



National Police Research Platform



February 2011

The Longitudinal Study of First Line Supervisors

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Purpose

A distinguishing feature of the Platform Project is that it will follow law enforcement personnel over time to understand their “life course.” Law enforcement first-line supervisors are one of the populations we are studying because they are key to an agency’s performance. Despite their importance, first-line police supervisors have been under-researched, and in many departments they have not received the support and professional development that is needed to promote the highest quality supervision. The Platform will produce data about supervisors and supervision to supplement a sparse literature (Allen, 1982; Brehm and Gates, 1993; Engel, 2000, 2001, 2002; Mastrofski, Ritti, and Snipes, 1994; O’Brien and Kabanoff, 1981; Van Maanen, 1983; 1984; White, 2008). A key benefit of longitudinal data collection will be the production of information about first-line supervisors’ *life course*. When officers are promoted to a supervisory rank, they embark upon a new phase of their career requiring a transition to a different role (Van Maanen, 1983), and as with any job, police supervisors adjust to the requirements of the job over time as they “learn the ropes” and then mature in the position. Platform researchers will explore how police supervisors develop, determine what influences that development, and discern what the consequences are for performance.

Through on-line surveys and other sources of data, the Platform is collecting information from supervisors regarding their lives and work. Examples of key research questions that can be answered with this Platform component are:

What do supervisors do and think?

- How do they spend their time?
- How do they view supervision?
- What are their skills and styles?

The National Police Research Platform

The National Police Research Platform was developed as a vehicle to continuously advance our knowledge of police organizations and their employees and to provide regular and timely feedback to police agencies and policy makers nationwide. In doing so, the Platform is expected to advance both the science of policing and evidence-based learning organizations. This project was supported by Award No. 2008-DN-BX-0005 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

How do supervisors change over time?

- How much and in what ways do views, styles, stressors, and behaviors change over time?
- How does training impact on views? Styles? Behaviors? If yes, why and how?

Which aspects of the individual personality and which aspects of the police organization influence what supervisors do and think and how they change over time?

Methods

Presently there are five police agencies – four large and one small – participating in the longitudinal study of first-line supervisors, along with one statewide training center. The study tracks newly designated first-line supervisors, starting at the beginning of basic supervisory training. Individuals who agree to participate take two surveys during the early part of their training and a third soon after their training is completed. Participants are then sent short monthly surveys covering a wide range of topics related to their new jobs, some of which replicate measures previously administered.

Results reported here represent 16 classes of trainees from three participating sites (n=169). This sample represents respondents who started supervisor training between January 2009 and April 2010.¹ The sample is racially diverse (9.5 percent African American; 13.1 percent Hispanic; 68.9 percent White) and mostly male (85.4 percent). A plurality of the sample (37.9 percent) is between 35 and 39 years of age with six to 10 years of law enforcement experience with their current department (37.1 percent). The vast majority of participants has some college education (87.6 percent) and most have never served in the military (63.3 percent).

¹ Data from the other two participating sites are not included because they have not been involved long enough to provide data for the time periods covered in this report.

Key Findings

Several scenario questions tap into supervisor style, including one administered in the post-training survey that asks respondents to indicate how they would respond when observing a subordinate who seems headed down the wrong path in dealing with a dispute:

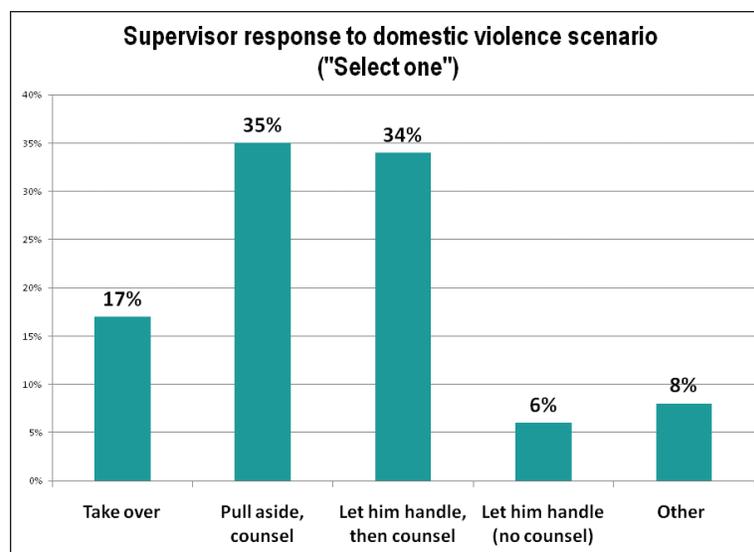
“You are observing one of your officers dealing with a husband and wife who are angry and engaged in a domestic dispute. There has been no violence, and the probability that it will erupt at this time seems low. Your officer is taking actions that you think will be unhelpful in bringing the situation to a desirable conclusion, but the risk of violence remains low. What is your most likely course of action?”

Respondents can select from the following:

- Step in and take over the situation, counseling the officer later
- Pull the officer aside, counsel him, and then let him proceed to handle the situation
- Let the officer handle the situation as he chooses and counsel him later
- Let the officer handle the situation as he chooses and let him learn from his experience rather than counsel him
- Other

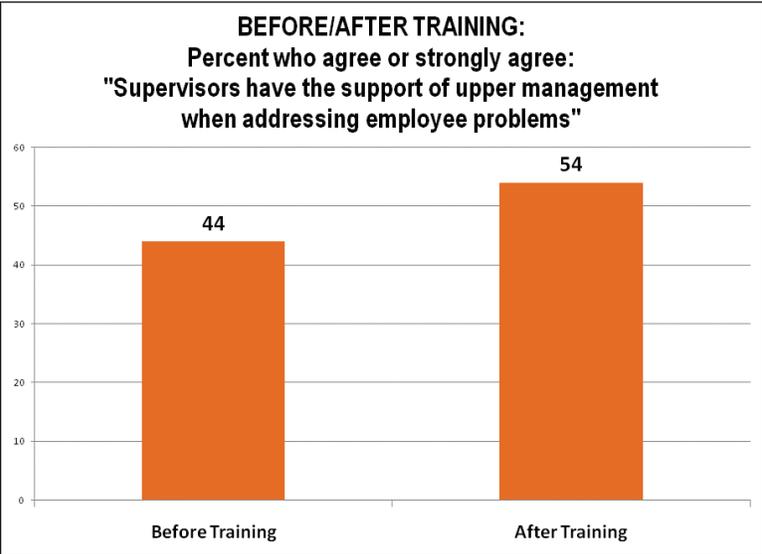
The results provided in Figure 1 show diverse styles; some form of counseling at the scene is the most common. Many experts recommend some form of timely coaching in circumstances such as this, rather than either taking over or doing nothing. When we replicate these questions in a future survey, we will be able to determine whether supervisors become more or less inclined to counsel on scene or take some other course of action.

Figure 1



We were also able to track supervisors' views and styles before and after receiving basic supervisory training. Figure 2 shows that after training, 10 percent more officers felt support from upper management when addressing employee problems than before training, a positive sign from the perspective of department managers.

Figure 2



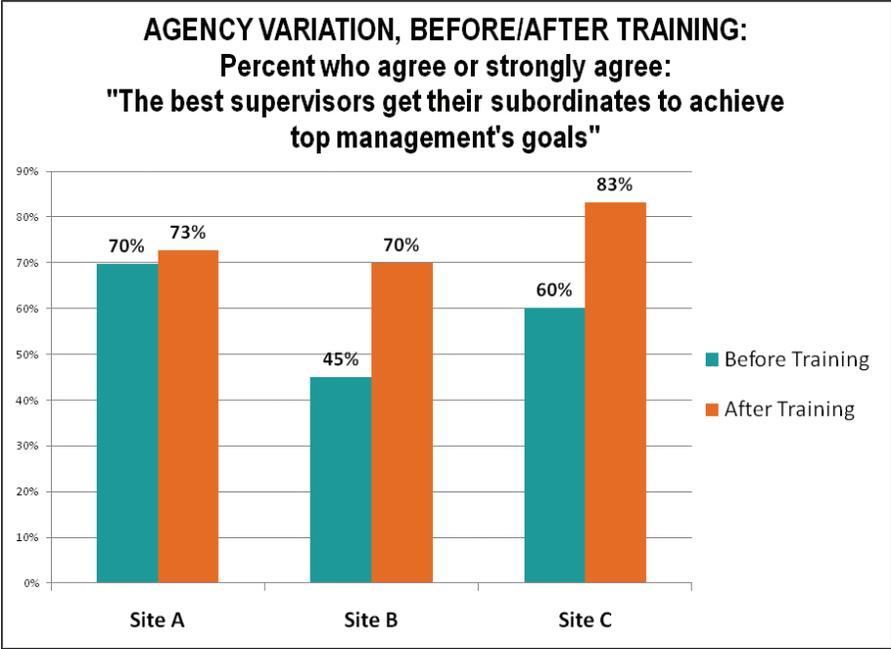
As seen in Figure 3, skepticism about the ability to improve the productivity of problem officers was cut nearly in half after training – from 18 percent to 10 percent. Less skeptical supervisors may be more inclined to strive to improve the productivity of subordinates whose pace is lagging. Training appears to enhance feelings of efficacy as a supervisor.

Figure 3



Another distinguishing feature of the Platform Project is its capacity to provide agencies with their own results that are benchmarked against other similar agencies. Figure 4 shows pre- and post-training agreement in three sites with the statement, “The best supervisors get their subordinates to achieve top management’s goals.” A high percentage of supervisors in Site A already agree with that statement at the start of training, and training had no impact. In Sites B and C, agreement improved considerably following training. Future research could explore factors that might extend the effects of training, such as alterations to policies and procedures that reinforce training.

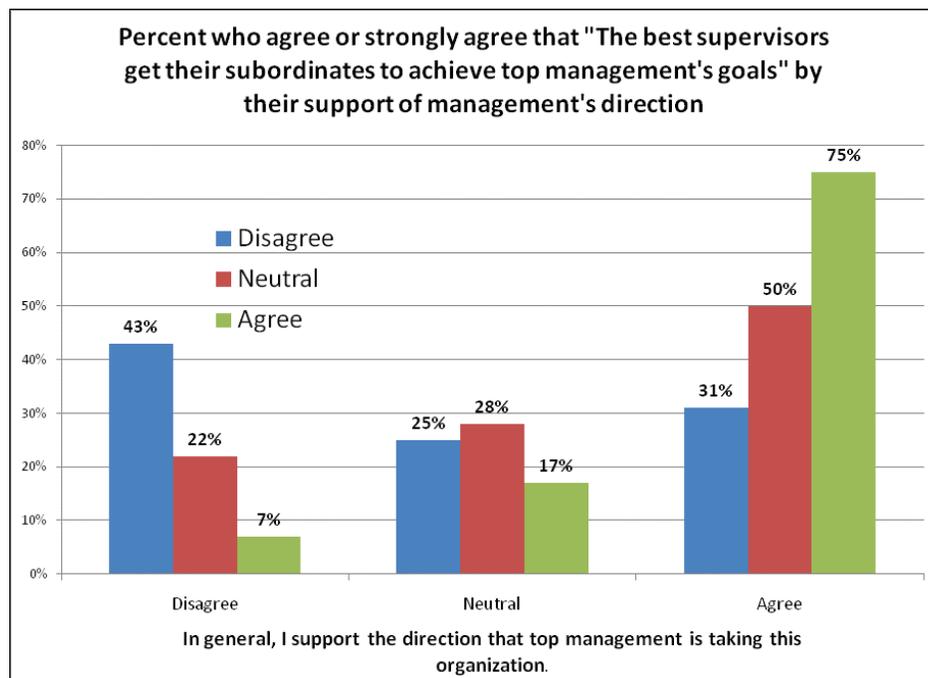
Figure 4



One might expect that a person who supports the manner in which top management is leading the agency will be more likely to think that supervisors should strive to get their subordinates to achieve top management’s goals. Indeed, this is what we found. Whether a supervisor believed that the best supervisors get their subordinates to achieve top managements’ goals was significantly related to the supervisors’ support for the direction that top management is taking the agency. Three-fourths (75.0 percent) of the supervisors who report that they agree or strongly agree that “In general, I support the direction that top management is taking this organization” also reported that “the best supervisors are those who get their subordinates to achieve top management’s goals.” Only 31 percent of the supervisors who reported lack of support

for top management’s goals thought supervisors should facilitate subordinates’ achievement of management’s goals (see Figure 5). Thus, this particular definition of a “good supervisor” (i.e. one who helps management achieve its goals) is endorsed primarily by new supervisors who believe in the direction that the current leadership is taking them. Otherwise, if they are not satisfied with direction provided by senior management, they will rely on other definitions of a “good supervisor” – ones that allow them to be successful by a different standard.

Figure 5



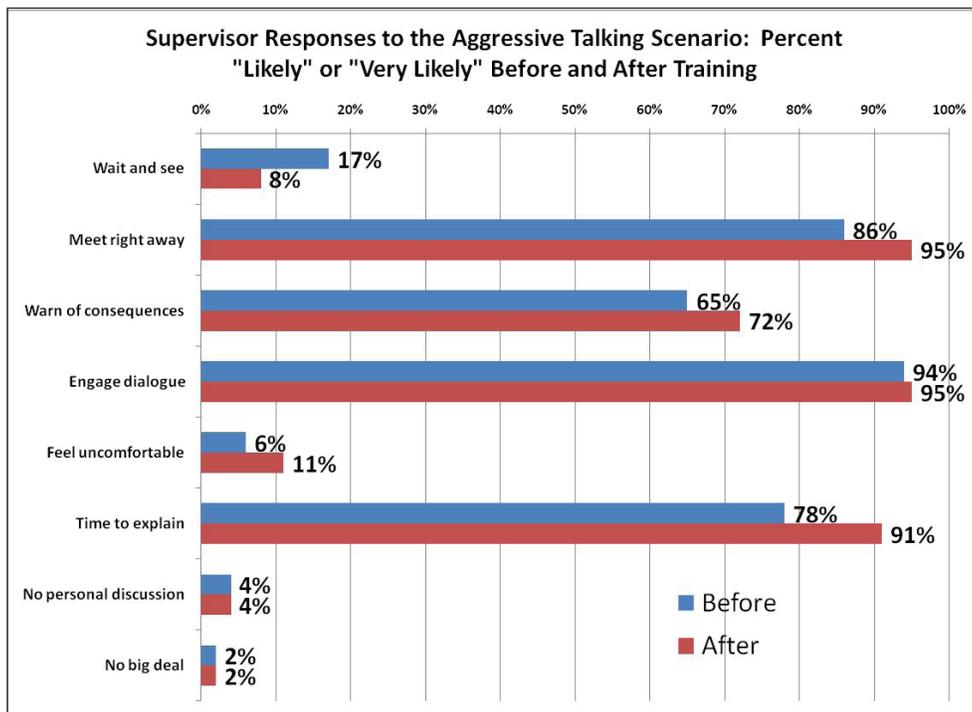
The Platform also sought to capture different styles of supervision that reflected supportive or punitive orientations and willingness to act or avoid giving unpleasant feedback. At the start and end of training, supervisors responded to a scenario that read, “Suppose on several occasions, you observe an officer/deputy talking to citizens in an unnecessarily aggressive or insulting way. How likely would you be to respond in the following ways?” Participants responded using a four-point scale ranging from “Very likely” to “Very unlikely” to the following options:

- I would wait to see if it happened again before taking any action.
- I would meet with this employee right away.
- I would warn the employee that there will be consequences if this happens again.
- I would try to engage the employee in a dialogue so I could learn why this pattern is occurring.
- I would try to make the employee feel uncomfortable because this behavior is unacceptable.

- I would give the employee as much time as needed to explain his/her side of the story.
- If the employee talks about personal problems, I would tell him/her that these issues should not be discussed at work.
- I would consider this no big deal and say nothing.

Figure 6 provides pre- and post-training results for each possible action. After training, supervisors were significantly less likely to “wait and see” and significantly more likely to “meet with the employee right away,” “warn the employee of consequences,” “try to make the employee feel uncomfortable,” and “give the employee time to explain his/her side of the story.” Hence, training appeared to have encouraged supervisors to become more active in dealing with problem situations that are a frequent source of citizen complaints, a trend that most managers would welcome. There were no differences in the post-training responses by gender or years of experience.

Figure 6



Participants were asked about burnout and stress during the first week of new supervisor training and again eight months after promotion. Levels of burnout and stress were measured using items similar to those on the *Maslach Burnout Inventory*, created in 1976 by occupational and organizational psychologists. The self-report 17 item questionnaire asks participants to report the frequency of various feelings. Statistical analysis identified several underlying constructs including optimism, stress comfort, and emotional burnout. Items producing the optimist construct include,

“I think I can make a difference in this department” and “I am optimistic about the department”; items producing the stress comfort scale include “I am comfortable with the level of pressure placed upon me in my job”; a representative item producing emotional burnout is “I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally.” Sergeants start with similarly low levels of optimism and stress comfort at the time of promotion, and then these levels increase significantly over the next eight months (see figures 7 and 8). Supervisors in all three agencies reported remarkably similar levels of stress comfort at both points in time, but sergeants in Site B did not experience quite as much increase in optimism as those in the other two agencies. The overall picture, however, suggests that new supervisors are becoming comfortable with their new role, feeling less stressful and more optimistic about their ability to make a difference.

Figure 7
Levels of Optimism at Start of Training and at Eight Months After Promotion, by Site



The results for emotional burnout indicate more dramatic agency differences. As indicated in Figure 9, supervisors in Site B had the highest levels of burnout at the time of promotion, but their burnout declined modestly after eight months in the position. Site C supervisors started with the lowest levels of emotional burnout, but experienced increases over time. Site A supervisors actually experienced the biggest changes, reporting the lowest levels of burnout after eight months.

Figure 8

Levels of Stress Comfort at Start of Training and at Eight Months after Promotion, by Site

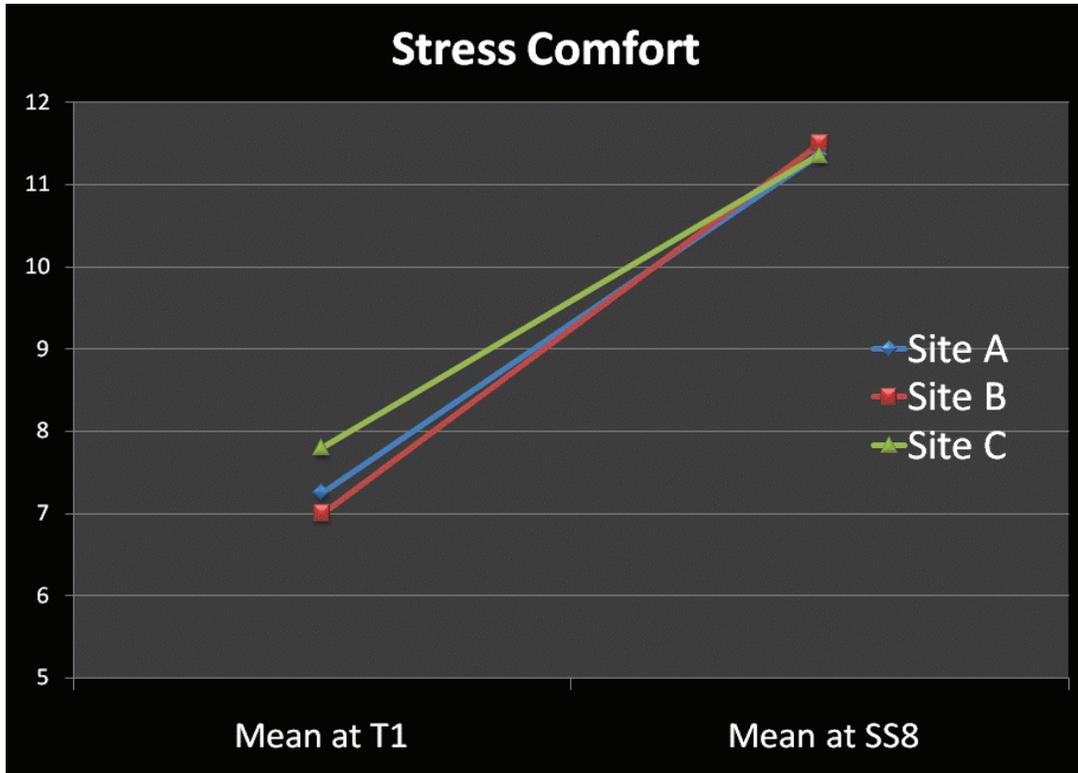
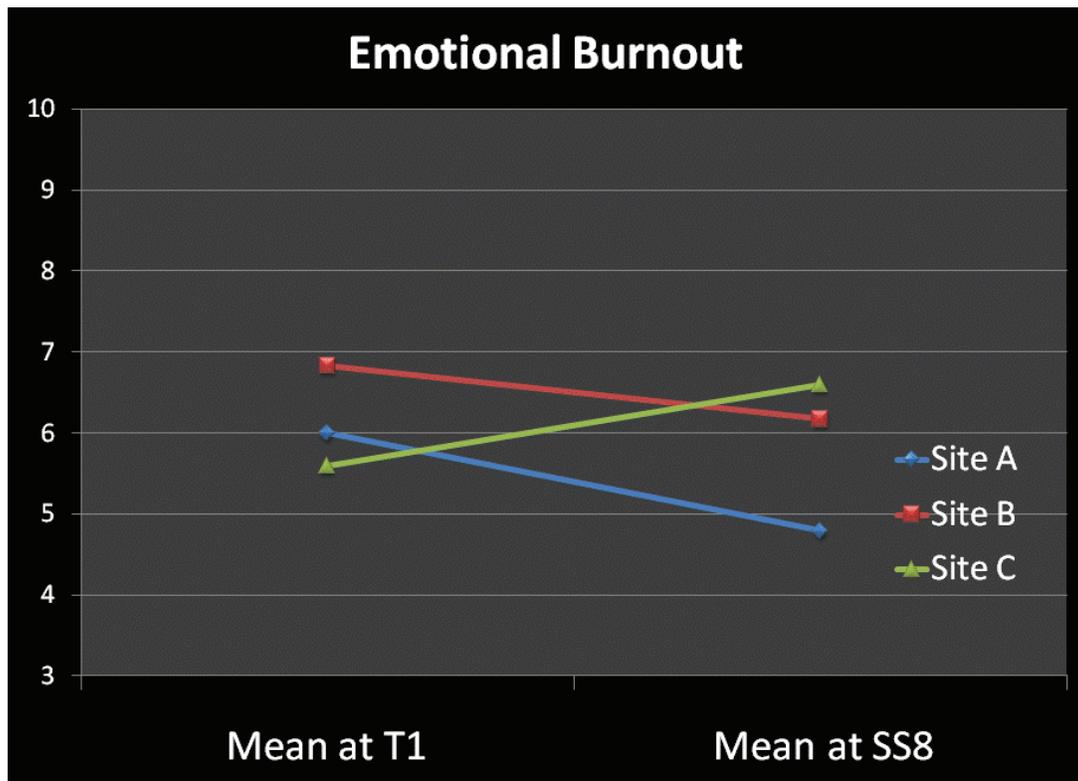


Figure 9

Levels of Emotional Burnout at Start of Training and at Eight Months after Promotion, by Site



Implications for Practice

The Platform’s longitudinal supervisor study can provide the profession and participating agencies with important information regarding supervisors’ views on such topics as management and supervision, how they supervise, their stress/burnout levels ,the impact of supervisory training, and so forth. Agencies can compare data for their own supervisors to those of other agencies.

Agency leaders can review their supervisors’ responses to the domestic violence and “aggressive talking” scenarios to determine whether they align with the preferred responses of the agency executive and modify training as appropriate. Executives can determine whether their supervisors perceive the support of upper management compared to their peers in other similar agencies and intervene to improve those levels as appropriate. If agencies want their supervisors to promote top management’s goals, then these data indicate they need to facilitate the likelihood that those supervisors support top management’s goals and direction. This might require more or higher quality communication with supervisors to convince them of the merits of top management’s goals. We need to precisely identify why first-line supervisors either support or do not support the direction of top management to ensure that messages from above are reaching the officers on the streets. With information, such as that provided by the Platform project, Site C would know to further investigate why their supervisors’ emotional burnout is increasing over their first months on the job and intervene to reduce that burnout.

The ability of participating agencies to compare their trends over time to those observed in other similar agencies makes it possible for police agencies to become active participants in going beyond their own experiences to learn what may be possible in improving and sustaining performance of their first-line supervisors. Thus, the Platform supports what ambitious contemporary police leaders are striving for – to improve performance by becoming better “learning” organizations.

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