

# THE WHITE HAT

## What's in a white hat?

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During my brief employment in the steel mill, one very large question has come to mind. Just who and what are the "white hats"? To many, white hats are a symbol of supervisory authority, knowledge, and responsibility. But is that really the way we see it? What could the answer be?

The supervisors' hope that wearing the "white hat" means that they have the knowledge to be able to supervise those around them. Is that knowledge going to be useful in keeping other employees out of harm's way and safe in their jobs? Is the entire reasoning skill still there for us to use?

One foreman put it this way: "We are only as good as others make us look." Without those fellow workers under them and their knowledge and ability to do their jobs also, supervisors would probably not be where they are today. Many of them at one time have done the same jobs as those that they supervise, therefore getting the experience that they need.

They have the hope that we all believe that we are all here for the same purpose. To do our jobs and do it to the best of our abilities. Being a supervisor brings them the hope that being a fellow supervisor those in higher or equal authority have a tendency to listen to what you might have to say even though it may not be used. They often find that things change when they reach certain levels and often become political. They become obligated to do things like change procedures, even though they know that the changes may not work. They often have mandatory overtime, and very seldom are there any advancements in their jobs, but what is known as lateral moves with the same rate of pay.

Yet, one supervisor remarked, "when I take my white hat off, am I really any different from you? I hope that even though I wear this hat, I am just the same person as you."

In my interviews with fellow employees, this is proving to be an even bigger question. Many of those that I have spoken to have had the privilege (if that is what it is?) to be what is known as a ten percenter. This is a time when you get to place yourself in the position of a white hat or better known as foreman or supervisor. Does this change your attitude toward your fellow workers? Does this make you any different than the rest?

Often asked is the question, just what does the color white mean? Are you going to have problems with working with this person in that hat? Are there any pluses or minus in the wearing of this hat and is this person just another one of us?

Most hourly members admit that a foreman who treats them with respect will gain the respect of those who work for them. The respect belongs to the person and not the hat. Many of these employees have many more years or as much as some of the white hats and just as much if not more knowledge.

Does putting this hat on change them? To some yes and others possibly not. Some feel that even though they put on that hat they are still the same. Others feel that with the hat comes the authority to no longer treat others with respect. Yes, they are your supervisors but they still should show the same respect that they showed with they worked with you on a day to day basis. Sometimes, when someone puts on the white hat, he becomes someone that you no longer want to respect.

I found that most employees who accept the responsibility that comes with wearing a supervisor's white hat usually take the job to gain experience. Often times they feel stagnated in their present positions and desire a challenge to break up the monotony of their every day work assignments. It is not an issue of exercising authority or acquiring the status symbol, as most people would have you believe. To the contrary, many very capable people bypass the opportunity to satisfy their desire to learn due to peer pressure. They feel a supervisors position is an excellent way of learning how management decisions are made and understanding the operations of the other jobs that were going on around them. By gaining this knowledge, they would better understand the production process. The ability to work together on a daily basis is needed when, at stake, are the lives of others. They find that the job of a supervisor is not for everyone in that you are always answering to those that are in higher ranks.

When workers retire, they may be given a white hat as a sort of going away gift. When asked, "why do you think getting that white hat when you retire is so important," the answers were mixed. Some say they don't care one way or another whether they receive it. It could be used as a plant holder and even be discarded. Others felt that it stood as a symbol, that like a gold watch, they are thanking you for your years of service and that it is the one true symbol that you have finally made it with the hopes that you will leave your mark.

The question remains, "Just what is in a white hat"? Does putting on that hat make a person any more intelligent than the everyday Joe? Are you really any different from him or I? Is there really any difference in the color for the world to know that you are out there and putting in your hours of your life like so many of us?

The real answer is still out there.

