. This was done to give teachers a feeling for the jolts they thought they would be discharging.

Shock levels were labeled from 15 to 450 volts. Besides the numerical scale, verbal anchors added to the frightful appearance of the instrument. Beginning from the lower end, jolt levels were labeled: “slight shock,” “moderate shock,” “strong shock,” “very strong shock,” “intense shock,” and “extreme intensity shock.” The next two anchors were “Danger: Severe Shock,” and, past that, a simple but ghastly “XXX.”

In response to the supposed jolts, the “learner” (actor) would begin to grunt at 75 volts; complain at 120 volts; ask to be released at 150 volts; plead with increasing vigor, next; and let out agonized screams at 285 volts. Eventually, in desperation, the learner was to yell loudly and complain of heart pain.

At some point the actor would refuse to answer any more questions. Finally, at 330 volts the actor would be totally silent—that is, if any of the

## SIDEBAR 12-1 (CONTINUED)

teacher participants got so far without rebelling first.

Teachers were instructed to treat silence as an incorrect answer and apply the next shock level to the student.

If at any point the innocent teacher hesitated to inflict the shocks, the experimenter would pressure him to proceed. Such demands would take the form of increasingly severe statements, such as “The experiment *requires* that you continue.”

What do you think was the average voltage given by teachers before they refused to administer further shocks? What percentage of teachers, if any, do you think went up to the maximum voltage of 450?

*Results from the experiment.* Some teachers refused to continue with the shocks early on, despite urging from the experimenter. This is the type of response Milgram expected as the norm. But Milgram was surprised to find those who questioned authority were in the minority. Sixty-five percent (65%) of the teachers were willing to progress to the maximum voltage level.

Participants demonstrated a range of negative emotions about continuing. Some pleaded with the learner, asking the actor to answer questions carefully. Others started to laugh nervously and act strangely in diverse ways. Some subjects appeared cold, hopeless, somber, or arrogant. Some thought they had killed the learner. Nevertheless, participants continued to obey, discharging the full shock to learners. One man who wanted to abandon the experiment was told the experiment must continue. Instead of challenging the decision of the experimenter, he proceeded, repeating to himself, “It’s got to go on, it’s got to go on.”

Milgram’s experiment included a number of variations. In one, the learner was not only visible but teachers were asked to force the learner’s hand to the shock plate so they could deliver the punishment. Less obedience was extracted from subjects

in this case. In another variation, teachers were instructed to apply whatever voltage they desired to incorrect answers. Teachers averaged 83 volts, and only 2.5 percent of participants used the full 450 volts available. This shows most participants were good, average people, not evil individuals. They obeyed only under coercion.

In general, more submission was elicited from “teachers” when (1) the authority figure was in close proximity; (2) teachers felt they could pass on responsibility to others; and (3) experiments took place under the auspices of a respected organization.

Participants were debriefed after the experiment and showed much relief at finding they had not harmed the student. One cried from emotion when he saw the student alive, and explained that he thought he had killed him. So, what was different about those who obeyed and those who rebelled? Milgram divided participants into three categories:

*Obeded but justified themselves.*

Some obedient participants gave up responsibility for their actions, blaming the experimenter. If anything had happened to the learner, they reasoned, it would have been the experimenter’s fault. Others had transferred the blame to the learner: “He was so stupid and stubborn he deserved to be shocked.”

*Obeded but blamed themselves.*

Others felt badly about what they had done and were quite harsh on themselves. Members of this group would, perhaps, be more likely to challenge authority if confronted with a similar situation in the future.

*Rebelled.* Finally, rebellious subjects questioned the authority of the experimenter and argued there was a greater ethical imperative calling for the protection of the learner over the needs of the experimenter. Some of these individuals felt they were accountable to a higher authority.

Why were those who challenged authority in the minority? So entrenched is obedience it may void personal codes of conduct.




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this type of abuse may end up sharing legal liability for wrongdoing committed by supervisors, or others, on the ranch.

#### **Organizational measures:**

(1) Conduct *training* to sensitize supervisors and subordinates to issues of abuse of power. Relevant cases, articles, or materials, such as a review of Milgram's experiment, can be used to stimulate conversation.

(2) Develop a *grievance procedure* to open channels of communication on abuse of authority. In a grievance procedure, an employee can take a complaint to her supervisor or, if the supervisor is the perpetrator, to a higher level. In effective grievance plans, workers know how to use the procedure, complaints are taken seriously, and charges are handled in confidence. Protests are expedited, letting the grievant know the status of her complaint. Grievances are mediated or arbitrated in a fair and impartial manner. It is difficult for an inexperienced in-house investigator, as well intentioned as he may be, to look at grievances impartially. This is why it often pays to hire an outsider who does not know the parties involved.

To show their good faith, some organizations provide for outside binding arbitration as a final step for

grievances. This may be a critical step to the success of a grievance process, motivating managers to arbitrate grievances in an impartial manner. Some cases are especially suited for mediation, instead.

(3) Establish a *disciplinary* process for clear violations (Chapter 21).

(4) *Rotate* the supervisory role where practical. Supervisors who know they will go back to "being one of the gang" are less likely to abuse power than those more permanently entrenched in their positions.

A Canadian HR consultant had a client use a similar concept to deal with a rude supervisor. She suggested the bad-mannered supervisor exchange jobs with his own assistant, and as a result, when the supervisor in question returned to his position, he behaved and performed to the manager's utmost satisfaction, and employee morale rose to an all-time high. It seems that the supervisor himself caught a vision of the process and had people under his own supervision rotate jobs, too. This tactic can help awaken people before it is too late. There were further benefits from the rotation, such as an added respect for what others did, improved organizational communications, team work, and an increase in excitement associated with the challenge and learning opportunities.<sup>7</sup>

Although ideal, such rotations are not always practical. Another type of rotation, where several crew leaders are employed, may simply mean rotating crew leaders from one crew to another from time to time. Employees are less likely to be fearful of a crew leader when they get to know a number of supervisors to whom they can bring concerns, when they arise.

(5) Set up a *business ethics committee* composed of management and other personnel. Here, questionable actions may be reviewed, or brought up and discussed before they are implemented.

(6) Avoid *appearances of wrongdoing* by not having supervisors make decisions possibly representing a conflict of interest (e.g., hiring family members or friends).

**Supervisor measures:**

(1) *Train* subordinates through word and example on the importance of being true to their own feelings. Advise employees they are not expected to carry out an order they feel is unethical. Supervisors can ask employees to speak up if they feel a course of action—even one they are not asked to participate in—appears unprincipled. Likewise, if a supervisor is asked to participate in a questionable activity, he should not ask a subordinate to carry it out. On one occasion I had a subordinate who suggested I not take a direction I was planning because it did not match the high principles she knew I held. She saved me from having committed an error. In contrast, after a misunderstanding, another subordinate lied to someone on my behalf. In the process of straightening and correcting the misunderstanding, she had to suffer the shame of having it known that she had lied, and I had to suffer the sadness of having her think I *wanted* her to lie.

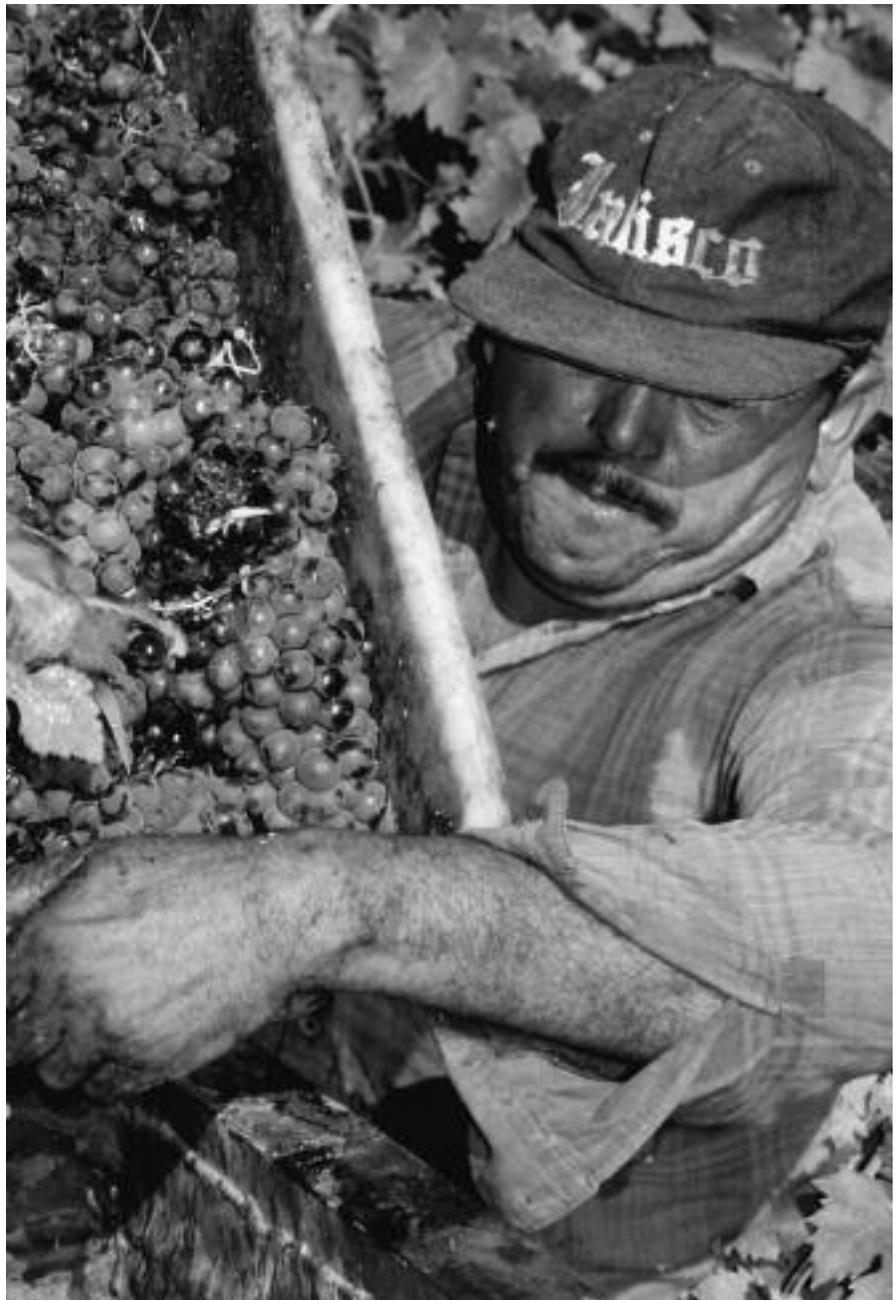
(2) Supervisors can *show sensitivity* to worker feelings and express appreciation for employees who display alternative views about how things ought to be done.

**Individual measures:**

(1) *Listen carefully* to the request and ask questions to clarify any doubts about what is being asked. Decent, honorable people may have different opinions about the ethics of particular behavior.

(2) Ask for *time* to consider a request, rather than feel pressured to decide on the spot. This approach often leads others to reconsider the validity of their request, also.

(3) Build *positive coping skills* to deal with difficult situations. It is hard to say “no” to peers, supervisors, or others who may exert coercive pressure. Individuals can learn to stand up for what is right in a diplomatic way. For instance, saying, “I do not feel comfortable doing . . .,” is normally preferable to “that’s wrong.” Give the supervisor the benefit of the doubt—he



may not have considered the implications of the request.

(4) Offer a *different alternative* if there is a viable one, or ask the supervisor to think of another approach. Supervisors are less likely to see individuals as obstinate, rigid, and stubborn when alternatives can be explored.

(5) *Stand firm* in your convictions if there are no real alternatives. Individuals do not have to follow a questionable course of action they will regret later.

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*Rotate crew leaders from one crew to another from time to time.*

### STANDING FIRM<sup>8</sup>

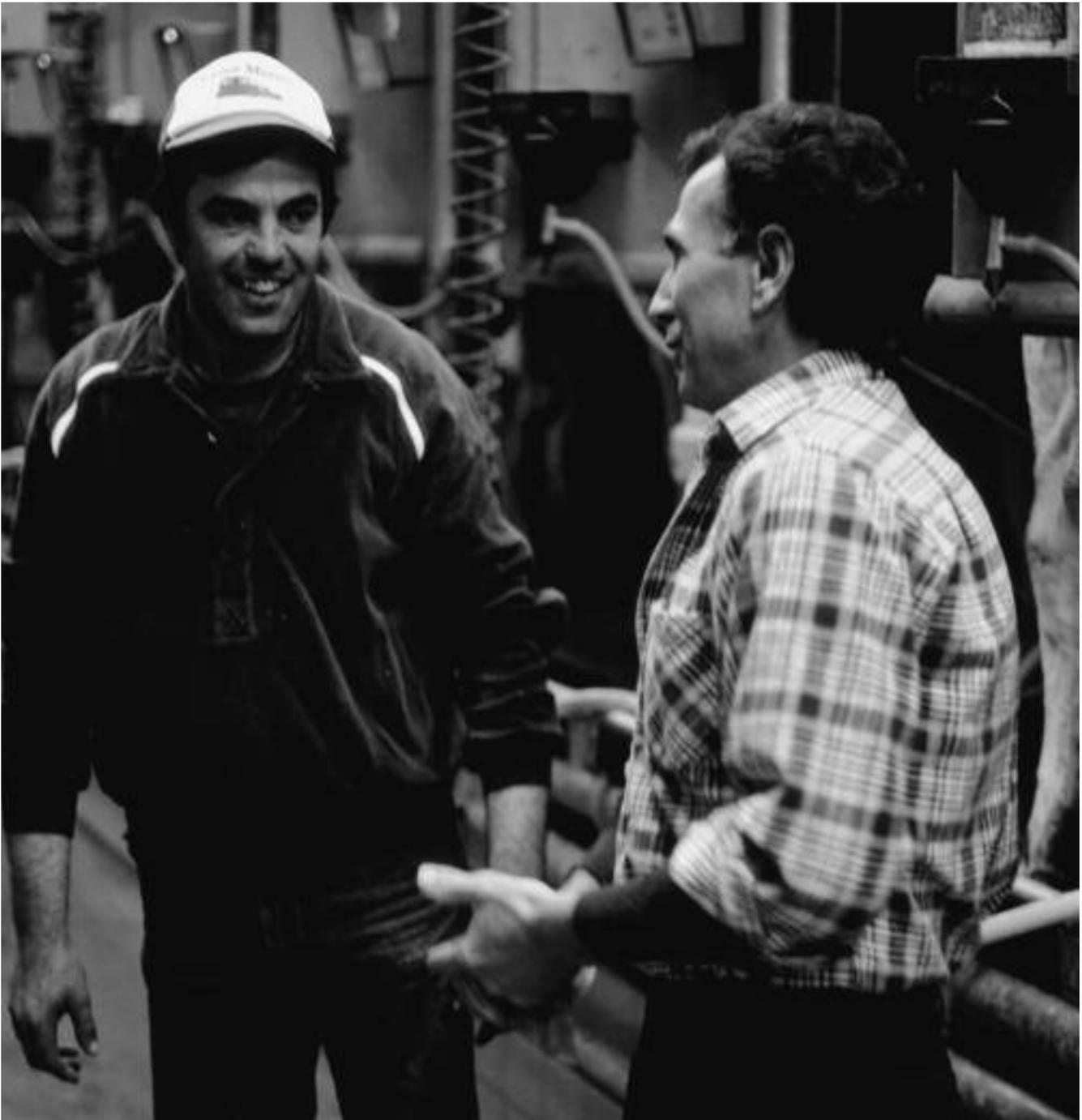
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In one cherry orchard, the foremen regularly told crew bosses to lower the number of *hours* recorded in workers' time sheets. This was done so the farm enterprise did not have to pay the crew worker the *difference* when piece-rate earnings (translated into hourly wages) fell below the minimum wage, as mandated by California law.

The crew bosses at first were hesitant, but soon yielded to the pressure. They were told by management that if this was not done, the affected workers would have to be fired, as the computer in payroll would add "make-up" wages if the correct hours were reported. The crew bosses soon came to believe that there was nothing wrong, as workers never complained, thus, it must be acceptable and best for them.

*Individuals can learn to stand up for what is right in a diplomatic way.*

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Jack Kelly Clark

Crew bosses were “trained” by their foremen to check time sheets before turning them in. When a crew boss would forget to make this “correction” on his own, the foreman handed the time sheet back to him and firmly declared, “*¡Están malos los números!*” (i.e., “The numbers are wrong!”). It was taken as a reprimand and, furthermore, the crew boss had to stay after work to make the correction.

When Manuel, the production manager, first spotted this widespread questionable practice, he brought it to the attention of upper management. Manuel was eventually accused of not being a “team player.” At first, the top manager, Jerry, made every pretense of appearing friendly, acting surprised at every new revelation. With much sincerity Jerry said there must be some misunderstanding. Later, Jerry pretended to get angry at the foremen who might be involved. After that, Manuel was invited to tell who was alleging such nonsense. When Manuel, instead, persisted on asking more questions about the pervasiveness of the dubious practice, he only succeeded in getting Jerry mad.

As he left the interview, Manuel suspected that he was really onto something. Jerry moved quickly to discredit Manuel behind his back to both people above and below in the organizational structure. This was done in the nastiest ways, through false accusations. For instance, the foremen were intimidated into abandoning any association with Manuel. But Manuel found out from friends what was taking place. Manuel decided to take the problem all the way to the owner, but discovered she was similarly unimpressed. She first tried to find flaw after flaw in Manuel’s report, and unable to do so expressed some disappointment in Manuel’s efforts, as questioning the integrity of people she knew. Manuel was then told the situation would be investigated, and was summarily dismissed from her presence, after first being told that he was not the company auditor.

This story has a semi-happy ending. Because Manuel took the principled

road—he was unyieldingly able to stand up to mounting pressure, and I suspect he was affected by feelings of loneliness and at times self-doubt—in time, some positive organizational changes were made.

Manuel felt he would have been fired had they not feared repercussions about what he could divulge. The farm enterprise took steps to document and correct the shady problems by conducting well-publicized meetings with all employees and announcing that correct payroll procedures must be observed. They also were more careful and courteous around Manuel, taking everyday requests more seriously and allowing him to do his job better. They also took a number of visible steps on their own to ensure that other improper abuses were stopped. Despite what at first appeared as an insincere effort on the part of management, the farm enterprise’s behavior has become better over time, which will help the farm as well as the employees. Certainly, it has been my experience that in the long run top management is more likely to respect an individual who is willing to take a principled stand.

## SUMMARY

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Supervisory power stems from both organizational authority and personal influence. Supervisory responsibilities must be matched with corresponding power, such as the right to hire or discipline personnel.

In organizations with more than one level of management, supervisors may find themselves in the powerful position of acting as interpreters, filtering information and passing on the essentials. Supervisors need to be sensitized to the importance of not distorting information.

Unchecked organizational authority can lead to abuse of power. Stanley Milgram’s study shows normal people may be coerced into doing something they will later regret. It is not necessary to have a threat expressed to feel coerced. The line between cooperation and coercion may be a thin one. Doing what is right takes increased inner

strength. Employees may obey today, but resent tomorrow.

Organizations, supervisors and individuals can take steps to avoid abuse of power. Abuse of power is not always something that can be recognized immediately as some ghastly act. There are many shades of abuse. A lack of respect toward subordinates is a form of abuse of authority. This abuse may be manifested through impatience, lack of kindness, raised voices, or a number of other ways. Furthermore, while large differences in status between supervisor and employee may cause workers to accept discipline today, they are likely to resent the supervisor later. In the next chapter, we will look at empowering employees by involving them in decision making.

## CHAPTER 12 REFERENCES

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