

Successful Supervisor Part 35

Communicating with your Group

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

In my last article, I dealt with improving face-to-face communication with individuals using the VARK Model, but often supervisors are called on to communicate information verbally to their entire group. The skills to do this successfully are different from the ones used to get a message across to a single person, because the group contains people with different communication styles. There is a group dynamic that can create negative momentum that is not present when working with one individual. Normally, you can read the body language of one person rather easily.

When the information to share is good news, supervisors usually have no problem just getting everyone together and sharing the information. When the news is problematic for the workforce, supervisors often make mistakes that lower trust or even cause more angst than is necessary. It is this case that I want to explore in this article.

When the supervisors are faced with trying to explain information that people really don't want to hear, it is a real test of their leadership ability and communication skills that many supervisors cannot pass. Here are some tips that will be helpful to improve the results when communicating negative information.

Have a Plan

If the subject is difficult, it is worth the time to do some concrete planning. Don't just call everyone together and "wing it." Consider the reaction you are likely to get and think through how to keep things from spiraling out of control. You may want to have an HR manager attend the meeting, or you may want to even have some security people available and ready just in case.

Outline the key points, and make sure the sequence is not confusing. Put yourself in the seat of a person who is known to react strongly and test the validity of your approach based on that insight. Anticipate the issues, fears, and questions people might have and be ready to address them.

Use Different Forms of Communication

Each individual will absorb information most readily based on whether he or she is a visual, auditory or kinesthetic communicator. If the supervisor just speaks (auditory) the

information, it will be picked up accurately by the auditory learners but often not by the people who have alternative styles. Use a chart or a slide to illustrate (visual) your message visually and then get people to share their feelings about the message (kinesthetic). It will not make the information any easier to take, but it will ensure a better understanding of the message by everyone.

Try Communicating with Smaller Groups

If the news is particularly bad, like an impending layoff, the supervisor would be smart to deal with small family groups rather than a large room full of all the people impacted. For example, she might get together with the crews on a packaging line for a briefing early in the morning and have a separate meeting with the inspectors later that same morning. Recognize that the rumor mill will spread the bad news very quickly, so do not space out the small groups with a lot of time in between.

Since this communication is one person to many by design, it is important to keep people from shouting insults or derogatory comments and keep the focus on questions for clarification. The smaller group format will be particularly helpful for this.

Body language is extremely important to convey a calm demeanor, even though the topic is troubling. The tone of voice should be soft and low, and the information should be shared in its unvarnished ugliness, but avoid using inflammatory words in the description. Rehearsing the delivery is important for very sensitive discussions. Trying to sugar coat bad news is a mistake many supervisors try to use in order to get out of a tough situation. It usually does not work.

Allow People the Opportunity to Grieve

Upon hearing bad news, people tend to go into shock. They need to go through the stages of grief in order to work their way through a transition. If you try to deny the grieving period by promising some good things to come, they will become hostile and make the situation worse. Allow them to feel badly, if that is appropriate, and promise that you will be there for them as they work through the situation. By acknowledging the grief and showing you care about them as people, you will actually be helping them cope during the shock period.

Don't Lie or Weasel

Often supervisors try to protect themselves by blaming other people or some situation out of their control in order to soften the blow. This strategy will usually backfire. People have a keen ability to sniff out the BS, so be sure to tell the truth and do not try to weasel out with some lame excuse why it is not your fault. If they are going to blame you anyway, there is nothing you can say to stop that, and any attempt to deflect blame

will make things a lot worse for you in the end. Keep in mind that to these people, **you** represent the organization.

Set up an Open Channel for Future Communication

Most supervisors have an “open door” policy where people can stop in the office to chat whenever they need it. When there is bad news, it is smart to redouble the accessibility and make an overt attempt to be out there with people. In doing so you will be one-on-one with individuals, so you can use the VARK Model to match your communication style to their preferred channel.

As a division manager, I noticed that when there was bad news in the air, supervisors tended to cloister themselves in their offices, thinking it would reduce exposure. That behavior only inflames the matter. I always advocated that supervisors (and managers at all levels) consciously double the time they spend mingling with people in the difficult times. It allows people more opportunity to vent, which reduces the pressure. In addition, you have the opportunity to squash any false rumors that happen to spring up. During difficult times, rumors seem to take hold and spread with ease.

Make Small Gestures that Show You Care

There is an old saying that “people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” Look for ways to show empathy, but avoid saying something false like saying “I know exactly how you feel.” I learned a long time ago to avoid saying that phrase to someone who just lost a loved one. It is better to say something like “I cannot imagine the pain you are going through now.” At least that is an honest statement. The very best approach to use with people is to ask yourself how you would like to be treated if the roles were reversed. This “Golden Rule” approach normally is the safest one to use in sensitive times.

All supervisors and managers go through times where difficult messages need to be disseminated. If you approach this task delicately and with sincerity, you can get through it with grace, and your subordinates will appreciate it, even though they are not happy about the message.

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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