

Successful Supervisor Part 84

How Trust Impacts Reinforcement

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

One of the most powerful ways to impact performance is through positive reinforcement. Supervisors who know how to reinforce right behavior and extinguish wrong behavior not only foster a better working environment for everyone, they improve all aspects of organizational life.

This article shines a light on how reinforcement works well in an environment of high trust but often backfires if trust is low.

Reinforcement when trust is high

In a culture of high trust, positive reinforcement works for many reasons. Here are four of them.

1. People appreciate the recognition

A supervisor who takes the time and energy to sincerely thank people who are doing a great job will find they respond positively to the praise. The recognition does not need to be tangible things, like theater tickets or a gift card. Often sincere praise and a simple “thank you” provide the means to sustain and enhance motivation.

2. The supervisor appears to be paying attention

Sometimes a supervisor will get so busy or preoccupied with tasks and problems that she appears to be out of touch with the effort her people are expending. When she takes a moment to see and appreciate the good things workers are doing, it gives them more incentive to do more of those activities.

3. It brightens the atmosphere

In many organizations, the pressure for performance is so great that workers feel they are working in some kind of sweat shop. Reinforcement works like a breath of fresh air to bolster morale, and that leads to higher motivation.

4. A sense of camaraderie

Teamwork is stronger in a culture of high trust, and therefore the reinforcement usually leads to better performance. There is one caveat on this point, however. The

reinforcement must be perceived as fairly and evenly distributed to those who deserve it. If one individual or group is highly reinforced while an adjacent group who are also doing well is ignored, it feels like favoritism to the workers. Nothing destroys trust faster than if people believe there is favoritism going on.

Reinforcement when trust is low

If the culture is one of low trust, then reinforcement appears to be suspect. The workers may believe that the supervisor is trying to trick or bribe them into performing better.

1. People wonder what the other shoe is going to be

When a supervisor tries to reinforce workers in a culture of low trust, they often will roll their eyes in anticipation of some negative announcement to follow. The workers might shrug and say “Pizza party? I wonder what that’s all about.”

2. People feel they are being manipulated

You might hear a conversation within the team like this, “I heard she is bringing in donuts in the morning. I wonder what she wants from us. I would rather just be left alone to do my work.”

3. A surrogate for something people want more

In many organizations of low trust, people are there for the money only. They do not expect to have a good time. After all, “isn’t that why they call it work? Rather than having all these parties, I wish they would just put the thanks in my paycheck.”

4. People look for inconsistencies

Workers are extremely alert to inconsistencies in reinforcement. This issue has caused many supervisors to back away from reinforcement because they believe it can be dangerous. People can get riled up or even hostile if they perceive someone else is getting more than their fair share of the credit.

If you have managed to cultivate a culture of high trust, you will find that reinforcing people usually takes you in the right direction. If trust is low, beware that your best intentions might lead to problems you did not anticipate.

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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