

Successful Supervisor Part 76

Building Trust for Life

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Early in my career I learned a valuable lesson that is important for all supervisors to know. The circumstances will be different but the lesson is unmistakable.

I was sent to Japan to negotiate a deal on a large supply of high capacity floppy disks. I was nervous going over because my boss was busy preparing a law suit against many of the companies I would be negotiating with for dumping low capacity floppy disks on the US market.

On the flight, my buddy and I amused ourselves by making notes in a periodical that described the tension between our organization and the Japanese companies. We probably wrote some things that were too juicy for public consumption.

The trip went very well, and there was no acrimony with our hosts. Coming back from a long lunch on the final day, I noticed that I had left my briefcase open and the periodical was on top of the stack. I realized that someone could have read and copied some of the private information, which would have damaged our case. I was terrified that my actions could possibly turn into a major gaffe with my boss.

As soon as I got back I went to my boss immediately and told him that I did something really stupid in Japan the prior week. He said, "What did you do?" My reply was, "You would never know this unless I told you, but here is what happened..." He looked up at me and said, "You know you are right, Bob. That's not the smartest thing you ever did. The smartest thing you ever did was to tell me about it."

From that day on for the next 25 years until he retired, I was golden boy to him. Reason: I blew myself in (admitted my mistake) when I didn't have to. Essentially I earned his trust for life by owning up to my indiscretion.

The lesson that I learned was that even though I did something admittedly dumb, I was able to turn it into a major step forward for my entire career. Most of us intellectually know that admitting a mistake is usually a trust-building action. There are two kinds of mistakes where this would not be the case:

1. If the mistake is a repeat of one that was made once or many times in the past

2. If the mistake was so stupid that it revealed the person to be clueless

Most mistakes are things that simply did not go the way we planned, so they are easily forgiven when we openly admit to them. This method is particularly potent for people in supervisory positions. Reason: From past experience most of us view supervisors and managers as people having a hard time admitting mistakes.

Exercise for you: Look for opportunities to admit your own vulnerability. Obviously it is a silly strategy to create mistakes so you can admit them, but we all do have lapses from time to time. When you are smart enough to blow yourself in, it usually impacts your long term prognosis favorably. Try it and see if you agree.

Human beings normally have the capacity to forgive an occasional error if it was done with good intent. By admitting an error, you will give a powerful demonstration of your own personal integrity. That is a tangible sign of being a trustworthy person.

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***