

Successful Supervisor Part 91

Mentoring a Successor

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Some supervisors forget that it is an essential function to develop at least one successor to grow into their position. This article will discuss why having a successor is essential and give some tips on how to do this gracefully and seamlessly.

Why is Having a Successor Important?

When you mentor a person to take your job, what you are really doing is growing other leaders. John Maxwell calls this the leadership legacy. I call it the most important function of any leader. When you groom other people to move up in the organization, you are really paving the way for you to move up as well.

Often, I run into supervisors who are reluctant to train others on their function because of job security. What if the understudy gains more skill than me and comes into favor with the higher ups? Could I become expendable? This narrow mindset really shows a misunderstanding of how the world works in the vast majority of cases. If you want to move up yourself, become known as a developer of people.

Below, I have listed several ideas on how to select and mentor an understudy. You may have other techniques that work well too.

Select more than one candidate

Supervisors make a mistake when they select the obvious choice to train and put all emphasis on that person. This practice will disenfranchise others who might aspire to grow as well. Instead, have several people you consider as potentially capable of moving up and rotate your energy among these people so a kind of competition develops.

It is important to point out there is good competition and bad competition. Work to develop an atmosphere where each understudy sees a chance to move up, but no guarantee. Don't have an heir apparent, but rather have several strong people who each have their own strengths and development opportunities. Work with each one individually and give each one extra things to do in order to gain more skills.

Delegate More, Micromanage Less

The reason most supervisors micromanage too much and don't delegate enough has to do with risk. It is easier and quicker to just do the task herself. If she spends the time to train a protégé, then there is a chance he will do the task wrong, which means rework and a negative feeling of failure for the protégé.

Once something has been delegated, do not hover over the person to make sure it is done your way. This practice also has to do with risk. Take the risk the other person will mess up a bit and will need to learn by failing. That is how we all learned to walk and talk.

Tell the protégé that you are not going to micromanage him, but you will be available to help if he gets stuck. Support rather than hovering is the best paradigm.

Don't Play Favorites

The practice of playing favorites will almost always result in lower trust among the group. Avoiding this problem is rather simple; operate outside your normal groove for some small percentage of the time. By the way, you get to select a time when choosing another person to step up will involve less risk.

Go on vacation and leave your PDA home

When you go on vacation, make it a real vacation, and do not try to run the place as if you were on the job personally. Let the person selected for this backfill feel the true responsibility of running the place. I guess it would be OK to take your cell phone in case of a real emergency, like the place is on fire or something, but back way off and tell your protégé that he has the ball for the next two weeks. "Only contact me in the event of a true emergency."

Ask the understudy to keep good notes about what things worked well and what things backfired, so you can do a solid debrief once you return.

Give lots of feedback along the way

Make sure the person in training has a good sense of how he is doing. Avoid burdensome written reports every couple days, but do keep the person in the loop at all times. If the trainee figures out a better way to do the job, then be sure to reward his creativity and initiative. Your way of doing things is not the only way possible.

Always remember my favorite quote: "The highest calling for any leader is to grow other leaders." If you have a reputation of doing this well, then your own star must rise as well because you will be viewed by higher management as one of the elite leaders in

your operation. You will also be well respected by the people working for you and will be building higher trust daily.

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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