



Successful Supervisor Part 6

Playing the Rank Game

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Think back to when you were a child and you wanted to bend the rules. For example, maybe you wanted to eat a big ice cream cone an hour before dinner. You probably remember a parent saying “No, you can’t eat one now, you’ll spoil your appetite.” Then, being a child who knew what he wanted, you would persist and start to whine. “Why is it important that I have a good appetite?” Back and forth you would go with your parent trying every logic you could think of until finally the parent said some form of “You cannot do it because I said so. I am the parent and you are the child, so forget about it.”

Now think about how you felt about that logic. If you were like me, you probably went off muttering something like, “It’s not fair. Someday I will be the parent then I can do what I want.”

Supervisors who pull rank in order to get people to do something are playing the parent-child game, and the employees can be heard muttering to their friends about it in the break rooms. The tactic can work to force a specific behavior or result, but the supervisor will pay dearly in the end. Pulling rank on people almost always results in lower morale and lower performance with people, so why do so many supervisors use it? Let’s peel back this issue and dissect several things that have a bearing on this conundrum.

You might believe that supervisors have forgotten how it feels to be outranked, but that is not a valid reason because every supervisor has a boss and several others above that person. It is likely that she has the same feelings about some of the things she is ordered to do. Pulling rank is about obtaining power through position. It is certainly possible to do, but there are definite negative side effects. When people are forced by rank to do something, it demeans them and robs them of their dignity, so they are instinctively vengeful.

When you pull rank to get people to do what you want done, it “feeds the hog.” Let me explain what the “hog” is. In the lumber industry, after they fell a tree and cut into usable boards, there is some scrap wood with bark still on it. There are various outlets for this byproduct. One method is to use a giant wood chipper and feed the unusable

boards into this so-called “hog” to make them into small chips that can be compressed for pellet fuel or used as mulch.

One supervisor was using a lot of command and control tactics with his shift workers in order to get them to perform. Since the boss had the higher rank, they were forced to comply, which they begrudgingly did. But the minute the boss left the immediate area, the workers started feeding the **good boards** into the “hog.” By “feeding the hog,” these workers were getting their revenge on the supervisor in ways he could not easily detect.

Motivation to do the right thing is not enhanced by a command and control approach to people. Oh sure, you can force them to do what you say, but you will regret it later. The better way is to inspire motivation inside the workers to do things the right way because they are convinced it is to their benefit to do so. They become intrinsically motivated to do what the supervisor wants to have done. We will discuss motivation in more depth in a future segment. For this article let me just list several ideas to create intrinsic motivation so that the supervisor doesn’t need to resort to pulling rank.

Create a culture of trust. This technique was discussed in a prior article. It works because with the right culture, the supervisor is not operating in a hostile atmosphere. People are willing to listen and to extend themselves because they are treated well.

Share a compelling vision. If people clearly see that they are better off doing what the supervisor is suggesting, then they would be foolish to resist. People understand that work is work, but they will willingly extend the needed effort if they see they will benefit by it personally or achieve an inspiring goal.

Articulate a common and aggressive goal. Goals can be burdensome or inspiring depending on how they are presented to people. Stretch goals are often better than mediocre goals, simply because they bring out a desire to reach and stretch. People often rise to incredible levels of performance if they are challenged by a leader they truly respect.

Build a sense of team spirit. People work better collectively when there is a spirit of love and good feelings between the individuals. When the boss tries to demand performance, it creates an instantly hostile environment. If some team spirit does develop in that environment, it will be the workers banding together against the boss. That leads to all forms of sabotage in order to “get even” with the supervisor. Smart supervisors understand that they are on the same team as the workers and build rapport with themselves included in the team spirit.

Reinforce right behavior. Sincere reinforcement “the right way” is the best way to perpetuate good performance. When the supervisor has an attitude of trying to catch

people doing good things so she can praise them, the atmosphere becomes less of a sweat shop and more of a congenial or cheerful workplace.

Advocate for people and their needs. If the supervisor becomes known as a person who will “go to bat” for the desires of her workers with higher up management, it displays she is a strong advocate for their well being. That does not mean she always needs to take the side of the workers in every conversation, but at least people know she will do her best to argue their case in higher management discussions. That behavior breeds respect, and respect is the fuel required for an engaged workforce.

Study Emotional Intelligence. The ability to work well with people at all levels and read them accurately is an essential ingredient of good leadership at all levels. It shows most starkly at the supervisor position. If she is able to read the emotions of people, even before they verbalize them, then she will manage the daily situations for better outcomes rather than constantly putting out emotional fires. That is a huge advantage.

There are dozens of other things that can be done to allow a supervisor to obtain sustained excellent performance without having to resort to rank. The above list is a good starter kit that will allow any supervisor to do a fine job as she hones her craft, through experience, to become a master leader.

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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