



Successful Coaching and Counseling by Supervisors: A Key to Employee Retention

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A veteran successful director of research and development once said to me, "If you can do a first-line supervisor's job, you can do my job." That's not exactly true, of course, but he was talking about the very difficult transition from being an individual contributor to being a leader of others. How well a supervisor manages this move is key to subordinate morale, productivity and retention.

Many supervisors never do figure out the difference, and they hang on to the skills and behaviors that got them there. As Peter Drucker, the management guru, has said, "Whatever you did to get the promotion is exactly what **not** to do in the new job." He always exaggerates for effect, but his point is clear. A new position requires a clear-eyed look at what is now needed, which is likely different from what worked in the last job. Certainly, a person builds on past skills, but a search for new requirements is critical to continued success.

Moving from being one of the troops to being a boss, a part of management, ("them!") is monumental. A supervisor can no longer do the job alone. He/she needs to accomplish goals through the work of others. For many leaders this is an intuitive, natural process which takes introspection and emotional and behavioral movement. For others it requires additional training, seminars and coaching to help make the transition.

A boss is no longer "one of the boys," no matter how collegial the atmosphere may be. A leader must evaluate the performance of subordinates, which has impact on salary treatment. A leader also has the necessary power of discipline, of reward and punishment, over behavior and productivity. If a new supervisor comes from a new group it makes for an easier transition because there are no personal relationships. I once spent some consulting hours walking around parking lots talking to a young supervisor in a research and development organization who had effectively been elevated by his peers. He was having a justifiably hard time learning how to be the boss of his friends. Fortunately, talent, hard work and mutual respect helped him survive some mistakes and self-doubts to the point where his group became known for its innovation, productivity and esprit.

Unfortunately, too many supervisors glory in administrative, hierarchical powers, not understanding that in this era of "free agency" the real task of the supervisor is not controlling employees but guiding and providing and motivating them to greater achievement and growth. The administrative part is fairly easy – policies, regulations, forms, deadlines, etc. The hard part is managing people to great performance. This takes coaching and counseling.

Coaching is pretty straightforward, stemming from a relationship that anyone who has been in a learning/mentoring relationship can understand. Sports, counting, good

teaching and wise parenting provide metaphors. A coach helps a person get better, stronger, more effective at the tasks at hand. This can happen through critique of performance, provision of skills training, exhortation to higher achievement and provision of rewards and sanctions.

Coaching is about performance. An effective coach tries to see things from both the project or work objective and from the subordinate's point of view and then marries these perspectives into helpful suggestions. As a wise person once said, "Helping is for the helper." It isn't a matter of how the coach/supervisor would do it. It's a matter of helping subordinates be more effective in their own way. There is usually more than one way to skin the cat. The supervisor's success is the aggregate success of the rest. This often requires the necessary but difficult subordination of one's ego to the needs of the project and its participants. It requires maturity and a sense of the "big picture."

Counseling is a more personal endeavor. It is harder because there are no clear answers. It requires the supervisor to stop and really listen to the work- and career-related concerns of the subordinate. A person struggling with his project or doubting her abilities needs more than exhortation or another training class. They need to be heard first before they will open themselves to support and new approaches. Even employees with family or financial issues need to be heard first before they can be passed along to appropriate company resources (e.g., employee assistance programs).

It is a trusted supervisor with whom employees will talk about career decisions within and without the company. A competent, confident supervisor knows that people will sometimes leave a group for good and personal reasons, hurting immediate productivity. Yet that same supervisor also knows that time invested in people pays off in the long run in motivation, productivity, dedication, loyalty – and retention. Counseling is not about charity or being a shrink. It's about helping people achieve their potential and mutually reveling in it. Ultimately, it's about group performance.

Research in employee retention about why people leave and why they stay points to the relationship with their supervisor as the number one variable. That is the person with whom they interact most frequently and the one who has the most direct influence on their work experience and their future. Being a good supervisor who attracts and grows strong subordinates is neither magical nor mysterious. It is hard, eyes-open, focused, ego-subordinating work. As the young new supervisor said to me as we were rounding the parking lot of the Holiday Inn in Corpus Christi, Texas, for the fifth time, "This job is a bitch; God, I love it!"