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A healthy corporate culture

Supervisors need to be strong communicators

Question:

“I manage a team of three supervisors. We’ve been having some difficulty getting the employees in our department to work together. We’ve also had some ups and downs with other departments. Our charge from top management is to do more with less. We’re all feeling the pressure to step up the pace. I obviously want us to succeed but tensions are rising and I’m concerned. What’s your advice for moving things forward?”

It seems to me that you might have been focusing more on the technical aspects of the situation and less on the interpersonal. That might be the reason why there is friction.

Employees must be held accountable for the products or services they support (the what) as well as the processes (the how) they use. Relative to the situation you describe, they must also be held accountable for the partnership (the whom) aspects of work.

Remember your kindergarten report card? In addition to reporting your proficiency in using scissors, tying your shoes, reciting the alphabet, etc. there probably was a space for “works and plays well with others.” I’m not being sarcastic when I say that you need to have a similar report card for your employees. Supervisors and managers particularly need to be held accountable, because they model the way for the people they direct and lead.

To resolve your situation, I think you’re looking at a multi-step process involving three activities:

One-on-one discussions with

each of your supervisors.

The goal of your meetings is to help the person see how his/her behavior impacts others. Use representative observations to let him know that this isn’t one person’s opinion. Ask him to put himself in the other person’s shoes. Ask how it would be to be confronted with someone exhibiting

this kind of behavior. Share your view of the impact the behavior is having on the department and why it is important to change. Then, point out precisely what is expected in the future.

Convene a meeting with the supervisors and the employees.

This is not a venting session so much as it is an action planning session for how

to work together in the future. Identify what needs to be done in both the technical operating and the human operating systems. Identify how accountability will be established (e.g., monitoring progress, one-on-one feedback sessions, etc.). Don’t mince words, by the way. Point out what is and is not working in the way you see them collaborating and what you want to see change. Ask them to take ownership of their piece. Ask them to make a public commitment to take action to make the situation better. Put it in writing. Set a follow-up date and establish criteria by which progress will be gauged.

Convene meetings with other work areas.

Once you have put some steps in place

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to get your own house in order, take some time to reach out to the other work areas with whom you are interfacing. Convene a series of meetings in which you and your supervisors talk about the processes that are currently being pursued and what is working and what isn’t. Make sure to spend time talking about communication, problem solving, and decision-making processes as well as technical work pro-

cesses. Document the meetings and verify that there is common understanding. Use this as a basis for moving forward.

The point in all of this is to bring into better alignment the technical (i.e., hard) elements of the job with the interpersonal (i.e., soft) elements. You need to help your supervisors see that they each need to augment their technical capabilities with stronger interpersonal acumen. As we see time and time again, the best employees are those that not only are subject matter proficient but able to work effectively with their colleagues.

Technical proficiency is most germane to work at the grassroots level. Your supervisors need to be technically competent. Key roles in this regard have to do with producing, directing, and monitoring. Key competencies include working productively, fostering a productive work environment, managing time and stress, developing and communicating a vision, setting goals and objectives, designing and organizing work, managing information overload, analyzing core processes, and measuring performance and quality.

At the same time, your supervisors

need to be interpersonally adroit. Key roles here include mentoring, facilitating, and coordinating. Key competencies include understanding self and others, communicating effectively, developing employees, building teams, using participative decision making, managing conflict, managing projects, and managing across functions.

Interestingly, you just might find that by focusing on the softer side of work, some quick gains can be made with regard to productivity and output. The interpersonal aspect of work seems to be an elixir that adds that extra something that turns a work unit that is going through the motions to one that is standing and delivering.

Time and time again, organizational culture surveys reveal that people feel most productive when they work in environments that are positive and constructive, rather than negative and diminishing. See what you can do to move in that positive direction. ■

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