

Successful Supervisor Part 68

Assume Best Intent

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Assuming best intent is a simple concept that can save a lot of grief and acrimony in any organization. Human beings have a curious way of jumping to conclusions when something done by another person does not track with expectations.

We jump to assign blame and think of all the evil things that might be behind the action. In doing so, we fail to take into account a myriad of alternate scenarios that might explain the paradox as something more benign.

We have all experienced this phenomenon, and there is a simple antidote. Assume the best intent rather than the worst. As a supervisor, you can teach the people on your team to assume the best intent if there is any doubt. This action will enhance the trust level between people and prevent unnecessary squabbles.

A place to view this phenomenon most easily is in e-mail communication, especially with workers from different shifts. One person will dash off a note and make a statement like, "Did you go home without cleaning up the machine?" The person reading the note will say to himself, "Ed is clueless. He obviously is out to try to embarrass me with this note. I don't care if he is having a bad day or not, he has no business accusing me of being lazy. I did clean the machine correctly before going home."

So, what started out as an inquiry note from Ed, turns into the fuel for an e-grenade battle. The response coming back to Ed assumes the worst intent, so it is far off base in Ed's mind. Ed writes back a blistering note, and we are off to the races.

Several days later, after numerous notes and escalating distribution lists some manager steps in and asks these two feuding juveniles to stop the food fight. All of this acrimony and conflict could have been avoided if the recipient of Ed's first note assumed the best intent rather than the worst.

He would have stayed over the next shift change to talk it over with Ed saying, "Your note was confusing to me. I'm sure that I left the machine ready to run, but maybe someone else ran some product after I went home and messed things up again." Then

Ed could apologize for seeming to imply the other worker was too lazy to clean up on a shift change.

This technique is helpful for all forms of communication, not just the online environment. If we teach people to assume the best intent whenever there is a disconnect, it prevents people from going off on each other inappropriately. This creates a significant reduction in conflict, and since conflict often gets amplified in the pressure cooker of the work environment, this little remedy can save a lot of hurtful turmoil.

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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