

The Work and Learning Process

What Every Worksite Supervisor Should Know

There are many ways to supervise people and get a job done, and many ways to teach people new skills. Supervising a learning-rich task requires a supervisor who is more of a coach than a boss. Supervisors must ask themselves the following questions.

What work needs doing that is of value to the organization?

Make sure the project and its tasks have some real benefit to the company. People know when they are doing make-work. Real goals foster real effort and accomplishments foster and raise higher self-esteem.

How will student workers be directed to do the task?

The key here is to offer advice rather than answers. That advice usually comes in the form of a question, which facilitates the young adult worker to arrive at his/her own conclusions. As an expert, we want to share all of our knowledge in our particular discipline. However, the best way for young adults to learn is through exploration. This doesn't mean that answers are never given, but rather that there are multiple options, solutions, and answers. The responsibility is to coach the young adults in discovering solutions.

What should the young workers learn?

In addition to learning the skills they need to accomplish the project at hand, young adults are learning skills that are transferrable and applicable to a broad range of jobs. Encourage young workers to think about what other ways they might use the skills they are currently practicing. Ask them to share what skills they think they're learning.

How will they best learn it?

We know from research that people learn best in an authentic context; that is, they learn skills by using the skills, and by reflecting on what they have done. As young adult workers progress through their work, have them reflect on their work and learning in a journal, in group discussions, and on their own.

What is the supervisor's role in this process?

There are at least two roles: 1) the supervisor, and 2) the coach. The supervisor makes sure that the work gets done, and young adult workers understand the consequences if it does not. It's important that both the supervisor and the young adult agree on clearly articulated expectations. The second role is much more complex, and is a critical element to the success of both the supervisor's and young adult's work experience. In the role of coach, adults encourage young people throughout the process and encourage them to learn new things through what they're doing. The coach prods young workers to learn from and improve upon their performance. The coach asks questions to encourage young people to think about possible solutions rather than giving answers. If you give them the answers, they will learn not to find their own. If you give them thoughtful questions, they will learn to seek and find the information they need to produce solutions.

Adapted from: Work-Based Learning: Learning to Work; Working to Learn; Learning to Learn,
Strumpf, Center for Strategic Change