Questions & Answers

Q. What should I measure to know if my work unit is characterized as having “good communication?” I would like to gauge the quality of communication and then respond accordingly, if needed.

A. A work unit characterized by good communication will typically demonstrate strong employee engagement, strong teams with high morale, and the ability to witness a competitive spirit among a productive group of people. One or more of these things is usually adversely affected when internal communication suffers. Delving deeper, the most commonly cited employee complaints linked to problematic communication are information flow between management and line staff, and lack of recognition and praise for employees. When you have a troubled employee or an employee who is not performing to expected standards, always analyze at least those couple of factors mentioned above and the role they might play in your approach to correcting performance. This is because behavioral manifestations of personal problems are often influenced or exacerbated by issues in the work environment, also referred to as corporate climate.

Q. We have some pretty uncivil people in our workplace. I’m not talking about bullying, but instead nasty notes, silent treatments, withholding information, or not inviting someone to lunch. What can supervisors do? Perhaps I am just oversensitive and shouldn’t care.

A. Lost productivity, diminished employee loyalty, and turnover costs all stem from incivility in the workplace. Workplace incivility often stems from the absence of visible, proactive leadership and regular communication. If you have characteristically been visibly absent or you seldom meet to discuss team issues, start doing so. You may see some of these behaviors instantly stop. Employees take their cues from you on how to speak, behave, and engage with others. They notice your attitude, demeanor, personality, disposition, and how you treat others. All of these things play a role in influencing their behavior. You possess a natural form of power that comes from the right to be in charge, make decisions, and enforce standards. This is wonderful leverage for creating a positive work environment. Incivility is motivated by the desire to exert power over another, demonstrate frustration, or attain something desired. Tell employees you want a more civil workplace and expect it to happen. You will be surprised at how fast things can turn around.

Q. Can you recommend a quick conflict resolution strategy that supervisors can use? Is there such a “formula” – an A, B, C approach? Then, if that doesn’t work, we can refer to the EAP.

A. There are thousands of books on conflict resolution, each with variations on the subject. This shows the difficulty in a cookie-cutter approach. However, where conflict resolution between two employees exists, changing the dynamic to elicit more cooperation between warring parties can help speed a resolution; for example, insistence by management that the conflict be resolved and having participants face some sort of penalty or consequence for failure to do so. Instantly the dynamic is one of cooperation, with the conflict itself, not the other party’s perceived unreasonable demands, the bigger problem. Managers who do not understand this simple dynamic may fall victim to playing the role of cajoler, attempting to wheedle and coax employees into cooperating. This mistake puts more focus on the solution than on the inappropriate behavior of employees, and years may then pass without a resolution.

Q. I often see references to the importance of “being yourself,” “being authentic,” and “being a real person” as a skill for supervisors. What does that actually mean? Does it mean being a certain way or making sure that you do not act in a certain way?

A. Being yourself, being genuine, being “real,” not pretending to be perfect, or learning how to be more available emotionally to employees all refer to the same thing: “authentic leadership.” This is a dynamic in supervision, the goal of which is to increase productivity of workers by establishing optimal relationships with them. The idea is to be professional but at the same time to balance this with approachability, friendliness, openness, and affability. The opposite of this is a supervisor who is physically and/or emotionally remote, detached, and mysterious to his or her employees. This balance is a learned skill. Supervisors vary widely in their ability to do it. Being authentic is not just being nonthreatening to employees but also being purposeful so the manager can elicit employees’ opening up to the supervisor so their strengths and weaknesses, personality, and working style can be better understood. This in turn allows the supervisor to help an employee maximize his or her potential. This improved relationship with the supervisor facilitates the workers also putting forth more effort.
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