

Successful Supervisor Part 26

The Supervisor in a Transition

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Organizations go through changes periodically. I wrote an entire book on the topic of [*Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change*](#). In the book I highlighted the role of the supervisor when organizations make large scale changes that impact how people work. This article will highlight some tips from the book to help managers guide their supervisors to be successful when transitions occur.

When I discuss transitions in organizations, I am referring to any structural change in the way the people interface with their jobs. The spectrum runs the gamut from small department restructurings all the way up to corporate mergers and acquisitions. In this article, I will refer to mergers and acquisitions, because the challenges of these kinds of transitions are easier to visualize, but the same issues also exist to a lesser degree in other transitions.

Whenever people are forced to deal with a new set of rules and different set of people, there is a transition that has to go smoothly or the organization will suffer or even fail completely. There are some unique issues that make supervisors particularly vulnerable, but at the same time extremely valuable in a transition. Get this part wrong, and you will severely hamper the reorganization; get it right, and you will be halfway to success.

The common thread with frontline supervisors is that these people operate at the critical and delicate junction between the management layers and workers on the front line. Depending on the type of work being done, supervisors come from a variety of backgrounds.

The typical history is that the supervisor was once an individual contributor who did very well on the job over a long period of time. Through dedication and deep content knowledge, this person sparkled relative to her counterparts. When an opportunity arose, this individual was tapped to become a supervisor.

Another common situation with supervisors is that they often are put on the job with little training. They already have deep process knowledge and have shown a natural tendency toward informal leadership, so they are given the responsibility. Often they receive no training at first, and later it is forgotten because the person does just fine from the start. There is, however, a lurking weakness that surfaces during any kind of transition.

The attitudes of supervisors during a transition are critical influences on how the employees react to the change. More than any other relationship in the organization, trust is maintained or lost by the workers' relationship with their direct supervisor.

If supervisors model a cooperative and adventurous spirit and keep looking for the good, it can help people see that positive outcomes are possible. If the supervisors are rolling their eyes and visibly displaying their own fears, then that attitude is going to be picked up and amplified by the people who work for them. It is impossible to act out positive behaviors if they are not deeply implanted, because people are reading body language at every interaction, and they will pick up the true attitude of the supervisor quickly.

In reorganizations, the operational processes are subject to combinations or modifications in order to accommodate the changing nature of the business. Often the new entity will be a combination of companies with completely different cultures, perhaps even different languages.

This new dynamic could be threatening to supervisors, since their license to lead is often their familiarity with the work rather than deep leadership skills. Changing their work means their platform to lead has potentially been compromised. Couple that with the inevitable push to reduce supervisory headcount, and you have an opportunity for some terrified people in these roles.

You absolutely cannot afford to have any weakness showing through to the workers during the process, and the supervisor is the critical link to demonstrate the management point of view. This issue can be a huge problem in a transition. Thankfully there are approaches to deal with it.

Training

The antidote here is training, and the cost for the training program should be included in the original financial analysis for the merger. Front-line leaders need more and different skills during a transition. They also will require some cultural training if the combined organization involves groups from other cultures.

The training should begin as early as possible and contain supervisors from both groups so that early team bonding can occur. Getting to know the front-line leaders in the other half of the organization will pay huge dividends as the process unfolds. For one thing, these supervisors can be more easily interchanged later on. Also, having personal relationships with other supervisors enables more sharing of resources. This integrated training is a major way to prevent the "us versus them" thinking that hobbles so many reorganizations.

Coaching

Another suggestion is to develop a “coaching corner” for all supervisors. This is a mechanism for management to work face to face with supervisors during the planning and execution phases of a transition. It is important to have all supervisors emotionally engaged and pulling in the direction you wish to go. If they favor a different path, they will take the spirit of the masses in the wrong direction every time and you will not get them back easily.

Special briefings and team activities for supervisors will keep them actively supporting the effort because they are helping to design it. Remember the old adage, “Change done to me is scary, but change done by me is energizing.”

Convert or Remove Naysayers

Finally, it is vital to cull out any supervisors who would sabotage the effort, even unwittingly. It is not hard to determine who might undermine the effort. Some supervisors will not agree with the change. Try to convert those who would push against the change. Many times, through careful attention by management, an individual can be turned around. I call this process “adopting a supervisor.”

Basically, the manager gets very close to the supervisor through a series of informal conversations to figure out what makes the person tick. It takes time to do this, but the payoff is very high. The advantage is that after a while you get to identify which reluctant supervisors are worth trying to save.

Focus your efforts on them and develop a plan to move the others out of leadership positions. This action can, and should, be done routinely, but it becomes an essential ingredient during reorganization. You cannot afford to have a supervisor who is not completely on board with the effort. She will poison the attitudes of people who work for her.

The most wonderful part of this coaching process is that you have the opportunity to turn some powerful negative forces in the organization into powerful allies. Keep in mind that the supervisor was originally selected based on her ability to be an informal leader. Turning a negative person into a positive force is a huge swing in the right direction. If you can simultaneously remove the sour individual, who will never change, that is also a blessing.

Adopting a supervisor may seem like a very time-consuming effort. The change is not going to occur in a week, but the daily time investment is not great. What it takes is resolve and persistence to work with those you want to convert. Select the people who are worthy of your limited time and invest in them.

Recognize that the supervisor is a key position during any kind of organizational transition. If you work hard to provide the ideas and tools in this article you will go a long way toward having the transition be successful. If you ignore these ideas, then the entire change process will likely be compromised.

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.

*Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of four books: 1. *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals* (2003), 2. *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online* (2006), 3. *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind* (2009), and 4. *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change* (2014). In addition, he has authored over 500 articles and videos on various topics in leadership and trust. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763***