

Successful Supervisor Part 31

Reducing Conflict

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Conflict between people is simply part of the human condition. Organizations are a good place to observe conflict because they have all the ingredients that encourage people to bicker. First of all, people are in close contact for many hours a day. It is a fact that if you put people together for a long period of time, they are going to end up driving each other crazy. It happens like spontaneous combustion at the bottom of a pile of oily rags.

The second condition that encourages conflict is stress. Organizations are constantly under stress to optimize performance of all their resources. The most typical stressor that causes conflict is time. People tend to overvalue their own contributions and undervalue the contributions of their work mates. It is just the way we are programmed.

I got interested in this topic of conflict a couple years ago and actually wrote a 30 part video series entitled “Surviving the Corporate Jungle.” Each video is only 3 minutes long and each one has an exercise to instill a new habit that can reduce conflict between people. The series was produced by an organization called “Avanoo.” Here is a [link to a free sample](#) of three videos from my series.

In this article, I want to give a few overarching tips that may be most helpful at the supervisor level. The subject is endless, so you may wish to contribute your favorite tips after reading mine.

Appreciate Differences in People

Each person is unique, so what works for one person may not be ideal for others. In addition, we each see the world through glasses that only we can see through. When we witness another person doing something that does not look or feel right to us, we grit our teeth and instinctively push back, trying to get the other person to see it our way.

I call this phenomenon the “I AM RIGHT” condition, and I have purchased hundreds of three-inch buttons with those words on them. I give them out at all my seminars on trust. The tip for the supervisor is to recognize that each person is wearing an imaginary I AM RIGHT button all day.

Since each individual experiences every facet of organizational life through his or her own paradigm, it is no wonder conflict erupts. The supervisor can help people recognize

that we have no choice but to see things from our perspective, so it is perfectly natural that there will be tension at times. Try to see the other person's perspective as being valid, and you will reduce conflict.

Go Back to the Sense of Purpose

Even though people may see things from different perspectives, we can usually get along much better if we remind ourselves that we share a common purpose. We may have different functions, but we are all important parts of the process, and we are all needed to be at our best if the job is to get done well.

The supervisor is the main coach to help people understand the purpose and remember the larger mission when tempers flare about how to do things. The supervisor paints the vision of the whole organization onto the canvass that represents her part of the whole and makes sure everyone sees that connection. When people recognize that they are all pulling in the same direction, the individual idiosyncrasies don't have as much power to polarize them.

Build a Culture of Trust and Love

When a group of people trust and love one another, the seeds of conflict have a difficult time taking root. Building a culture is a daily task that never ends, but the task is a joyous one because the end result is a much happier existence, not only for the supervisor, but for everyone on her crew.

Building that kind of culture takes tending and constant effort. First of all, the supervisor must model the right kind of behaviors herself at all times. She must be the source of love and trust between people, even when things get tense. It is her actions and words that make the difference every day. The most powerful thing a supervisor can do to build that kind of culture is to make the environment safe and not phony.

Eliminate Playing Games

If you observe most stressful groups at work, you can see that much of the time people are playing head games with each other in order to gain advantage. The environment is phony and full of intrigue. The supervisor needs to create a kind of culture that is real, where people are able to disagree without being disagreeable.

Hopefully the organization has a concrete set of values, and the supervisor must adhere to those values in every conversation and action (especially body language). The workers are there to do a specific job, but that does not mean the atmosphere needs to be heavy. Great teams make the work light and fun, because they support each other and bring each other up. The supervisor needs to understand a great culture begins with her.

Avoid Inter-Group Conflict

Another common problem is that group cohesion can become so strong that silos begin to form. The workers bond together and against another group in the process as the enemy. You can observe a kind of Civil War going on in many organizations on a daily basis. It is amazing to witness this hostility, because if you go up to the next level the warring groups are really on the same team.

It is up to the supervisor to keep her area from losing this larger perspective. One idea to accomplish this is to share resources with parallel groups. If team members see an unselfish person in their supervisor, then the ability to maintain proper perspective is easier.

These are just a few of the ideas in my series on “Surviving the Corporate Jungle.” For the supervisor, these ideas may seem like a heavy load, but the joys of doing things in an uplifting way makes the work a labor of love.

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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