

What makes a good Supervisor?

A practical guide for Employers, Supervisors and Team Leaders in the South Australian Manufacturing Industry



About MISAC

The Manufacturing Industry Skills Advisory Council SA Inc (MISAC) was established to specifically represent the workforce development interests of the South Australian Manufacturing Industry.

It is one of nine Industry Skills Boards in the State, working with industry; the community; and Government to identify workforce development trends; emerging skill needs; and issues relating to the attraction and retention of a skilled workforce.

MISAC comprises senior representatives of key manufacturing industry organisations and the twelve member Board addresses workforce development issues through four Standing Committees:

- **q** Automotive
- q Light Manufacturing
- q Metal, Engineering and Aerospace
- q Process Manufacturing.

The organisation is committed to meeting the challenges of skill and labour shortages; recruitment and retention difficulties; and the creation of a learning and skills culture across the industry.

About this booklet

This booklet has been prepared to assist existing Supervisors in the South Australian manufacturing Industry to extend their expertise and effectiveness—and to encourage prospective Supervisors to prepare for this important role.

There are also key messages for employers—to assist the decision making process in appointing the right people into frontline management positions and providing the training and support people need to do the job well.

Development and publication of the booklet has been supported financially by the South Australian Government through the Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology (DFEEST).

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Government of South Australia

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Why are good Supervisors so important?

All companies rely on effective frontline managers. Good Supervisors are the backbone of the business the strength that links the strategic planning of upper management with the body of the organisation.

Good Supervisors are often the people who:

- **q** Make the difference between meeting production targets and missing them (because they motivate and energise their teams)
- **q** Have the most significant impact on workplace culture (because they set the tone of behaviour in their individual work areas and across the plant)
- q Influence the retention of staff (because people feel a strong sense of loyalty to their Supervisor)
- **q** Provide an incentive for people to join a company (because word gets around that people will be treated well and fairly).

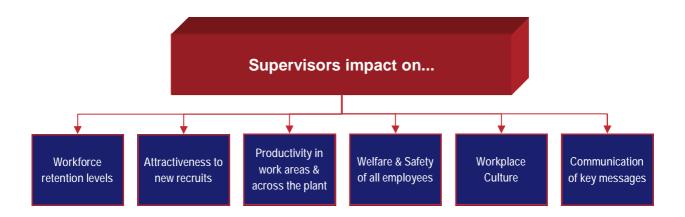
Ineffective Supervisors may cause:

- q High levels of absenteeism (because people simply don't want to come to work)
- q Reduced productivity (because people are not motivated to give their best)
- **q** Workplace conflict (among workers because there is no team cohesion and between departments because there is no effort to achieve common goals)
- **q** Safety issues (because people are not inspired to care for the welfare of others)
- **q** Resentment toward upper management (because the communication conduit is not working well between the various levels in the company).

The impacts listed above relate to the way Supervisor behaviour can influence those around them in the workforce. However, the nature of the Supervisor's role means there are also other impacts to consider.

Supervisors manage the day-to-day operations of the workplace and ensure both production and quality targets are met. The decisions they make while doing this affect not only their specific work areas, but also other areas of the business.

This is true for all industries, but has a particular impact in manufacturing, where each stage of the production chain is so dependent on previous links.



What makes a good Supervisor?

Supervisors have three quite distinct roles:

- **1.** An operational role which manages the flow of work through decision making and problem solving to meet targets in terms of production and quality
- 2. A leadership role which encourages, supports and motivates their team members
- **3.** A communication role which serves as a two-way conduit between upper management and the people who make up the general workforce.

These three roles need to be performed simultaneously—they are seamless—and to make the Supervisor's job even more complex, the roles need to concurrently address short term priorities as well as long term outcomes and take account of the overall goals of the company and individuals.

Effective supervision is therefore about 'managing up, down and across'.

It stands to reason then, that just being 'good at their job' does not equip people to be good Supervisors of other people doing that job.

Technical skills and a good work history and high job performance are important starting points, but companies that promote on this basis alone have found that they not only get an ineffective Supervisor, they lose a good worker.



'Good Supervisors' usually come from a combination of different factors.

While it's true that there are good Supervisors in the South Australian Manufacturing Industry who have got there without specific training or formal mentoring—and sometimes even without planned support from upper management—these times are well and truly over!

Workforce expectations have changed—Generation X and Generation Y expect competent, inspirational leaders from their first day on the job.

The ageing workforce and the associated challenges of labour and skills shortages—coupled with intense international competition—mean there is no longer time for Supervisors to only learn on-the-job. The need to be attractive to the reduced labour market; to retain every employee against stiff competition; and to continually increase productivity as a weapon against international cost pressures all heighten the urgency for good Supervisors on the floor—now!



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What type of personal qualities and attributes?

When asked about the most important personal qualities of a good Supervisor, most people will answer 'people skills'. This can be a little tricky to define—and it's also important to remember that Supervisors have other important aspects of their job in addition to managing people.

An effective Supervisor will therefore have a 'package' of personal attributes which contains as many as possible of the following:

- **q** Good communication skills—Supervisors need to be able to present complex ideas in simple terms and convince others about why tasks need to be done a certain way. They also need to be able to communicate upward to higher management about issues and concerns on the floor—and, importantly, good Supervisors have good listening skills which they use with both upper management and their work teams.
- Q Resourcefulness—A good Supervisor needs to be able to 'make things happen' when confronted by obstacles. Some people refer to this as having 'problem-solving skills' but it's also about being innovative and thinking 'outside the square'—being creative and seeing solutions others just don't see.
- **c Flexibility**—The needs of the business will change throughout the year, throughout the week, maybe even throughout the day. The needs of work team members will change also—and flexible working arrangements are a valuable tool for today's businesses to use in attracting and retaining the workforce they require for success and sustainability. A good Supervisor will understand and accommodate these requirements for flexibility and adapt readily to 'change'.
- **q** Commitment and Responsibility—Managers need to know that tasks assigned to Supervisors will be completed. They also need to be confident that the work will be done in line with the company's values and long term goals—even for routine work.
- **q** Empathy—This is about being sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of other people. Understanding others and their likely reactions to specific situations is the first step in developing relationships which can help to get the best performance from the work team. Good Supervisors remember what it was like to be 'new on the job'.
- **q Respect**—Being respectful is more than just being courteous and polite. Good Supervisors treat people as individuals, acknowledging their individual needs and aspirations.
- **q** Enthusiasm—People who are enthusiastic can generally motivate and energise others to behave the same way and reach their full potential.
- **q** Time management skills—Good Supervisors don't try to do everything at once or try to do everything themselves. They know how to manage interruptions and distractions from the task at hand—and they also know how to say 'no' when it's needed. They know how to prioritise!
- **q** Ability to delegate and influence—Being able to effectively delegate tasks and influence others to perform the work in an appropriate way can be difficult to master, but there should be early signs that the trait exists and can be developed through mentoring and experience.
- **q** Being open to new ideas—This is related to flexibility, but it's also about being open to looking at things from different perspectives and trying new approaches. A Supervisor with this trait is particularly valuable in a multigenerational or multicultural workplace.
- **q** Attentiveness to team stresses—Being able to recognise hazards or stresses in the workforce team is important—as are the skills to address them (many of which will come from the attributes listed above).

What type of technical skills and knowledge?

Supervisors will often be required to provide instruction on the correct use and handling of machinery and equipment—including the use of hazardous substances—so they need to be technically competent in these aspects.

They are also responsible for educating new employees and apprentices about specific workplace policies and procedures, so their knowledge in these areas needs to be extensive. Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare (OHS&W) are key areas for Supervisor attention and will requires competent skills and comprehensive knowledge.

Because Supervisors generally oversee more than one job, it's helpful if they have broad skills and work experience across a number of different areas in the business.

For the employer grooming a group of potential Supervisors as part of succession planning, it can be useful to provide this experience and opportunity for skills development through job rotation.

Employees with a goal to becoming a Supervisor could investigate ways of obtaining knowledge or skills in particular work tasks not part of their current job. This could involve short courses or workshops away from the workplace—or asking to learn new skills and earn new qualifications on-the-job through Vocational Education and Training (VET). Discuss options with your manager or HR personnel—at the very least you will have flagged your interest in a supervisory role down the track.

What type of experience on-the-job?

Appropriate personal qualities, technical know-how, training, mentoring and support all help people newly promoted into a Supervisor's role—but 'hands-on' experience is still a critical component of developing a good Supervisor.

Although a Supervisor's role brings many benefits, it's also accompanied by pressures from the additional responsibilities—and people can really only develop their own personal stress-coping mechanisms while they are performing under those pressures.

However, it doesn't have to be a 'sink-or-swim' scenario.

For employers, your succession planning should include creating opportunities for Supervisor candidates to perform in the role for short periods. Preferably, this should be arranged with 'a coach' on hand (someone who has proven to be a good Supervisor) but if this is not possible, at least filling in for Supervisors on leave or working as a Supervisor on a specific fixed-time task.

Employees who are looking for promotion to a Supervisor's role can also seek experience away from the workplace by managing projects on a voluntary basis for organisations in the community. Demonstrating to your boss that you have been able to pull everything (and everyone) together to build a sheltered barbecue area at your local footy club or fundraise for charities may seem unrelated to work—but it speaks volumes about your initiative, people skills and organisational abilities.

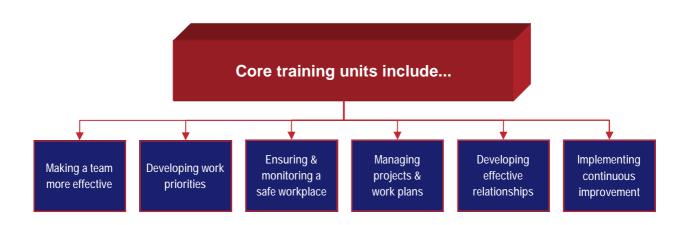
What type of formal training?

Formal training in Frontline Management provides Supervisors with the core management skills they need to do their job effectively.

Courses are available through VET in *Business (Frontline Management)* at Certificate III, IV and Diploma levels and there are also specific qualifications in *Automotive Manufacturing (Frontline Management)* at Certificate III, IV and Diploma levels.

People aspiring to a Supervisor's position and looking to demonstrate their interest could also investigate specific separate units that are available (some of them as 'on-line' courses) which may provide you with credits if you later embark on the full qualification. Discussing your interest with management or HR personnel is a first step to finding appropriate subjects in these short courses.

Most formal training courses for Frontline Management will include modules which are built around the core skills Supervisors need in the workplace.



Apart from generic or industry-specific external training, Supervisors also need training in relation to their specific workplace. This can be conducted in-house and should include:

- **q** The company vision, mission and values
- q Workplace policies, procedures, enterprise agreement provisions and relevant OH&S legislation
- q The business rationale for responding to flexibility issues and the range of options available
- q How the company's disciplinary process works and what the Supervisor's role is in that process.

Depending on the particular needs of the workplace, training workshops which are available externally and could prove useful include:

- q Change Management
- q Developing a positive workplace culture
- q Managing a multicultural workplace
- q Managing Generation Y
- **q** Promoting Innovation and Change.

What type of mentoring?

The leap from 'being led' to 'leading' can be daunting. Some people feel alienated—as though they are not part of the group anymore. This will change as the new relationship develops, but meantime matching a new Supervisor with a Mentor can give valuable support.

There's a difference between 'mentoring' and 'coaching':

- **Coaching**—is about improving skills and performance and working toward a pre-defined goal. It's acceptable (and often appropriate) that the 'coach' for new Supervisors is their Manager.
- **q** Mentoring—is more personal and supportive, rather than instructing. The mentor is someone a Supervisor can turn to and confidentially discuss issues and problems they may be having in the role. For this reason, it's more appropriate that the mentor is not the Supervisor's immediate Manager. The best person for this role is another Supervisor who is competent in the role and has the personality to guide and encourage without being over-bearing.

Mentoring can be either a formal or informal arrangement—and can be one-on-one or involve one mentor and a group of 'mentees'.

Employers could consider establishing a formal group mentoring program for Supervisors which has 'time' allocated to it—and perhaps even a specific role and budget if the business (and number of Supervisors) is large enough to warrant it. Formal mentoring has a structure and an agreement—to mentor and to be mentored—with clear expectations and written commitment to participation.

New Supervisors and Team Leaders—or employees seeking to be promoted into those roles—could actively seek to establish an informal mentoring arrangement with someone they trust. Knowing when to seek guidance and assistance from others is a key skill for Supervisors.



Mentors can provide a wealth of practical examples and 'how-to' advice, but their key role is to help the Supervisors develop their own critical thinking and problem solving techniques. In many ways mentors present as a type of sounding board—they listen, ask questions, lead the conversation and help the mentee to identify the consequences of particular actions.

Through discussion—face-to-face, telephone, email and even SMS communications can all work well the pair can then sort through options and decide together on an appropriate course of action which can be planned and implemented by the new Supervisor. The outcomes are then reviewed together.

This approach is empowering. It encourages progressive independence so that solutions are increasingly discovered alone—and eventually become instinctive in the 'good Supervisor'.

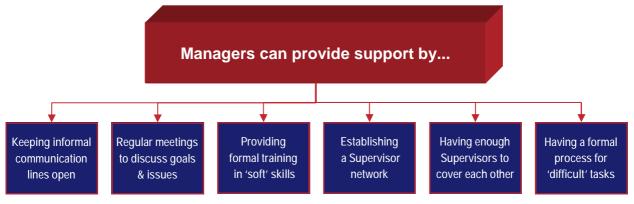
What type of management support?

Management expectations and priorities have a huge impact on Supervisor behaviour—and this, in turn, has been shown to have a direct impact on whether a business has an engaged and committed workforce; with high job satisfaction and productivity; and low turnover and absenteeism rates; operating in a safe work environment.

Managerial support for these key employees is therefore critical to the success of the business.

As with many industries, Supervisors in the manufacturing industry have generally 'risen through the ranks'. Their work to the point of promotion has often been based on absolutes—there was either a right way or a wrong way of doing things. The world of the Supervisor is quite different to that—it requires a continuing series of judgement calls.

Management support for Supervisors is therefore centred on providing very clear and consistent messages about what it is the business really wants from them—reinforcement of the company values. Placing too much emphasis on short term priorities which don't appropriately align with those values will leave Supervisors feeling confused and pressured—and these feelings will transfer down the line to the rest of the workforce.



- **q** Being accessible is the first step to providing support—Keep an 'open door' and 'drop by' the work area for a chat occasionally, but let them know you're coming so they retain authority for their area and don't feel 'spied on'.
- **q** Schedule regular meetings to talk—about 'the big picture' and to give an opportunity to air issues and concerns. Use these meetings to provide positive feedback.
- **q** Consider a Supervisors' Induction Program—which focuses on the interpersonal skills they'll need. This confirms you care about how they lead people as well as how they meet production targets.
- **q** Consider a Supervisors Network—Supervisors shouldn't feel competitive with each other. Arrange opportunities for them to network so they can share experiences and feel part of a Supervisor team.
- **q** Don't just run with the bare minimum of Supervisors—Having cross-trained extras available will help to relieve Supervisors for on-going training and life-balance absences—but it's also an important part of your succession plan.
- **q Provide clear pathways for difficult tasks**—Often the most difficult tasks for Supervisors are disciplining members of their team; dealing with sustained absences; 'difficult' employees; and resolving conflict among team members. Providing clearly defined pathways for dealing with these issues will help resolve their own conflict about how to approach the matter when it arises.

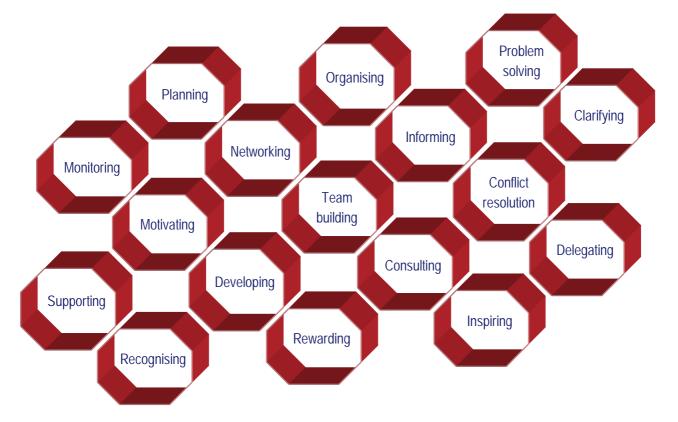
Performance assessments are important for all staff. Use this time with Supervisors to encourage feedback on your performance as a Manager—do they need more support in specific areas?

Everyday functions of a good Supervisor

Working as a Supervisor can be one of the most challenging—and rewarding—positions in the South Australian Manufacturing Industry because the work requires both technical and interpersonal skills.

Although the role can be fast-paced and demanding, there are so many different activities built into each shift that good Supervisors will always go home at night knowing they 'have made a difference' by performing well in one or more of their core functions.

As with any job, it's important to be very clear about the specific functions of a Supervisor's role. The model below lists some of them—things the good Supervisor would expect to be involved in each day.



In addition to these 'standard' functions, Supervisors are likely to be involved in:

- q Cost control
- q Regulation compliance
- q Equipment and materials inventory
- q Quality management
- q OH&S monitoring and planning
- q Recording and reporting
- q Disciplining
- q Performance assessment.

All this needs to be achieved while maintaining a personal healthy work/life balance!!

The following pages provide some 'tips' about how good Supervisors can be effective in these functions and, in many cases, can perform them simultaneously.

Tips for putting the functions into practice

Most Supervisors newly promoted to the role will model their behaviour on their boss, or bosses they have known previously. This can work well if the role model has been a good leader, but it's important to recognise that the dynamics of the workplace have changed dramatically in recent years and, in particular, the incoming Generation Y has different expectations of their managers.

Top-down, autocratic, order-giving management styles have evolved to now be more 'coach-like' and motivating. 'Orders' and 'commands' have become more consultative and informative—and the response has become more about teamwork, rather than fear of retribution.

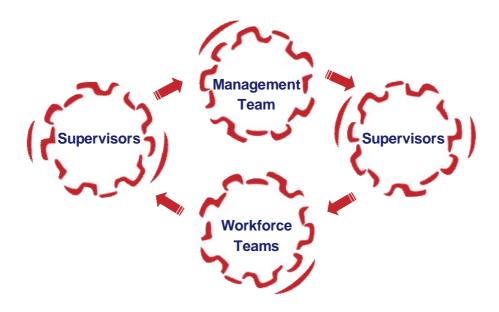
The following suggestions may assist Supervisors in working with their team members—as well as employers in working with their Supervisors!

- **q Be approachable and encouraging**—People who are new to a workplace or a job role are likely to be anxious and your attitude will make a difference.
- **q** Communication is about clarity—This means being clear about more than just that you want the job done. Explain the rationale behind the work—including why it needs to be done a certain way, if that's the case.
- **q** Break down tasks—This is important both for yourself and your team members. Being able to present complex ideas in progressive steps and simple words is a talent, but it becomes easier with practice.
- **q** Reflect on what has been learned—Recapping with anyone new in a job about new learnings for that day, or during that week, is good practice. The review not only reinforces the lessons, but generates a sense of achievement—and shows that you noticed!
- **q Give plenty of positive feedback**—This is not just more reviewing. It's about noticing 'how' the job was done rather than just the achievement of it. *"You were really keen to get that right, weren't you!"* can put a different spin on a situation which took someone a few tries to master.
- **q** Take the time to interact with their instructor—If people are undertaking formal courses, identifying what's coming easily to them and what is more of a struggle to understand will help you give extra practice and practical examples.
- **q** Take the time to listen—Listening is an important component of communication and it lets team members know you value their opinions and respect them.
- **q Watch your body language**—Even if what you're saying is 'by the book', folded arms will tell them you have a closed mind on the subject and hands on hips will expose your aggressive feelings. Worse still, other team members can read these messages, even if they can't hear what you're saying.
- **q** Give them credit for their good work, ideas or innovations—Team members who perform well deserve to be acknowledged—both by you personally and by others as appropriate.
- **q** Always be respectful—There's a difference between being assertive and going in 'heavy handed'!

Supervisors in the communication cycle

Supervisors are the linchpin in the workplace communication cycle.

They take the key messages from upper management and interpret them for the workplace team into behaviours and operational activities—and they're also responsible for presenting the issues, suggestions and ideas of the workforce back to the management team.



The flow of communication needs to be smooth and clear—not only in regard to the content, but in the way the content is conveyed. When people communicate, they take in a number of messages apart from the spoken words. Preparation is therefore important when communicating—both with the boss and the team members on the floor.

Communicating with the boss

These days most Supervisors recognise the importance of using good communication skills when dealing with their team members. However, sometimes they forget that they are part of another team too—one that involves upper management. The style of communication between Manager and Supervisor will depend to a large extent on the personalities of each—but the following comments will be helpful to Supervisors in most situations:

- **q** Active listening—All good communication uses good listening skills and what is called 'active listening'. This involves asking appropriate questions at appropriate times and also 'reverbalising'—using different words to confirm what you think the speaker meant.
- **q** Asking questions—When you need to go to the boss with questions, it's important to not only be clear about what you want to know, but also why you want to know it. This helps the Manager provide the most appropriate responses.
- **Q** Making a request—The same rules apply for requests. Give your reasons for making it, with some supporting information—and have more detailed information ready if you need to answer questions.



- **q** Making suggestions—Again, give reasons for making the suggestion, but this time include consequences. What will be gained if your suggestion is implemented? What will be lost if it isn't? There may be some 'negatives' associated with the suggestion and it's important you include those as well (rather than let your boss think of them) and, if possible, have some remedial actions ready to discuss.
- **q** Passing on information—This should start with a short overall summary statement (so the Manager doesn't block the communication by continually thinking, '*Get to the point!*'). Once there's a broad understanding, you can go back and fill in the details—such as background to the incident, what actually happened, how it was addressed and what the outcomes or consequences have been (or are likely to be).
- **q** Receiving instructions—Look for the who, what, when, why and how. If any of these are missing (and you feel they should come from the boss, rather than your own initiative) you should ask at the time, rather than need to come back. Examples of good questions include the Manager's deadline for completed work and whether progress updates would be helpful.
- **q Progress updates**—Keeping the boss in the loop even when you haven't been asked to will be appreciated if you can do it in a way that is not intrusive on the boss's work. A long telephone conversation or knock at the door may come at the wrong time—but a quick email to say 'All's going to plan' with a few dot points on status may be helpful at the next Managers' Meeting.
- **q** Approval to proceed—The status reports you have sent will make it easier to get approval to move to the next stage or if you need additional expenditure. You should also seek approval if someone from another department (or even your boss's boss) has asked you to take on a specific task. Remember, you have a direct line of accountability.
- **q** Making judgements—Your boss won't want to know every little decision you need to make in your work area—that's what you're there for. However, neither will the Manager want to know about problems or 'situations' only when they're full blown! Making sound judgements about when to include the boss is one part of being a good Supervisor that does come with time. The more you and your boss get to know each other in the new work relationship, the easier it will be to make this type of judgement call.

Quick tips for Team Toolbox Meetings

A Tool Box meeting presents an excellent opportunity for Supervisors to communicate with team members and to encourage a feeling of involvement—such as in matters relating to their own (and others') safety; changes in routine or in what's happening around them.

- **q** Keep meetings short and 'to the point'—These meetings are not meant to be lengthy training sessions but can be a good opportunity to remind people about key issues or points of safety.
- **q** Choose a good location—Although there's no need for formal meeting rooms, they still require space away from noise and other people working.
- **q** Encourage input—These meetings are not meant to be 'lectures'. Ask for ideas and suggestions for continuous improvement and potential solutions to any raised issues.
- **q** Keep a written record—There's no need for a masterpiece of prose, but there does need to be a record of who was there, what was discussed and any decisions or commitments that were made.

Where to find more information

Ü Manufacturing Industry Skills Advisory Council (MISAC)

The MISAC site offers information on Training Packages and Career Pathways in the South Australian Manufacturing Industry and provides hyperlinks to a number of other useful websites.

www.misac.com.au

Ü Safe Work SA

This website provides a range of categories useful to Supervisors and employers, including information on Industrial Relations, OH&S, Legislation, Resources and links to information regarding specific sectors of the manufacturing industry. The site features *Five ways to look after your workmates*.

www.safework.sa.gov.au

Ü My Future

The 'My Future' website is an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments and is full of useful information about career development in general. There's also specific information about Frontline Management Courses and Training Providers.

www.myfuture.edu.au

Ü Registered Training Organisations

Registered Training Organisations, including TAFESA, will be pleased to provide information about accredited courses in Frontline Management or specific units available.

www.tafesa.edu.au

Acknowledgements

This publication was developed in August/September 2007 as an initiative of the Manufacturing Industry Skills Advisory Council (MISAC) and was supported financially by the South Australian Government through the Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology (DFEEST).

MISAC Board Members at the time of publication were:

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| SA Branch Organiser Liquor Hospitality & Miscellaneous Union (LHMU) |
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