

Successful Supervisor Part 64

Signs of Impending Conflict

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

I have written extensively on conflict and even produced a 30-video series on the topic entitled [“Surviving the Corporate Jungle.”](#) This article focuses on conflict within shop floor teams that supervisors are trying to manage. A smart supervisor realizes that conflict is generally there to some extent, even though things may look placid on the surface. She is on the lookout for the signs of impending open conflict so she can take corrective actions before serious damage is done.

Heed the Signs of Impending Conflict

By observing the behavior of people constantly the supervisor can detect when interpersonal stress is starting to boil over. Here are six of the signs:

1. Body Language Indicating People are “Fed Up”

Watch for wild arm movement like putting hands on hips when addressing coworkers. Another telltale sign is crossing of arms when addressing another person. Arms straight down with clenched fists is a sign of extreme agitation. Contrast that body language with a person making a point to another individual with his arms slightly forward and palms up, which is usually a sign of openness.

An extreme position of being fed up is thrusting one’s arms upward and fists clenched. This is an expression that the person is ready to blow up. All of these arm and body gestures will be accompanied by facial expressions.

2. Facial Expressions

There are literally tens of thousands of facial expressions we use to communicate with each other all the time. Some of these are obvious and easy to spot, like clenching of the jaw or a frown. Other expressions are more complex and involve several parts of the face (eyebrows, cheeks, mouth, eyes, etc.) at the same time. If you would like to take a quick quiz of how accurately you read facial expressions, go to this link for a [fun test](#).

3. Cliques Forming

The ideal configuration for a team is where all members share equal access to information and each other. When you see cliques starting to form, it is a sign of impending conflict or even active conflict. Some grouping of people within a team is normal for any group.

People will sit with their friends in the break room; that is normal human behavior, but if a subgroup physically cuts off access to some members, there is a specific reason. Smart supervisors view the ambient group norms for access and pay particular attention to changes in these habitual patterns.

4. Pointing

One tell-tale sign of boiling over interpersonal tension is when people address each other while pointing a finger at the other person. A pointing finger is one of the most hostile gestures in the body language lexicon. The message is “You need to shut up and listen to me.” Teach people to avoid pointing and use softer gestures to gain attention. When you see people pointing, it is time to find out what is going on between them.

5. Talking at the Same Time

Any mother will intervene when two siblings are shouting at each other. The message is always the same; “You cannot possibly hear each other when you are both talking at the same time.” In the work place, you can observe the same kind of childish behavior when anger is pent up. The first instinct in any argument is to block the inflow of information, so it is natural to start shouting over the other person. Smart supervisors intervene immediately when this behavior is happening.

6. People Avoiding Each Other

Another childish practice that you can witness when tensions become extreme is avoidance. It looks like this. People are together in a room when another member of the team walks in. Another member gets up, looks disgusted, and leaves the room without saying anything. Total avoidance is an extreme gesture that is unmistakable. It is important to get to the root cause of the tension when you observe this kind of thing.

These are just six of the signs you can observe within groups of adults who are working together supposedly with a common purpose. Actually, the best way to prevent dysfunctional behavior is to ensure everyone in the group shares a common goal.

Reduce Stress by Building Trust

When there is trust within any group and people truly care about each other, the small interpersonal stress points do not blossom into open warfare. In fostering such a culture, the supervisor plays a dominant role by continuously demonstrating and saying that we are all on the same team and we are pulling in the same direction.

Your Own Behaviors and Body Language Count the Most

People are continuously watching what the supervisor does for clues of what acceptable behavior is in this team. If the supervisor indicates lack of respect for one or more people by rolling her eyes so others see it, then she is sowing the seeds of conflict that will eventually erupt elsewhere. The supervisor's body language is evident in literally thousands of ways every day, so her true feelings will always be known by people within her team.

The most important advice for any supervisor is to make sure her true feelings and care for the people on her team are deep and genuine. If she does that, then her people will observe congruity between her body language and the words she uses to encourage her group to always act as a high performing team.

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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