

Successful Supervisor Part 27

Keeping Discipline

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

There is a natural tendency for people to test their supervision. I believe this universal condition stems from people's desire for maximum comfort and the ability to control how they use their time. In most, but not all, cases this forces the supervisor to maintain discipline within her group. I will deal with an exception at the end of this article.

In order to obtain maximum efficiency, most organizations establish rules that are expected to be followed. For this article, I will use the example of the length of breaks, but the same logic holds for all rules that employees are expected to follow.

Let's say that in this organization there are two breaks from the work, one about half way between the start of the shift and one midway between the lunch break and quitting time. The standard break has been set in this organization for 15 minutes. It is up to the supervisor to enforce this rule along with all of the other rules of department.

She notices that the time her employees are actually off the job for break time has started to creep higher than 15 minutes because employee need to shut down the process and travel to the break room. First they go to the bathroom to take care of physical needs and wash up, then they go to the break room, or some of them go outside for a smoke break (more information on smoking later in the article).

The employees sit in the break room chatting and snacking for 15 minutes, but the actual time off the job turns out to be closer to 25 minutes. The supervisor wonders if she should say something because the total lost production time for the break is typically nearly twice what was intended.

The supervisor decides not to be hard-nosed on this point and gives the extra time so employees can have a reasonable break. Then she starts to notice the actual time in the break room starts to lengthen to roughly 20 minutes, making the total production loss more like 30 minutes. She still wrestles with whether to come down hard on the crews because she can anticipate they will get even with her in some other form of work slowdown over which she has little control.

This pattern of extending breaks goes on and continues to get worse with time until the supervisor is forced to do something. What she does and how she does it will make the difference between success or failure. It will also determine the level of true respect she receives going forward.

The easiest way to handle this situation is to put a notice on the bulletin board or write an e-mail to all employees that “from this point on we will adhere strictly to the 15 minute break periods.” That course of action may work in certain cultures, but it will backfire with most groups. What she will get is a kind of scorn that mocks her attempt at discipline.

I recall one manager early in my career tried to enforce quitting time by memo. What happened is that one of the technicians built a “bugle” out of copper tubing, a funnel and a pneumatic fitting. Every day at precisely quitting time he would blow the bugle to signify time to go home and everybody would stampede to the elevator. Essentially the employees were mocking the manager’s attempt to control the time employees left for the day.

Solutions

1. Discuss in small groups

One way to control the following of rules is to work with people in small groups and discuss the reasons for the rules. The supervisor can be open to suggestions but ultimately has to ask the group if they intend to follow the rules. If they say “yes” then she should ask them to police themselves in that behavior. If they say “no” then the supervisor might ask what it would take for them to comply. I believe asking questions in these situations is more helpful than citing rules from the book.

2. Identify the informal leader and enroll that person as an ally

In every group there is one or more informal leaders to whom the rest of the people look to for guidance. Usually this person is easy to spot. The supervisor can confide in the informal leader her dilemma at getting people to keep breaks to a reasonable level. She can ask for the informal leader’s help or suggestions as to how to get people back to a reasonable break length. If the informal leader gets up from the table at roughly the specific time for end of break, then the others will notice and break up their visiting quickly.

3. Join the group but leave at the proper time

The supervisor can actually join the group of workers to have some social time and have a break along with the others. She can then get up from the table at the appropriate time. This action puts everyone on notice through behavior rather than trying to reason with people verbally or by e-mail.

4. Avoid trying to incent people to follow the rules

I knew one supervisor who tried to regain control by offering a pizza party at the end of the week if the crews would only comply with the specified break times. This approach

is a kind of slippery slope that will become an albatross down the line. Do not provide additional incentive for people to do what is expected of them.

5. Examine the rule to see if it should be altered

If shutting down the process plus a bathroom break take so long that there is no real “break” without stretching things, maybe the rule is too restrictive. The supervisor could lead discussions on how to make up the productivity losses to give employees a sense of ownership. Often some form of staggering break times is a reasonable solution. That way the process can limp along and never shut down throughout the break period.

Special situations with Smoke Breaks

Smoke breaks are a special condition that can easily get out of hand. The ultimate problem with frequent smoke breaks occurs with fellow employees who have to cover for the person who is outside indulging his habit. This stress can become a real problem for any group. Here are some ideas:

1. Make it illegal

Many organizations have made the entire premises a smoke free zone, and that ends the stress of people taking too many smoke breaks. Supervisors need to be sensitive to people who are truly addicted. Sometimes medical assistance during the transition is helpful.

2. Confine the activity to the standard break time

Some groups allow smoking only during standard break times in an effort to be fair to all employees. In other words, let it be known that a person can smoke on break time but then not be allowed to take an additional 20 minute break for another smoke the very next hour.

3. Have a Wellness Program

Many groups run wellness programs that encourage employees to do a number of things to improve their overall health. Coaching on quitting smoking can be one of the major things a supervisor can employ to help people improve the quality of their lives. This may involve professional help from the outside.

Owning the Rules

At the start of this article I promised to address a different kind of ownership of the rules. Many companies have adopted practices that allow employees to feel true ownership of the business. There are several organizational techniques that can lead to this kind of ownership.

One such arrangement is an ESOP where the employees are literally the owners of the business. As the business does well financially, the employees are directly compensated for that good performance. There are several other methods to achieve a similar dynamic, and where it is truly embraced throughout the organization, the need for a supervisor to enforce rules becomes significantly diminished.

If you are a supervisor in a conventional organization, realize that the employees are going to test you in every way imaginable. You must be worthy of the test and maintain good control without becoming like Ebenezer Scrooge. You also need to determine when it is necessary to bend a rule for a personal emergency situation. These tests will determine your level of effectiveness, because they ultimately define the culture in which your employees work.

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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