Successful Supervisor Part 18

Avoid Playing Whack-a-mole

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Unfortunately, there is a situation in most organizations where the supervisor is served up a never-ending supply of tasks to do and problems to resolve. Let's picture a supervisor named Marcie. She comes to work on a typical day with 2-3 problems left over from the previous night. Her calendar is jammed with discussions and meetings to report on the status of problems or work on emergency situations. Perhaps there is an immediate need to reorganize her group because of an unexpected order or the absence of some key people.

She faces several new problems or crises every day. Sometimes the problems are waiting for her outside her door when she arrives in the morning. There are certain to be several new ones when she looks at her inbox or her manager shows up unexpectedly.

She instinctively knows the organization could run a lot better, but there is simply no time to even work on a long term plan. So, poor Marcie runs herself ragged and just keeps her head out of the water on most days. She goes home exhausted, yells at her kids, and tries to clear out a few more issues online before going to bed.

I call this condition the "Supervisor Whack-A-Mole" syndrome, after the famous carnival game. Every time a mole comes out of one of the holes you whack it down, but there are others emerging all the time. You can never get them all down at the same time, and they keep coming up faster and faster. The poor supervisor feels totally overworked and cannot begin to think strategically about how to improve her conditions.

This problem is not universal, but it is far too common in most organizations. There is a way out of the maze, but it requires courage and vision. The way out is to invest time creating an improved culture within her team. Supervisors need to see one of their key roles as **creators of culture**, not just problem solvers. Developing an environment of higher **trust** is an investment that pays off many times over the cost. This shift in mindset has numerous advantages.

First, carving out time where the entire team can work on trust issues will result in less friction between people in the future. Since many of the "problems" have to do with people being unable to work together efficiently, this investment pays off in two ways:

Employees work better together with fewer problems, and employee satisfaction improves, resulting in greater productivity.

Second, by focusing on teamwork, the supervisor emphasizes that many employees are capable of solving the inevitable daily problems themselves. The supervisor has many willing hands to lighten the load of problem solving in the future. The employees feel good about having greater responsibility as well. They become **empowered** and trusted to handle many situations previously delegated upward to the leader.

Third, the tendency toward burnout is greatly reduced when there is time set aside to work on the culture. Getting temporarily out of the "rat race" every once in a while to think about what is happening and do some planning is cathartic. People have the opportunity to vent and rebuild relationships in a "safe" atmosphere. In some situations this is best handled with the help of an outside expert schooled in conflict resolution.

Of course, the supervisor needs to be creative and fit the development work into times when the pace of production is not at a peak level. This means she needs to consider how to get snips of time that would otherwise be not fully loaded and use them to figure out how to improve relationships among the team.

In the time crunch on every supervisor, many believe it is impossible to invest a few hours every few weeks to work on the culture. They are too busy solving problems and juggling all the balls on a daily basis. However, those supervisors who are able to carve out some time, find the payoff is far greater than the investment. It leads to a stronger, more productive, and more smoothly running organization. It also leads to fewer health problems due to burnout.

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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