

Successful Supervisor Part 40

Engaging People

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

In this article I want to share some of my personal experience on the topic of how to obtain the full engagement of people. Getting the maximum discretionary effort of each individual on the team ought to be a top priority for any supervisor, yet in an attempt to “maintain control,” many supervisors make critical errors that undermine their intentions. Control is extremely important, and yet there are right ways and wrong ways to obtain it.

First, there is a term that I often hear which puts a negative slant on the concept of coaching people to do better. That term is when the supervisor “writes up” an employee.

Let’s say I am an employee, and you are my supervisor. You have noticed that my breaks are too long, so you tell me that you are going to “write me up” for not following the break rules. Let’s break down some of the implications around that statement from my perspective.

1. First, you have historically failed to provide the kind of culture in which I decide, on my own volition, to take a standard break because it is in my best interest to do so. I should be writing **you** up for poor leadership.
2. Second, you reveal yourself to be a “Theory X” type of leader, who believes that to get people to perform their best, they need to be beaten.
3. Third you insult me by putting my “sin” on a piece of paper that you can use in the future to punish me in dark and mysterious ways.
4. Fourth, you are treating me like one of Pavlov’s dogs by expecting me to toe the line now that you have demonstrated your authority over me.
5. Fifth, you have encouraged me to figure out some ways I can get even with you in the future without being detected.
6. Sixth, you have put me on the list of enemies of the state, so I have lower engagement in the work I perform at your behest.
7. Seventh, you have lowered teamwork within the crew because some people with the same time pattern as me were not “written up.”
8. Finally, you have helped me picture you as the enemy from now on. You are not interested in me as a person but only as a cog in your machine, so I will restrict using my precious discretionary effort to some extent in the future.

Granted, some of these consequences are a tad exaggerated, but there is some truth to every one of them. The flip side of the coin is that you would be doing a bigger disservice to me and the entire crew by ignoring my tardiness and letting me get away with it. So, what alternative methods might there be to prevent the need for you to write me up?

1. Start by treating me differently from the outset. Show by your prior behaviors that you are a different kind of leader who establishes trust with your employees. There are numerous ways to do this, but establishing a “safe” environment where I do not need to worry about speaking my truth is a key method.
2. Get to know me as a person, and show an interest in my family situation.
3. Value me for my brain as well as for my hands. Let me know what is important to accomplish in our crew and why that is.
4. Train me very well from the start, so I understand what behaviors are important to model and provide me with a buddy who will help mentor me when you are not around.
5. Develop within me a sense of pride that I am doing good work for a reason: that while providing for my family, I am also part of a larger system that serves humanity.
6. Praise me when I do things well or at least according to the behavioral norms. Celebrate with me and the crew that we are capable of performing at a very high level and challenge me with good stretch goals.
7. If I do something wrong, speak to me in ways that maintain my self esteem while simultaneously letting me know that I need to improve in this particular area. Ask me how you can help me link my behaviors to the goals and needs of the organization.
8. Continually model the values that you preach, and explain to me why you are making the calls that you do. Illustrate that you are true to the values at all times, and stress that I need to act in ways that are consistent with the values too.
9. Help me understand how valuable I am to the organization for the work I do and also for the attitude I demonstrate, which has a real impact on the entire crew.
10. Foster a level of esprit de corps within the crew that transcends teamwork and leads to a true sense of belonging and affection.
11. Be open with me and accessible to me. Never punish me for sharing my thoughts and ideas, even if they were not what you wanted to hear.
12. Be transparent and admit when you have made a mistake.
13. Represent my viewpoint and that of my coworkers well to higher levels of management.

If you do all those things, I feel confident that there will be little need to beat on me to abide by the rules, but just in case I do not respond in a way most people do, and seem to get off track often, follow these ideas to bring me back to reality:

1. Hold me accountable in a balanced way: not just when I mess up. Let me know when I am doing well and when there is a need for some correction.
2. Enforce the rules with an even hand, and do not play favorites, but do not always treat each person exactly the same way. Recognize that my needs may be somewhat different from my coworkers.
3. If I have the same pattern of poor behavior more than once, remind me that I am an adult and am capable of learning the right way to do things. If I am habitually late or in other ways miss the mark, it is OK to put down the expected behavior on a note to remind me of the correct thing to do rather than to write me up for being bad. Try to find out what is going on in my life that is causing me to act out at work. Show that you care about me as a person.
4. Discuss with me that the employment situation is a matching phenomenon. Not all organizations are right for a particular individual and not all individuals are right for a particular organization.
5. If I continue to struggle, look for ways to help me find a better situation where I can be more successful. Get involved in helping me make a transition to a future pattern of employment either inside the current organization or elsewhere.

Being a great supervisor means juggling the needs of each individual on the team and keeping discipline without resorting to Theory X type command and control logic. Great leadership is an art, and if you are an excellent artist, you can paint the vision of the future on the canvass of today's paradigm in a way that empowers and engages all members of the team because they trust you.

Following these ideas can not only lead to less documentation; it can also mean that your team operates as a world class group with high trust levels.

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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