



## **Losing Control**

### **by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

The role of supervisor is one of the most challenging positions in the working world. Reason: Supervisors walk the fine line between losing control of the employees or losing employee motivation by being too strict with rules.

In any organization there are going to be norms or rules that people are supposed to follow. Let me illustrate my point with a specific example. Let's look at the length of the morning and afternoon breaks. Let's say the standard break in the organization is 20 minutes. That seems simple enough, everyone in the group is supposed to adhere to the 20 minute break.

What you will see if you actually time the break is that most employees stop work let's say at exactly 9:30 am. They then go to the bathroom down the hall to wash up before going to the break room. They arrive at the break room at 9:40. They get their coffee or whatever and sit down to chat with friends. Since they arrived at 9:40, they take the full 20 minutes and chat till 10 am. Then they go to the bathroom again to get rid of the coffee they just drank. They loiter in the hall and get back to the workplace at roughly 10:15. So, the standard 20 minute break is now more than double the specified length. The afternoon has the same pattern.

This pattern is typical rather than the exception. The supervisor has a difficult time trying to control this situation without seeming to be an ogre. It can go uncorrected for years, costing the organization a huge penalty in productivity.

Supervisors are continually challenged by people to meet their individual and collective needs, even if it means bending some of the rules. If they let one person come to work a bit late because of a child with special needs, then other people are going to come in late with less valid reasons. First thing you know, nobody is showing up on time. Once people begin to see the supervisor is "reasonable" with exceptions to stated rules, he is on a slippery slope in terms of long term control. Trying to get out of the cycle can be

vexing because if the supervisor takes a strong stand on rules, then he becomes despised, and people start finding other ways to cut corners.

Here are seven rules that can prevent the erosion of discipline while, at the same time, showing flexibility and respect for individuals.

1. Be alert to the concept of rules being there for a reason. Know the reasons and communicate them when needed.
2. Let people know what the rules are by well-timed reminders, but avoid getting anal about it.
3. Allow open discussion on how the rules should be applied. This has two benefits 1) it serves to remind people of the specific rules, and 2) it gives people some say and creative input into how the rules should be applied in your area.
4. Be consistent on the application of rules. Do not bend for one person and not another.
5. Allow exceptions only when there is good justification, and explain to people why you decided to bend a rule in this case.
6. Intervene early if there are abuses of the rules. Do not let bad habits continue for months before taking action. Reason: if you wait too long, when you finally do try to enforce the rules, you are subject to ridicule and over reaction.
7. Treat people like adults, and they will act more like adults.

My observation is that the best supervisors are those who really care for people enough to expect them to follow the rules and call them out when they do not. A gentle but firm hand that is applied with kindness will work in most cases. That attitude creates long term respect and trust.



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