

Successful Supervisor Part 62

Admitting Mistakes

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

We all know that all human beings make mistakes. The real character of a supervisor rests with her ability to admit it when she makes a mistake. Trying to cover up an error almost always backfires. While the intention may be to preserve respect by her people, concealing a mistake usually results in lower trust and respect.

One of the most powerful opportunities for any leader to build trust is to publicly admit mistakes. The source of that power is that it is so rare for leaders to stand up in front of a group and say something like this: “I called you here today to admit that I made a serious blunder yesterday. It was not intentional, as I will explain. Nevertheless, I failed to do the best thing for our group. I sincerely apologize for this and call on all of us to help mend the damage quickly. Without being defensive, let me just explain what happened...”

In a recent [blog by Daniel Coyle](#), he quotes Dave Cooper, a Navy SEAL, as saying “The most important words a leader can say is ‘I screwed that up.’” He points out that leaders who create a safe environment by admitting their own vulnerability create the highest levels of trust.

If you were in the audience listening to this leader, how would you react? Chances are your esteem for the leader would be enhanced, simply by the straightforward approach and honesty of the statements. Of course, it does depend on the nature of the mistake. Here are a few situations where an admission of a mistake would actually lead to lower trust:

- If the blunder was out of sheer stupidity.
- If this was the third time the leader had done essentially the same thing.
- If the leader is prone to making mistakes due to shooting before aiming.
- If the leader simply failed to get information that she should have had.
- If the leader was appeasing higher-ups inappropriately.

Assuming none of the above conditions is present and the mistake is an honest one, admitting it publicly is often the best strategy. There is an interesting twist to this approach that has often baffled me.

Let's suppose that I have gathered 100 supervisors into a room and asked them to answer the following question: "If you had made a mistake, which of the following two actions would have the greater chance of increasing the level of respect people have for you? (A) You call people together, admit your mistake, apologize, and ask people to help you correct the problem. (B) You try to avoid the issue, blame the problem on someone else, downplay the significance, pretend it did not happen, or otherwise attempt to weasel out of responsibility."

Given those two choices, I am confident that at least 99 out of the 100 supervisors would say action (A) has a much greater probability of increasing trust and respect. The reason I am confident is that I have run that experiment dozens of times when working with supervisors in groups of all sizes and in all industries.

The irony is that when an error is subsequently made, roughly 80% of those same supervisors choose action more consistent with choice (B). The real conundrum is that if you were to tap the supervisor on the shoulder at that time and ask her why she chose (B) over (A), she would most likely say, "I didn't want to admit my mistake because I was afraid people would lose respect for me."

This pattern of response illustrates that in the classroom, all supervisors know how to improve respect and trust, but many of them tend to not use that knowledge when there is an opportunity to apply it in the field. It seems illogical. Perhaps in the heat of the moment, supervisors lose their perspective to the degree that they will knowingly do things that take them in the opposite direction from where they want to go.

I believe it is because the supervisors are ashamed of making a mistake. The irony is that when you admit an error, it has an incredibly positive impact on trust because it is unexpected. Perhaps this is one of the differences between IQ and Emotional Intelligence. Intellectually, supervisors know the best route to improve trust, but emotionally they are not mature or confident enough to take the risk. When you admit an error, it has a positive impact on trust because it is unexpected. As Warren Bennis in *Old Dogs: New Tricks* noted, "All the successful leaders I've met learned to embrace error and to learn from it."

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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