

Successful Supervisor Part 75

Handling a Trust Betrayal by Upper Management

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Last week I discussed a process of recuperating from a trust betrayal between a supervisor and an employee. This article deals with the situation where the supervisor has lost trust in upper management. Unfortunately, this situation is common, and it can be as problematical as the downward loss of trust between the supervisor and employee.

Picture a loss of trust between a supervisor and her manager because she feels she is being required to support a policy or decision that she believes is wrong. What advice can we give the supervisor who finds herself in this common but delicate situation?

1. You must support the decision to your people even though you are trying to get it reversed. Reason: if you tell your people you are going along with it simply because it is an order but you think it is wrong, you are undermining the authority of your superior, and that is a certain black mark on your reputation. Too many black marks and you will find yourself on the outside looking in. When you publicly support a decision that you privately don't agree with, employees might sense a lack of transparency. I will deal with how to prevent the loss of trust in this case later in this article.
2. Seek to understand the nature of your disagreement. If it is a matter of style and you think there is a better way to handle this issue, then push back with your logic about why a different approach is wiser. Be flexible and ready to negotiate to find a win-win way of framing up the problem. Often there is a third approach that will satisfy both you and upper management.
3. If instead you believe upper management is violating one of the values or advocating some policy that is unethical or illegal, then you need to decide if you are willing to die on that hill. Point out the reason for your belief in clear but gentle terms to give your manager the opportunity to give a counter point. Be willing to listen and be flexible, but do not bend on a matter of principle. In the end, you may have to indicate your desire to work somewhere else if an illegal policy is being contemplated. Just make sure of your facts before becoming adamant.

4. It is a delicate discussion to stand up to a superior in this way, so remain open minded for a solution that is a reasonable compromise as long as the values are not breached.

When arguing your case for why you feel uncomfortable with a decision, avoid the logic that it is not going to be popular with your employees. Supervisors are sometimes called upon to administer unpopular policies, and you need to step up to the challenge of doing that or leaving your position.

In trying to explain unpopular decisions, you must support the management position, even if you argued against it strongly before or after the decision was made. This is one of the most difficult challenges any supervisor will face. You cannot say, "This is a really dumb decision but we are going to have to do it anyway." Here are some considerations to think about when this situation arises:

1. You should tell your employees the decision with the sensitivity that you would want if the roles were reversed. Often people need to be reminded of the larger picture and that some sacrifices are required for the greater good. Say something like "There were other possible alternatives, but our management believes this path is the best one for all of us in the long run, so we are going with it."
2. Often the organization is facing a decision that might temporarily disappoint employees but be beneficial to customers or some other stakeholder. Remind the employees that we cannot win every point and that the bigger battle is more important to their long term objectives.
3. It is important that you remember who is in charge and act that way unless the proposed action is illegal, unethical, or dumb. Which of those three problems are in play will determine the intensity of your push back on upper management.

When you took on the role of supervisor, you accepted a difficult position. You need to recognize the job is not always going to be an easy one and that you will be called upon to administer unpopular policies at times. Think of this as a test of your ability to see the management perspective, but if the proposed action is unethical or otherwise violating the values, it is time to stand firm for your convictions.

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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