



## YOU ARE NOT TRAINING AND SUPERVISING YOU

By Lewis G. Bender, Ph.D.

Michigan Public Service Institute Facilitator and Instructor

Management Consultant and Trainer

[www.lewbender.com](http://www.lewbender.com)

“They have no common sense! They have no respect for authority. They think they know it all and don’t want to learn. They are constantly on their electronic devices and don’t pay attention to the work.”

Sound familiar? Many supervisors are frustrated, perplexed and share a sense of helplessness in addressing many of the young people coming into their organizations.

Please note this is not a discussion about **all** young people or **all** supervisors. Rather, this is about **trends** that are observable in society and the workplace.

In over four decades of training and coaching public works teams and supervisors one of the biggest changes that I have observed is in the general motivations and world views of many of the younger employees coming into the workplace. In many ways millennials (83 million people between 14 and 33) represent a significant shift in key factors impacting the workplace. Training and supervisory practices have been profoundly impacted by the changing life experiences that many young workers now bring to the workplace. Compared to you, Mr. and Mrs. Supervisor, and your experiences as a child growing up, young workers today have experienced or they are part of seismic shifts in four intersecting fundamental areas childhood:

- **Societal cultural norms-including educational expectations and practices.** The rise of the self-esteem movement in K through 12 education, for example, has led to less focus on performance and more focus on the “experience and feelings” of students. The “everyone gets a trophy phenomenon” thus divorcing performance from reward, encourages less rigor and diligence in students and young athletes. Grade inflation and increased social promotions to the next grade level and other practices are symptoms of this educational philosophy. Indeed, for some young workers “demands” to perform or get the job done are viewed as abusive and hostile.

**Impact:** Increasingly, supervisors are dealing with younger employees who require and desire constant stimulation and never ending positive feedback. This can be a challenge for supervisors who were rarely praised and were expected to learn on their own. In addition, supervisors who “had to figure it out on their own” have a difficult time coaching and mentoring other people.

- **Leadership and accountability in the workplace.** The demands and constraints on public sector leaders and supervisors are greater now than ever. In my workshops I ask supervisors with 20 or more years’ experience: “Name one area where the demands on you or your people are less

now than when you started.” They fail to cite one example. Yet as resources decline or fail to stay with demands, supervisors are expected to produce at higher quality levels. All this while numerous well intended “support” systems (grievances, ADA, FMLA, EEOC, conflict avoiding bosses and human resource managers) can be misused by employees to undermine simple job and task accountability. In many cases supervisors are not supported by their bosses when they attempt to hold employees accountable for lack of performance. Indeed, in some of these cases the supervisor is accused of being “mean” or “insensitive” to employees.

**Impact:** Frequently this results in many supervisors hesitating to hold employees accountable for “small” things. As a result, the performance bar gets lowered and accountability is only introduced when things get out of control. In some cases, supervisors will avoid doing supervisory duties and just do the job and tasks themselves. Teaching and learning and development get lost in this non-delegated work environment.

- **Families and child rearing.** This is probably one of the biggest changes that we have experienced in the past plus four decades. Families have experienced some monumental changes. Starting in the mid 1970’s women started entering the workforce to the point now that almost 80% of American households are dual income. The roles of women, and to a lesser degree men, changed as women increased their 1950’s style work outside the home. Men did not necessarily fill the void left by women in the home. The rise of daycare facilities, grandparent sitters, latch key kids and other significant changes occurred in the processes of raising kids. In 1965, 87% of American families with children had the original parents in the household. Today the approximate census numbers for households with children are: 28% original parents, 31% blended families and 40% single parent households. These and other trends have had many impacts on young people. Families rarely sit down to eat together. We eat on the way to soccer, piano or other activities. The strict discipline parenting of the fifties, sixties and seventies gets replaced with more flexibility and in many cases parents who feel guilty because they don’t spend as much time with their kids. Face-to-face communication has, in many cases, been replaced by texting, tweeting and other electronic forms. Peers and families have more **face-down** communications replacing **face-to-face** discussions. Children today, for good or ill, are growing up with a very different set of familial and communication circumstances than previous generations.

**Impact:** These and other changes have had profound impacts on the views many young people have of authority, their expectations of leaders and in many circumstance their views about themselves. Authority figures, like their parents, must be “friends” or at least friendly. Just doing something because the boss said so becomes out dated and autocratic. It is about me!

- **Technology and the digital world.** The studies and data are very clear. The ways we think, learn and retain information and knowledge are rapidly changing. Screen interactions and digital devices are having a profound impact on all of us. This is especially true for younger people who have not experienced a world without smart phones, notebooks and other compelling digital devices. In the last five years numerous studies are revealing that the very ways we think process and retain information are being radically transformed. It has always been true that the emergence of any technology has meant that some abilities are gained and some skills are lost. The gains in a digital environment are many. Hugely expanded information at your fingertips. Instant communication. Monitoring capabilities from water meters to vehicles proximities are examples of the innumerable benefits of expanding technology.

Then there is the down side-mostly on the human side of the equation. Researchers state that “Neurons that fire together-wire together. Neurons that wire apart-fire apart.” Translated this means that as we Google items we will not retain the information. When we use GPS to get our turn-by-turn directions to our destination, as opposed to using a map to get there, we won’t necessarily remember how we got there or know about the nearby towns or streets we passed along the way. Extrinsic knowledge Google, GPS, etc. give us great knowledge and informational power. However, we do not gain tacit knowledge. That is information and knowledge that we internalize. Tacit knowledge involves approaches, ideas, and ways to solve problems that we actively learn and remember. So we get there in a faster more efficient way, but we really don’t know how we got there. And without the device we are lost. We have all heard the story of the kid at McDonalds that can’t figure out or count back change when the computer is down.

**Impact:** We really don’t know all of the impacts of this phenomenon. It is still playing out. However, things like decreased attention span, inability to conceptualize or put ideas in a larger context and decreased non-computer based problem solving abilities have all been documented. This constitutes a significant challenge in the teaching and learning environment. Clearly, the mental muscles used to learn and retain information and processes are negatively impacted by extrinsic information gathering.

**The Challenge: Older folks trying to teach younger folks who have totally different life experiences, expectations and ways of learning.**

Many supervisors who have vast amounts of internalized experiences and knowledge are failing in their attempts to train and supervise young workers who have experienced very different childhood, educational and family expectations. Tacit/intrinsic knowledge-based teachers attempting to teach extrinsic/externalized knowledge-based learners. The inevitable result is frustration, lack of understanding and even division within the team.

**So, what can be done about this?**

Clearly, we all want simple answers to complex problems. After all, we are the species that created the “Easy Button.” Success in addressing this challenge involves more than just changing the supervisor-learner relationship. It starts with changing some key organizational assumptions. Then leadership can address the supervisor-learner relationship.

**Organizational change suggestions**

Over the past decades, all of the fields of Public Works have dramatically changed. In many cases, massive amounts of technology have been introduced into work processes. This has had significant impacts on the skills required of employees. Based on these changes and other factors it is suggested that leadership teams engage in the following two processes;

- 1. Identify work that requires tacit versus extrinsic knowledge.** In other words, what jobs do I really have to know “how it works” versus jobs that I only have to know how to operate it. It is one thing to understand the factors involved in successfully installing a culvert versus just knowing how to operate a backhoe. In the first case, I need to have greater levels of tacit knowledge than in the second case. What jobs are you training me to do? How much depth of knowledge do I need to have in order to be successful? This is something the leadership team needs to initially identify in a successful training program.

2. **Benchmark probationary jobs and promotions.** One of the most frequent complaints directors have about their supervisors and foremen is that they are all different and not on the same page. So get on the same page. The supervisory team should take each position where new people are frequently hired and benchmark skill levels that need to be attained at different points in the year. So, at month two, four, six and nine what should a new hire in this position be able to do? Consistency and shared ownership emerge when the first line supervisory team creates the benchmarks for the positions for which they are responsible for developing people.

**Supervisor teaching and leading suggestions.** The first suggestion is to incorporate the above organizational suggestions into the teaching and leading approaches of supervisory staff. Beyond that there are two over-arching suggestions for strengthening the supervisor-younger learner relationship.

1. **Make them own it. Teach by questions-not answers.** In many ways, this is old wine in new bottles. Good 'ole Socrates taught his students by questions, not answers. What does that mean today for supervisors? Teach by questioning. Don't answer all or even most of their questions. Make them answer their own questions. Why do you think we do it this way? Can you think of a better approach? That is a good question. Why don't you come back in an n hour and tell me what you think the answers or pro's and con's might be. When a person has to think and come up with a cogent answer, the inevitable result is they **own it! Get them to own it.**
2. **Hands on-then talk** You and I will only retain about 10% of what we read. We will retain almost 90% of what we say as we talk about it. Translated that means whenever we wish to retain knowledge we need to actually do the job and talk about it. The least effective method of teaching is straight lecture. This is especially true for young people today. Whenever possible create a teaching approach that involves: hands on/doing the process- then talk about it including questions and then -do it again. Sometimes building reading about it can also factored in after the hands-on experience.

Young people have much to offer in today's public works operation. Their abilities to use technology and move it to great new levels is amazing. The challenge for public works leaders is to capture those innate abilities and blend them with the knowledge necessary to be successful in an ever-challenging environment.

**Lewis G. Bender, Ph.D.**

**Illinois Public Service Institute Facilitator and Instructor**

**Management Consultant and Trainer**

**[www.lewbender.com](http://www.lewbender.com)**