

Leader, Manager, Supervisor: Three Roles Everyone Responsible for a Group Must Fill

If you're responsible for the performance of a group, then you're both. No matter what you may have read in the last 20 years of management literature, leadership, management, and supervision are not about what you are. They're about your behavior and your roles.

The simple fact is that all of the writing about the distinctions between managers and leaders, about whether one is better than the other, about whether we need both, and about whether organizations need more or less of one or the other entirely miss the point.

The first time that you become responsible for the performance of a group, your life changes. When you were an individual contributor, you had pretty much complete control over what to do in order to achieve better results. Once you become responsible for a group of people and their performance, though, that control disappears and is replaced with influence.

In fact, the higher you move up your organizations structure, the less power you have (in the sense of the ability to directly create results) and the more influence you have. That means that what you do and say has more impact because people pay more attention to it. You're also responsible for other people's performance in three distinct ways. Those ways are your leadership role, your management role, and your supervisory role. Let's look at them in reverse order.

Supervision is probably the easiest to understand. In supervision, you deal with individuals and with tasks. No matter what level of your organization you are, you will have some supervision work to do. You will have people directly responsible to you and you will talk directly about what they are going to do and how they are going to do it. That's supervision.

In your **management** role, you'll deal with groups and priorities. You'll handle things like scheduling problems and how to allocate scarce resources to the projects you need to complete. Your planning perspective will be tactical.

Tactics is planning to achieve objectives to support overall organizational goals within a defined portion of the organization.

Now we come to **leadership**, a term that's taken on almost mystical connotations in the last 20 years. Leadership, and your leadership role, is about purpose and direction. In your leadership role you deal with strategic issues.

Strategic issues are the ones that affect the whole organization. If you happen to be at the top of the organization, that means the whole organization. But, if you head up a smaller sub unit, like a division or office, strategy is what you do that affects your entire sub unit.

As you move up the organizational hierarchy, you're likely to have a greater proportion of your time devoted to your leadership role and a lesser proportion to your supervisory and management roles. But, no matter where you are, if you're responsible for a group, you're responsible for leadership, management, and supervision.

There's one more key point here. You don't get a choice about whether you're a leader or not. You're a leader because that's what the people who work for you expect you to be. They will look to you for purpose and direction.

They'll also expect you to be a manager, and a supervisor. They'll expect you to sort out priorities from among many competing ones. They'll expect you to give you direction in how they'll perform their tasks.

Leadership, management, and supervision are three roles that you have as soon as you become responsible for a group and for every similar job thereafter.

The trick is to figure out where the mix of roles is for you and then develop the tools, techniques, and tricks that you're going to need to fill those roles effectively.