

Successful Supervisor Part 42

Hiring the Right People

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Selecting the right people to bring into the organization is undoubtedly one of the most critical functions any supervisor has to perform. Bringing in a problem employee can set an operation back for months. Most organizations have a set hiring process that needs to be followed, but normally the supervisor has a lot of latitude as to who gets selected. In making the best hiring choice, I believe it really matters what kind of function your group is called upon to perform.

First let me describe the most typical supervisory situation, where the job is a production function, like running an assembly line or a packaging operation. In this situation, you want the group of individuals working as a team and with the ability to swap workers to different stations as the situation requires it.

It is a good idea to select people who will blend in well with the existing group from the outset. Select people who are similar in outlook and demographics so there will be less need to play referee down the road.

Have a specific program of cross training workers on each function, so there is maximum flexibility for backfill in case of absence or to accommodate peak loads in one part of the process. The ideal set up for an assembly line operation is if each person can perform any of the functions equally well as another individual.

The logic is quite different if you happen to be supervising a group of people who have jobs with highly creative requirements, cognitive skills, or customer/supplier interfaces. In this case, diversity is superior to a homogeneous group philosophy, and yet the temptation is strong to try and find people who match perfectly with the existing team.

I often hear a phrase that makes me cringe coming from the lips of these managers: "We want to hire someone who will 'fit into' our group." A lot of effort is expended in screening candidates with personality tests, multiple interviews, even role plays in order to determine that the new hire will be similar in thinking to the existing team. I think this is a big mistake, if the work to be done requires a high degree of mental capability.

It is often the maverick or even rebel among a group of people who comes up with the genius solutions to problems or creates entirely new streams of income. When we seek

to have everyone "fit in" we lose the potential for diversity of thought that is a major part of the creative process.

When creativity is a significant aspect of the work, you do not want a team of people where everybody looks, thinks, and acts the same. A room full of clones may look reassuring to the boss, but it is not the pathway to peak performance, unless you are running a production line operation as described earlier.

Obviously, it is a good idea to avoid putting a person on the team who is a total misfit, is disruptive, or always brings up a contrary point of view, creating dissent. Instead, try to foster a mixture of ideas and points of view when hiring new team members.

As the supervisor, you need to pay special attention to the team dynamics and interplay during the time when a new person is settling in. The team will eventually morph into a way of operating that takes the newcomer into account, but it may take quite a while, and you may not be happy with the new equilibrium if you let it happen naturally. My rule of thumb is to double your interface time with the team when they are assimilating a new person. Doing this teambuilding is your best way to have a good result.

Recognize that each time you bring a new person onto an existing team, there is an adjustment period where new team norms are established. It is the old familiar Bruce Tuckman Model (1965) of forming, storming, norming, and performing that always occurs when there is a change in personnel on the team. Expect this pattern and help the team work through the phases efficiently. When the team expresses frustration with the storming phase, point out that it is perfectly normal for a team to go through and ask the group for patience. Point out that when the team figures out what rules they want to play by, the stress will go down again.

The first few weeks, or even days, are critical to bringing a new member onto an existing team. I will deal with some tips for the onboarding process next week.

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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