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Smart Supervision™

“It’s a lot more fun and fulfilling to bless, and not blast, your people.”

STRATEGIES, IDEAS AND TIPS FOR MANAGING YOURSELF AND OTHERS

The Three G’s: Gold, Guts And Gaps

Principles For Engaging Your Team Members

by John Pearson

Peter Drucker, the founder of modern management, delivered an elbow to our supervisory ribs when he wrote, “Most of what we call management consists of making it difficult for people to get their work done.” Yikes!

OK, let’s confess we have all made our fair share of supervisory blunders. But if you’re like me, you really do want to be a better supervisor. Frankly, it’s a lot more fun and fulfilling to bless, and not blast, your people. Here are three principles for engaging your team members more effectively. I call them “The Three G’s: Gold, Guts and Gaps.”

1. Ask The Gold Standard Interview Question

It’s such a basic Management 101 principle, it’s often missed. Smart supervisors look even smarter when they hire the right person up front.

About half-way into a one-hour interview with a potential new team member, I always ask the Gold Standard Interview Question. Let’s assume we’re interviewing Maria and we’re now acquainted. She’s already described her previous positions and her personality is emerging, but she’s not sure what I’m looking for — because I haven’t told her. First, I want to know who she is and what motivates her. I never ask, “Do you think you can do this job?” (Has anyone ever said “no” to you?)

So here’s the Gold Standard Question. “Maria, think of the position you have now. It’s 5 p.m. and you’re driving home from work and the thought hits you, ‘Wow! That was a fantastic day at work!’ Tell me, what happened at work that day?”

This question — and the answer — has never failed me. If Maria has been nervous throughout the interview, suddenly her eyes brighten, she smiles broadly, sits up straighter and confidently launches into an often remarkable and engaging story of success at work. Now I know her passion! This is the real Maria.

And then comes the gut check — mine. OK, if this is what Maria really enjoys doing, if this is her passion, is there a job fit with the position that is open? If yes, I am

so excited, I can hardly contain myself. I still need to do the due diligence but, in my mind, all systems are go.

However, what if Maria’s anecdote of a fantastic day at work has no connection to life-in-the-trenches in my organization? I don’t hire her. It would be a disservice to Maria because she needs to be employed where she has lots of fantastic days at work.

While this is a mandatory question for all of your interviews, don’t limit it to the front end of your people process. Keep asking it. Smart supervisors know their people and what motivates them. Effective supervisors work ruthlessly to align passion with position. As you coach and mentor your people, ask them often what a fantastic day looks like. As much as possible, heap those fantastic days on your people! When you have highly motivated, passionate team members, you, too, will experience more fantastic days at work. (What a concept!)

2. Have The Guts To Cut The Cord

In their very practical and quick-reading book, *Winning: The Answers — Confronting 74 of the Toughest Questions in Business*, Jack and Suzy Welch deliver a Management 101 no-brainer. It’s one of my “Top-10 Supervision Principles of All Time.”

The authors call it “The Ultimate Values Test.” They warn not to get rid of value offenders with surreptitious excuses, such as, “Charles left for personal reasons to spend more time with his family.” Instead, they say that you should inform your team publicly and “announce that Charles was asked to leave because he didn’t adhere to specific company values.”

Jack Welch, chairman of GE for 20 years, says that

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“The people you lead need coaching from you. They need a simple, but comprehensive management system to categorize all the stuff.”

The Three G’s: Gold, Guts And Gaps

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people should be evaluated on two key areas: their performance and how well they live out the corporate values. This means that, at the end of the day, there are four kinds of team members:

- People in Group 1 deliver great results and adhere to good values. “They should be praised and rewarded at every opportunity,” says Welch.
- Team members in Group 2 deliver poor results but adhere to the values. They “deserve another chance, maybe in another position within the organization.”
- Group 3 people deliver great results but have lousy values. This kind, says Welch, “deliver the numbers, but usually on the backs of their people.” Companies very often keep these people around for way too long, destroying morale and trust as they do.
- Employees in Group 4 have poor performance and poor values. This one’s easy to deal with, says Welch. “When you finally get the guts to cut the cord, you’ll wonder why you didn’t do it sooner.”

At your next staff meeting, discuss these four groups and review your company’s core values. Your core values must be crystal clear to everyone — and you must live them out — or your integrity as a supervisor will be lost forever.

Peter Drucker said that “executives owe it to the organization and to their fellow workers not to tolerate nonperforming individuals in important jobs.” Ditto for all jobs. Performance and values matter. No one said supervisory work is easy. It’s a balancing act.

Author Bruce McNicol writes that “one of the greatest gifts we can offer another person is a safe place to fail.” As you define and refine your core values, you’ll need discernment to know when you must show grace and when you must show someone the door. Many times, though, you must have the guts to cut the cord.

3. Attack The Knowledge Gap With A Vengeance

Smart supervisors know that there is a minefield of information about leadership and management that they don’t know. Ineffective supervisors acknowledge this knowledge gap — and then promptly ignore it. Smart supervisors attack the knowledge gap with a vengeance! When you’re at “I don’t know what I don’t know,” you need a plan ASAP.

There are four levels of management knowledge. You must mentor your team members so they become life-long learners in all the core competencies of leading and managing your business or organization. Note Drucker’s

insight again, “We now accept the fact that learning is a lifelong process of keeping abreast of change. And the most pressing task is to teach people how to learn.”

That’s your job: teaching people how to learn. But go to any major bookstore and stroll down the business and management aisles. The sheer number of books with clever and compelling titles will give you a headache. The people you lead need coaching from you. They need a simple, but comprehensive management system to categorize all the stuff.

I created the “20 management buckets” system to help me think clearly — but comprehensively — about mastering management. You might have another system. Just pick one and begin.

Here’s the big idea about the knowledge gap. Challenge your people to think about management knowledge in four levels. No single person, of course, will master every core competency, but your team members must collectively master the leadership and management core competencies if your organization is going to reach its maximum potential. Here are the four levels:

Level 1: I don’t know what I don’t know.

Level 2: I know what I don’t know.

Level 3: I have an action plan to address what I know I don’t know.

Level 4: I am knowledgeable and effective in this core competency and can mentor others.

Help new people move quickly from Level 1 to Level 2. Then inspire them to move to Level 3 with an action plan. When a team member is promoted or moves to another department, it’s the same drill. Coach the person so he or she identifies his or her knowledge gaps and moves along.

When you’re driving home, a fantastic day at work for you will be to note that you had the guts to cut the cord and send Charles on his merry way. But you also helped Maria move from Level 3 to Level 4 and made it possible for her to reach a career goal early. Congratulations! ■

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The Sensitive Way To (Constructively) Criticize

If you’re going to help your workers give their best possible performance, you need to communicate with them. This means letting them know when they’re doing a good job — and when they’re not. It’s the “when they’re not” part that many supervisors find challenging. After all, criticism, however constructive, is often difficult for employees to deal with. And it’s tough to have to tell someone something he or she really doesn’t want to hear.

Here are some ways to make the job of providing criticism a little easier:

1. Nip problems in the bud. Supervisors who resent their workers for not performing up to par but fail to say anything about it end up having their annoyance build up until they blurt out something that is more hurtful than useful. Also, by waiting until the problem is that bad, all you do is force yourself, your department and the entire company to put up with work that is less than it should be. This is entirely unnecessary. If you say something immediately about poor performance, you stand a much better chance of bringing about improvements.

2. Be patient with slow learners. It won’t help if you betray your frustration with a worker who is slow to grasp a concept. Chances are the worker is frustrated, too. This is your chance to use feedback as an educational tool, helping the worker understand something new.

3. Speak sternly with “tough” cases. Sometimes, feedback needs to be strongly phrased and delivered. For example, we know a supervisor in a construction company who had repeatedly told one of his employees to follow safety rules. The employee would comply for a few days, but then slide back into his old habits. The supervisor felt that the worker really needed more than a polite explanation of why it’s important to be safe. But he wasn’t sure how to convey his message. He knew, however, that losing his temper would be the wrong thing to do. So instead, he used a very stern tone of voice in speaking to the worker, instead of his usually casual, “Don’t forget to use your belt.” He didn’t smile or banter or offer any apologies for his rule: “From now on, you wear your belt.” But at the same time, he didn’t get angry. He just spoke as if he meant it — and the worker could tell this was a serious matter.

4. Change the venue. Sometimes, the best way to make sure a worker listens to you is to provide your

criticism in a different location than you normally would. For example, if you usually talk to the worker at his or her workstation, it might be a good idea to speak to him or her in a more remote location, such as an office or meeting room. The setting itself can make the worker take notice that what you are saying is more than an offhand remark.

5. Get to the point right away. Sometimes when you feel it’s hard to say something, your natural inclination is to beat around the bush — to not say what the problem is until the end of the conversation, and then to just bury it. The employee leaves feeling that, yes, you had some criticism, but it wasn’t really important. To provide effective feedback, you need to say what you have to say first, clearly and simply. It’s not necessary to say any more than that — just have everyone get right back to work.

6. Be positive. When offering criticism, there’s no reason to mumble or frown. Speak with a positive tone of voice, and put some energy into your body language. The worker should be encouraged to work better after receiving your feedback. In order to give encouragement instead of discouragement, you need to be a bit of a cheerleader. You can even end the meeting with a smile and a handshake, to show there is no personal animosity involved. Ultimately, the supervisor-employee relationship should be improved by feedback, not damaged by it.

Another way in which you can show the employee that there are no hard feelings is to relay an anecdote about your own career. It helps the employee see that you are speaking to him or her as the voice of experience, and that no one is immune to making mistakes. This helps humanize the problem and keep the employee from feeling singled out.

7. Ask for a response. Sometimes supervisors know that there is a problem that needs to be fixed, but they aren’t sure how to get the worker to fix it. You need to think carefully about the words you use, because the employee is likely to think about them too — and act on them. Later, if it turns out the message you gave is not the message the worker heard, there could be problems because the worker will feel he or she did what you wanted, but you’re still not satisfied. The best way to avoid this problem is to ask the employee to tell you what he or she thinks should be done to fix the problem. Say, “I’d like to know what you think will fix this problem.” If the response is not on target, you know that the feedback session isn’t over. Keep communicating until you’re satisfied that the employee understands. ■

“As a supervisor, you need to make sure your staff understands and believes in the value of diversity or they won’t be able to do their jobs well.”

How To Connect With A Diverse Customer Base

Obviously, your company’s customers aren’t all the same — they are different ages, from different cultures, of different races, of different genders and, many times, even speak different languages. They have never been all the same, but now, with the demographics in America shifting rapidly, companies are realizing that the target to whom they are selling their products is no longer the white, English-speaking male head of household, at least not exclusively. Companies that want to do well must sell to — and provide customer service to — a broad variety of people.

As a supervisor, you need to make sure your staff understands and believes in the value of diversity or they won’t be able to do their jobs well. Of course, one of the best ways to do this is to have a diverse staff and, in fact, many companies are reaching out in their recruiting methods.

Take the example of a Toyota dealership in California, where the 60-person sales staff speaks more than 20 different languages. This has made the dealership one of the best in the country in terms of sales, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

To maintain its success, the dealership focuses on hiring great people for its sales and customer service staff. It’s not difficult to find diverse candidates — California is a quintessential American melting pot, with immigrants from Mexico, South America, Central America, Asia, the Philippines and other countries. Customers walking into the dealership feel comfortable right away, no matter what language they speak, because of this diversity.

Training Is Essential

But it’s not enough just to have a diverse work force — you need to train your workers to respect differences in people and to treat every customer well. After all, even workers who are considered diverse may hold a denigrating view of another group. For example, some cultures have beliefs regarding the role of women that can be unaccepting of an independent woman. It is important to educate workers before a comment, such as “If you bring your husband in, I can explain how this ABS system works,” repels a potential customer.

Some supervisors have found that the best way to encourage workers to embrace the idea of diversity is

to have diversity training sessions. These can be done by the supervisor or they can be done by an outside consultant (which is more expensive but sometimes more worthwhile).

Remember that diversity training is not like the training workers receive on a new piece of equipment. It is an emotionally charged process. If you, as a supervisor, decide to train workers formally on diversity, be prepared to use your best sensitivity skills to deal with some personal issues that are likely to arise.

Set The Tone For Your Workers

The single most effective thing that you can do to reinforce the importance of diversity, internally as well as with customers, is to set a good example. Show that you are not prejudiced against a worker’s sexual orientation or race, and you will have done more than any amount of formal training can do. This attitude should be prominent when you are dealing with customers, as well.

Finally, management must view diversity as a business strength, as it does at the California car dealership. Successful companies know they need to get — and keep — diverse customers to perform well financially. As a supervisor, you need people from different backgrounds and with different attitudes so you and your team can serve these diverse customers well. ■

Pros And Cons Of The ‘To-Do’ List

The “to-do” list has a time-honored position in the lives of working people. Some experts, however, caution that creating a to-do list can be a method of procrastination. It takes time to make lists. It takes time to determine the rank of importance for each task, and many listers end up making several to-do lists for various aspects of their work.

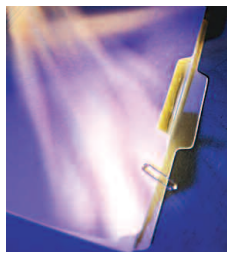
Julie Morgenstern, author of *Making Work Work* (Fireside) estimates that as many as 30 percent of listers spend more time managing their lists than completing what’s on them. They feel safer in the planning mode than in the action mode.

To-do lists can be a valuable organizing tool if they aren’t too complicated. Try to limit your lists to no more than seven items. Anything longer than that generally requires an effort that stretches beyond the confines of the normal workday. ■

“Supervisors must be careful not to discuss sexual harassment claims. These are private and confidential, and should not be trumpeted about the workplace.”

How To Handle A Sexual Harassment Claim

When an employee says he or she is going to file a sexual harassment claim — or actually files it — what should the supervisor do? Once the claim has been filed, it’s a bit too late to start developing procedures and training employees. But there are some tips to make this difficult situation easier:



1. Don’t make assumptions without evidence. The most difficult part of the investigation process for the supervisor is to remain neutral. Some employers, who have a legalistic bent, think

that you should assume that all sexual harassment complaints are true. This is not a good way to begin an investigation. Yes, you should take all claims very seriously, and you want to avoid assuming the accuser is wrong. But don’t assume that the harasser is guilty, either. Doing so may subject your company to a defamation claim — after all, sexual harassment is about as damaging as an allegation can get. Do all you can to appear fair to the accused. This will help prevent a lawsuit from that party. The supervisor must remember to consider the rights of both the accused and the alleged victim.

2. What is offensive behavior? How can a supervisor tell when conduct is harassment? There is no statutory definition of offensive behavior. However, certain courts have espoused the “reasonable-person standard,” under which a reasonable person would view certain behavior as offensive.

3. Protect confidentiality. Supervisors must be careful not to discuss sexual harassment claims. These are private and confidential, and should not be trumpeted about the workplace. In fact, excess publicity would only increase the likelihood that the employer would be sued for defamation.

4. Be careful with written complaints. Some employers require that their workers put sexual harassment complaints in writing. This is a double-edged sword. First of all, a written complaint will codify the process for the worker, perhaps making him or her feel that it’s necessary to involve a lawyer. Once that happens, the employer may lose bargaining power. It might be better for the super-

visor to interview the complaining worker and to write down notes.

5. Document the situation. Despite the fact that written complaints are not necessarily a good idea, at some point, you will have to deal with a written complaint if the employee takes the situation to the next level. Therefore, the supervisor needs to document all harassment complaints, as well as the actions taken to investigate and resolve them. It’s important for supervisors to make notes because these notes provide a permanent record, preventing the employee from changing his or her story after talking to a lawyer.

6. Don’t wait for complaints. Even if no employee has complained about sexual harassment, if a supervisor notes that there is a hostile work environment or has knowledge of harassment, the supervisor and employer should take corrective action. Even without a complaint, if the supervisor has reason to believe that harassment existed or exists, he or she must investigate and take whatever action is appropriate. ■

Talking To Your Workers About Sexual Harassment

Sometimes, the easiest way to explain sexual harassment to employees is to talk about whether or not behavior is welcome. For example, men usually know when their behavior is annoying to a woman. Likewise, a woman who eyeballs a man she is working with, making him uncomfortable, usually knows that his response signifies her signals are unwelcome. But those who are harassers keep doing it. Let them know that this is not acceptable. It’s not even legal. It is harassment, pure and simple. Workers need to be told that they are adults and should act as such. This is not just a matter of etiquette or of focusing on the job. It’s something that could land everyone in court — including you, the supervisor, who is supposed to be responsible for monitoring and preventing such behavior in the workplace. ■

“Understanding the definition of a serious health condition is absolutely necessary to avoid potential litigation as a result of denial of FMLA leave.”

What Constitutes A ‘Serious Health Condition’?

The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) allows employees to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for a serious health condition, to care for a close relative with a serious health condition or for the birth or adoption of a child. Birth or adoption is pretty well understood. However, “serious health condition” is not so straightforward. In fact, there have been court cases over the definition. Here are some tips from the Society for Human Resource Management and from employment attorney Eric Paltell to help you understand how the FMLA applies to medical problems:

What Is It?

1. The FMLA defines a serious health condition as any illness, injury, impairment or physical or mental condition that involves either: (a) inpatient care in a hospital, including any “period of incapacity” subsequent to or in connection with such inpatient care; or (b) continuing treatment (see point 2) by a health care provider.

The Need For Continuing Treatment

2. Continuing treatment is defined in the FMLA’s interpretive regulations as including one or more of the following: (a) Any period of incapacity due to pregnancy or prenatal care; (b) A permanent or long-term period of incapacity due to a condition for which treatment may not be effective; (c) Any period of absence to receive multiple treatments for a condition that would likely result in a period of incapacity of more than three consecutive calendar days if treated; (d) A period of incapacity of more than three consecutive calendar days that involves treatment two or more times by a health care provider or, alternatively, requires treatment by a health care provider on only one occasion but results in a “regimen of continuing treatment” under the supervision of the health care provider. A “regimen of continuing treatment” includes only those treatments that cannot be initiated without a visit to a health care provider, such as taking prescription drugs. It does not include taking over-the-counter medication; nor does it include what many would consider to be common therapy, such as bed rest, drinking fluids and exercising.

3. The FMLA can also be used for any period of incapacity or treatment for a “chronic serious health condition.” A chronic serious health condition is one that requires periodic visits to a doctor, continues over an extended period and causes episodic, rather than continuing, periods of incapacity.

4. FMLA may not be used for conditions such as the common cold, the flu, earaches, upset stomach, minor ulcers, headaches other than migraines, routine dental or orthodontic problems and periodontal disease.

What The Courts Have Said

Much of the interpretation of the FMLA has been left up to the courts. Courts have determined that a broad range of ailments fall under the FMLA’s definition of a serious health condition, including depression, peptic ulcers, morning sickness, bronchitic asthma, migraine headaches, sickle cell disease, post-menopausal vaginal bleeding and lumbar strains.

In one case, an employee missed four days of work while getting treatment for a heart condition. According to the trial court, FMLA leave was not justified because the worker was not physically incapacitated. But on appeal, that decision was reversed. The issue, the appeals court said, was not whether the worker was incapacitated, but whether he could perform his job at the time. This ruling suggests that whenever an employee needs to seek treatment that will require him or her to be away from work, FMLA leave can be utilized.

In another case, a court ruled that a worker with a minor stomach ulcer could have FMLA leave. The employer had argued that FMLA regulations specifically state that the law does not cover ulcers. But the court said the issue was whether the employee went to her doctor and missed more than three days of work on doctor’s orders. Just the fact that the worker missed four days of work and saw her doctor twice during that time justified FMLA leave, the court said. This ruling is in accord with the federal Department of Labor’s position that the most important test of FMLA is whether the definition of a serious health condition has been satisfied — the actual condition is less important.

Understanding the definition of a serious health condition is absolutely necessary to avoid potential litigation as a result of denial of FMLA leave. ■



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