

Successful Supervisor Part 2

Up From the Ranks

by **Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

There are several different ways people find themselves as a newly-ordained supervisor. One common way is a promotion from the ranks to the leader of a group.

Pathway

This person came up through a series of line functions and did well. She (I am going to use the female pronoun for this series to avoid the cumbersome 'he or she' configuration throughout. All of the points apply equally to both genders.) showed some potential for leadership and dedication, often through years of service.

Process knowledge

She also demonstrated high content knowledge for the operations being performed having actually performed many functions herself. She was put in place when an opening became available because she was a logical choice and there seemed to be little training required to just have her assume the new role.

It is a mistake to assume this person does not need training in leadership. Her role in the organization and in the social order has just changed dramatically, even though she has been in place, perhaps for many years. Now all of a sudden, she is the manager of the group. Her entire point of view has changed, and yet upper management often assumes she can make this "minor adjustment" to a different role without much preparation.

It is common for supervisors in this situation to struggle for years and even to fail, simply because they do not know how to make the transition from a peer to a manager. The antidote here is to not underestimate the magnitude of the transition and provide not only initial training, but coaching and mentoring for the first several months until the new supervisor feels at ease with the new role.

Understanding the needs of the organization is usually an easy step because of the underling role the person has been doing for a long time. Trying to navigate the new

social order is much more tricky than meets the eye and is the area of greatest peril. If she tries for a laissez-faire management style, then the workers are not going to respect her and will push the rules until it is obvious there is no control. Then if she tries to regain control, they will push back, and there can be an ugly scene because she is not being consistent. If she tries to establish tight discipline from the start, then she looks like a hard-nosed manager who plays only by the book and is over reaching, simply because she was named as a supervisor.

Suggestions

1. One really good antidote for these problems is to have a kind of “family group” meeting at the start. Admit that the new role is challenging because of her prior relationships and ask for ideas on how to make the transition go well. Listen to the input and acknowledge the feelings of the group members. This open style of leadership where the manager asks questions rather than giving orders gets people involved in the interplay, and that helps ease the transition.
2. Another suggestion is to have a series of one-on-one discussions to feel out how each person in the group is reacting to the promotion. In these frank conversations, the new supervisor can humbly ask for each person’s help with the transition. This high-touch approach usually helps to ease the tensions and can lead to some great suggestions. The heart-to-heart discussions can also be helpful in the event there are a few people in the group who have exhibited bad work habits in the past. It is a good opportunity to reset the scale and get people on the right track.

In all these approaches, tact and sensitivity are critical. It helps if the new supervisor is good at reading body language and has high Emotional Intelligence, both of which we will discuss in future episodes. Make sure the new supervisor has some specific training in these two topics before she tries to operate as a supervisor.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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