

Successful Supervisor Part 67

Smart Pills

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

One of my leadership students laments that some of the decisions the supervisors in his organization make relative to policies and how to fully engage the workforce sometimes are not very effective. These decisions reflect a misunderstanding of their impact, so the supervisors end up doing things that have an impact at cross purposes to their true desires. While they believe they are improving team motivation, they are actually reducing it.

I told the student to figure out signal which can let supervisors know when they do things that are likely to take them in the wrong direction. Then I realized that I already had discovered such a signal several years ago, which I facetiously called a “Smart Pill,” and have taught people how to administer this magic potion for quite a while.

Supervisors need a way to determine the impact of their decisions on the organization at the time of making those decisions. This knowledge will reduce the number of actions that do not have the desired effect. Picture a supervisor of 24 individuals. There are exactly 24 people who are capable of telling her the truth about the impact of questionable decisions before she makes them. They would gladly do this if the supervisor had established an environment where it is safe to challenge an idea generated in her mind. How would a supervisor go about creating such an environment?

If a supervisor makes people glad when they tell her things she was really not eager to hear, those people will eventually learn it is safe to do it. The supervisor will build higher trust with her people. They have the freedom to level with the supervisor when she is contemplating something that might backfire.

It does not mean that all questionable things the supervisor wants to do need to be squashed. It simply means that if the supervisor establishes a safe culture, she will be tipped off in advance that a specific decision might not be best. Sometimes, due to a supervisor’s perspective, what may seem wrong to underlings may, in fact, be the right thing to do. In this case, the supervisor needs to educate the doubting underling on why

the decision really does make sense. Here is an eight-step formula that constitutes a smart pill.

1. As much as possible, let people know in advance the decisions you are contemplating, and state your likely action.
2. Invite dialog, either public or private. People should feel free to express their opinions about the outcomes.
3. Treat people like adults, and listen to them carefully when they express concerns.
4. Factor their thoughts into your final decision process. This does not mean to always reverse your decision, but do consciously consider the input.
5. Make your final decision about the issue and announce it.
6. State that there were several opinions that were considered when making your decision.
7. Thank people for sharing their thoughts in a mature way.
8. Ask for everyone's help to implement your decision whether or not they fully agree with the course of action.

Of course, it is important for people to share their concerns with the supervisor in a proper way at the proper time. Calling her clueless in a shift meeting would not qualify as helpful information and would normally be a problem. The supervisor not only needs to encourage people to speak up but to provide them coaching as to how and when to do it effectively. Often this means encouraging people to express their concern in private and with helpful intent for the organization rather than an effort to embarrass the boss.

The supervisor may still make some poor decisions, but they will be fewer and be made recognizing the risks. Also, realize that history may reveal some decisions thought to be wrong at the time to be actually brilliant. Understanding the risks allows some mitigating actions to remove much of the sting of making risky decisions.

The action here is incumbent on the supervisor. It is critical to have a response pattern that praises and reinforces people when they speak the truth, even if it flies in the face of what the supervisor wants to do. People then experience higher trust and will be more willing to inform the supervisor when her judgment seems off base.

A supervisor needs to be consistent with this philosophy, although no one can be 100%. That would be impossible. Once in a while, any supervisor will push back on some unwanted "reality" statements, especially if they are accusatory or given in the wrong forum.

Most supervisors are capable of making people who challenge them happy about it only a tiny fraction of the time, let's say 5%. If we increase the odds to something like 80%,

people will be more comfortable pointing out a potential blooper because the trust is high. That is enough momentum to change the culture.

It is important to recognize that making people glad they brought up a concern does not always mean a supervisor must acquiesce. All that is required is for the supervisor to treat the individual as someone with important information, listen to the person carefully, consider the veracity of the input, and honestly take the concern into account in deciding what to do.

In many situations, the supervisor will elect to go ahead with the original action, but she will now understand the potential ramifications better and will know how to explain the final decision in ways that acknowledge the expressed concerns. By sincerely thanking the person who pointed out the possible pitfall, the supervisor increases trust and makes that individual happy she brought it up. Other people will take the risk in the future. That changes everything, and the supervisor now has an effective “smart” pill.

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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