

Workplace News

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Who's boss here, anyway?



Let managers manage, especially when staff personalities clash

by Richard Hart
and Joe Moore

You're a manager, and you're going about your business of making sure people fulfill the technical aspects of their job descriptions. Lately, though, you find the "soft stuff" taking up a good part of your days. Your staffs aren't getting along with one another. Tempers are flaring. Productivity is suffering. When this happens, you're never quite sure to what degree you're supposed to intervene.

Conflict management consultants hear it all the time:

"My team will simply look at me like I'm nitpicking if I start to make a big deal of this stuff," complained one supervisor at a resource-processing company based in North America.

"The truth is, there is little I believe I can do about the ways that people treat each other, short of harassment or violence," said another. "That's certainly the way that the union and the workers see it."

A third chimed in, "And what happens if people simply ignore me after I raise the issue with them? Because I have no effective powers to back up my position regarding people's conduct towards each other, I'll simply end up with egg on my face, and lose even more authority in their eyes!"

Treating employees fairly is one thing, but allowing highly unprofessional behaviour, such as openly disrespectful interactions involving your staff and suppliers, contractors or

others, is quite another. Company operations will suffer when relationships break down and managers don't take charge.

Many of the managers and supervisors we talk to admit they may be contributing to the problem. Here are some common pitfalls that undermine a manager's authority:

- Failing to recognize and actively address problem behaviours in a timely and effective manner.
- Treating people differently with respect to opportunities for overtime, time off, leaves of absence, and other benefits.
- Cutting some people more slack than others for mistakes.
- Gossiping and tolerating gossip.

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- Undermining other supervisors and managers in front of workers.
- Adopting an authoritarian supervisory or management style.
- Failing to enforce existing rules.
- Failing to apply existing rules equally and consistently.
- Not making expectations clear.
- Communicating disrespectfully.
- Not taking people's perspectives and situations into account when making decisions.
- Not keeping people informed about decisions that affect them.

Few tasks are as inherently stressful - or as critically important - as that of managing the way that people deal with each other in the workplace. Some experts say this is the key function of a manager or supervisor, since no business will function if people are unable to communicate and work with each other.

Yet few organizations properly equip their managers and supervisors with the training, tools and direction to most effectively manage work relationships. Many actually put up roadblocks that make effective relationship management a far greater challenge than it has to be.

INADEQUATE JOB DESCRIPTIONS

Supervisors and managers are often unclear about whether relationship management is part of their job description, and the staff's job descriptions, or to what extent.

Sure, supervisors and managers are responsible for making people accountable for productivity, ensuring that they perform the technical aspects of their duties to expected standards. But all too often organizations neglect to emphasize that working together respectfully and effectively are required elements of job performance for the entire workplace.

A RELIANCE ON DISCIPLINE

Supervisors and managers who rely on disciplinary measures for both their authority and their response options end up seeing the world exclusively through the discipline lens: where no behaviour is worthy of a response unless it clearly violates a specified provision in a law, regulation, policy, collective agreement or other written prohibition.

Such an approach disempowers supervisors and managers. It naturally fosters a very literal and legalistic analysis of behaviour and creates huge gaps in management and supervision.

The manager ends up tolerating incidents of hostile teasing, social exclusion, as long as behaviour stops short of clear harassment, violence or similar prohibited behaviours.

Disempowered supervisors and managers often respond to complaints of low-end behaviour by therefore minimizing, trivializing and dismissing them. The attitude they adopt falls along the lines of "You must be overly sensitive for whining over things I have no power to do anything about."

LACK OF LEADERSHIP FROM THE TOP

As the saying goes, manure settles at the bottom of the trough. From our experience, nothing is guaranteed to create more resentment, resistance, and outright hostility than for managers and supervisors to raise "respectful workplace" issues when workers feel that those very leaders treat them disrespectfully.

Internationally renowned management consultant and author, David Maister, is emphatic in his view that organizations are headed for trouble when they fail to appreciate the impact of managers' and supervisors' daily behaviour on the workplace culture.

"It may be blindingly obvious," says Maister, "but my research findings demonstrate that announcing that you are committed to something and then not following through is not neutral. In effect, it actually hurts you... You lose your credibility. You lose your authority."

Maister adds that, ultimately, it is much more important for managers and supervisors to act in accordance with the values and vision they espouse than it is to set those values out on paper.

INADEQUATE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

The engineering department of a municipal government was afflicted with an apparently unabating stream of grievances and harassment complaints made by workers against each other, their supervisors and their managers.

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A quick review of individual grievances and complaints was enough to establish that the managers had missed many opportunities for early intervention. It was also apparent to us that those individuals sorely lacked some essential conflict resolution and problem solving skills. "The workers here simply won't listen to me when I tell them how to behave," was the constant theme in discussions at the leadership level.

Managers can learn basic, relationship management skills such as active listening, assertiveness, paraphrasing and reflecting. These go hand-in-hand with the corporate values of respect, transparency, compassion, and empathy; More advanced skills such as conflict analysis, coaching and mediation allow managers to enhance the social capacities of their teams.

People aren't necessarily born with these skills. Getting appropriate training is, from the perspective of relationship management, a necessity for anyone in a management position.

"I feel sorry for the supervisors," we are often told by lower level employees, "they just don't have the skills they need to deal with people."

LACK OF POLICIES, PROCEDURES AND SYSTEMS

The senior manager of a conflict plagued media firm confided, "If we can't even commit to spending the time and effort in putting this down on paper as policy statements, how are we ever going to organize ourselves to do the hard stuff like putting systems and procedures in place to

actually resolve conflicts as they arise?"

And without established, flexible processes designed to meet an organization's specific needs; there is little chance of dealing with relationship problems, except on an ad hoc basis. Making important procedural decisions in the midst of the crisis is a recipe for disaster.

UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Some supervisors and managers place unrealistic expectations on themselves regarding their own ability and obligation to avoid conflict and bad feelings in the workplace.

"I feel trapped by this situation," one supervisor confessed while discussing chronic behavioral problems of one production line worker when dealing with certain contractors. "I want to deal with the situation, but I know that he is suffering from marriage problems right now, his kid is in rehab, and I kind of suspect he is dealing with some real psychological issues. It somehow doesn't seem appropriate to start dumping this on him, too."

"I'm stuck," a manager in a different workplace once told us in respect to a similar situation. "I know that if I take disciplinary action, this person will get really upset and run to my boss."

A false belief that it is (or should be) possible to deal with complex situations without upsetting anyone can be paralyzing for a manager. Supervisors and managers are hired to make difficult decisions every day that affect a variety of people. Professionalism and

competence demand that those decisions not be made with unnecessary haste, or without due consideration of all relevant factors, including people's feelings, where appropriate.

Collaboration has many benefits, which should not be overlooked whenever the option is available. But leaders must lead, and circumstances will always arise that require authoritative (as opposed to authoritarian) decision-making.

Organizations have to support supervisors and managers in making the difficult decisions, and in doing so wisely. They have to show those individuals, and the organization as a whole, that they are highly valued members of the workforce who perform an essential function in managing workplace relationships. They have to give those individuals the guidance, training and tools to fulfill their roles. And they have to give them the room to do their jobs, make mistakes, and learn.

Richard Hart and Joe Moore are both Conflict Management Specialists with ProActive ReSolutions. Inc., who assist organizations internationally in dealing with Workplace conflict and violence.

Hart is a former lawyer, mediator and arbitrator currently based in Canada.

Moore, based in Australia, has extensive experience in adult training and business management, and was Executive General Manager of Australian Business Limited prior to joining ProActive ReSolutions Inc.