

Successful Supervisor Part 4

The Role of Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

The topic of trust in organizations has been my life's work over the past 25 years, and it will be until I am no longer able to communicate. I have written four books and produced hundreds of articles and videos on various aspects of trust. For this article, I will confine my comments to the role trust plays for supervisors. Obviously, the points made here extrapolate to leadership in general.

Since the supervisor is the link between upper management and the first line employees, she needs to consider the impact of trust and how to achieve it in both venues, and they are substantially different. First I will cover the bond of trust with her direct reports, then I will reverse the logic and discuss trust with peers and upper management.

Trust with subordinates

My observation is that without trust between workers and the supervisor, people spend a lot of energy playing games with each other. You can observe all types of childish behaviors on the part of people who want all the goodies they can get with the least amount of effort. They form cliques in order to protect themselves and work to undermine other people as they jockey for favor with the supervisor.

The majority of people in production jobs have been abused by at least one tyrant manager in their career, so it is easy to mistrust anyone who is perceived as "management." The suspicions are easily confirmed, as some heavy handed managers in the hierarchy shoot themselves in the foot with respect to trust on a regular basis. This situation creates numerous headaches for the supervisor, because to the front line employees, she represents "management" and is painted with the same brush as all managers. If some manager up the chain commits a bonehead move, the credibility of the supervisor will go down, even if she did not agree with what the upper level manager did.

It is critical that the supervisor establish relationships of trust with people in her group. This is often accomplished one person at a time or perhaps with small groups. Since people are predisposed to be suspicious, any misstep or perceived false statement (even if it has been misinterpreted) only makes the problem worse.

There are literally hundreds of behaviors the supervisor needs to exemplify if trust is to be achieved, maintained, or in some cases, repaired. It is not in the scope of this article to list all of the necessary behaviors, as I have written about these in my books. For this article I will mention the most powerful way a supervisor can build trust and apply it in her daily work.

Best way to build trust

The supervisor needs to build a **safe environment** where people recognize they will not be punished when they bring up perceived problems or things that appear to be inconsistent. She needs to work tirelessly to instill a **fair workplace** where people see her as impartial and approachable. It is a tall order to create such an environment, since some individuals will try various tactics to advantage themselves in comparison to their peers.

The role of alignment

The best approach for the supervisor is to create full alignment within the group. Everyone needs to know the values of the organization and also the vision: what the group is trying to accomplish. Each person must buy into the mission and recognize that by accomplishing the mission he or she **will be better off**. The role of the supervisor is to create this alignment by constantly reminding people that what they are working for is a better future for themselves.

Operating under different conditions

The supervisor needs to be the “head cheerleader” when things are going in the right direction and the “coach” when things get off track. She needs to insist that everyone on the team pulls his or her share of the load and not tolerate selfish behaviors. Basically, the supervisor needs to constantly build the team.

Building trust upward

At the same time, the supervisor needs to support high trust with her peers and upper management. The origin of trust in any organization starts at the top and flows down throughout the whole organization. It is the behaviors of the senior-most leaders that normally determine the level of trust in an organization. It is the role of the supervisor to support the vision of the entire organization through the efforts and activities of her group.

The most difficult conundrum for a supervisor is if she is asked to implement a policy that she personally believes is a mistake. To prevent this, the supervisor must have built up enough trust and stake with upper management to have a seat at the decision table and be listened to as a respected member of the management team.

Sometimes you can find a brilliant supervisor who has the “Midas Touch” for creating a great culture within her group, but that group is placed in a toxic environment from above. When this occurs, the supervisor ends up trying to translate the needs of her team upward and the demands of the larger organization downward. It is a delicate balancing act, and those supervisors who can perform well in that dichotomy are scarce and precious.

Usually the supervisor ends up trying to influence the organization in both directions. She constantly works to build the culture of the group reporting to her while simultaneously trying to advocate upward for the needs of the group. This is the reason that I believe the role of the first line supervisor is one of the most important and most difficult in all of management.

The role of the first line supervisor in maintaining trust within the organization cannot be overstated. If she loses the culture of trust, then the struggle will be one of various degrees of warfare, and productivity will be severely impacted. I think the best approach is to have a solid training program for supervisors that continually builds the skills to manage in a complex world. If the supervisor is not provided with the training program at work, then she should start reading books and watching videos on the topic and gain skills that way.

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***