

Successful Supervisor Part 24

Holding People Accountable

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

In my corporate work on leadership, the most common issue that comes up is accountability. Reason: most leaders do a poor job of holding people accountable, so they do not get the change in behavior that they would like to see. This issue is particularly evident at the supervisor level because the span of control for supervisors is normally much wider than for higher level managers. This article outlines a model for improved accountability discussions based on five concepts that all begin with the letter “C.”

Clarify Expectations

People must understand expectations to have any shot at meeting them. In some complex situations, a written document is required, but most of the time it is a matter of spelling out what the requirements are and gaining a *verification* that the employee has truly internalized them. Often a failure to perform at the prescribed level can be traced to a misunderstanding between the supervisor and employee.

Supervisors sometimes make the mistake of assuming the employee understands what is required because he or she has heard the instructions. To verify understanding it is critical to have the employee state in his or her own words the specific requirement. It needs to be framed up in terms of the specific action to be done by a specific time and with certain level of quality. The employee can decide how to accomplish the task, but the deliverable must be crystal clear to avoid ambiguity.

Having the employee parrot back the expectation has the additional benefit in the event the deliverable is fuzzy. The supervisor can take the time to reiterate the specific deliverable before the employee attempts to do it. This saves time and money while reducing frustration.

If an employee has a pattern of habitually missing expectations and later blaming it on a misunderstood specification, then it is a good idea to put the expectation in writing. In cases where the employee is on progressive counseling, it would be a good idea to have the employee sign the written document for filing. A copy should be given to the employee.

Contribution of Supervisor

Often the supervisor will attempt to hold an employee or group accountable when the reason for the shortfall was a blockage caused by the supervisor rather than the workers. Most people will do a good job if the culture and environment set up by management are conducive to working well. When supervisors micromanage or otherwise destroy positive attitudes of the workers, they are contributing substantially to the shortfall they see within the workforce. They are quite often the root cause of the problem, yet they find it convenient to blame the workers for not meeting expectations.

I recall one supervisor who lamented that "all my people are lazy." As I dug into the situation, it was evident that the bully attitudes of the supervisor had caused people to become apathetic and perform only when beaten. The supervisor blamed the workers, but she was obviously the source of the problem. She could not understand this connection of cause and effect. Her "command and control" way of managing was the root cause of her problems. If this supervisor was replaced by an empowering leader, those "lazy" workers would quickly become productive and show high initiative.

Care

When giving feedback on performance, especially if performance is not at the level expected, be sure to treat the employee the way you would want to be treated if the situation was reversed. "The Golden Rule" provides excellent guidance in most cases. There are some exceptions where the Golden Rule breaks down (like suppose I enjoy being yelled at and confronted), but they are rare. If the manager demonstrates real care for the individual, even when the feedback is not positive, the employee will usually respond well to the input.

Comprehensive and Balanced

This principle means that the leader must take the big picture of what is going on into account when deciding if an individual is meeting what is expected. There may be a specific reason for not living up to the agreed performance that is totally out of the control of the employee. If a dog is left locked up in the house all day, it is entirely possible you will find a mess on the floor, even if the dog would have loved to have been let out.

Make sure that the feedback is balanced such that you account for the good things they do as well as for times they fall short. Since most people do things right far more often than they fail, your holding people accountable should normally be a positive discussion. Rapport and trust are destroyed when employees only hear from management when they are having problems. It is a common refrain for an employee to say "My supervisor only talks to me when I screw up."

Collective Responsibility

If the accountability discussion has the flavor of everyone, including the manager, being responsible, then that feeling of a family working together will permeate the discussions, and they will be more fruitful. When the manager points the finger at a specific worker and fails to involve the other people who also make up the system, the employee feels picked on. This results in hard feelings and creates more problems than it solves. When the atmosphere becomes one where “we win or we lose together,” then the proper level of teamwork is assured.

These five C's will help you create an environment where holding people accountable is far more productive and effective. Try to remember these principles when you are dealing with the people in your life.

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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