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Interaction Skills and the Modern Supervisor

The responsibilities of modern supervisors have been expanded to include planning, operating and controlling the production and personnel functions of their departments. Supervisors also have a strong voice in decision-making, job design, job analysis, and quality control among their own staff. Personnel responsibilities have been extended to include training, counseling and managing the development of workers. Supervisors perform all these functions within an organizational, economic and social context. Regardless, however, of the supervisor's tasks, organizational skills and awareness of the interrelationships of human, organizational and social factors, unless he is able to *model* and utilize sophisticated communication skills when interacting with his staff, he is likely to be inefficient in maintaining optimum production and service. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to discuss the application of the general principles of communication to the specific context of employee supervision in libraries.

PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNICATION

Below are three specific principles and suggestions based on behavioral science data for improving supervisory communication. However, it is not enough simply to know and appreciate communication principles; they must be translated into appropriate behavior. Each of us is different, and there are no perfect blueprints for the ideal communication style. Supervisors must decide how to incorporate the principles in a way that is comfortable for them, taking into consideration such variables as the personalities of their subordinates, the particular organiza-

tional climate of their library, and individual personality. The reader should be cautioned further that one does not become an "expert" human relations specialist instantly, and that some dissatisfaction in early attempts to change communication behavior should be expected. Old habits are hard to change, but if one is willing to make a conscientious effort to increase communication competence, he will eventually succeed.

Principle 1

Meanings are in people — not in words. Words are merely symbols. No matter what or how something is said, no one derives exactly the same meaning the speaker intended from the words used. There are several implications here for supervisors. For instance, when passing instructions downward to the subordinate, it is unwise for the supervisor simply to ask if the message has been understood. More than likely the recipient will respond positively. It may be that he doesn't want to appear stupid in the boss's eyes, or he may honestly believe he has fully understood the message. In any case, requesting the other to paraphrase important instructions is a far more efficient way to verify that both persons understand each other. One will learn, however, that most people go through life believing they are communicating fully when, in fact, the amount of accurate transmission is closer to 50 or 60 percent.

A second implication involves upward communication, that is, messages sent from subordinates to the supervisor. The behavioral literature refers to this phenomenon as the "good news barrier to communication." Apparently, no one wants to bring "bad" news to the boss; consequently, information passed upward is often slanted positively. Supervisors need to compensate for this by rechecking information, seeking verification from a variety of sources, and creating a climate that permits their subordinates to be candid without fear of rejection, insult or humiliation. Supervisors ultimately are decision-makers, and decision-makers need *accurate* information — both good and bad. A staff that is afraid to reveal its true insights and feelings will hamper the quality of the supervisor's decisions.

Principle 2

Worker satisfaction, and ultimately production and services, are affected considerably by the social climate that exists among the staff, between the staff and supervisor, and between one department's staff and another's. Conflict within a work group is inevitable. The enlightened supervisor will expect it, prepare for it, and use it to obtain greater awareness of the various aspects of the problem at hand. Studies in group dynamics indicate that the greater the variety of perspectives in a group, the greater is that group's potential for *synergy*, that is, group decisions

that are qualitatively superior to those of the most resourceful group member working alone. In other words, group conflict and heterogeneity are actually an asset to a supervisor skilled in group dynamics, the techniques of participative decision-making, and the means of achieving group consensus. Jay Hall and Irving L. Janis have written outstanding articles on the subject which include practical suggestions.¹

Principle 3

When conflict is confronted and dealt with, the supervisor can anticipate an increase in hostility and tension; however, this anxiety is ordinarily short-lived and is followed by long-term harmony. In work groups, social concerns take precedence over task concerns. Individuals are unable to work optimally when experiencing some social concern such as feelings of humiliation, hurt, anger or frustration. Unless the social concern is perceived by the supervisor and dealt with, production and services are likely to suffer. It takes a supervisor with well-developed communication skills to handle this situation. Those who have such abilities are generally the most successful, representing departments with records of high production, superior service and *esprit de corps*. Confronting conflict is best done through the creation of a supportive climate.

Such a climate is one in which individuals feel comfortable expressing themselves openly, and in which opposing views are heard without defensiveness. Nonsupportive climates create defensiveness and are inefficient. Once an individual's defenses are aroused, he is no longer able to listen rationally, but will instead concentrate on his own feelings of anger, revenge, rejection and humiliation.

CREATING A SUPPORTIVE CLIMATE

The discussion which follows describes some behavioral techniques, culled from the communication literature, that have proven to be essential for creating a supportive climate. As many of them as possible should be employed simultaneously whenever the supervisor needs to discuss with a subordinate a topic likely to create tension and anxiety.

1. The supervisor should describe his perceptions of the situation rather than evaluate the person involved. For example, he might say to the evening librarian in the children's room, "Circulation has gone down 25 percent during the evening hours over the last three weeks." While this comment might make the evening librarian tense, it would probably be less threatening than if he had said, "You people are goofing off at night. You are all lazy goldbricks." By describing only objective facts, without making personal evaluations or engaging in name-calling, the other is allowed to respond to the objective facts. When a

person believes the criticism is against him personally, his natural instinct is to become defensive and fight back.

2. The problem-oriented supervisor is more likely to reduce a subordinate's defensiveness than one who is controlling and manipulative. For example, the former might say, "There seems to be a problem during the evening. What can be done to raise circulation?" A manipulative supervisor, for example, might begin with a series of questions for which he already had the answers, merely trying to get the staff to acknowledge his perspective: "Isn't it true that last month's circulation was 25 percent higher? Isn't it true that patrons have complained about the rudeness of the staff?" The primary responsibility of the supervisor is to increase production and quality of service, neither of which is ordinarily aided through reprimand or punishment.
3. A supportive climate is fostered when the supervisor is empathic in dealing with a staff member, rather than unfeeling and disinterested in the other's perceptions of the situation. In behavioral terms, *empathy* is more than just "putting oneself in the other's shoes." Rather, it is making an effort to appreciate the other's perspective and then *verbally* sharing his concern. Instead of silently suspecting that a subordinate is anxious and nervous about some problem, the supervisor might ask him if this is so. The act of verbalizing the empathic concern is likely to cause the other to infer interest and warmth on the supervisor's part, which in turn causes him to want to continue communicating. Open channels of communication which encourage subordinates to reveal their concerns to the supervisor are the primary ingredient of a healthy work environment.

Good listening skills are directly related to empathizing. Before one can make a sincere effort to appreciate the problems of another, he has to listen, not only to the content, but to the underlying feelings. Supervisors who know how to listen have learned that once a subordinate has had an opportunity to clear his own mental agenda, he is much more receptive to the suggestions of a supervisor. He can sit back and listen, for now he knows the "boss" has heard his side and appreciates his position and rationale.

4. The supportive climate is maintained when the subordinate perceives no intent on the part of the supervisor to emphasize relative rank and status. Each person knows who is in the position to reward and punish, but when supervisors underscore their rank, they tend to put subordinates on the defensive.

In each of these guidelines, the accompanying nonverbal communication is as important as the verbal. Recent studies indicate that

approximately 65-75 percent of the meaning abstracted from communication originates from nonverbals.² When the verbal and the nonverbal do not support one another, the listener tends to trust his interpretation of the nonverbal. If one is verbally making an effort to paraphrase another and to empathize, but at the same time is looking at his watch or nervously fingering his telephone or car keys, the other will surely decide that the speaker would rather be doing something else.

With regard to the emphasis on relative status, nonverbals are particularly influential. Supervisors who expect employees to stand while they sit, who plan their offices so that their superior rank is evident in trophies or parchment, or who arrange special barriers around themselves to keep others from getting too close are likely to be fostering a defensive climate within their work group.

5. In maintaining a supportive climate, the supervisor must be careful to avoid making judgments prior to hearing all sides of an issue. Perhaps the four most important words a supervisor can use when confronting a subordinate with a problem are: I may be wrong. When the supervisor lets a subordinate know that he recognizes the fact that reality may be structured differently according to one's perspective, and that he is willing to withhold judgment until all views have been considered, that supervisor will be securing a supportive climate. If the subordinate suspects that the supervisor has a preconceived notion of the "true" facts, and that he alone will decide what is "right," the subordinate will probably accommodate by saying "all the right things," but never revealing his true concerns, anxieties or questions.

Rarely will anyone change his mind simply by being asked to, told to or argued with. A person is not likely to see a situation differently as long as he feels threatened and in need of defending himself. Supervisors need to control their own ego-building desire to get the upper hand, to point out weaknesses in another person's point of view. Weaknesses — when they are important — need to be revealed; however, this can be done in a way that leaves the other person's ego intact. Every opportunity must be taken to make the other person feel respected and valued.

REFERENCES

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2. Knapp, Mark L. *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction*. New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972; and Mehrabian, Albert. *Silent Messages*. Belmont, Calif., Wadsworth Publishing, 1971.