

ARE COLLEGE GRADUATES BETTER FOREMEN?

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FACTORY

The brevity of this publication possibly oversimplifies some matters and does not allow full cover of subjects such as – assisting present foremen obtain further education which will give them greater mobility – technician foremen – and training, motivation, communications, job design etc. where the new foremen are employed. See also other publications by Kenneth Hopper including GRADUATES ON THE FLOOR, Management Today, London October 1966, THE GROWING USE OF COLLEGE GRADUATES AS FOREMEN, Management of Personnel Quarterly, Michigan Summer 1967, and GRADUATE FOREMEN IN MANUFACTURING AND SIMILAR U.S. ORGANIZATIONS, Harvard Business School Research Report 1966.

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Are college graduates better foremen?

Britisher Kenneth Hopper says they are. An authority on management development, he recently studied industry's use of graduate foremen. Using The Harvard Business School as his base of operations, Mr. Hopper interviewed over 70 influential managers in companies representing a cross-section of manufacturing. Among other things, his survey revealed a trend toward hiring college graduates as foremen, especially in "growth" companies. These firms contend that graduate foremen are more versatile and promotable than non-graduates. Moreover, they tend to be more effective in reducing costs and improving methods.

Mr. Hopper is an engineer who has worked in line management posts and as management consultant, primarily in Europe. He constructed his survey, however, in the United States, where he is now working. FACTORY asked him about the pros and cons of using college graduates as foremen. Some of his replies are based on the results of his survey, others are simply impressions drawn from his general experience. But they all carry important implications for management.

Q. Mr. Hopper, just what do you mean by graduate foremen?

A. Anyone who has a qualification above the high school level—a college degree. In some cases, this would include people with junior college or technical school diplomas.

Q. In your opinion, should all foremen be college graduates?

A. No, because a mixture of graduates and others provides a variety of talents. You can never replace the practical, nuts-and-bolts know-how possessed by regular foremen.

Q. Wouldn't graduates shun a first-line supervisory post as being below their status?

A. Perhaps, if the job title is "foremen." But reluctance drops if the label is department manager, supervisor, section manager, and so on. The chance for upward mobility is also an incentive.

Q. Why should companies hire graduate foremen?

A. Firms I interviewed reported several benefits seldom found when promoting men from the shop floor to supervisory posts. For one thing, a graduate's broader hori-

zons makes him (or her) more responsive to change.

These people are eager to get ahead; they welcome training as a path to promotion. The scope of their knowledge, plus practical training, gives them flexibility; they can work in many departments.

Their greater self reliance permits more control at the first level, and less blind acceptance of bad decisions from higher management. This means higher efficiency, fewer errors.

Moreover, this supervisory experience is good background for men who will later be promoted. They gain first-hand knowledge of plant problems.

Q. Have graduates been successful in foremen jobs?

A. The senior managers I talked to were well pleased with the effectiveness of their graduate foremen. Many reported them to have considerable senior management potential.

Companies with good programs attributed major methods improvements and lower costs to their graduate foremen. Only one company expected to drop its graduate foremen program—due

mainly to the lack of candidates.

Q. Is their turnover any higher?

A. I know of no overall statistics in answer to that.

Q. Are graduate foremen disappointed when they don't get a chance to move up rapidly?

A. That depends. Not all graduates aspire to higher posts, nor do all companies offer them promotional opportunities. This is regrettable. But in some parts of the U.S., companies can hire seasoned grads, or those with less-sought-after degrees earned at little-known schools. These people tacitly accept the fact that they are not likely to rise through managerial ranks.

Q. Are the lack of promotional opportunity and the need to pay higher salaries good reasons for not hiring graduate foremen?

A. The first is, but not the second. While it's true that graduate foremen require and usually get higher salaries, their potential value to the company can far outweigh this consideration.

Q. Does job performance suffer while graduate foremen learn?

A. No, not with proper training and supervision. At first, more training is needed than that traditionally given foremen, and the graduate's boss must always be ready for consultation.

But as the new man rotates from one department to another, the need for basic training declines. The man can guide his own instruction according to the demands of each department.

Q. What constitutes a good graduate foremen training program?

A. It should include practical knowledge about the equipment in the department, insight into rela-



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tionships with other departments, and human relations.

Information should be broken down into training modules or packages such as work study, production control, and labor relations, so that each grad gets only the modules he needs when he needs them. Often-repeated basic material can be put on teaching machines, for example.

Q. Do shop-floor foremen resent these crown princes?

A. Not if they are sure of their jobs. They may even enjoy the "fallout" in higher status and security resulting from the graduate hires. In fact, other foremen are sometimes motivated to higher learning.

Several plants said regular foremen developed a paternal attitude toward grads. They were proud when one of "their boys" rose to top management ranks even though they themselves were ineligible—and knew it.

But if regular foremen are relegated to clerical jobs—or retired—to make way for incoming graduate foremen, as occurred in one company, you can expect friction between them.

Q. How long can a company "bank" graduate foremen trainees before restlessness sets in?

A. It's hard to predict when a man wants to try out his newly-learned skills. But he'll be satisfied not to use his full abilities, as long as he is getting valuable training.

Q. What happens to graduate foremen when production cut-backs threaten layoffs?

A. This is where these men have the advantage over a shop-floor foremen. They can switch to research, design, or other departments, whereas regular foremen might be laid off or returned to the wage force.

Q. How do you convince graduates that foremen posts are stepping stones to higher management?

A. Admittedly, this is a difficult job at the start of your program. The best tools are logical reasoning and assurances that the company regards the experience as valuable.

After a reasonable time, the company must keep its word by appointing graduate foremen to responsible jobs. Then you can cite their example to others.

Q. Are graduate foremen used in maintenance?

A. Yes, but it's important to provide promotional opportunities. Some companies allow maintenance foremen to transfer into works management, design, and other engineering functions.

Q. What's the feeling on shift work?

A. If it's a top drawer company with good promotion prospects, they will adapt to shifts. Quite a few companies, however, place a high percentage of grads on shift

work, where they lose the chance to innovate. They're out of touch with the day-shift technical staff and other supervisors in a position to listen and act upon suggestions. Left indefinitely on shifts, young men will quit.

Q. Can recent graduates effectively deal with plant problems?

A. The need for extensive, practical know-how is probably the most important reason for not using graduate foremen. But changes are coming.

Automated machines are spelling the demise of traditional methods and techniques. More scientific methods make a proportion of graduate foremen even more desirable.

Q. Where is the trend toward graduate foremen strongest?

A. In the electronics industry. It's quite common to find companies with all graduate foremen. This is partly due to their employment of so many women, who seldom seek promotion.

Chemical and oil companies also report up to 80% graduate foremen. On the other hand, food, textile and paper hire few.

Q. What advice would you give a company considering a graduate foremen program?

A. First, examine your operations to make sure graduate foremen would be beneficial. Then establish a long term policy of easing them in as vacancies arise. Finally, prepare your management structure to fit them in.

Q. Can you offer any advice to companies already employing graduate foremen?

A. Yes. They should be sure their program includes the best practices in training, communications, decision-making and motivation.