

RETURN TO "ONE BOSS TOO MANY"

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, 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.

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 consciously 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 similarly 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.

Interpersonal communication frequently fails because of the imperfections in the process. Too often communication fails simply because we assume the person we are talking with knows and understands what we happen to be talking about—after all, *we* know what we are talking about. Also, the process is fully as susceptible to failure when viewed from the other side; we assume we know what the other person means without taking steps to make certain this is so. The greatest number of communication failures probably occurs in simple interchanges between people: You say something to another person and the two of you part, each with a meaning in mind. You believe you have been understood, and the other person believes he or she understands; yet you have parted with completely different meanings in mind.

DEVELOPING MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Every supervisor should strive to develop a personal approach to establishing and maintaining honest two-way communication in all person-to-person contacts. A sound approach does not involve slogans, catchphrases, or other special language or unique terminology that has to be learned. It involves only common-sense rules and suggestions. There are no formulaic approaches; rather, our interest most appropriately resides in the simple fundamentals of good interpersonal communication that, when fully absorbed through faithful practice, essentially become automatic.

Communication Perspective

When we feel inclined to complain about the lack of real communication in the organization, we are surely not speaking of ourselves. Rather, we are talking about all other people who we believe should be keeping us advised of what we want to know. When we say this or something similar we feel “loopy”—we have been cut out of the loop and feel like we have been denied information. It usually does not occur to us that we ourselves are a significant part of the problem. As noted in the foregoing sections, individually we all tend to think we are better communicators than we really are. This statement applies to everyone, especially those who enter communication believing they are very good at it.

When we assume a communications expertise we do not possess we behave in a manner that prevents us from communicating as effectively as we are otherwise capable of doing. It is necessary to remain constantly aware of this “expertise assumption” and its effects; this awareness will encourage us to reach out in communication rather than waiting for everything to flow toward us.

To improve communication within the organization and increase the effectiveness of every interpersonal contact, do not presume to tell others what to do. Rather, work on yourself, recognizing that you can always improve your own communications skills and you can always take steps to make whatever interchange you are involved in more productive. It is not readily possible for you to change others’ behavior, but you can always do something about your own behavior—and how you behave with others largely determines your own results.