

Successful Supervisor Part 8

Satisfying The Top Brass

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

While a great deal of the energy of any supervisor is directed toward the people she leads, the practice of managing the relationships upward and sidewise is always an equally challenging dynamic. In this article we shine a light on some dynamics that help or hinder the relations with superiors and peers of the supervisor. Let's start with superiors.

Keeping Upper Management Happy

It is universal: the boss is looking for performance without problems. As long as things are humming along and there are no major complaints coming from the area, the supervisor will likely be in the good graces of upper management. If delivery, quality, or cost start to slip below the expected level, then the supervisor will be asked to explain why.

Often the true reason is that the variation in performance is the result of common cause variability, so the correct explanation W. Edwards Deming would urge the supervisor to give is, "Nothing is wrong and stop wasting my time trying to explain common cause variation."

Of course, while that answer is technically correct, it is a stupid strategy to use. You do not wave a red flag in front of a bull unless you are a professional bull fighter. The supervisor needs to come up with some reasons why performance is lagging and be very politic when giving them to top management.

For example, one typical scenario is that the policies set from on high are killing morale on the shop floor. The supervisor needs to frame up the information using positive suggestions rather than fixing the blame at the managers who came up with the stupid policies in the first place. Let's compare a right and wrong way to explain why productivity has slipped causing costs to go up.

Right – "People seem to be more upset than usual. It may be due to a combination of things, but I think if we can soften how we explain the new overtime policy they may feel like management understands and is sensitive to their situation. Also, maybe we can

phase the new policy in more slowly. That would go over well because people will have time to adjust to the new rules.”

Wrong – “Productivity is in the toilet because of the overtime policy you announced last week. When you abuse people and piss them off, they are bound to get even with you in some way. You throw crap at them, and you are likely to get some of it thrown back at you.”

One of the most difficult situations for any supervisor is when she is ordered to implement a management decision that is bound to make her subordinates angry. In most cases, the supervisor will take the side of the employees, so in meetings where the top brass is describing the new policy, the supervisor is likely to speak out about the negative consequences of following it. To the managers, the supervisor is not being a “team player,” and the more she digs in, the worse it gets for her.

When a supervisor is forced to administer a policy that she thinks is ill advised, it becomes almost like an interpersonal crisis. She knows that pushing back is going to hurt her, yet her sense of rightness has been violated and it becomes like a moral decision. These times can be very challenging for a manager at any level, but they are particularly stressful for the first line supervisor.

At times like this, having a trusted mentor or coach somewhere in the organization is quite helpful. The supervisor needs to take the long view and try to understand the logic of the policy. If she can at least partially support the decision, then things will go a lot better in the implementation.

Trying to explain the policy to her subordinates is another moment of truth. It is wrong to say, “I told them they are crazy to implement this policy and I fought it like crazy all along the way, but, of course, they won.” A much better way to verbalize the situation is, “This policy is probably not what you were all anxious to hear, so let’s look at the situation as objectively as we can. Recognize that to be successful yourself, the organization you work for must succeed. In addition, what is a good move for some people may not be popular for others, but we are all in the same boat ultimately. We need to be successful as a group before any one of us can be successful individually.”

Hint

When the supervisor has to administer an unpopular policy, it is best to give people time to grieve. If the supervisor tries to convince people that they are really going to like the policy in the long run, they will become angry and hostile. Instead let people feel sad about the perceived loss and deal with their emotions over time. After the shock wears off, then there will be time to bring out some points that provide a more positive light.

Getting along with peers

Supervisors are usually intensely loyal to the people working for them. They work incredibly hard to have their employees respect them. They may also be protective over some of the gems in the bunch so as not to lose them. Peers view what is going on from a different vantage point that is often in some kind of competition for resources. Many supervisors tend to “circle the wagons for warfare” in a visible way that does damage to peer relationships.

The best approach is to earn a reputation as someone who is willing to help out others outside her own influence. That means being willing to listen to contrary opinions without becoming prickly. It means extending favors where possible to help another supervisor look good. It means being the bigger person and not holding a grudge if something does not go her way. It also means being willing to share vital resources to enhance the development of the best people. The image I like to encourage is to walk around with a bundle of olive branches every day and see how many you can give away.

In the daily chaos of conflicting needs up, down, and sideways, the supervisor needs to be a cheerful and calming influence who is viewed by her workers as a strong advocate and enthusiastic cheer leader who is fair. She must simultaneously be a diplomat with her peers and upper management to influence decisions and create sound policies. The most successful supervisors have the knack of operating seamlessly in these three modes while maintaining poise at all times. That is a very tall order.

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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