The Supervisory Dialogue
(The key to Stellar Team Performance)

The following description of The Exceptional Team Supervisory Dialogue has been influenced by our colleague, Dr. Rodney Napier who introduced us to the concept many years ago. This version is dramatically different than the original thinking, but he was helpful in informing this new version.

One of the key “differentiators” that explicitly distinguishes an Exceptional Team is the time and attention paid to the supervisory process. The term supervision might seem outdated to some people . . . terms like performance appraisal and performance review are more frequently used currently. But we like the term supervision because it describes the ongoing relationship, not just the evaluation between the team leader and team members.

In the following pages you will learn about a highly effective supervision process that has been used in a variety of organizations (e.g. a nuclear power plant, several university campuses, many government agencies, at the state and city level, school districts, a large insurance company and a hedge fund) very successfully. By “successful” We mean the consistent application of this process produced powerful organizational and team results. Hundreds of participants have reported that it has helped them take their teams to a new level of play, help change their organizational culture towards a positive and effective one and vastly improved the relationships between supervisors and their direct reports.

To conduct the Supervisory Dialogue correctly takes time and attention. Anything of real value needs to be thoughtfully applied over time. People who have experienced it, even those who initially were reluctant or skeptical, report that the time invested is well worth the outcomes produced.

The research on supervision shows that most organizations spend somewhere between 1 and 2 hours on employee supervision a year. Often, these tend to be perfunctory sessions, utilizing checklists and focusing on a one way dialogue from the supervisor to the employee. Many are dreaded moments where employees feel judged and evaluated with little understanding of their boss's expectations. Others are demotivating because the standards seem ridiculously high and a 2.7 on a 5 point scale doesn't make much sense but it sure doesn't feel very good.

What could be an opportunity for a great discussion, sharing of ideas and perspectives and creating a plan for development moving forward is instead a tedious, morale wasting experience. There has to be a better way.

Ideally, the timeframe for the Supervisory Dialogue is one year. It can be adapted to meet the needs of the team but a team that will only operate for a relatively short period of time (e.g. 30 days) will find this process less helpful.

In an ongoing team (e.g. quality control, customer service, marketing, development, communications) or a team that is working on a long term project (e.g., implementing an enterprise-wide technology system, a branding/image team, a change management task force), the Supervisory Dialogue is a powerful mechanism for achieving excellence.
The Guiding Principles of the Supervisory Dialogue (S.D.)

1. **The primary focus of the Supervisory Dialogue (S.D.) is the success of the team member**

   The S.D. assumes that most employees are intelligent, hardworking and well-intentioned. The S.D. builds on the strengths of the team member, not their weaknesses. Although it acknowledges all team members have areas of needed development, it concentrates on the many gifts team members bring to the table. It also articulates the support the team leader and the organization is willing to provide the team member to ensure their success.

   **Strategic Note:** A reality check: We realize there are very difficult problem employees. This represents about 5% of the total workforce and they can be very hard to deal with effectively. The Supervisory Dialogue is for the 95% of the workforce who are not “difficult” or “problem” employees. There are other processes, like Progressive Discipline that can be utilized with those challenging individuals. We have used this process with “difficult” employees and have been successful about 50% of the time.

2. **Supervision must be valued by the organization**

   This means that team leaders and anyone who is supervising people need to be trained, supported and rewarded for effective supervision. *(This is rarely the case in most organizations)* Effective supervision communicates to everyone throughout the organization that investing time, attention and support in people is an organizational value. It also communicates that honest feedback, rigorous goal setting, good communication and developing people is prized by the organization.

3. **It is all about building an honest and authentic relationship between the team leader and each team member**

   Without authentic and meaningful relationships, real supervision can never take place. The team leader and team members need to feel connected to each other, feel respected by each other and believe that both parties in the S.D. are well-intentioned. This positive relationship enables both parties to explore possibilities together, be open to each other's ideas, negotiate differences effectively and improve the team's overall performance. This leads us to the next key principle.

4. **Trust is essential**

   The S.D. will only serve both parties effectively is there is a fair amount of trust in the relationship between the team leader and team member. Without some real trust, the dialogue will be guarded, the team member will endeavor to negotiate minimal goals and take little risk. As trust is created, the team member will share more, take on bigger responsibilities and stretch themselves to achieve more meaningful goals.

   The S.D. can create real trust between the team leader and team member because it creates an authentic discussion between two people. There is mutual accountability and support and some shared vulnerability.
5. The team member is in a vulnerable position in the Supervisory Dialogue process

The team leader is in the “power” position because they can either reward or punish the team member. This human dynamic is rarely discussed about supervision but it is present in every supervisor/ supervisee relationship. This is not a bad thing but needs to be acknowledged and the team leader needs to be conscious about this ever present dynamic.

The team leader needs to be proactive in establishing a safe and trusting relationship with the team member. They can do this by: listening carefully, providing clear examples of performance, focusing on the strengths of the individual, giving honest feedback and being interested in the development of the employee.

People know when their boss values them as a person, it can't be faked. If respect is present in the relationship, the power dynamic is lessened, but it is always present. The team leader needs to be conscious and considerate about this.

THE SUPERVISORY DIALGOUUE QUESTIONS

1. When you look back over the past year, what stands out to you regarding what you have accomplished? (Please be specific)

2. What have been some important “lessons learned” from the past year?

3. What have been some challenges or difficulties you have encountered over the year?

4. What are 1 – 2 areas of “needed development” you need to work on this year? (How will you enhance your effectiveness?)

5. What are some things you would like to accomplish over the next 6 – 12 months?
How to Prepare for the Supervisory Dialogue (S.D.)

In order for a S.D. to be successful, there is a fair amount of upfront preparation on the leader and member's part. Both individuals should take the time to answer all seven questions carefully prior to the S.D. The goal here is to create a comparative database to support the discussion. You don't “wing” a supervisory dialogue and talk off the top of your head. It is a mature and information rich discussion and, if one of the individuals is unprepared, do not conduct the S.D. Reschedule it at a time when a prepared and thoughtful discussion can take place.

It is important for both parties to have clear examples to share (e.g., completing a complex project, making an excellent presentation, missing a deadline, implementation of a business process) of the team member's past performance. Having good examples creates a thoughtful database for an intelligent and mature discussion to take place.

Because the two parties have done their homework, they can acknowledge areas of agreement where they see things much the same as well as areas where their perspectives are different. It is the comparison and contrasting of their prepared notes that creates the “fuel” for a good dialogue.

By coming prepared to the discussion, several things are accomplished and communicated:

- This is an important discussion for us to have together
- We value and respect the time invested in this process
- We want a thoughtful exchange of ideas, open discussion and constructive feedback

The setting ideally should be in a neutral setting where both parties feel comfortable. Avoid having the S.D. in the team leader's office because it unnecessarily communicates being “summoned” to the office of “power”.

(Please provide a rationale for each goal and a way to measure them)

6. What education/training do you think you will need to be successful this upcoming year? (Please be specific)

7. How can I be supportive as your supervisor?
The Rationale Behind the Seven Questions

1. **When you look back over the past year, what stands out to you regarding what you have accomplished? (Please be specific)**

The first question focuses on the positive accomplishments and successes of the team member. It creates the foundation for the Supervisory Dialogue and is the most important question in the entire process.

The team member helps create a constructive context for the discussion by focusing initially on their contributions. It builds a positive base for the discussion to follow.

2. **What have been some important “lessons learned” from the past year?**

This question assumes that the employee has actually learned some important things over the past year. One of the Exceptional Team differentiators in the learning culture and curiosity that exists on a high-performing team. This question asks the team member to reflect upon what they have learned, another telltale sign of an E.T.

These “lessons” can either be positive or negative. The team member chooses the direction here and the leader should make sure not all the lessons are on the negative side. For example:

- “I learned that I am a little too ambitious about what I can realistically accomplish - need to get reality checks before I commit to something.”
- “I am a much better project manager than I originally thought. My group got all our major projects done on time this quarter.”
- “I really have to work on my conflict resolution skills. I have avoided some important conversations that needed resolution.”
- “My team is full of hardworking, dedicated people. I feel blessed to be their leader.”
- “My people want to see me more often. I get caught managing the technical side of things and don’t walk around and talk with folks.”
- “We need to do a better job at boundary management with other teams and work groups throughout the division. As this initiative picks up more steam, we will be interacting with a lot of others.”

3. **What have been some challenges or difficulties you have encountered over the past year?**

This question assumes there have been some “difficulties” and that it is helpful to identify them. This is not meant to be critical of the team member or put them on the defensive. It is meant to begin to discuss some of the sensitive issues that need to be addressed. The S.D. is a holistic approach to supervision and deals with the good as well as the not so great. Both are needed if the supervisory process is going to have real integrity.
By posing the question, the team member has the choice and freedom to acknowledge that everything hasn't been “perfect”. It is important that the team member not dodge it by saying something vague like, “there were a couple of glitches last year but nothing worth talking about”, they are soft selling their challenges. The team leader should be ready with their prepared examples to provide more rigor to the discussion. (This question will be a diagnostic about how open and honest the team member really is about their shortcomings.)

4. What are 1 – 2 areas of “needed development” you need to work on this year? (How will you enhance your effectiveness?)

This question begins to move into a sensitive area because the team member must be willing to admit they actually do have some things that need improvement. If there isn't a level of trust and a positive relationship present, the team member will be reluctant to share this.

This is another reason the team leader prepares their answers to the questions. If the team member has some difficulty with this, the leader can then suggest some ideas and continue the dialogue.

We have found that most employees are all too willing to talk about their weaknesses and downplay their strengths. This is why you only ask for one or two areas of needed development, not seven or eight. If most people focus on improving one, possibly two areas, they will have done well.

What is important to pay attention to is how improving their areas of “needed development” will enhance their effectiveness as a team member. They must be clear about this because they need to believe it is well worth the time and effort to improve. They must understand the tangible benefits for improving.

For example: “By learning the Critical Path Planning software program, I will improve my overall project management skills and keep my unit's work on track” or “By improving my decision making skills, I will be better prepared for the upcoming project we will undertake next month.”

5. What are some things you would like to accomplish over the next 6 – 12 months? (Please provide a rationale for each goal and a way to measure them)

It is important that the team member share what they believe they need to accomplish in order to contribute meaningfully to the team's goals. The fact that both parties have thought carefully about this question beforehand creates a “reality check” for the team member. If they go off on a tangent that really doesn't focus on the team's goals, the leader can provide some strong ideas about this. It is important to have a rationale that is well thought out because the team leader can diagnose the effectiveness and strategic nature of the member's thinking. The toughest element of this question is the measurability of the outcomes. Too often, individuals focus on activities (doing lots of things) and outputs rather than outcomes. For example:

- I will accurately complete the monthly audit report on time (there is no “fuzziness” about this)
- I will reduce the number of customer complaints in my unit by 30% in the first half of the year. (Note, they didn't go for a ridiculously high number like 90%. The 30% figure seems doable.)
- I will reduce the office expenses (e.g. photocopying, telephones, computers,
electricity) by 15% by the end of the year.

- I will work with the Human Resources division and provide training in decision making for everyone in my unit. I will also work with H.R. to assess the effectiveness of my direct reports decision making skills throughout the year.
- I will spearhead Project X and successfully complete it on time and under budget.

6. **What education/training do you think you will need to be successful this upcoming year? (Please be specific)**

At this stage, you have a great deal of helpful information regarding the learning and development needs of the team member. They will have discussed what they have learned, identified their areas of needed development and their future goals. This information creates a Learning Agenda for the team member. This 'agenda' should focus both on their strengths and areas of needed development.

The team leader needs to solicit the member's ideas about their educational and learning needs.

For example: If a team member realizes they need help managing their time, selected courses should be identified and participation ensured. Other examples might include: visiting other departments in the organization to learn about best practices, choosing a mentor to seek advice and wise counsel, receive coaching on a specific area of needed development, read an article about a specific topic to continue to build on a strength, attend a management/leadership program, write a paper on lessons learned about a particular project or take an assertiveness course.

Everyone on the team should have a “learning agenda” that they are working on throughout the next 6-12 months. Exceptional teams share their learning agenda with each other; this way everyone knows what others are working on. Having this information is helpful in several ways:

- It communicates that everyone is focusing on improving, which becomes a team norm
- It can create the opportunity for team members to help each other. If one team member is strong in an area where another member needs help, a natural support network can be created.
- It creates a thoughtful risk taking opportunity for everyone. Sharing your agenda lets everyone know that you know what you need to work on. This shared risk tends to build a stronger team feeling.

7. **How can I be supportive as your supervisor? (e.g. spend more time with you, provide access to outside resources, provide more timely feedback)**

This question is important because it communicates to the team member that the leader is committed to their success and they want to be supportive. It is essential that the leader probe a little with this question because members might be reluctant to ask for help.

The leader can suggest ways they can be helpful:
• How would you like us to communicate over the next six months (face-to-face weekly meetings? a working lunch every month?)

• What should we agree to do if you encounter a problem or get stuck on a project? How can we be proactive when this happens?

• Can you identify any company hurdles (e.g., politics, resources, connections) that might get in the way of successfully completing your goals? How can I be helpful with them?

The key here is for the team leader to commit to specific support and follow through with them. This will build trust and credibility on the team leader/member relationship.

A Proposed Model

To implement an effective supervisory process with a team takes an investment of time. Those teams and organizations that have utilized the Supervisory Dialogue have found overwhelmingly that it is a great investment and well worth the effort.

Let's do some math . . .

1. A “typical” work week is 40 hours (most of us do 50-60 hours)
2. A work year consists of approximately 2000 work hours, excluding two weeks for vacation
3. The Supervisory Dialogue schedule would take approximately 8-10 hours per employee each year. This is about ½ of 1% of your total available work time. If you have 8 direct reports, this model would take approximately 5% of your time. This would leave you with lots of time to do other important “stuff”.

This bears repeating . . . if I told you that if you dedicated 5% of your work time on a particular process it would help you achieve stellar performance, most leaders would jump at the chance to implement the process. Five percent is not a large amount of time to invest in building a great team. In over 25 years of working with teams, the Supervisory Dialogue is the most effective process I know.

A Proposed Model

1. The Initial Supervisory Meeting: This meeting would take place yearly and be approximately 1½ – 2 hours in duration.

This meeting would be an in-depth discussion reviewing the team member's progress, accomplishments, contribution in work of the previous year. The 7 questions create the framework for this discussion.

Note: Many Exceptional Teams include peer feedback in the supervisory review process. The leader would organize a process to solicit anonymous information and feedback about each
team member's performance. This creates a holistic database for the discussion and helps put the team leader's perspective in a more informed context.

2. **Monthly “Check-Ins”**: These are brief, scheduled meetings (30 minutes) to maintain the dialogue, rightsize expectations, provide feedback and continue to build the team leader/member relationship. A team member should **never** be surprised at the end of the year that they have not met their agreed upon goals or that their performance is less than stellar. These **check-ins** prevent this from happening. A short (1 page) summary of this meeting should be captured on a written format and given to both parties.

3. **A “Half Time” Check In**: This meeting would be conducted approximately six months after the initial meeting and be formal in nature. It should take about an hour and have some structure to it. You can use the 7 questions as a framework or create your own. The primary purpose of this **half-time** check in is: to make sure everyone is on the same page; identify what has been accomplished to date and what needs to be completed; identify what has changed in the environment and how this influences/impacts the team member's goals going forward and determine what is reasonable to accomplish over the next six months. You will have a good track record and database to reflect upon as you negotiate the future goals and accomplishments.

This proposed model takes a real and meaningful investment of time on the team leader's part but, in my experience, it is the very best investment the leader can make to ensure stellar performance.

*Obviously, this takes some time and attention on both participants, it is a wonderful investment that will create positive outcome.*