Give Them A Hand:
Supporting Supervisors and Managers in the Management of Workplace Relationships

By Richard Hart and Joe Moore

What do you do in the face of ongoing feuds between co-workers in your team? Testy communications between the sales staff you oversee and their customers? Openly disrespectful interactions involving your staff and suppliers, contractors or others?

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 actually proclaim that 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 fulfill their relationship management mandate. Many actually put up roadblocks that impede effective relationship management. When this happens, supervisors and managers inevitably fall short of their true professional potentials, to the detriment of the whole workplace.

Falling Short

Recently, a group of front line managers and supervisors employed at the New South Wales branch of a large Australian-based manufacturing firm met for a training session. When the facilitator asked for examples of difficult situations they typically encounter, one of the production floor supervisors gave this response:

> *Our procedures require forklift drivers to take their machines to the maintenance department their batteries require changing; a maintenance worker is to switch the old battery for a new one. It's not a big deal — it should all run pretty smoothly. But there is this one guy in maintenance that screws it all up. He's big, intimidating and appears to be permanently angry with everyone. The drivers end up coming to me all the time to arrange their battery changes, because this guy swears and yells at them regularly. I can't get my work done when he is on shift, because I end up spending half my time running back and forth from the maintenance department making sure that the batteries are changed!*

Further questioning from the facilitator reveals that the maintenance worker has been employed by the company for 10 years, and that no one has ever specifically challenged him about the way he deals with other people.

The facility's office manager offered up another example for consideration:

> *Overall things go pretty well in the office, but there are a couple of people who don't seem to get along. Often times it seems like they just sort of tolerate each*

other. Then some little thing will flare up into a big issue, and suddenly the tension in the air is so thick you can cut it with a knife: people aren't talking to each other, they're not looking at each other, they're not passing each other information so that the work can get done. This will go on for a couple of days, and then everything settles down again. I find it really hard to deal with. And it's not just me — I know that I've lost a couple of office clerks just because of the tension in the place.

As the facilitator led an exploration of this example, it came to light that the problems had been continuing for the last several years, and had coincided with an increase in rates of absenteeism and in identifiable work errors.

Once described in these terms, it took little for participants in the training session to recognize that situations they had identified were creating real problems for the individuals involved and the organization as a whole. Authoritative action was needed to deal with intimidation and other problematic behaviours of certain individuals.

More importantly, however, the supervisors and managers participating in the session realized that they themselves had contributed to these difficult situations by failing to recognize and actively address problem behaviours in a timely and effective manner.

At this point, the participants were quickly able to move on to brainstorming strategies and action plans for dealing with the specific challenges they had raised during the session.

Let Me Count the Ways

Of course, there are many other ways in which we can fall short as relationship managers in the workplace. Here is a partial list of common complaints about supervisors and managers that typically undermine their authority:

- Treating people differently by 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.

- Undermining other supervisors and managers in front of workers.

- Adopting 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 in making decisions.

- Not keeping people informed about decisions that affect them.

All this begs the question, "Why?" Why do supervisors and managers so often fail at effective relationship management?

Inadequate Job Descriptions

One reason is that a lot of time supervisors and managers are unclear as to the extent to which relationship management is part of the workplace's job descriptions – their own, and others.

Sure, we all know that 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.

Want proof? Just consider how few organizations include aspects of relationship management in regular, meaningful job performance appraisals for all employees, from executive management on down.

And if the organization does explicitly not place responsibility for effective relationship management on all employees, it certainly makes it difficult for managers and supervisors to raise and address such issues. "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. "It's simply not on their radar as part of their job."

"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!"

In the context of perceptions such as this, is it any wonder that it seems so much easier for supervisors and managers to simply focus on demanding that people fulfill the technical aspects of their job descriptions, leaving the "soft stuff" out of the daily conversations with their teams?

The Discipline Lens

"I went to my supervisor about the ongoing jokes that [my co-worker] was making in front of everyone else about mistakes I had made in my work, but she just told me that because this wasn't harassment under the wording of our policy, there was nothing she could do about it and that I had to just grow up and learn to take it," related one highly distressed employee, who was caught up in a long-standing workplace dispute in Canada. "She knows what's going on, and

sees how uncomfortable the situation is making me and everyone else in the office, but she just ignores it."

By the time that management initiated a workplace intervention in this case, the trivialized behaviours had led to the "target" taking extended stress leave on two separate occasions, and had driven her to meet with a lawyer regarding a possible "hostile workplace" action against the employer.

Supervisors and managers who are overly reliant on discipline mechanisms for both their authority and their response options end up seeing the world exclusively through the discipline lens: 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. This is because the only response option seen as available is discipline, and the opportunities to exercise such options are often constrained to specific circumstances.

Such an approach disempowers supervisors and managers. It naturally fosters a very literal and legalistic analysis of behaviour. It creates huge "supervision/management gaps" through which certain individuals in the workplace can and will drive a truck. Incidents of hostile "joking", teasing, social exclusion, and such are tolerated 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. An organization that tolerates bullying, intimidation, disrespectful communications and other forms of problematic behaviour on the part of managers and supervisors inevitably finds itself dealing with problem behaviours from personnel at all levels.

In fact, 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.

"How can they dare talk about 'respect in the workplace' when all they treat us the way that they do?" ranted a worker in the course of a workplace intervention that took place earlier this year. "It's everything – the dismissivness, the contemptuousness, the rudeness. This company is so two-faced it makes me sick," agreed another.

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. His studies of workplaces around the world have led him to conclude that organizations create the potential for real harm

when they reflexively trot out corporate values while tolerating contradictory behaviours on the part of managers and supervisors.

"Just declaring that you are going to eat less and exercise more accomplishes literally zero," says Maister. "It may be blindingly obvious, 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. People watch you, and say, 'OK, I know that I should not listen to what he says, as he doesn't follow his own rules – they mean nothing.' They stop listening to you. You lose your credibility. You lose your authority."

Maister emphasizes the critical role of front line managers in defining the employee's experience of the workplace and ultimately the financial success of the organization. In his book, Practice What You Preach, he uses statistical data to support the conclusion that employee perceptions of managers' behaviour factors hugely into workplace attitudes of employees.

The importance of behaviour on the part of managers and supervisors appears to far outweigh the significance of stated values and written policies in terms of affecting employee attitudes and, ultimately, organizational performance. Maister concludes 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 one 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. A quick review of individual grievances and complaints was sufficient to establish the existence of many missed opportunities for early intervention by workplace leaders that could have paid off handsomely in many ways. Yet it was equally apparent from speaking with those individuals that they 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.

An organization's failure to include relationship management as part of its job descriptions for supervisors and managers can lead to difficulties in addressing weaknesses in specific relationship management skills. Basic skills such as active listening, assertiveness, paraphrasing and reflecting are important in actualizing typical corporate values such as respect, transparency, compassion, and empathy. More advanced skills such as conflict analysis, coaching and mediation permit supervisors and managers to systematically enhance the social capacities of their teams.

These are not skills we are born with. But we can acquire them through appropriate training if given the opportunity. The granting of those opportunities to supervisors and managers is not a luxury — it is, from the perspective of relationship management, a necessity.

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

Lack of Policies, Procedures and Systems

Clear policies regarding the management of workplace relationships are important in a number of respects. Not only do they make clear the organization's commitment (in principle, at least) of specific values and ideals, they also provide guidance to personnel at all levels in terms of base-line expectations. It is often amazing how many organizations that are mired in workplace conflicts, expending precious resources trying to identify causes and cures, fail to understand the importance of basic policies.

"If we can't even commit to spending the time and effort in putting this down on paper as policy statements," confided the senior manager of a conflict-plagues media firm, "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 that relationship problems will be dealt other than on an ad hoc basis, with important procedural decisions being made in the midst of the crisis — a recipe for disaster in the making.

Unrealistic Expectations

Unrealistic expectations that supervisors and managers place on themselves regarding their own ability and obligation to avoid conflict and bad feelings in the workplace can cause real problems with respect to effective relationship management.

"I feel trapped by this situation," one supervisor confessed while discussing chronic behavioural 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 the disciplinary actions called for, this person will get really upset and will run to my boss. Then my boss will come down on me like a ton of bricks because of the relationship the two of them have from working together years ago."

The growing awareness of the importance of "people issues" in the workplace may lead to problems in prioritizing concerns in a given situation. A false belief that it is (or should be) should be possible to deal with very complex situations involving diverse perspectives and personalities without causing fear or upset to anyone can be paralyzing.

Supervisors and managers are hired to make difficult decisions every day that affect a variety of people. Professionalism and competence demand that those decisions must 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 there will always arise

circumstances that require the exercise of authoritative (as opposed to authoritarian) decision-making.

The Point of it All

The point of relationship management is not that actions should be avoided it they will cause people distress. It is that the distress has to be dealt with by prevention, wherever reasonably possible, and by appropriate remedial action where prevention is not possible.

For this to happen, 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.

So here's the question of the day: Is your organization doing enough to support your supervisors and managers in dealing with workplace relationships?

Do We Support Our Supervisors and Managers in managing workplace relationships? A Preliminary Checklist					
Item	**Rating**				
	1 No! **Definitely not**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5 Yes!** **Absolutely**
We provide Supervisors and Managers with specific education programs about					
• How to build trust-based relationships					
• Our expectations about acceptable work behaviour					
• Our workplace policies and procedures					
• The unwritten rules and expectations about work behaviour					
• How to challenge inappropriate work behaviour					
• How to respond to abusive behaviour at work					

• How to respond to, document and report incidents of violence or inappropriate work behaviour				
• How to resolve conflicts and disputes				
• How to conduct, participate in and follow up meetings with colleagues, clients and suppliers				

We have put in place workplace systems, policies and procedures that

• Cover all employment law requirements				
• Have been communicated to all employees				
• Include standards against which the conduct of all employees may be evaluated				
• Provide a legal basis for imposing discipline, suspension or termination				
• Provide for a full range of flexible, complaint resolution options				

Supervisors and Managers are coached, supported and reviewed with respect to

• Conducting performance appraisals at regular intervals throughout the year				
• Building teams of engaged employees				
• Managing workplace relationships				
• Implementing action plans based on annual workforce climate or attitude surveys				

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