

## Successful Supervisor Part 81

### *Trust Leads to Better Communication*

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

In any organization, the most frequent complaint about the quality of work life is usually about communication. Supervisors are the mainstay of communication in any organization, because they work at the critical junction of the professional staff and the workers.

If you work in an area of low trust, communication is difficult at best. People will continually second guess what you are trying to convey. They will look for ulterior motives or hidden agendas. It is common for workers to actually hear what they think the supervisor was going to say rather than what she actually did say.

To assure your message has been internalized, it is necessary to verify what the people in the group heard you say. Often there is at least a partial shift in meaning if trust is low.

In the 2011 Edelman Trust Barometer, Richard Edelman measured a shift in what it takes for people to believe information they are hearing about the organization. Prior to that time, the majority of people said they were likely to believe the information if they hear it once or twice. By 2011, most people said they needed to hear the information three to five times before they were likely to believe it is true.

That shift in perception means that supervisors need to be highly creative to send consistent messages in different ways until people really understand and internalize the information. The best way to test if people have heard you is to ask them to repeat what they just heard you say. Be sure to do this in a friendly and sincere way rather than with a demeaning attitude. Stress that you are taking this verification step to test for understanding on important points.

When trust is high, more of the true meaning is absorbed instantly. The supervisor may even mess up the communication, yet the workers will hear the correct message. That is because people are emotionally aligned with the supervisor more often and know what is in her heart. If something comes out garbled in a statement or email, they are more likely to cut her some slack.

I believe the weakest communication skill set for most human beings is listening skills. When employees complain about poor communication skills on the part of supervisors and upper management, the most frequent interpretation is that they are not being

heard, or if they were heard, their views were disregarded. One reason for this problem is that humans can think at roughly four times the speed as we can talk, so there is a lot of excess capacity in the brain while someone is talking to us to formulate our responses. We end up not paying close enough attention to the full message.

It is vital that supervisors practice good listening skills, but there is a major challenge in doing so. Great listening means paying attention at a higher level than we do in casual conversation, but that takes so much energy that most supervisors cannot sustain the effort and relapse into casual listening. The proper way to listen with precision is to reflect some of the content back to the speaker. It is called reflective listening. That technique also requires more energy than most supervisors can sustain continuously and many find it difficult to do.

The antidote here is to have a signal whereby you know which conversations require you to wear your “listening hat.” The signal is when an employee is coming to you in a highly emotional state. I think over 80% of conversations are casual, so relaxed listening is adequate in those situations. Serious conversations with another person who is highly emotional require us to shift into a higher gear of listening effort.

Pay close attention to your communication skills. If they are solid, you are likely adding to the trust on a daily basis. If they are weak, get some help to avoid having your communication weakness drag down the ambient culture in your organization.

*This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on [www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision](http://www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision) or on this blog.*

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