

Successful Supervisor Part 7

Using Peer Pressure

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Everyone knows there is such a thing as “peer pressure.” It is kind of intangible at times and often hard to control, but the group mentality has a lot to do with how people behave. It is also pivotal for morale and engagement in the workplace. For a supervisor, trying to harness and use peer pressure is often a minefield. From the outside, it may look and feel manipulative, yet to ignore its existence would be a significant missed opportunity.

In this article, we will examine the phenomenon of peer pressure from several different angles and examine some of the ways to use it with integrity and also some ways it can be abused, leading to the opposite impact than the supervisor intended.

The first principle is that not every situation and group is the same in terms of how peer pressure is manifest in the organization. The wise supervisor realizes that there is such a force but holds back from trying to use it until she has a firm grasp of the social structure and what is actually going on.

Why is peer pressure so powerful?

In any group, from inmates in a prison yard to cabinet members of an administration (can you tell the difference?), a set of interpersonal behaviors emerges that tells the members who they are and how they act in certain situations. These preferred behaviors are rarely written down, and they are most heavily influenced by the informal leader of the group. Note: the informal leader is the person to whom people listen the most, and it is often not the actual leader of the group, unless that person is an especially talented leader.

For ease of communication in this article, I will call the expected set of behaviors the group’s Code of Conduct, or COC.

In any set of circumstances, the COC determines how the group members are supposed to act and react to the daily challenges that come up. The attitude of the members, in most circumstances, will be consistent with what the COC prescribes. The COC can shift a bit based on local conditions or periods of uncertainty, but in general it

is a stable set of group norms that everyone in the group understands, albeit sometimes unconsciously.

A supervisor who understands the COC is able to predict with reasonable accuracy how the group will respond to a stimulus or challenge. This knowledge can be a blessing or a curse for the supervisor.

If the supervisor uses the knowledge to manipulate people, they often resent it and push back hard, because they have a feeling of being maneuvered into doing something. The Supervisor's logic would feel like this, "I'm going to lay this out so that you have no option but to do what I want because of your own rules of behavior."

If instead, she uses the knowledge to demonstrate her affection and understanding of the group, it can endear her to people in a helpful way. In this case, the logic would feel like this, "I know your group prefers to hear things that affect you quickly, whether the news is good or bad. I always provide timely communication, so you know where things are headed. I inform you as soon as I know something out of a sense of respect."

Follow the Leader

Humans, just like animals, establish a kind of informal pecking order in terms of leadership. In any group there will be an inner council of the most influential people, and typically, one leader of that pack. This person sets the tone of the group with regard to its attitude toward the supervisor and management in general. Often the supervisor was a former leader of the informal pack who was elevated because of her obvious influence. In this case, another individual will backfill for the, now-promoted, former leader to become the new leader of the pack.

For the supervisor, the good news is that it is not hard at all to figure out who the informal leader is. The territory is staked out and defended by all forms of body language and tonal qualities when the person is speaking. The informal leader does not need to be the most vociferous person in the group, although sometimes that happens. The overarching characteristic is one of greater influence than anybody else in the group.

Once the person has been identified, it provides an opportunity for the supervisor to tap into that person as a resource. I like to think of the process as just becoming a lot closer to the person. When I employed this method, I actually felt like I was "adopting" the person in order to understand him or her at a deeper level. Whether the informal leader is generally negative toward management or positive, it helps the supervisor to have a wide open channel of communication with that individual. Of course, the supervisor is smart to create a bond of trust with every person in her group, but that mandate is amplified when it comes to the informal leader.

The enhanced communication channel is always a two-way street. The individual benefits from understanding the point of view of the supervisor better, and the supervisor gains the understanding of what makes the person tick.

The supervisor can test possible ideas with the person, in confidence, and get some feedback on whether they might be embraced by the group. If the channel is wide open, then the informal leader will tell the supervisor immediately when she is pushing the group too hard or is about to blunder into an unwise policy for the group.

I like to think of this relationship with the informal leader as having a bottle of “Anti-Stupid Pills” that can be doled out to the supervisor whenever a remedy is needed most. If the supervisor reacts in ways that makes the informal leader glad to have shared the information, it will deepen the relationship of trust, and the leader will be more inclined to share sensitive thoughts in the future.

All of these dynamics usually happen in private, but the information, and the supervisor’s reaction, are quickly communicated to the group through informal channels. In this way, the group becomes well informed and the supervisor is protected from making bonehead decisions inadvertently.

The danger of this method is that the supervisor is singling out a person for more attention. People can easily pick up on this dynamic and become negative about the relationship. The smart supervisor works daily to maintain constant communication with everyone on a daily basis and fosters a cordial relationship with each person.

Try Better Teamwork

Another common method of appealing to peer pressure without being manipulative is to foster a true sense of teamwork within the group. Supervisors who invest time and energy into helping their teams work very well together gain in numerous ways. In my division, I encouraged each manager and supervisor to take his or her team off site for at least a half day every month. I found over the years that these team building and strategy sessions paid for themselves ten times over in terms of productivity for the remainder of the time. Reason: when people know and respect each other as mates, then the backbiting and dysfunctional behaviors usually melt away.

The precaution here is to test every time if the off-site work is still helping the team to grow. Sometimes, and with some groups, the teambuilding efforts can become a burden or an unwanted disruption. It is important to test the vitality of the interfaces periodically.

One important ingredient was to have a good facilitator who was not on the team guide the discussions and activities. Paying for these facilitators was an investment I was happy to make because the benefits outweighed the costs by orders of magnitude.

When people feel great about being on a winning team, they gladly put forth extra effort daily, and any would-be slackers are brought around through peer pressure.

What to avoid

Basically anything that might be interpreted as manipulation has a bigger chance of backfiring than succeeding. A common mistake supervisors make is to pit some people on the team against others in a form of intimidation. It is a ploy that is easily detected through body language, and it lowers trust instantly. If there is a discipline problem with one or two people, the supervisor needs to own the issue and work with the problem people directly rather than attempt to have the group do it through peer pressure.

Another thing for the supervisor to avoid is participating in any form of gossip or rumors. These hurtful practices lower trust and cause a lot of damage. I once had a supervisor who had “loose lips.” She would go around telling people information “on the QT” and people learned quickly not to trust her. Basically the logic is simple; while the supervisor was whispering some juicy information about someone else, the recipient is thinking, “I wonder what she tells other people about me.” A part of integrity is keeping confidential information from leaking out. Further, it is the supervisor’s responsibility to coach any individuals who spread rumors that leaking confidential or questionable information about other people, regardless of their position, will not be tolerated.

These are a few of the tips on how and how not to utilize peer pressure if you are a supervisor. They come from my own experiences along the way. There are countless other techniques that may prove helpful to you. My advice is to monitor what tools you find most effective and practice them consciously and with care. Peer pressure is powerful and can be a significant positive force in any group, if it is properly managed.

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.

*Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of four books: 1. *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals* (2003), 2. *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online* (2006), 3. *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind* (2009), and 4. *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change* (2014). In addition, he has authored over 500 articles and videos on various topics in leadership and trust. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763***

