People Management: Suggestions for the Inexperienced Field Supervisor

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Supervisors for short-term field jobs often have little or no experience managing people and sometimes do not have much more experience in data collection and field protocols than the field crew. The goal of this essay is to provide some simple, practical, and accessible advice for the inexperienced supervisor (e.g., new graduate students or experienced field biologists who are taking the next step to crew leader) in hopes of ensuring a productive, satisfying, and fun field season for all involved.

Regardless of profession, managing people is challenging, and doing it well requires a diverse set of skills (Belker 1997). In many ways “people management” in the wildlife sciences is no different than in any other profession; a manager must effectively and efficiently ensure that the work gets done via other people by planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating or controlling (see Section 22 in Wenger 1984).

Many wildlife jobs, however, have characteristics that act together to pose some unique challenges for field-crew supervisors. These characteristics include the following:

1. Field-based. Wildlife jobs require going out into the field to collect data. While “the field” is what we love, it can also be physically and emotionally challenging. As a result, not only is the job demanding (e.g., long hours) but the work environment also can be taxing (e.g., extreme heat).

2. Short-term. Many field jobs are short-term (4 or 5 months), typically reflecting a particular seasonal interest of study, such as breeding or migratory periods. As a consequence, time is of the essence—study organisms will not wait while you train a field crew or extend the season to accommodate the learning curve. Hence, there is often urgency to “get to it,” and field crews feel the pressure of time (“I need to find some nests”) while simultaneously learning about wildlife field biology.

3. Remote and primitive. Sometimes study areas are far from civilization and living conditions can be quite primitive. Remoteness can provide communication challenges and creates an environment where work and nonwork life are inextricable. Field crewmembers necessarily become very familiar with each other rapidly.

4. Dangerous. Field workers may encounter rattlesnakes (Crotalus spp.), bears (Ursus spp.), or hazardous terrain. There also may be dangers posed by humans at study sites, such as crime and assault. Finally, there may be methodological dangers specific to projects such as use of small aircraft for surveys, etc.

5. Low pay and large workload. Field jobs often simultaneously combine substantial workloads and, unfortunately, low wages or subsistence stipends. At the same time, recently graduated field biologists are more and more burdened with the debt of student loans. Some field jobs partially compensate by serving as true internships with a primary goal of training interns in some aspect of wildlife biology. Even organizations providing internships rely on interns to collect good data, however, and internships do not differ in workload or intensity from other better-paid (relatively speaking) positions.

Together these characteristics can create intense, sometimes emotionally stressful, working conditions. Some people thrive in this situation; others find it extremely challenging, which in itself may create conflict among field staff. Field leaders, thus, need not only to train their crews to collect data and manage environmental hazards, but also to train themselves to read human emotions to keep the crew balanced.

This essay assumes you have taken the time to carefully choose your crew by investing time and energy in the advertising, interviewing, and hiring process. Develop a good screening process, ask appropriate questions during interviews, provide honest communication about expectations from both sides, and through reference checking, you will have the best chance to get a team that really wants to do the work required.

The most important skill needed to successfully manage people is the skill of communication. Good communication avoids the dangerous pitfall of miscommunication, an all too common phenomenon. So go ahead and ask: ask, if you sense confusion; ask, if someone seems upset; ask, if there is anything you can do. Additionally, supervisors must learn to listen and to hear (e.g., accept advice and suggestions).

An important aspect of being a good communicator is being a good teacher. A good supervisor—teacher—communicator requires focusing on the supervisee, showing passion for the job, study, and study organism, creating a safe work environment, and repeating the important points. Perhaps especially, repeat the important points.

Most of the advice that follows provides specific avenues for improving communication and it is in this context that they should be implemented.

1. Set goals and objectives. Much like good science, a successful supervisor will have created a list of specific goals and objectives for the field season. If necessary, work with the principal investigator (PI) to develop these. Depending on the job, it may be necessary to provide these as orientation materials, spending the time to go through each one with the crew. Consider providing these as a checklist and associated timeline. The goals and objectives are not exclusive to the needs of the scientific study, as they can and should include items such as weekly chores and safety protocols. In general, establish pathways for you and your crew to remain organized.

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throughout the season. If the crew has a multitude of diverse responsibilities check in with them regularly to ensure that deadlines are being met; do not wait until the end of the field season to discover that some team members were not following protocol. Provide “extra credit” type projects for those who like to go above and beyond the call of duty.

2. **Training.** Of course, training is a vital component and doing it well will save you a lot of grief. The amount and intensity of training will depend on the job and the level of experience of the crew. In general, attempt to provide as much detail as possible and be prepared to revisit these details throughout the season. Make yourself accessible. Speak directly to your crew; avoid passing along vital information via other crewmembers or notes that only a few might read. Do not assume that returning field crewmembers remember all details from the previous year; even the most seasoned field biologists need refreshers. Training builds confidence in the crew and your competence in this regard will make them have confidence in you. Comprehensive written descriptions of field and data entry—verification protocols can be very helpful, especially when you are not always available. Such meticulous attention to detail helps to maintain morale as it indicates to the crew that they are collecting data in a well thought out manner and, as such, their efforts will be useful.

3. **Involve them in the research.** Provide your crew with relevant literature and research proposals. This helps them understand how the data they are collecting will be used and provides the scientific background and theoretical context. Let them know how and why the project was funded. Ask them their opinions on these materials. Ask them to interpret what they are seeing. Such attention to detail helps to maintain morale as it indicates to the crew that they are collecting data in a well thought out manner and, as such, their efforts will be useful.

4. **Have meetings.** Hold informal but regular meetings to discuss relevant research papers, check in regarding goals and objectives, protocols, housing needs and maintenance, field safety issues, etc. Bring snacks to these meetings.

5. **Daily journal.** Consider keeping a daily group journal. There are many direct and indirect benefits to keeping a group journal. For example, journals are excellent places to log weather data and daily events. The daily journal still remains an important tool of the wildlife scientist and keeping species lists and other natural history notes teaches keen observational skills. The group journal also helps to foster a team environment—the entire group, including you, participates.

6. **Acknowledge them.** Thank them. Tell them that they are doing a good job. It may sound obvious but, unfortunately, this one is not obvious to many supervisors—even seasoned ones! Acknowledge their hard work by taking them out to eat or bringing them some baked goods for early morning work. This is simple to do and its effect goes a long way.

7. **Lead and lead by example.** As crew leader it is important to establish friendly authority in order to inspire confidence (e.g., understand your project so you can answer questions). At the same time, realize that it is acceptable to not know the answers (understand your limitations) and let the crew know that you will ask the PI or consult the literature to see if you can get the answer. Do not micromanage; give the crew flexibility to operate within defined boundaries, acknowledging that they may not go about a task the same way you would. You will sometimes find that alternative approaches produce better ways of doing things. Let go of ownership of some decisions. Get dirty; when possible, participate in all of the required tasks, from fieldwork to data entry to weekly chores, without losing site of your leadership responsibilities. Mistakes will always transpire and are rarely as significant in retrospect; good leaders will allow themselves and their crews to learn from these mistakes.

8. **Follow up.** It is important to follow up in several different areas. It is a supervisor’s responsibility to provide references and letters of reference and to debrief individuals upon their departure, seeking feedback about their tenure. In some cases we should be prepared to offer advice regarding other employment, graduate school, career choices, etc. Consider sending project reports to field staff from that past season so that they have a sense of accomplishment and appreciation; they can refer to these in their resumes.

9. **Have fun.** Your field crew works hard, so make sure they have opportunities to have fun. Just because you are a workaholic (and stressed about your graduate project) does not mean everyone else should be. Make sure the crew gets sufficient time off.

Even a good supervisor will encounter difficult situations. There will be personality conflicts among crewmembers. There will be bad workers. These are the most difficult times and require the supervisor to push the limit of her or his communication skills. When it is necessary to be critical or deal with a difficult situation regardless of topic, do so in private, never discipline or criticize in public. I suggest learning conflict resolution skills or at least having access to someone certified in conflict resolution, such as a mediator. Dealing with these and even more serious issues, such as harassment or serious mental health issues, is beyond the scope of this paper. In general, however, it may be necessary to look to your own supervisor, PI, or institution, as some types of conflict may have legal consequences.

I have found that doing all of the above suggestions and doing them well is a tall order, especially when you are trying to balance supervising, fieldwork, and a preponderance of office work. However, do your best to fit these suggestions to your particular crew and situation. For example, find out what individual crewmembers do well and ask them to do more of it. Revisit these suggestions from time to time. Know your limitations and ask for help when you have reached these limits.

Many of the characteristics that make wildlife jobs challenging and stressful are the very ones that attracted us to the wildlife sciences. Supervise your crew so that their experience fosters passion for wildlife, science, and field biology. And, most of all have fun.

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**Literature Cited**


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