

# White Paper

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# Supervisor or Manager: What's in a Name?

## Supervisor or Manager: What's in a Name?



One would think that the question: "What's the difference between a manager and a supervisor?" would have a simple answer. After all, people live day in and day out with titles such as Human Resources Manager or Front Line Supervisor. There must be a reason why these people have been given these titles, and common sense would tell us that the reason may very well be connected to the tasks specific to those titles. However, the reality is that there is a great deal of confusion and disagreement about the differences between a supervisor and a manager.

According to the Cambridge Online Dictionary, to manage means "to be responsible for controlling or organizing someone or something, especially a business." Management is "the group of people responsible for controlling and organizing a company." And finally, a manager is "the person who is responsible for managing an organization." In a nutshell, the dictionary is telling us that the core of managing is to control and organize people or things within an organization.

Using the Cambridge Online Dictionary once more, to supervise means "to watch a person or activity to make certain that everything is done correctly, safely, etc." Supervision occurs "when someone watches a person or activity and makes certain that everything is done correctly, safely, etc." And therefore, a supervisor is "a person whose job is to supervise someone or something." Using these definitions, it appears that the core of supervising is to oversee another person or activity to ensure the satisfaction of certain standards.

Reviewing these definitions, it would initially appear that the primary difference between a manager and a supervisor is the target of their activities. Both have responsibilities within the organization: The manager is responsible for people and things such as the company itself, while the supervisor is responsible for people and their actions. Another way to look at this is that managers are responsible for the people's products (what), and supervisors are responsible for the people's processes (how).

In many organizations, the terms junior management, middle management and upper (or senior) management are used. These suggest three distinct levels of responsibility. Most junior managers are responsible for the day-to-day, front line results. Most senior managers are responsible for the vision of the company's future and organization-wide results. The middle managers are often responsible for the information flow between the other two levels, as well as having some accountability for the results of the front line staff and junior managers. Typically, there is some amount of prestige connected with the management title, and these layers make up the path most people take when they are climbing that "corporate ladder."

Such formal delineations are not found among the supervisor set. A supervisor is an individual who is responsible for the actions of individual or groups of employees, and they can be found at all levels of an organization. These are the people who ideally do what they can and need to in order to ensure that their employees are engaged and being productive every day. Often, the official title of “supervisor” is only found at the front line or “middle management” level of an organization.

The challenge is that many organizations are missing one very important fact: supervision and management are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Many top level administrators do not think of themselves as supervisors, but rather only as administrators. However, with the possible exception of the President and/or CEO, every single person in the vast majority of organizations reports to and is accountable to someone else...their supervisor. Also, many supervisors, particularly those on the front line, do not consider themselves as managers. However, supervisors are usually held accountable not only for the actions of their staff, but also their final products.

From a different perspective, it is probably safe to say that all supervisors are managers to some degree. People who are given the role of supervisor are not expected to only oversee *how* their direct reports do their job (as the earlier definition implied). Supervisors are also held accountable for *what* their staff accomplishes.

It is also probably safe to say that not all managers are supervisors. There are many people out there in roles in which they are in charge of a particular task or product (such as handling payroll or being in charge of an ongoing project), but who do not have any people reporting to them directly. The formal title of “coordinator” is often found among this group.

The clarification between “supervisor” and “manager” is not just a point of interest. This information can be utilized by organization leaders, particularly in regards to training and development. As there are different actions and responsibilities connected to each function, the skill sets for both supervisors and managers should be identified and provided in a proactive fashion. It is also important to remember that all supervisors should receive training on how to manage, and the people at the top of the hierarchy should also receive training on how to be effective supervisors. Specific information on ten effective supervision strategies can be found in Rising Sun Consultants’ white paper entitled [“The 10 Keys to Effective Supervision<sup>TM</sup>: A Developmental Approach.”](#)

This white paper will not stop the confusion around the use of these terms. Human resources professionals will still be wrestling with this for years to come. Hopefully, this slight clarification between the two is clear enough so that the readers will be able to view the dynamics within their own organization just a bit more objectively.