What is a supervisor?

An employer can’t be everywhere all the time. Whether there are few employees or a few hundred on the jobsite, at some point an employer must designate someone to act as a supervisor. The Occupational Health and Safety Act defines a “supervisor” as “a person who has charge of a workplace or authority over a worker”.

Supervisors have many roles on a worksite. They represent management and its policies when directing workers or subcontractors, and they represent the needs and concerns of workers when updating management about the activities at the workplace.

The law requires supervisors to “take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of a worker”. A supervisor’s primary responsibility is to prevent injury, illness, and death on a site.

Under Ontario’s Occupational Health and Safety Act, a supervisor must be a “competent person” (OHSA, s. 25(2)(c)). Under the Canada Labour Code, Part II, a supervisor must be adequately trained in health and safety and informed of their responsibilities (CLC, s. 125(1)(z)).

Many supervisors have not received formal training on their duties and responsibilities. This guide provides untrained supervisors with basic knowledge about their health and safety responsibilities. For experienced supervisors, this guide can help ensure they’re meeting their duties and obligations.

Knowledge means knowing what precautions to take and how to control or remove hazards.

Training means formal health and safety training that is specific to the work.

Experience means a proven background in dealing with the health and safety aspects of the work.

Performance here relates only to safety and health performance.

A competent person is qualified because of knowledge, training, and experience to organize the work and its performance.
**Essential responsibilities of a supervisor**

Supervisors are the employer’s representative on a worksite. They plan the project’s work and oversee its implementation. They assign tasks to their workers and provide them with advice and direction. Their responsibilities include monitoring the project’s progress and getting work done through other people. To be effective, they must integrate health and safety into the planning, organizing, directing, and control of the work.

✓ “Take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of a worker” against actual or potential hazards. They must also supervise any subcontractors to ensure that they comply with health and safety legislation.

✓ Learn what the specific hazards are on the jobsite and inform the workers about them. In some cases, supervisors are required to inform workers in writing.

✓ Ensure that workers have the training they need for the work they’ll do.

✓ Ensure that workers work “in the manner and with the protective devices, measures, and procedures required by” the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* and regulations. It is the workers’ responsibility to work safely, but it is the supervisor’s responsibility to make sure that they work safely.

✓ Ensure that workers use the protective equipment or clothing that the employer requires. Make sure they also follow the manufacturer’s instructions.

✓ Implement the company health and safety policy and program to ensure that employees are following the policy, procedures, and safe practices.

✓ Provide new workers with an orientation to the project so that they’ll become familiar with site-specific hazards and how to control them.

✓ Perform workplace inspections on a weekly basis or more frequently if necessary to ensure the workplace is in compliance with the legislation and health and safety program.

✓ Cooperate with health and safety reps, Joint Health and Safety Committees, and Worker Trades Committees. Provide information upon request.

✓ Undertake and document investigations relating to incidents, accidents, work refusal, or complaints.

✓ Cooperate with enforcement agencies during investigations or inspections. Fix any problems identified in Ministry of Labour orders.
Four main tasks

1. Communicate

Supervisors are the main vehicles of communication for employers on the project to the workers and vice-versa.

✓ Inform workers about the regulations and company policies. They can’t follow the rules if they don’t know them.

✓ Give workers frequent safety talks once a day is ideal. Document the topic and who attended. Get free safety talks or order the Safety Talks Manual (V005) and a Safety Talk Report Form (RF023) at ihsa.ca

✓ Discuss health and safety during your regular communication with workers. For example, when assigning work to workers, go over the hazards associated with the tasks and what protective equipment they have to use.

✓ Coach workers on how to do tasks safely. Not everyone has learned the right way to do things. Providing ongoing coaching is part of what it means to supervise.

✓ Inform workers what the top three causes of injury are in Ontario construction:

  • Falls
  • Struck-bys
  • Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) from repetitive tasks, heavy lifting, awkward postures, etc.

✓ Think about the overall message you’ve been giving workers. If all you talk about is deadlines, you’re sending the message that speed is more important than safety. And remember: actions speak louder than words. If you tell workers safety is important, make sure you back it up.

✓ Update management regularly about the realities of the jobsite and what you learn from workers.

2. Inspect

Construction supervisors are legally required to perform weekly health and safety inspections (O. Reg 213/91, s. 14). Inspections for other things such as work progress and quality don’t count.

✓ During an inspection, supervisors need to know what to look for. They may need training on how to conduct an effective inspection. Using an inspection checklist can help keep them focused on the important issues.

✓ Supervisors need to fix any problems they encounter, or at least find a way to control the hazard. A good resource for solutions is IHSA’s Construction Health and Safety Manual (M029) (free for supervisors in Ontario construction).

✓ Document the inspections. Without a written record, you can’t prove that they were done. The easiest way is to use a checklist. You can get several sample checklists at ihsa.ca

3. Investigate

Supervisors have a duty to investigate work refusals and dangerous circumstances. They can also assist in incident investigations. The primary goal of an investigation is find out what happened in order to prevent it from happening again.

✓ Investigate any worker complaints or near misses—situations in which no injury or damage occurred but might have if conditions had been slightly different. Don’t wait until something happens before you take preventive measures.

✓ Look for the underlying causes that allowed an incident to occur. Remember: the injury or damage is just a symptom, not the problem.

✓ Document any investigations that take place and follow up on whether corrective action identified during an investigation has been taken.

✓ If workers are not complying with the rules, look into the reasons why before imposing discipline.
4. Enforce

Not everyone follows the rules. Supervisors have a duty to protect workers by enforcing the rules and imposing discipline.

✓ If a situation looks hazardous, supervisors have a duty to take immediate action. Ignoring the situation implies that you condone it.

✓ Sometimes a person just needs to be reminded. But make it clear that repeat offenses will not be tolerated. Clearly explain the consequences of a repeat offence.

✓ For repeat offences, use a progressive discipline system. Refer the matter to management as appropriate.

✓ Show that you enforce the rules by keeping a written record of your interventions—perhaps on your inspection sheet. Cases of discipline should be documented formally.

Professional development

• If you haven’t already done so, take IHSA’s Basics of Supervising, Basics of Supervising—Federally Regulated, Construction Health and Safety – Basic, and Construction Health and Safety Representative courses. They’re free for IHSA members. You can also take them in home-study formats. Visit ihsa.ca or call 1-800-263-5024 to find out more and register for the next class.

• Sign up for IHSA’s free monthly email bulletin 2-Minute News. It gives you material for safety talks and information that matters for your job. To sign up, email awhite@ihsa.ca

• Get to know IHSA’s website. It will help you enormously. We offer free safety talks, inspection checklists, sample policies, how-to guides on best practices, and the latest news in health and safety.

Emergencies

Despite everyone’s best efforts, an unexpected crisis can still happen. Every company needs a clear policy on emergency response and supervisors must know it well and ensure that workers know their roles in an emergency.

If an emergency occurs, the objective of a supervisor is to minimize any injury or damage and to prevent a recurrence in the future.

If an emergency such as an injury occurs:
✓ protect workers and the public from further danger and injury
✓ prevent the situation from getting worse
✓ provide first aid to the injured worker(s)

✓ protect material and equipment from further damage
✓ isolate and secure the area to ensure that nothing is disturbed. This will help when it comes time to do an incident investigation.

Remember: The Ministry of Labour must be notified in the case of a critical injury.

IHSA Supervisor Log Book

A competent supervisor keeps a record of daily events on the job. IHSA’s Supervisor Log Book (RF008) contains safety talks, inspection checklists, a job safety analysis (JSA) form, a due diligence checklist, and other helpful resources. 240 pages.

Member $24.95  Non-Member: $49.95