Successful Supervisor Part 90

Managing a Low Trust Group

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Sometime in your career, you may inherit a low trust group. It won't take you long to figure out that you have your hands full. In low trust groups, the acrimony is obvious, and employees take every opportunity to turn honest attempts to improve the culture into further difficulties.

This article highlights why this phenomenon occurs and suggests some antidotes to try if you are in that circumstance.

Why do Low Trust Groups Exist?

Almost without exception, when you run into a group of people who are totally negative, it is because they have been poorly led in the past. Often there have been a string of ill-equipped leaders at several levels that have destroyed the culture and created the monster you now face.

The good news is that if you are an excellent leader, the prognosis to regain a great culture is pretty good. It is certainly not a cinch to turn the situation around, but it usually is possible depending on your own leadership skill.   Below are some ideas that I have found work well, if they are skillfully applied.

Do not assume they are just "bad people"

Often leaders blame the workers for their poor attitudes or work habits. It is really the circumstances they have been in that are causing the hostility they are showing toward you. Recognize it will take time, but you can get most of the people to be great workers once again.

One caution here, you probably will not be able to save them all. Once people have been abused past a certain point, some of them will never be able to regain positive mindsets. One of your tasks is to figure out which few will never come around and find a different home for them inside or outside the organization. If you do have a few truly bad apples, it is essential to remove them from the rest of the group or you will never be successful at changing the culture.

Have open discussions about a "new deal."

Tell the employees that you are not like the leaders they have had in the past. Realize they may scoff at this idea, but keep pointing out that you value a culture of high trust and will be working to earn their trust as you proceed.

Recognize that they are acting out in ways that annoy you, but the underlying cause is fear. When people are afraid of bad things happening to them, they become jaded and push back on every positive suggestion. One of your main jobs during the first few months is to drive out the fear.

Ask your new employees to tell you any time what you are proposing does not square with their sense of rightness. They will be reluctant to do this at first because there has been a pattern of punishment for this in the past. You must convince them by your actions that you will make them glad when they point out what they feel are inconsistencies as long as they do it respectfully.

Understand that you do not have to reverse every decision when there is pushback from the employees. Instead you should make the decision that is best for the organization but just make them not feel punished when they pushback. Treat them as adults who have legitimate points of view.

Be consistent and also flexible

It is not necessary to treat all employees the same way on all decisions. Employees have different needs, so you may have to make some decisions that reflect that. However, on enforcement of rules and policies or on modeling the values, you must be consistent and unwavering. You need to know when you can flex and when you must be rigid. Knowing when to be "steel" and when to be "velvet" is a concept taught to me by my dear friend Bob Vanourek in his book "Triple Crown Leadership." I recommend this book for all leaders.

Admit mistakes publicly and quickly

It is normally a trust-building event when a leader admits a mistake. The two exceptions to this rule are if the mistake has been repeated several other times or if the mistake is due to a sinister motive. For example, if the mistake was to avoid owning up to a lie you told in the past, then admitting it would seal your fate. Most mistakes are honest attempts to do something worthwhile that just did not work out as planned. For those mistakes, admitting them builds higher trust with most people.

Praise in public but coach in private

Become known as a person who acknowledges the good deeds of others. Make sure your praise is sincere rather than manipulative. When it is necessary to enforce discipline or coach an errant employee, do it face to face (not in e-mail) and do it privately. Make sure the employee knows you are having this discussion because you genuinely care about him and want him to have a successful future.

Learn their names

Make sure you call people by their name when passing in the hall or at their work station. Keep track of what they are going through in their personal lives, so you can relate to them emotionally. Say things like "Did your daughter ever find her lost cat?" or "How are those new tires working out?"

Practice good body language

Making good eye contact is essential if you hope to develop trust with people. Study the different forms of body language and use that knowledge to connect with people on a deeper level. For example, you might say "You are looking much brighter today; yesterday I thought you looked a little sad…anything going on?"

There are literally hundreds of other tips that can allow you to turn a hostile group into one of high trust, but these seven ideas make a good starter kit. Practice them daily, and you can transform almost any hostile group in just a few months. Once you have a reputation for being able to accomplish this feat, you will become known as "one of the best supervisors we have in the organization."

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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