



SUPPLY CHAIN INSIGHTS

MODERN LEADERS ON THE FRONT LINE: PUTTING THE 'SUPER' INTO SUPERVISOR

Leadership is key to success at the world's largest contract logistics provider. For DHL to become a great company to work for all, its leaders need to motivate and inspire colleagues and be open to embracing both challenges and opportunities. And that starts with its supervisors. Read how, in a logistics industry first, DHL is developing supervisory skills in its own Academy.

DHL Supply Chain – Excellence. Simply delivered.

Dave Ames is clear on the value of the role that supervisors play within DHL Supply Chain.

Dave, the North America business's VP, Talent Management/Acquisition and Certified Learning & Development, says: "Our 10,000 supervisors around the globe are on the front lines. It's up to them to lead, motivate and develop our teams to run and perform to their highest potential. In order to have a world class team, we need world-class supervisors."

But how are logistics supervisors trained to be world-class? It's a topic that is attracting much attention in the supply chain industry with its much-publicised talent shortages.

According to a 2022 joint survey by Logistics Management and Instawork¹, 75% of light industrial businesses – a category that covers warehouses, distribution centers and 3PLs – felt unprepared to handle the year ahead. Why? Because 60% of them said that they had struggled to keep pace with increased demand during 2021 and the effect that supply chain variability had on labor requirements.

One of the report's takeaways was that "while light industrial businesses have traditionally focused on recruiting and hiring in order to keep up with increased demand, the persistent tight labor market has led retention to become increasingly critical to long-term business health and operations."

The need to hold on to experienced members of the workforce is especially true when it comes to a vital cog in the process – those who work at supervisory level in a logistics operation.

High-performing supervisors have long been in demand, for reasons that the Harvard Business Review describes: "Being a first-level supervisor is one of the most difficult, demanding, and challenging jobs in any organization...this person must be adroit at administering a unit and at perceiving which, among all the daily tasks delegated downward, are the most important to accomplish. Through such administrative competence, he or she must be able to link the unit's accomplishments to the functioning of other organizational subunits²."

But one effect of the extreme disruption caused by Covid has been the fuelling of demand for logistics supervisors who have the experience and the agility to deal with such a fast-moving scenario. In fact one recruitment executive estimates that between 65% and 75% of supply chain professionals are open to hearing about other positions within six months of getting their current role³.

What distinguishes the kind of businesses that people really want to work for? "Candidates are less willing to go to a firm that is outdated in systems or outdated in general processes", she says. If modernity, then, is the name of the game, what makes a modern logistics leader?

At DHL Supply Chain, the ground-breaking Supervisory Academy – a first-of-its-kind for training logistics leaders – is leading the way in developing its supervisors so that they are equipped with skills for the supply chains of the future.

Strong, authentic leadership skills

As Dave Ames points out, supervisors connect with every frontline employee in the business,

¹<https://info.instawork.com/state-of-warehouse-labor>

²<https://hbr.org/1980/03/let-first-level-supervisors-do-their-job>

³<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-23/supply-chain-managers-are-quitting-in-unprecedented-numbers?leadSource=verify%20wall>



meaning that they have a wide scope of influence. Through the Supervisory Academy a significant investment is being made in training them through a program that focuses on developing the skills to lead, skills to do the job and skills to engage with customers.

The Academy takes a holistic approach, combining the nurturing of strong, authentic leadership skills with instilling excellent operational knowledge. A multi-disciplinary team of IT, Operations Excellence and HR experts worked together to develop this world-class, technology-enabled solution.

Over the course of 15-18 months, participants are equipped with interpersonal and leadership skills, operational knowledge, deep insights into dealing with customers – and a good measure of personal growth. Through the course, DHL aims to make participants experts in their respective area of responsibility and enable them to embark on a continuous learning journey.

The course helps supervisors develop a sense of personal and professional pride in the critical role they play, appreciate the direct impact they have on DHL's business performance, and feel part of a wider team. They learn to bring a better balance to their management of tasks, teams and individuals and develop the confidence to lead and inspire teams to a high performance level, while building their own core competencies in change leadership.

Louise Gennis, VP, Global Talent Management/Acquisition, Certified Learning & Development at DHL Supply Chain describes the unique blend of training that takes place at the Supervisory Academy: "Everybody learns differently. So we have classroom training, we have e-learning, and then we have experiential – or 'on the job' activities. So what they learn in the classroom, they take back with them into the workplace and are able to carry out work activities that relate to their learning."



"Because we're operationally focused, we decided that the Academy should have three elements to it: a leadership element, where supervisors learn good behaviors and leadership skills; an operational element covering things like health and safety; and a customer and business element where they build up knowledge of our customers and our business."

The Academy helps Supervisors apply standardized ways of working and best-practice approaches for key operational deliverables, while key topics such as safety, core routines, continuous improvement and digitalization are also part of the agenda.

The training doesn't stop at supervisor level though as participants' line managers also embark on a learning journey. In a specially-designed module they are taught how they can best coach and support the supervisors who report to them, as well as assess their work activities and performance.

Satisfied customers

Starting in September 2020, the Supervisory Academy program piloted in all DHL Supply Chain regions – making it

a truly global effort. So far, more than 2100 participants around the world have started on the Supervisory Academy journey. To date, 130 cohorts have been launched in 32 countries and the rollouts are continuing, with 7,400 graduates expected to have attended the Academy by the end of 2025.

Since supervisors have a huge impact on how customers feel about DHL, the Academy will also benefit our partnerships with them. Employing high performing talent helps our customers to grow, continuously improve, innovate and lead in their markets. Additionally, they benefit from the experience of a multi-skilled workforce and from the competitive advantage provided by leaders who foster a culture of agility in a disrupted, shifting marketplace.

As one company's director of production summed it up to the Harvard Business Review in an article on the importance of supervisors: "The real key to productivity is my supervisors. Any investment in them in training, communications, time, energy, attention or plain listening gets one of the best returns in this company⁴."

⁴<https://hbr.org/1980/03/let-first-level-supervisors-do-their-job>