



Distribution Center MANAGEMENT

Managing people, materials and costs in the warehouse or DC

Human Resources

When moving frontline workers into management roles, training is crucial

It's a common practice at distribution centers: The most productive picker or star lift truck operator is promoted into a management role.

This upward mobility is one of the great strengths of the warehousing industry — but it also can be a weakness. Promoting the wrong person, or failing to prepare the person you promote, can ripple throughout your operation.

When you hire supervisors from the frontline workers within your ranks, you must prepare those workers for their new roles, says consultant Ken Ackerman.

“You pick Joe because Joe is such a marvelous forklift operator, and you want to reward him,” Ackerman says. “In effect, you're punishing him, because you're throwing him in the pool without teaching him to swim.”

Ackerman outlines the upward mobility dilemma in the recently published third edition of his book *Warehousing Profitably*.

The dangers of promoting workers who turn out to be poor managers are many. Risks include a decline in productivity and an increase in employee turnover. Too many bad managers can even allow unwanted unionization efforts to take hold.

While there's no easy way, you must teach workers how to handle their new roles as manag-

ers, Ackerman says. That could mean paying for workers to attend a course or complete a leadership class at the local community college.

“There's no single formula that's right for every single situation,” Ackerman says.

The star picker or forklift operator has mastered his job. But to be an effective manager, that worker needs to master a wider variety of skills. Ackerman sees six skills as crucial:

1. Communication. Neither speaking nor writing are crucial skills for pickers and forklift

Three questions to ask about your own leadership

While on the subject of leadership training for frontline workers, Ken Ackerman suggests that managers ask themselves the following questions, which may indicate leadership gaps:

- Who is ready to replace me in my job? Part of a leader's work is grooming his own successor.
- How do we help newly promoted workers learn to manage? Often, the answer is that there is no program.
- Does my DC have a positive work environment? If you don't know, consider a survey to measure worker attitudes.

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operators, but that changes when the worker is promoted.

Managers need to be able to run meetings, pass on key information, and convey expectations. With email a common form of corporate communication, they also need to know how to write.

Ackerman points to the example of a Honda plant in Ohio, where supervisors run a five-minute meeting at the beginning of each shift. Good supervisors know how to run this sort of gathering.

“Inability to communicate is a real killer for a lot of people,” Ackerman says.

If you’re considering promoting star employees, take into account their communication skills. If they can’t speak or write, you might want to look elsewhere. But if they show promise, train them to run meetings and to speak and write effectively.

And remember that leaders don’t just talk. They are also good listeners.

2. Inspiration. Communication skills are a basic building block. The ability to inspire comes next.

Inspiration is the ability to convince workers that they can achieve more than they thought possible.

It sounds like a lofty task, but it’s not as difficult as you might think. Ackerman points to the example of a supervisor who challenged workers to slash shipping errors from 2 percent to less than 0.1 percent. He gave regular feedback and continued to urge his people to improve, and he ultimately achieved his result.

3. Delegation. A true leader knows he can’t do everything and actively enlists the help of others. But delegation doesn’t come easy to someone who was good at his previous job.

All too often, Ackerman says, the star forklift operator keeps driving the forklift even after he’s promoted and gives his new supervision duties short shrift. It’s your job as a manager to communicate the new expectations.

“Usually, his boss never tells him to get off the forklift,” Ackerman says.

4. Evaluation. Leaders have to give grades, provide feedback, and hold workers accountable. This can be a daunting task for new supervisors, particularly if they’re suddenly required to criticize the same people they worked with only a few months ago.

“People don’t like confrontation,” Ackerman says.

But competent managers understand that it is essential to let workers know how they’re doing and what they must do to improve.

5. Coordination. This is the job of leading a team. Distribution is a team effort, and an effective manager works with suppliers, customers, and colleagues.

6. Execution. In the end, managers need to get things done. Execution requires that the new supervisor: knows his own strengths and weaknesses; knows his people; and sets realistic goals that are both ambitious and achievable.

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