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Equipping, Enabling, and Encouraging Marketplace Leaders

What Supervision Skills do You Need to be Successful?

First of all, let's understand that people are promoted from the ranks to the first level of management for one of several reasons; they demonstrate the ability to lead others, they do their current jobs very well, they demonstrate an ability to carry out the responsibilities of the supervisor's job, they are the most senior person in the office, or they are the CEO's nephew.

Regardless of how they got there, the issue is, "How do you develop people into talented supervisors?" The answers to this question are as varied as the people themselves. Yet develop them you must if you expect them to succeed, and in turn, add value to your corporation.

The role of a supervisor is generally broken down into five areas: planning, staffing, organizing, directing, and controlling. Developing skills in each of these areas will provide well-balanced supervisors who add value to your organization.

Failure to develop supervisory skills will not only cause frustration for the newly appointed supervisor, but also for the people they supervise. The results of poorly trained supervisors are decreased productivity and increased turnover. Who among us can afford these consequences in today's business climate?

Nehemiah The Supervisor with Super-Vision

Nehemiah provides a Biblical model of an excellent supervisor. He had risen from the ranks of the captives to the king's cup-bearer. As such, Nehemiah was frequently in the king's presence and was a very influential man in the Persian empire.

In November 446 B.C., Nehemiah's brother came to him to describe the situation in Jerusalem; the city walls and gates were broken down, and marauding tribes were plundering the city and assaulting the people. During all this, the leaders of the city did nothing.



Ezra had led a remnant back to Jerusalem in 458 B.C. They had begun the work of rebuilding the city but were stopped by King Artaxerxes. Under Nehemiah's supervision, the same people were able to accomplish the work that had not been accomplished in the prior 12-years and they did it in only 52 days.

Why was Nehemiah successful when others had failed? The answer, his skills as a supervisor.

Planning

More work can be accomplished by accident by a group with a plan, than a group without a plan can accomplish on purpose.

A supervisor's planning job includes setting objectives, developing plans to achieve objectives, scheduling the work to be done, evaluating suggestions, and reviewing completed work.

Don't worry about those who would say that making plans makes you too rigid. A plan that has to be changed is better than no plan at all.

Four months passed between Nehemiah hearing about the condition of Jerusalem until he approached the king. But when he did, he had a complete plan prepared for what he needed from the king and the length of time it would take to complete the work. He knew that he would need timber from the king's forest, letters for safe conduct, and soldiers from the king's army.

When he arrived in Jerusalem he did not go immediately to the city leaders and call them on the carpet; "Why in the world have you been sitting here for twelve years letting these marauders steal from you and do nothing about rebuilding the city?"

Instead, he quietly spent three days surveying the city and laying out specific plans. When he had completed his planning he got all the leaders together to explain the situation and the need for the work that he had planned, "*You see the trouble we are in; Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace*" (Neh. 2:17).

Note, Nehemiah did not say, "You go build this wall." He said, "Come let us." The people's response to him was, "*Let us start rebuilding*" (Neh. 2:18).

In today's parlance, he had a vision for what he wanted to do and he got "buy-in" to the vision from the leaders of the city.

Another job of a supervisor is to evaluate suggestions. At a time near the completion of the wall, a man named Shemaiah told Nehemiah that his life was in danger and that he should shut himself up in the temple and lock the door. Nehemiah said, "*Should a man like me go into the temple to*



save his life? I will not go!" (Neh. 6:11). Nehemiah took no time in deciding the suggestion was a bad one and summarily rejected it.

A good supervisor needs to be able to discern good suggestions from bad ones and needs to act quickly once a decision has been made.

Staffing/Organizing

Once plans for the work have been outlined the supervisor must staff the organization. In many cases, the workers are already employed but they need to be assigned their responsibilities.

The supervisor's job of staffing includes analyzing personnel needs, instructing the employees, coordinating the activities of the workers, and delegating important work to others.

Nehemiah wisely involved all of the people of Jerusalem in the rebuilding project. He had goldsmiths, priests, perfume-makers, guards, and merchants among the people working on the walls and gates. Women worked next to men. Community leaders worked next to servants.

Perhaps the most interesting strategic decision he made was to have each individual repair the area in front of their own home. These people were not experts at wall-building or gate-hanging but when faced with the work to be done in front of their own homes and businesses they took extra care and pride in completing the work quickly and with precision. There is no report of their work needing to be redone because it was sloppy.

Nehemiah had no patience for those who did not share the vision. In the case of Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, each challenged Nehemiah's authority, and were immediately dismissed by him; *"We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you will have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it"* (Neh. 3:7).

A good supervisor needs to know who shares the vision of the group and will contribute to the finished result. Anyone that does not add value is not used.

Directing

The job of directing involves much more than simply giving directions to employees. But even if this is all there was to it the plain fact is most performance related problems stem from the poor direction of the supervisor to the employee.

In addition, the job of directing entails improving the skills of your employees, showing recognition for their work, and providing strong leadership.

When Sanballat and Tobiah saw that the work on the wall was proceeding quickly they developed a plan to disrupt the work by attacking the workers.



Nehemiah heard about the plan and immediately took action; he had half of the workers standing guard and the other half working, he had each man armed, he had the man who sounded the trumpet with him at all times, he had all the people of the city stay inside the city at night, and he had guards posted day and night.

A good supervisor needs to be a decisive individual. When Nehemiah heard about the attack plans he did not wait until the opposing forces were camped outside the wall, he took immediate action.

Another characteristic of a good supervisor is that they are strong leaders. Despite personal hardships Nehemiah was able to get the people to work 12-18 hours a day on the wall. Supervisors must be able to give employees a sense of the importance of the work they are doing. They must also be able to create excitement around the work they are doing together.

When the work of rebuilding the wall was completed Nehemiah reestablished leadership in the city. He appointed the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites to their jobs. He placed Hanani, his brother, in charge of the city.

Following the establishment of a government, the people rededicated the city and themselves to God. Then, at Nehemiah's command, they had a party, *"Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to the Lord"* (Neh. 8:10).

A good supervisor understands the need to celebrate the victory of work well done. How do you feel when you have done an outstanding job and your boss says nothing? Does this fill you with excitement, anxious to repeat your record-setting work, or does it make you feel like your work is taken for granted?

A good supervisor will never let people feel like their good work is taken for granted. Let people know how much you really appreciate their accomplishments and their sacrifices by taking the time to celebrate their successes.

Controlling

If you fire an arrow into the air before aiming and checking the wind, the likelihood of hitting your target will be minuscule. But, if you see that the arrow is a little left and short you can correct by aiming a little right and higher. By making a number of these corrections one can eventually expect to hit a bullseye.

This makes sense but amazingly, there are any number of supervisors who fire the arrow the same way every time and move the target. They keep asking employees to do the same work in



the same way and then to make themselves look “successful” they set their objectives to match their achievements.

The job of a supervisor is to use controls to achieve objectives. This includes discipline, checking progress on a regular basis, identifying problems, and correcting errors.

Part of a supervisor’s job is the need to administer discipline. Nehemiah had no tolerance for those who did not share the work of rebuilding the city. Nehemiah wasted no time in taking disciplinary action. He did not wait until the wall was half-done to kick Sanballat, Geshem, and Tobiah out of the city.

Likewise, as a supervisor, if you see a need for discipline or corrective action do not wait until an individual’s next formal review in six months to bring the matter up – do it now, be upfront with the person, be direct and decisive, and deal with the behavior, not the individual.

One way to reduce the need for disciplinary actions is to monitor the work and progress of the group on a regular basis. This does not mean standing over people’s shoulders every minute of the working day. It means to give them the job, give them the training they need and get out of their way. But be there to help and make suggestions.

You do not read about Nehemiah assigning jobs and then retreating to the palace. On the contrary, Nehemiah had the man who sounded the trumpet with him at all times so he must have been outside on the wall, watching the workers. He was a very early example of MBWA, “Management by Walking Around.”

A supervisor will be able to spot problems early and will be able to make decisions about corrective action if they establish early and often the habit of *Management by Walking Around*.

When Nehemiah found out about the plot to attack the city he immediately changed the way the work was being completed. He realized that they were most vulnerable at places where the wall had not been built up at all. So he had everyone work on building all the wall to half its height so that there would be no openings in the wall.

A supervisor must be flexible, have the ability to identify problems, and take corrective action. If you see that unforeseen problems are lurking on the horizon, do not wait until you are behind in your production to take corrective action. Be flexible enough to change your plans once you have identified a problem and be ready to take immediate action.

One Final Thought

Nehemiah was a man of God. From the moment he heard about the problem in Jerusalem he began praying and seeking God’s direction. When he was faced with difficult situations, he



prayed. When faced with trouble from those who wanted to stop his work, he prayed. When the work was finished, he prayed. Importantly, he also led the city back to a commitment to God.

Could it be that the failure of previous leaders to rebuild the city was due to their lack of faith in God to enable them to do the work? Perhaps. But one thing is very clear. Nehemiah accomplished what he accomplished because he kept his focus on God. A man who trusted and relied on God all the time.

When we are in the crush of a deadline it is our natural inclination to exercise our might to accomplish our work, rather than taking a moment to seek God's counsel. A really good supervisor understands that taking the time to seek God's will is the most important supervisory skill of all.