

THE VISIBLE SUPERVISOR

To provide true leadership to the work group, the supervisor must be seen as an integral part of the work unit and must in fact be such a part of the work unit. To get things done effectively through employees, as supervisor you should: (1) be visible and available, spending most of your time where you are really needed; (2) show concern for the employees' problems; (3) maintain a true open-door attitude so that your employees can always reach you when they need you; and (4) rely on immediate feedback to let all of your employees know exactly where they stand. Much of true leadership is provided by visible example, and the more visible you are to your employees, the greater the chance of your gaining their acceptance.

LEADING BY DEFAULT

The supervisor who is frequently neither visible nor available is often put in a position of "leading" by default. When the supervisor cannot be found or does not act, different employees will proceed—or not proceed, as the case may be—in different ways. In the absence of direction some employees will bite the bullet and use their own best judgment in taking action. Some, however, will do nothing and allow events to follow their normal course, which may lead just as easily to disaster as to inconsequential results.

The majority of defaults occur because allowing them is the supervisor's path of least resistance. Because one soon discovers that default is frequently neutral and occasionally even helpful, there often develops a temptation to just let things go until they resolve themselves. Given the crush of activities many supervisors are regularly drawn into, it can be extremely tempting to sometimes let events follow their own course.

However, default management will not long be seen as representative of real leadership. Your employees should, of course, be encouraged to work independently as much as reasonable under the circumstances, but it is important for them to know that you are readily available when needed and that you will not default on them.

TRUE LEADERSHIP

It has already been mentioned that in the last analysis the only factor that truly defines a leader is the acceptance of that person's leadership by the followers. It has been further suggested that a style that leans toward participative leadership is more likely to be acceptable by the majority of today's workers than a style that leans toward autocratic behavior. However, no single pattern of leadership behavior is appropriate to all situations at all times. If your employees are largely healthcare professionals and paraprofessionals you may lean toward participative leadership most of the time. However, there still may be times when the situation calls for autocratic behavior—you need to be able to make a decision, issue an order, and expect results. Also, there may be times when bureaucratic behavior in the form of strict interpretation and application of the rules and regulations may be required. True leadership is flexible; it responds to both individual and organizational needs and is shaped to fit the needs of the moment.

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Concerning the case presented at the start of this chapter, much time could be expended exploring possible reasons for the resistance of the manager of engineering and maintenance. Suffice it to say that this manager now has a superior where no superior previously existed, and that this superior and the long-time manager are in constant conflict. Unfortunately, the three first-line supervisors and their staffs are adversely affected by the conflict between their managers.

A suggestion: The next time the director bypasses the manager and delivers an important instruction to the supervisors, the supervisors should stop the director, tell him what they have been experiencing, and ask for a joint meeting of the director, the manager, and the three of them. The issue of conflicting instructions, and especially of one manager's reversal of another manager's instructions, if that has indeed been happening, needs to be out in the open in front of all concerned. As long as the supervisors are bounced from director to manager and back again, they remain victims of a tug-of-war between two higher-ups.

If not blessed with an immediate meeting to iron out differences, the supervisors are left in a position of having to decide whom to obey. In the absence of any other assistance, they are probably better off paying more attention to the director, the higher of the higher-ups, than to the manager, simply because of position in the chain of command.

If every effort to correct the situation by dealing directly and jointly with manager and director is made and conditions fail to change, the supervisors might consider following the chain of command upward and requesting a meeting with the person to whom the director reports. This is of course a frequently risky step, and it is one that should never be taken without first making every reasonable effort to solve the problem at the level at which it occurs. The primary responsibility for the existence of this problem lies with the director. The manager is, after all, the director's subordinate. Properly and thoroughly advised of what is occurring, the director may well address the problem before it has to go further.

COMMUNICATING WITH EMPLOYEES: LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

On any given day the largest part of a supervisor's job is likely to consist of interpersonal contact with his or her direct-reporting employees. In recognition of the supervisor's constant contact with employees to get things accomplished through them, the remainder of this chapter concentrates on face-to-face communication specifically within the context of the supervisor-employee relationship.

For the sake of simplicity we might describe communication as "the transfer of meaning." In an organizational sense, communication involves the transmission of information and instructions from person to person in such a way as to accomplish mutual understanding on the part of both the sender and the receiver of every message. The goal of communication is always a complete and accurate transfer of meaning resulting in assurance that the understanding of the person who received the message is identical to that of the person who originated the message.

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Regarding the supervisor-employee relationship, recognize that there is no single absolutely "correct" way of dealing with employees. Your employees are different from each other, and they are all different from you. What works well in your relationship with one may not work at all in your relationship with another. In your relations with your employees there may be fully as many "correct" ways of dealing with employees as you have employees.

An effective relationship with each employee is not something that can simply be established and assumed to exist forever. No such relationship between two people is ever completely "established"; it must be constantly nurtured and conscientiously maintained if it is to serve appropriately the needs of the people involved and the organization.

Although interpersonal relations constitute a large part of the supervisor's job, it is not always easy to concentrate on people and their problems and needs. There are hidden pressures that encourage a focus on things rather than people; after all, things cannot hurt, disappoint, frustrate, influence, disagree, or misunderstand. There is a measure of safety and security in things. However, the supervisor must learn to overcome the tendency to seek reduced vulnerability and look in the direction of the job's true demands.

EMPATHY AS AN ASSET

The effective supervisor is called on to acquire and practice empathy—the capacity to put oneself in another's place and respond accordingly. Not many people are naturally attuned to the feelings and needs of those around them, but empathic sensitivity can be developed through conscious effort. Although we tend to take our communication capacity for granted, we are not really very good communicators by nature. We can, however, learn to communicate effectively. To do so we first need to appreciate the difficulties inherent in human communication, and we need to recognize one critical fault in ourselves: *the tendency to believe that we are better communicators than we in fact really are.*

We use our primary tools of communication, words, to express meaning; yet a tremendous gap exists between the thoughts or feelings we experience inside and the words we use to direct them toward another person. Likewise, a similar large gap exists between the words taken in by the other person and the thoughts or feelings experienced as a result of those words. Rarely is it possible, except in the most inconsequential situations, truly to transfer meaning to another person in every precise dimension in which it was experienced.

We are all unique. Countless factors and influences in your upbringing, background, education, and life experience make you the unique person you are. Because of our differences, we relate to the world in our own particular ways. Individual experiences are never identical, and our uniqueness affects our ability to communicate with each other. Whenever we communicate with others we are attempting to describe what has happened within us as a result of experiences coming from outside of us. As long as each of us can sense with only our own minds the process will remain imperfect. We have no control over the mind of another; rather than directly transferring a thought or feeling, the best we can do is put it into words and hope those words create a similar thought or feeling in someone else.

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