

## Successful Supervisor Part 92

### *Avoid Playing Favorites*

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

In my blog last week, I shared a bit of information on how to avoid playing favorites. This week I want to go deeper into that aspect of supervision, because it forms one of the most significant pitfalls that leads to loss of trust in any group. First, we need to recognize that we do have “go to people” for certain jobs. It is literally impossible for any human being to not have people they favor over others based on their skills, track record, or any number of other reasons.

It is the appearance of always playing favorites that really causes the damage to trust, but that fact also contains the seeds of how you can avoid the problem. Simply do things that are not in your normal pattern on rare occasions, and people will stop thinking of you as playing favorites. In fact, I like to use the word when deciding to do something unusual.

#### **How do I know?**

How can you tell if you are coming across as playing favorites? Keep in mind, there will be a difference between what you think and what other people might observe. In your own mind you are simply selecting the best person to do the job in each case, but if you always make the same call, then it will eventually come across as playing favorites. It is not just that the person is doing a good job but also the fact that you are noticing and praising the person more than others that exacerbates the issue.

One good way to detect if people are thinking you are playing favorites is to watch their body language when you make an assignment. Another method is to have a trusted employee who is part of the larger group and simply ask that person if there is a problem. If it looks like there may be an issue, here are some ways you can mitigate the angst.

#### **Ways to reduce the problem**

Let’s say I wanted to assign a work chore to someone, but I realize that I have gone to this person the last several times this chore has come up. The best approach is to ask myself if I really need to keep going to this person, or if this situation is a lower risk than usual, so it would be a good opportunity to let someone else have a shot at it.

Suppose in this case I have picked up some grumbling about playing favorites. In explaining why I am suggesting a different person than my usual choice, I could explain that I don't want to appear to be playing favorites and that I believe it is good to have deeper bench strength in the organization. I could also explain it as part of a greater emphasis on cross training in general.

By actually using the word "favorite" you send a signal that at least you are not clueless about how people may be feeling. You project the flexibility to allow others to grow if they are interested. If the job is technically challenging, you might offer to have the person who normally takes this assignment train another employee this time around. This reduces the image of an heir apparent and simultaneously adds to bench strength. In this case, you are showing a willingness to let others try provided they are properly trained. Allowing people to volunteer also breaks the stigma of playing favorites.

Another typical way of showing favoritism is when a supervisor does not apply the rules with the same rigor for some individuals. If you let a person show up late with no penalty but do write up another individual for the same problem, you are playing favorites in a very visible way. I do not advocate that you should treat everybody the same way in all circumstances. That is because people have different needs in certain circumstances. However, when it comes to enforcing rules or other policies, you must treat all employees the same way or you will become known as a supervisor who plays favorites.

In summary, playing favorites is a real trust buster, but you can use the techniques in this article to mitigate any damage and still have the ability to use your "go to person" in cases where it is critical to do so.

*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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