

Successful Supervisor Part 23

Delegation and Micromanagement

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

I have written on the topics of delegation and micromanagement before on my [Trust Ambassador Blog](#). This article will describe the issue from the point of a supervisor, because the caveats are even more critical in that arena.

It is normal, but not universal, that the supervisor of a work cell has a very deep understanding of the processes that are performed in her area. This situation is because a common path for an individual to become a supervisor is to work herself up from the shop floor as a result of her content knowledge of the processes. She has worked in the area for many years and has shown some leadership ability and dedication to the organization, so when an opportunity arose she was promoted to supervisor.

A supervisor taking this common pathway is in a precarious position relative to the concepts of delegation and micromanagement. I will describe these issues separately and then discuss an antidote for both problems.

Delegation

If you start with the premise that the supervisor knows the process at least as well as the people working for her, it is a challenge to delegate because she knows very well how the tasks should be performed. Her employees are often less experienced, so they will need some instruction, which will take time to accomplish.

Picture the logic going on in the head of the average supervisor as she contemplates delegating the task of making a widget to an inexperienced employee. "I can spend the next three hours explaining to George how to do this job correctly and safely, but there is a good chance he will mess it up anyway because it is very tricky. Chances are I will need to come in and bail him out when he gets stuck, which will take me more time. I could do the job myself in a little over an hour and know it will be done correctly, so I am far better off just getting it done."

Another issue with delegation is that the supervisor has a rigid picture of what the finished product needs to look like as a result of her history. She will not be amenable to creative solutions that work just as well, or maybe better, than the old way. If someone comes up with

an “improved” version of the function, it will appear to the supervisor as a problem to be resolved rather than a breakthrough to be embraced.

The natural tendency is for the supervisor to limit delegation for the above reasons. That practice stifles the growth of her employees and blocks new methods from being developed.

Micromanagement

Since the supervisor knows full well how the job *should* be accomplished, she will be quick to intervene if an employee is not on the right track. She will insist that the employee use the standard process in every case and hover over the employee to ensure that happens.

We all know that the impact of micromanagement is highly negative in terms of motivation. We have experienced the exasperation of being asked to do something only to be guided every step of the way as to exactly how to do it. That practice takes all the fun and initiative out of doing the job, and the employee grinds his teeth and is forced to comply with the instructions.

The unfortunate result is stagnation, because to reach excellence we must go well beyond compliance and achieve the full energy of everyone in the workforce. In addition, the supervisor cannot possibly witness every step of every operation simply because she has many people reporting to her, so she becomes fragmented and frustrated herself even though she is trying to do things right. What a mess!

The Antidote

To reduce these problems, the wise supervisor leans less in the direction of a manager trying to force everyone into a compliant mold and more in the direction of a leader who empowers people to use their own brains. She ensures that employees are trained on how to do the job safely and according to specifications. Then she needs to step back and give the employee some breathing room. Quite often the employee will discover a way to do the job faster and better than the supervisor could.

I recall one supervisor who had a penchant for micromanaging. One thoroughly frustrated employee brought in a fake pair of handcuffs and kept them in his work station. When the supervisor came around and started to bark out orders for how to do the tasks, the employee would get out the handcuffs and put them on. He would say something like, “I will do whatever you force me to do, but I think if you take the cuffs off I will get a lot more done.” The supervisor got the message rather well and changed her pattern. Of course such a direct approach might be viewed as insubordination to the supervisor, so I would not advise trying it.

If you are guilty of micromanaging more than you should, how can you tell? Look for clues in the body language of the people you are coaching. A stiffening of the facial muscles is an

indication of stress. Also, watch the hands; if you see the fingers clench into a semi fist posture when you suggest that the person try something, it is a good bet that person is feeling micromanaged.

Another easy way to tell if you are too intrusive with your suggestions is simply to ask the person. “Am I being too intrusive here?” often will generate an honest reply, especially if you have not bitten off the person’s head the last few times he has opened up about his feelings or expressed an opinion. You can also ask other people if you have a tendency to micromanage. Have the topic of micromanagement be on the agenda for group meetings and have an open discussion about the level of coaching you are giving. It may lead to healthy and valuable input.

When a supervisor does not delegate enough or tends to micromanage tasks, it sends a strong message that she does not trust her employees to do things right. That visible lack of trust will quickly break down a culture, and the work area will become much less productive. To prevent this decay, she should take the slight risk and delegate tasks more freely. Also, she needs to avoid hovering over people to verify they are doing everything according to her paradigm. Taking these steps will enhance rather than squash employee engagement.

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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