Successful Supervisor Part 5

Testing Limits

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

It seems so simple that there is a set number of rules for workers to follow, and they should always follow them. As any supervisor will tell you, getting people to follow the rules is a major part of the job that is both tedious and thankless. In this article, we dig into the phenomenon of rules: how people test them and how they react to various approaches to enforce the rules. I will suggest some best practices that allow the supervisor to thread the needle of this immense challenge and will discuss some things that should be avoided.

Regardless of how the supervisor was appointed, there is one thing for sure: people are going to test the limits to find out how she reacts in different situations. Now comes the part where most supervisors can struggle for years. The desire is to have a pleasant work environment where the tasks get done by cheerful people who follow all the rules. In other words, the supervisor would like to be **popular**, but being a popular leader is a tricky business. As Colin Powell once said, "Sometimes being a leader means pissing people off."

Constant conundrum

In most organizations, part of the performance and salary system for supervisors includes an evaluation by the people who are being supervised. The new supervisor knows that if she takes a hard line on all the rules, people are going to rate her poorly, and that could easily have an impact on her pay. She tries to accommodate people as much as possible and does not "put the hammer down" if people take a few extra minutes for breaks. Note: I will use the length of breaks as an example here. The same testing will go on wherever there is a behavioral rule, like attendance, work hours, housekeeping, or other standard measures.

Once people see the supervisor is trying to accommodate the workers, they will up the ante to push the limits. Five extra minutes for a break will stretch to 15 minutes extra or even more. Without some check, the abuse will continue to become more extreme. Eventually productivity takes such a hit that the supervisor has to clamp down. This is where most inexperienced supervisors make a fundamental mistake. They issue a note via e-mail or text reminding people that the standard break duration is 15 minutes (or

whatever the rule is for that unit). Now she will be faced with what I call "The Bugle Effect."

The Bugle Effect

When I was a young engineer, I worked in a bullpen area with few partitions. The group was rather lax about quitting time, because people wanted to avoid the rush hour traffic. The published quitting time was 4:40 PM, but if you actually left at that time it would take you an extra 30 minutes to get home. Discipline had been lost over the years, and most people checked out around 4 PM. The supervisor finally had enough and wrote a letter reminding people that the quitting time of 4:40 PM needed to be honored.

One of the technicians in the area made a "bugle" out of some copper tubing, a pneumatic fitting, and a large tin funnel. Every day all the technical staff would be at their desks working away until the clock reached 4:40, then the technician would pull out the bugle and blow it, and everybody would clamor to be the first one on the elevator. In essence, the population was mocking the supervisor for trying to hold the line on quitting time. They thought she was being petty, and so they developed bad attitudes about the hours of work. Her method of trying to enforce the rules had backfired.

Some possible solutions

I offer a few solutions below, but it is important to judge the group's personality and operating norms before applying any specific method. I learned that lesson the hard way when I was a new supervisor. I called a special meeting and marched the entire group into a conference room to go over my expectations. The body language of the participants was terrible, and I lost a lot of ground that day. Think through the possible options and select one that is right for your situation. An overarching consideration is to avoid being *manipulative* with people. Rather, seek to influence behavior with the truth served up in ways they can appreciate and always treat them as adults. Work to establish a sense of rightness and fairness that is built on the culture of trust developed within the group.

The symptom of pushing limits is rooted in motivation. I cover the topic of motivation in a later article, but for this article, I will suggest that a best practice is to investigate the alignment and culture within the team. Asking questions rather than making statements is an effective approach.

1. Here are some questions worth exploring with the group:
   a) To what extent do all people on the team recognize their contribution to the total effort?
   b) How do people feel about the culture and trust level within the team?
   c) What are some things the team can do to be more cohesive and more effective?

d) How strongly do people realize that without some controls, we cannot accomplish our tasks well and be fair to everyone?
e) How well do people in this operation understand the rules?
f) Is it in the best interest of the entire group to follow the rules, except in situations of a rare personal emergency?
g) How much better off would we be if we were not trying to figure out who are the worst abusers of the rules?
h) What are some of the advantages of having discipline within our unit?
i) To what extent do people feel reinforced or punished when they bring up things they do not agree with?
j) If we truly respect each other, how can we all abide by the rules without relying on some kind of policeman to enforce them?

2. Another approach would be to put the onus on group norms of behavior to achieve better control. The central theme is that, as adults, the group **owns** the process and has the ability to choose the best route to maintain order. The supervisor might lead a discussion as follows:
   a) Mention at a staff meeting that she has observed that not everyone is following the stated rules for leaving time.
   b) Discuss the reason for having a standard leaving time in the first place. Get the individuals involved in the discussion if possible. How would they like to control the situation?
   c) Ask if it is appropriate to have a team behavior that our intention is to follow the published rules unless there is an unusual situation or emergency.
   d) If the rule appears to be unfair or arbitrary, she might ask for creative suggestions for how to accomplish the required hours on the job in a different way, such as some form of flex time where people are allowed to leave a bit early provided they started early or took a shortened lunch break.
   e) Ask the group whether they understand the need to be more rigorous at following the rules because they are there for a reason (here the trick is to ask the group a question rather than make a demand.)

3. A third approach is for the supervisor to seek out an informal leader of the team and ask that person to help her out with the others. She might suggest that if the informal leader acts closer to the expected behavior the others may eventually follow. I will discuss the informal leader and several other types of individuals and give some suggestions in a future article.

These approaches might not work in all cases; it depends on the maturity of the group and the individuals in it. The supervisor has to sometimes try different approaches to keep a reasonable discipline. The magic here is to refrain from continually hounding people and insisting on compliance. When a supervisor demands compliance, it usually results in some form of "The Bugle Effect." By exploring the out-of-control situation openly and asking questions, the supervisor can regain control while simultaneously gaining more respect with the group members.

Now, the supervisor can suggest that it is the group's responsibility to reinforce their own behavior and recognize there may be certain circumstances where a person might have to leave early for personal reasons, but most people will stay until at least quitting time because they understand the logic. Most likely you will see several people working well past quitting time, because they are aware the boss notices these things.

An approach that will likely backfire

Some supervisors try to offer an incentive or reward for following the rules. The supervisor might say, "If the group takes breaks according to the standard all week, we can have a pizza party on Friday." This usually backfires because the rules are in place and are expected to be followed. A special reward of any kind for compliance may modify behavior for a while but will hurt morale in the end and will definitely lead to loss of cooperation. You do not reward a driver for stopping at a stop sign. It is expected behavior.

The attitude of the supervisor should be firm but reasonable. The idea is to gain and maintain trust and respect rather than try to trick or force people into compliance. The best approach is to be strong and unbending on matters of principle but approachable and flexible when dealing with individual situations.

It is important to realize that different people react differently to discipline, and you must flex your style appropriately to be most effective. One precaution on flexing is that the standards of deportment must be the same for everyone. If you let one individual get away with more lax rules because he is a bully or one of your favorite people, then you are in for trouble all along the line. Flex on style and approach to people but remain firm on the standards that apply in the area out of a sense of fairness. Treating first line employees like adults and being sensitive to their needs is usually superior to the militant approach of barking out orders then trying to enforce them every day.

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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