



When the Supervisor IS the Problem

“People quit their managers, not their jobs.” If this is true then it is essential that placing people in leadership roles should be carefully and strategically done. In addition, if there is a developing concern with a supervisor, there needs to be a way to voice the concern and address the issue.

Scott works in the building industry and his team appreciates his years of experience. He is also quite knowledgeable in his trade. The only area that keeps jamming him up is that Scott’s supervisor makes ridiculous demands and takes no ownership of his decisions. When I suggested that Scott simply approach his supervisor when he needs clarification or needs to talk to him personally about the morale problems his demands are causing among staff, Scott’s immediate response was concern about the retribution he would have to face if that was done.

When I suggested he go over the supervisor’s head, he told me it would make matters worse and nothing would be done anyway. He then said, “I just need to hang on for a couple of more years to get my son through college.”

Maria complains her new manager was pretty intense and didn’t really care about the former culture the staff developed when it came to giving input, feedback, ideas and speaking up in staff meetings about what was or wasn’t working.

Maria told me when she explained to her new boss there was more to discuss regarding changes that personally impacted her staff, her supervisor’s curt response

essentially had the “It is what it is” attitude and instantly shut down the discussion. Maria then said, “What do I do now?”

Sergio was a peer to another technician, Ron, who frequently complained about the unfairness of his workload which was a lot less than other crew members.



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Sergio tried to reason with Ron and balance the scales with the upcoming pending jobs. The next thing Sergio knew, he was called into his manager's office and told to back off from Ron and to be more sensitive. He finds himself on the ropes when actually it was Ron's lack of willingness to work with the team that was causing the problems.

What do you do when the supervisor or leadership IS the problem? I have heard more people say they are at a loss on how to satisfactorily deal with this issue, or even begin to answer this problem. Those who do seem to have answers have a protocol and a company-wide approach when it comes to staff bringing up concerns to a supervisor.

However, more times than not there is a lot of angst, anxiety and anger that prevents staff from opening up to their direct supervisor.

A Few Reasons Why Staff Won't Speak Up to Their Supervisor

1. Fear of retribution- This ranks as the highest reason. I was working with a crew on communication and building trust as a team and the supervisor was assuring the team she would always be approachable and her "open door policy" would be just that. She went on to say she was open to their ideas and suggestions for improvement as a manager and a team.

One of the men proceeded to tell her she wasn't around frequently to help them with problem solving, answers or assistance.

The next morning he was called into her office and reprimanded for humiliating her and told to never do that again. She only lasted two more months with the company.

2. Management will gossip to other managers-

The staff member fears they can then be labeled as the office troublemaker or whiner from other leadership members.

3. Nothing changes or is taken seriously anyway-

It can become a risk with some to speak up with the possibility of resentment and creating even more of a distant relationship with the supervisor, all for nothing.

Of course there are many more reasons. These just happen to be the top three out of a list of 20 which some health care managers listed when asked why their team was known to have "the meeting after the meeting."



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Signs the Supervisor Could Be the Problem

First of all, how do we determine it is our immediate manager or supervisor that IS the problem? A couple of symptoms of poor leadership can expose the issue for discussion:

- 1. High turnover-** When there is no possible way to fix a supervision concern, going to work becomes exhausting and staff begin looking elsewhere for employment.
- 2. Morale drops-** people lose respect, stop engaging and don't trust their boss so they simply put their head down and clock in and out.
- 3. Performance stagnates-** Employees only do what's required and no more. Creativity is squashed and ambivalence sets in.
- 4. Matters grow worse with time-** Since solutions should ultimately be overseen and/or managed by a supervisor, if they are the problem, nothing gets better.

So how do you candidly and honestly bring up the awkward suggestion to your boss that actions, decisions or style isn't working for the ranks under him/her?

Before we look at some different approaches for this potentially awkward situation, here are a couple of thoughts to keep in mind. Even if you might have lost respect for your supervisor as a person you should still respect the position. Also, the supervisor should sense your motivation is to support their role and always do what's in the best interest of the company.

Telling Your Boss He Is Wrong the Right Way!

1. Accentuate the positives

This isn't a way to let the boss down easy or flatter him into being open. It is more of a full-balanced picture to what to start, stop or continue doing.

Most people have strengths and weaknesses. It is not wrong to address both in a professional and candid discussion.

2. Use "I" statements

The word "you" is an accusative word, whereas "I" leaves room for discussion, interpretation and keeps dialogue possibilities on the table. There is a big difference between saying "Why did you hire Mable?" and "I feel like I can't effectively communicate with Mable and it is affecting our team spirit."

3. Focus on facts rather than feelings

Generally speaking, managers have got where they are because of their ability to logically size up situations and create solutions based on the concrete needs of the company.

Many are not motivated by fairness or feelings, but are open more with concrete data, proof and even suggestions on how to make things better.

4. Ask questions before making declarations

Bosses have more back story and information than you do. So before you launch into frustrations about your perceptions of where they are going wrong, ask good questions. Frequently, without calling a boss out on what they are doing wrong, good questions can bring them to their own conclusions.

- How do you feel the new hire is impacting our department?
- What was your perception about how the staff felt about your proposal at the staff meeting?
- Do you have any thoughts or ideas about the recent turnover in the company?
- How would you rate the overall strength and weakness of the company?

"If you approach the situation well, a great boss will thank you for your commitment and candor. Your company will have a better chance of success, and you and your boss will grow from the experience. If you're punished instead, it's time to ask yourself if whether that boss is worth your time and energy or if it is time to move on." –Peter Gaugenti

Chief Marketing Officer, Mesosphere

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Company Procedures for the Problem

What helps this type of concern more than any particular approach is when there is a cultural protocol and standard which is in place from the top down. Here are some further ideas that have been helpful to other organizations...

- **Create a culture of transparency and honesty-** This needs to start from the top down. There is not a person working anywhere that could not be stretched and improve in a given area. With this in mind, there should be an understanding that no one is exempt from challenges, feedback and even constructive correction.
- **Have an employee survey-** This confidential survey is to comment, give acknowledgement or express areas needed for improvement, including for managers.
- **Accountability buddies-** One organization in the health care industry suggests that when someone has to approach a supervisor, they should be encouraged and have the freedom to bring another worker with them for accountability sake.
- **Go to another manager for assistance-** Another company has suggested the employee can approach a different manager who then would approach his/her peer with the concern.

- **End-of-the-Week debriefings-** Some organizations have evaluation sessions at the end of the week to go over and highlight areas needing improvement as well as their successes from the top down, with transparency as their goal.
- **Go one-on-one-** Obviously, this is the most ideal. But as you can see in the above suggestions, whatever the plan it must follow a department or company approach, less there be a growing, perceived problem of insubordination.

So, since “most people quit their managers, not their jobs,” you can imagine a more satisfied work environment and a higher retention of the team when there is a professional approach to resolving the concerns if your supervisor IS the problem.



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Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture's needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill's strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.