

Successful Supervisor Part 3

New Sheriff in Town

by **Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

Aside from the promotion from within the ranks, there is a second major way to obtain a new group supervisor. Bringing in a resource from outside the group has some advantages, but there are huge caveats for this method. In this category, there are two common approaches that are used: 1) bringing in someone who has been a supervisor in another area, and 2) hiring a new college graduate as an entry level position. In this episode, I will describe some challenges and recommendations for each situation.

Transfer from another area

When bringing in a supervisor from another area of the company, or even a different company, at least she has the advantage of being a seasoned person who has experience leading front line employees. A typical mistake made by the supervisor in this situation is to be too zealous with advice learned on the prior job.

Typical problem

Suppose a supervisor has been moved from the packaging area to the formulation group. She has been successful in the packaging assignment and wants to bring her enthusiasm and knowledge to the new challenge. She begins by asking questions in meetings about how things are done in the formulation group she is now leading. She will make suggestions with various forms of “When I was with the Packaging Group, we used to have a daily update so we were all informed.”

People in the inherited group will listen politely as the supervisor makes logical suggestions based on her history. Unfortunately, after just a few suggestions, her new employees will start referring to “Miss Packaging” behind her back. It will be a very long time before the new supervisor has the purchasing power she will need with people in the Formulation Group.

Solution

The antidote here is for the new supervisor to listen to how things are done in the new area without making continual references to her prior experience. The rule I tried to encourage with new managers is to allow them to refer to the old job one time for the

first three months. That is a difficult challenge, but it is really important to not be overbearing with pre-existing theories at the start of a relationship.

New hire to the company

A second method of bringing in a new supervisor is to hire a high-potential person right out of school. Often the first line supervisor position is used as a way to “season” a bright new MBA in a large organization. This method is fraught with so many problems, it is a wonder that it ever works out.

Main problem

First of all, the supervisor has no practical experience leading people in the real world. She may have had a leadership course in her MBA curriculum, but her employees will be eager to show her where theory breaks down in the real world. The cultural gap between a college educated supervisor and the people on the shop floor is huge. There is also a jealousy factor that results from the supervisor being viewed as a “silver spooner” who got a college degree simply because daddy had enough money and who never had to do “a real day’s work” in her life.

The new supervisor does not have the experiential background to handle the myriad of issues she will face in her first few weeks. As she is trying her best to learn, the employees in the area will be polite on the surface, but the breakroom discussions will center on how clueless she is. It will take a very long time before she has the purchasing power to lead, yet she has been given a position that calls for great leadership from day one.

When you couple the lack of supervisory knowledge with the lack of content knowledge of the processes, the experience for the new supervisor is usually overwhelming, and failure is bound to be the result. It is awful for the organization because performance will suffer; It is awful for the people because they are not being well led; It is worst for the new supervisor, because she is going to start out her career with a very bad performance.

Solutions

1. The antidote here is to use a mentoring process where a new person coming out of school has the chance to learn the processes and people before being put into a position of supervisory power. Staff assignments can allow time for this mentoring to occur. Another position that can work as a temporary learning spot is an assistant to an excellent incumbent supervisor.
2. There are many training courses offered on how to make a solid entry as a new supervisor directly out of school. The American Management Association, Fred

Prior Seminars, Franklin Covey, and Dale Carnegie all offer excellent baseline courses that are short in duration and not very expensive. They can really help bridge the gap between the sterile world of academia and the messy world a new supervisor will soon face.

3. There are a number of great books on this specific topic. One of my favorites is **“Managing People is Like Herding Cats”** by Warren Bennis.
4. I have put out a series of 30 videos entitled **“Surviving the Corporate Jungle”** that contain tips on how to manage people with less potential for conflict. You can view some sample videos free at the following [address](#).

If you are facing a situation where a new sheriff is coming in to lead a group, make sure you avoid the traps outlined above. You want to set up the new supervisor for success and not let her flounder for months before gaining the credibility to lead.

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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