

Interacting with Employees



Jack Kelly Clark

For the fruit picking crew the day began like many others. There was the usual joking and laughing as laborers picked. It fell on me, as the foreman, to gather up the courage to tell the picker that his mother had died. But how? “Your mother has died, I’m so sorry,” I finally blurted it out. The worker began violently weeping and then embraced the tree he had been working on. Another crew member, unaware of the situation, mocked the grieving employee.

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Interpersonal relations at work (and away, too) serve a critical role in the development and maintenance of trust and positive feelings in a farm organization. Although the quality of interpersonal relationships alone is not enough to produce worker productivity, it can significantly contribute to it.

An effective supervisor needs to abstain from showing favoritism; make difficult, sometimes unpopular, decisions; show concern for

subordinates without appearing to pry; and avoid misusing supervisory power.

In fulfilling responsibilities, supervisors need to strike the right note in their interpersonal relations with workers. New supervisors, especially those who have moved up through the ranks, are often counseled to keep a healthy distance from workers. Supervisors must be approachable and friendly, yet fair and firm. A good sense of humor also helps.

Body language and tone of voice play an important role in the intensity of stroke exchanges.

In this chapter we look at basic concepts of human interaction as they affect workers in general and supervisors in particular.

BASIC HUMAN INTERACTION

The most basic unit of wholesome human interaction is the *stroke*—a

verbal or physical way to acknowledge another person's value. A *ritual* is a mutual exchange of strokes: a sort of reciprocal validation of each person's worth promoting a sense of trust between people. The term "stroke" connotes intimate contact, such as what is received by an infant who is caressed, pinched, or patted.¹

As adults, people generally do not go around patting, caressing or pinching other adults (except in the sports arena), but they may shake hands, wave, or say hello. At work most stroking takes place in the way of verbal communication and body language. Examples may include waving, smiling, a glance of understanding, shaking hands, saying hello, or even sending a card or flowers.

Physical strokes may include placing a hand on another person's shoulder, elbow, or back. While some persons do not mind, others feel these gestures, unlike the handshake, may be inappropriate. In one orchard operation, the owner's daughter reported that a worker mistook her friendly pats on the back—intended to convey thanks for a job well done—as a romantic interest on her part. Similarly, a milker confused the horseplay on the part of a young woman (in the way of throwing water at him and grabbing him by his shirt) as a show of sexual interest. As a result, both of these cases gave rise to unfortunate behaviors on the part of the men involved.

People may resent these physical strokes, not necessarily because they are sexual in nature, but because they often represent a show of superiority. Dexter, a supervisor, tended to frequently put his arm around Laurie's shoulder. Dexter was visibly uncomfortable when one day Laurie put her arm around his shoulder. In terms of physical strokes, we may have widely differing feelings about them depending on the situation and persons involved. From one individual we may find these gestures comforting, yet resent the same coming from another.

The need for personal validation is great. People may prefer negative attention to being totally ignored. Try to imagine how awkward it would be to



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meet a fellow farmer or supervisor and not greet him in any way, through either gesture or word. From an Argentine folk song, I like the saying, roughly translated, “When two people like each other well, they will greet each other from kilometers away.”² The opposite of a stroke is the “cold shoulder” treatment. A farmer was so uncomfortable when his otherwise excellent mechanics stopped talking to each other, that he was ready to fire them both.

Before job-related information is communicated, an exchange of strokes normally takes place. At the same organizational level either person can initiate or terminate a stroking exchange. In contrast, most workers understand it is the supervisor who often controls the length of exchange.

Even so, workers expect some sort of greeting from their supervisor. For example, a manager began to give orders to a foreman but after his long explanation, the foreman simply responded, “¡Buenos días (good morning)!” In essence, the worker was saying, “You forgot the ritual: I am not your horse, nor your tractor; I am a person.”

Some strokes may be quite neutral or uncommitted, such as “I see.” Others show more care or interest: “I heard your daughter is getting married, that’s exciting!” Body language and tone of voice also play an important role in the intensity of stroke exchanges. Generally, when individuals know each other well, have not seen each other for a while, or when there has been a catastrophe or other special circumstances, a more forceful stroke is expected.

At times, the intensity of a stroke may make up for its brevity. For instance, a herd manager may realize special circumstances call for a longer stroke exchange, yet he may not be able to deliver at the moment. The herd manager may enthusiastically welcome the employee returning from a vacation, “Hey, I’m so glad you’re back, you’ll have to tell me everything about your trip at lunch! I’ve got to be running now to get ready for the veterinarian who is coming today.” This stroking still

validates the employee’s existence while simultaneously acknowledging more is owed. A drastic change in ritual length or intensity, for no apparent reason, may affect a person’s self-esteem or make people wonder what is wrong with the other.³

CONVERSATIONAL SKILLS

Once the basic ritual is over, people may either go their own ways or engage in a longer conversation. Poor conversational skills hinder effective interpersonal relations. So, what makes a person difficult to talk to? Poor conversationalists are interested in only one topic, tend to be negative, talk excessively about themselves, resort to monosyllabic answers, talk too much, or are overly competitive (that is, they can top anything you say).

Some conversations are much more animated than others, involving some interruption, exchange of stories, and description of experiences. In *The Lost Art of Listening*, Michael Nichols says, “Talking and listening is a unique relationship in which speaker and listener are constantly switching roles, both jockeying for position, one’s needs competing with the other’s. If you doubt it, try telling someone about a problem you’re having and see how long it takes before he interrupts to tell you about a problem of his own, to describe a similar experience of his own, or to offer advice—advice that may suit him more than it does you (and is more responsive to his own anxiety than to what you’re trying to say).”⁴

Some claim they can simultaneously listen while they work on the computer, read a newspaper, or attend to other business. Certain individuals are better at multi-tasking than others. Nevertheless, the message to the speaker is discomfiting: “You are not important enough for me to attend exclusively to your needs.”

Effective conversationalists will take turns speaking and listening as well.⁵ Of course, there are times when we focus exclusively on the concerns of others through *empathic listening* (Chapter 15).

It is really not about conversing but permitting others to vent. Under these circumstances the transcendental skill is not only to listen but let the other know we are paying attention.

But returning to the topic of conversations, difficulty arises when people take more than their share of the talking time. This may happen when individuals feel others are not listening or when they suffer from lack of self-esteem.⁶ When they let someone else speak, they fear they may not get another turn. Whatever the reason, regularly monopolizing a conversation is likely to alienate others.

At the opposite extreme is the individual who pouts and refuses to speak. People who have nothing to offer or are not sure they can control their emotions can instead ask for additional time to reflect on the topic.

The point here is to try and avoid the extremes. It has been decades since I consumed any alcohol, but I had an interesting experience as a seventeen-year-old in Chile. I attended a *ramada* to celebrate Chilean Independence Day. A worker from a neighboring vineyard approached me, staggering, with a glass of wine clutched in his hand and a singsong in his voice.

“*Patroncito, ¿se sirve una copita de tinto?*” (My young boss, would you like a cup of red wine?)

I politely declined.

“Ah!” the farm worker uttered. “One can tell you are not a *true* Chilean!”

His comments pierced me with anguish. “May I have that cup?” I demanded.

The worker gladly handed me the glass and said, “*¡Salud!*” (To your health!)

I gulped down its contents. If my original refusal had upset him, his facial expression now betrayed an even greater distress. After getting over the shock of being left with an empty glass, he proceeded to teach me a lesson in interpersonal relations.

“Here is what the *people* do,” he began. “When someone offers you a glass, you accept, you hold it in your hand, you chat, and then you return the cup.” After a pause he added, “Or you

hold it in your hand, chat, take a sip, and then return it. But you don’t *drink it all!*”

Perhaps this lesson can also apply to avoiding extremes in conversational turns. Keeping comments short (not drink the whole thing) and checking to make sure the other person is still interested are two essential dialoguing skills. In a mutually productive discussion, individuals normally share equally in speaking and listening.

VALUING EMPLOYEES

In Chapter 12 we said supervisors and employees place a value on each other’s *inputs* (or “contributions,” such as a person’s job, education, skills, or efforts). We also said the best way of preserving the value of our own inputs is by valuing the inputs of others.

A farm manager may be considered charismatic by most, hold a position of leadership, represent the farm enterprise, and be highly skilled and knowledgeable in agriculture: those are her inputs. Even though she may not spend much time with the workers, what time she does spend is greatly valued by them. The value placed on a person’s time is a good proxy for power, and this helps explain why quality time spent with employees by the supervisor, manager, or farmer is so meaningful to employees.

Careful selection, training, and appraisal of employees are ways for management to show it values its human resources. So is paying good wages, providing safe and sanitary working conditions, and communicating company policies. Equally critical are factors affecting interpersonal relations such as involving workers in decision making, effective communication styles, listening to employees, and avoiding one-way communication.

Increasing employees’ value

A personal visit to a worker’s home by the farmer may be positively remembered for years to come and result in an increased sense of loyalty toward the farmer. A farmer who

attempts to speak in a foreign worker's native tongue will likewise generally be held in high esteem by the employee (one worker complained, however, that his boss was a tyrant now that he spoke fluent Spanish).

Significant contrasts in perceived inputs may lead a farm worker to avoid addressing the manager in a personal exchange, unless addressed first. Sometimes workers who can hardly afford to feed their families will bring a gift to the farm owner. This gift—their generous reciprocation for the job held or for a small attention on the part of the farm owner—may be homemade tamales, empanadas, a basket of eggs, or even the chicken that produced the eggs.

Depending on individual and cultural differences, a number of rites of passage observances, such as birthdays, *quinceañeras* (15th birthday and coming of age celebration for young women), weddings, and funerals can be quite significant to employees. Farmers and supervisors may often be expected to show support in some way. Workers are likely to remember who sent flowers, a card, and especially, who attended the event. The absence of a supervisor, manager or farm owner may be just as conspicuous.

The death of an employee's family member may be particularly trying (see Sidebar 14–3). Sending flowers, plants, cards, and personal notes of condolence are good ways to show concern without being intrusive. Notes are most effective when they are personal. "I'm sorry about the loss of your father," for instance, is better than "I'm sorry about your loss." It is preferable to do something concrete for someone than just offering to help. At the very initial stages of grieving, when it is hard to know what to say, sometimes a hug says it all.

Another way to value employees (besides treating them as human beings with needs, desires, aspirations, heartaches, and successes) is to find ways of putting aside traditional sets of inputs or contributions (such as positions of organizational power). You may want to take advantage of the opportunity to participate next time



workers invite you to join them in a soccer game, or challenge you to a race on foot or horseback, or to a game of chess. In these instances traditional assets related to societal position may lose importance.

Reducing another's value

Conflict may arise when other people's assets are not valued. One supervisor, a college graduate, may look at her formal education as an asset. A second supervisor may view her seniority, or having worked up through the company, as her asset. Neither may value the other's assets. Both may fight for resources on the basis of their

When dealing with technical questions, an important part of listening is ascertaining how much the person knows before starting to give advice. It often happens that people asking for help may have already given the matter much thought.

SIDEBAR 14–1

Learning Another Language

Although it is not an easy task, surely there are benefits from learning another language. Many agricultural workers speak languages other than English. Spanish is by far the first language of farm workers in much of western United States. Spanish-speaking workers have also migrated into other parts of the United States and into Canada. Beside Spanish, an increasing number of agricultural employees speak such languages as Mixtec, Trique, Zapotec, Lao, Hmong, Punjabi, and Tagalog, to name a few. In many countries agricultural workers are migrants who bring their own culture and language.

Some of the benefits of being bilingual on the farm include improved communication with the farm workers. Certainly it is difficult to delegate, provide simple feedback, give instruction, impart correction, listen to worker concerns, or hold a performance appraisal when one speaks a different language from the employee.

What can I do to encourage my workers to learn English? When workers see you trying a little of their language, willing to make a mistake, and notice that you do not take yourself so seriously, they are more likely to attempt a little English. Often, fear keeps employees from trying out their English. One farmer has been successful by paying a monthly bonus to those with whom he can communicate. Paying the tuition for workers who want to take a conversational or English as a second language (ESL) class may also be effective. Today, there are numerous excellent telephone apps that facilitate learning.

How difficult is it to learn another language? Learning another language, for most people, is extremely difficult and takes much commitment. My wife, for instance, took years of Spanish in high school and at the university and yet would refuse to speak it with me

(Ok, so I laughed once). Only after her fourth trip to South America did she venture out on her own. Setting a goal of learning polite expressions and basic farm vocabulary is not so hard, and it can be a lot of fun.

Language differences. Not only are there different languages, but even regional differences in vocabulary. Differences between Spanish-speaking nations are accentuated when slang is used and minimized with more formal Spanish.

What is the best way to learn another language? Assuming you want to speak more than you want to read that language, perhaps the best way is the way children learn: first by listening, then by repeating or speaking. Little by little children learn vocabulary and only much later do they learn reading and grammar. Learning another language needs to be fun, otherwise, it is hard to stay committed. We need to celebrate small achievements. The ideal is to travel to the country where the language you wish to learn is spoken. This is not a practical option for most farmers.

I recommend starting with audio CD sets that are not too extensive, as these are more likely to keep the vocabulary simple and expressions short. Listening to these audio files fifteen minutes a day, five or six times a week, is much more effective than listening for a long time once a week. In order to improve your accent, avoid manuals that provide English-based phonetic pronunciations

Other ideas include immersion classes, computer programs, listening to foreign radio or television programs, and getting an employee to tutor you.

Learning another language, then, takes commitment. Getting started with farm vocabulary and polite expressions is a reasonable goal and can be a lot of fun. After initial success, more difficult goals may be attained. At some point you will be ready to tackle those longer audio series and enjoy reading.

You may wish to download the free audio MP3 files from: <http://www.cnr.berkeley.edu/ucce50/ag-labor/spanish/>

perceived contributions. Instead, both would be better off by acknowledging each other's strengths.

Reducing another's value may also come from a misunderstanding of cultural norms. A Mexican cowboy in a cattle ranch cooked up a special native meal and took it to the American ranch foreman. Unfortunately, the foreman did not accept the gift. The worker was acknowledging the value of the ranch foreman's organizational position and, perhaps, his membership in the predominant racial group. The feelings of the Mexican cowboy were hurt. Now he has little loyalty for the foreman and is less concerned with being helpful.

ASKING FOR ADVICE

When asking for help, employees do not always ask the most knowledgeable person. They also consider factors such as who offers help cheerfully and without condescension. Asking for help includes possible disclosure of sensitive personal matters.

There is an additional cost when competitive behaviors are involved. Competitive conduct seeks to establish predominance in a given field and many see asking for help as a sign of weakness, or as a way of recognizing the other person's superiority.

Those who are asked for help also weigh the advantages and disadvantages of fully helping, offering a brief suggestion or two, or withholding help.

SIDEBAR 14-2

Working Through Interpreters

Here are a few suggestions to remember when you need to work through an interpreter:

(1) Individuals communicate directly with each other—not with the interpreter. It is preferable for a participant to say, for instance, “Tell me what you think . . .” rather than addressing the interpreter and saying, “Ask him to tell me what he thinks of . . .” The interpreter, in turn, needs to communicate as if she was the speaker. So, instead of “he is asking what experience you have driving tractors,” the effective interpreter will say: “What is your experience driving tractors?” Not, “it is his opinion that . . .” but rather, “It is my opinion that . . .”

(2) Speakers maintain eye contact with each other—not with the interpreter. The interpreter may want to suggest a seating arrangement that promotes eye contact between the stakeholders. One effective arrangement is to have both participants relatively close, and facing each other, while the interpreter sits further away facing both. The interpreter may at first have to remind

the stakeholders to focus on each other. If all else fails, the interpreter may try avoiding eye contact with the participants, except at times when she is asking for clarification (*see #5 below*).

(3) Express yourself through brief comments, pausing to allow for translation. Otherwise, the interpreter may abridge or misinterpret your remarks. The fewer the pauses allowing for translation, the greater the chances for interpretation errors. An effective interpreter will interrupt speakers as needed, and will often begin to translate longer sentences long before it is clear how the stakeholder will finish them.

(4) Avoid any possibly demeaning language that could be offensive to the interpreter, if not to the recipient.

(5) Encourage your interpreter to ask for any needed clarification.

(6) Ask your interpreter to translate questions back to you even when she feels they can be answered directly. This approach reduces misunderstandings and promotes a more natural interaction.

(7) When your interpreter is functioning correctly, you will soon forget she is present. (Interpreters need to avoid taking part in the conversation unless invited to do so.)

Assuming you want to speak more than you want to read a new language, perhaps the best way is the way children learn: first by listening, then by repeating or speaking.

Rewards an expert may gain from helping include increased self-esteem and a good feeling from being of service. Costs may include time and encouraging overly dependent behavior. Experts with poor self-esteem may fear they may reduce the knowledge gap between themselves and the person being helped.

Those who ask for help often rotate requests among several people. The degree of reward experienced by experts normally decreases with each subsequent helping episode—unless these are sufficiently well spaced⁷ or there is a mentor relationship.



LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Sometimes farm employers wonder if they should use an employee as an interpreter to train others or deal with sensitive issues such as performance appraisal and employee discipline. It is best to use an outside interpreter, unless the employee who is bilingual also happens to be the supervisor of the other employees.

The convenience and short-term savings of using a present employee as an interpreter are outweighed by the negative consequences of doing so. Employees are very sensitive about having their weaknesses discussed in front of others, such as co-workers, even if the co-worker is acting as an interpreter. There may be some competitive feelings among employees, also, that can be exacerbated by placing one of them, the interpreter, in a power position.

Sidebar 14–2 contains suggestions for working with interpreters when dealing one-on-one with another individual. Some of these suggestions can be adapted for working with multiple participants. The objective is for those holding the conversation to be able to forget they are working through an interpreter.

EMPLOYEE NEEDS

A few workers seldom ask for help, unwilling to admit they do not know how to approach a work challenge. Even though it is not their intention to do so, these employees sometimes ruin equipment, animals, or crops through their attempts at self-sufficiency. Other workers often exasperate their supervisors by their apparent lack of confidence. They need to be constantly re-assured that what they are doing is right.

Often supervisors feel uncomfortable about even listening to an employee's personal difficulties. In one agricultural packing company, a first-line supervisor adamantly felt workers should keep their home-related problems at home, and work-related challenges at work. As

SIDEBAR 14–3

Helping Employees Deal With Grief⁸

I conducted a study in an attempt to find answers to difficult questions surrounding how we treat the death of an employee's family member. For the most part, employees did find support in the workplace. People attended funerals, provided food, sent flowers or cards, offered time off and a good listening ear, reduced workloads, and helped in many other ways. Support tended to wane, however, after the initial mourning period. Employees who found little support in the workplace were deeply hurt, even several years later. In a number of instances, the lack of backing ended up with the employee quitting or being fired.

Some had difficulty concentrating or needed more time off. "[Those I worked with] let me grieve for about two weeks, and then I was expected to give 100 percent and act like nothing happened . . . I resigned my position three months later."

Some felt they had been given a time limit to be over their grief, "Odd you haven't got over it yet; it's been six months." Or, "Go see a movie. Take your mind off yourself." Co-workers and supervisors need to be sensitive to the emotional needs of the survivor. A person who lost a child was told, "You can have another child." She wrote in response, "I could have ten more but there will only ever be one Jonni." I suspect that those employees who were allowed to fully grieve were more likely to return to work ready to concentrate compared to those who lacked support.

Those who are grieving, when ready, may want to talk to you about the loved person rather than be sheltered from the pain. One person wrote, "Virtually nobody initiates conversation about our daughter . . . I think they just don't want us to hurt, but by doing that, we're being robbed of the only thing we have tangible, and that's to talk about memories of her." Finally, employees going through divorce⁹ or other personal challenges also need to feel care and understanding at work.

ideal as it sounds, this goal may be difficult to attain. Have you ever been so devastated by a personal challenge or family tragedy that it left you numb? One where you could not concentrate on work?

There are plenty of personal difficulties, as well as events in the community and elsewhere, that may act as distracters. These may trouble workers and affect their ability to perform on a given day. Some workers may not have anyone to turn to outside of work. Many people lack social networks of family and friends with whom to share difficulties. Trends show the numbers of divorced and single-parent families are increasing.

Accepting an occasional request for a sympathetic, listening ear, or for advice, is simply part of a supervisor's job. A supervisor who can help workers cope with their difficulties may deflect industrial accidents or serious errors. The sooner workers cope with their

problems, the sooner they can concentrate on their jobs (Chapter 15). This is not a suggestion to set up a counseling practice, nor should supervisors snoop into the personal lives of workers.

Some difficulties may be quite serious, such as feelings of employee depression or family related challenges. Workers may also turn to their supervisor for help in dealing with an alcohol or chemical dependency. Sudden performance deterioration or unusual behavior may also demand attention. At other times, performance may worsen over a long period of time. A supervisor may inquire about the drop in performance, but it is up to the employee to choose to talk about personal problems. Although supervisors may not have the background to be able to fully help in many of these situations, much good can be done by someone who is willing to listen. A referral to a professional counselor may be required.

SIDEBAR 14–4
Your Monkeys¹⁰

One clever analogy compares problems to monkeys. Everyone carries a few on their back. One day four employees came to see the farm manager who agreed to look into each of their difficulties. The employees left each of their monkeys in the manager's care. A manager who in one day accumulated four monkeys must, over time, have a jungle's worth of them. The manager had less time for her family and was not really helping the workers either. Employees were

irritated when problems did not get resolved as quickly as they wished. One weekend, while at work taking care of *their* monkeys, she saw four very familiar faces playing soccer. After some serious thinking she devised ground rules for employees: "At no time will your problem become my problem," she told them. While she agreed to discuss the challenges that employees faced, she was less quick to take the monkeys off their backs. Since then, she learned the important difference between listening to employees and agreeing to feed their monkeys.

Yet supervisors, especially at the farm, do wear some interesting hats—everything from delivering children to providing psychological first aid (Chapter 15). If performance does not improve, supervisors may need to resort to the disciplinary process (Chapter 21).

Supervisors vary in their approaches to answering requests for advice or help. Some prefer to have employees take as much responsibility as possible for finding solutions and feel uncomfortable being directive. Unfortunately, most people have little trouble telling others what they should do.

Some employees ask for help before carefully thinking through the problem on their own. Giving employees advice—work-related or personal—may also be looked at as the other side of the delegation coin. If supervisors are not

careful, employees will delegate their problems to them (see Sidebar 14–4).

To avoid such a situation, one hog operation supervisor has found it helpful to ask overly dependent employees to suggest alternative solutions to a difficulty. The workers often discover the best solution in the process.

THREE MINUTE LISTEN

Some of us are so goal oriented that we forget that much of the work gets done through people. I have developed what I call the three minute listen. The idea is to engage others in a conversation in which the other does most of the talking. We may ask an open ended question and then it is by showing our interest rather than by asking more questions that we keep the other talking.

SIDEBAR 14–5
Let the Phone Ring!

The next time a worker comes in to talk to you give him your full attention if you can or reschedule a meeting for a time you can. Show the employee you are concerned about his time, too. Turn off your cellular phone if you are in the field, and if you are in the office, ask your secretary to take messages rather than allow interruptions. If the telephone rings, well, let it ring! If you

are expecting an important call, you may want to let the worker know right away: "I can't talk very long right now, I'm expecting a call." This can be followed by an offer to reschedule the visit for a more appropriate time. If the employee decides to speak to you now, he knows the importance of being brief and the risk of interruption. Of course, there are exceptions, but letting the phone ring often makes good sense. If you are always too busy for employees, something else may be wrong.

SIDEBAR 14–6

The Accommodating Syndrome

There are a number of competing influences that help mold our behavior. One set of forces that often clash is a desire to do our duty and the need to be liked and fit in. Youth often grow up in subcultures where succeeding is simply not fashionable. They quickly learn that achievement often brings envy and disdain. Stories abound of young people who have buried their talents so as not to appear too successful, talented, or intelligent in the eyes of their friends.

Sooner or later these individuals enter the workforce, where things are not much different. Individuals who are perceived as working too hard are often targeted for punishment by co-workers. When employees become supervisors, foremen or crew leaders these challenges are compounded. As supervisors, such individuals often prefer the approval of subordinates rather than their own manager.

Even though the manager might clearly explain why a task needs to be done a certain way, when it comes time to explain it to the workers, this supervisor is more likely to just blame the change on management. I like to call such behaviors the *accommodating syndrome*.

These supervisors want to be seen as one of the gang: to be liked by the subordinates. When a person decides to favor subordinates without regard to the situation, sooner rather than later she will hurt the enterprise. Such is the case, for instance, when she looks the other way at poor quality work. Or, when his lack of loyalty is an example for all to follow.

Supervisors who yield to the pressures of the accommodating syndrome may be surprised to find out that in the long run they end up losing

the respect of both the boss as well as the employees they manage.

Not for a moment am I suggesting that supervisors should only be concerned with the needs of the enterprise without regard to the employees. Such individuals are often autocratic and self-serving, prone to abuse of power and authority. They are willing to climb the organizational ladder at the expense of those they step over. Sometimes they work very fast to impress those in management but then cannot sustain the pace they have set for themselves. Their loyalty is to themselves. It is not surprising that supervisors who only look at their own needs, or those of management, are greatly detested by employees.

Instead, what is needed is a supervisor who carefully seeks to understand the needs of both management and workers. It is clear to such individuals that effective policies must benefit both the enterprise and the employees if they are to be sustainable. This supervisor is loyal to both the worker and the organization. He is kind but firm—and above all, fair, honest, and full of integrity. Such a person is not afraid to take chances and help management or employees understand the unmet needs the other may have.

This foreman or crew leader does not take pleasure in the authority she has. Sometimes she will have to take flack from employees. With time subordinates will often come around and not only recognize that she acted fairly, but even defend her even when she is not around. Certainly, it takes time and effort to become such a supervisor. The good news is that at least some supervisors are able to leave behind the ugliness of the accommodating syndrome. If you have found such an individual among those who work for you, it is worth going out of the way to retain him.

We permit pauses rather than assume they are there for us to take a conversational turn.

These three minute listens often last much less time than that. When we are done we can either say goodbye or make

SIDEBAR 14-7

Qualities of a Great Supervisor¹¹

1. Technical skills. This supervisor (1) is a technician in terms of agricultural knowledge as applied to the specific farm enterprise; (2) understands the whole picture, both beginning-to-end timeline as well as the role of other production areas; and (3) comprehends both internal and external client needs.

2. Delegation and organizational skills. This supervisor (1) understands that employees often have great ideas and attempts to involve them in decision-making; (2) explores and can see all sides of an issue; (3) welcomes suggestions; (4) knows how to schedule and organize people so there is a minimum of wasted time; (5) is creative about delegation and can think on his or her feet when problems arise; (6) once he or she feels individuals understand their jobs, gets out of their way and does not micromanage; (7) can make a decision when it is needed, and does so even when it may not seem popular at the moment; (8) manages numbers well (worker productivity, employees needed and payroll expenses, production costs, fuel expenditures and other items that need to be projected); (9) does not attempt to do everything on his or her own; and (10) does not have people remain idle.

3. Enthusiasm. This supervisor has a contagious passion for life and work and (1) is constantly studying and learning about agriculture as well as human relations; (2) has an attitude of gratitude; (3) is continually on the lookout for better ways of doing things; (4) takes pride in a job well done; and (5) provides positive feedback, and looks for opportunities to do so.

4. Humility, politeness and respect. This supervisor (1) never thinks of her or himself as better than those s/he supervises; (2) stays humble despite the amount of power afforded by the position and knowledge held; (3) admits when he or she does not know something (or the need to search for an answer); (4) shows respect for

both management and employees—even when the other is not present; (5) is courteous to other supervisors, management and employees; (6) says please and thank you; (7) speaks in an appropriate tone of voice; (8) shows respect with both verbal communication as well as body language; (9) would never use position of power to elicit money, resources or sexual favors; and (10) treats all people with respect and avoids even the appearance of favoritism or illegal discrimination.

5. Integrity. This supervisor (1) realizes that decisions need to be fair to all, including management and employees; (2) helps subordinates develop; (3) takes joy in the success of others, even those who may be more talented; (4) lets management know of subordinate successes and does not take credit for their work or ideas; (5) attempts to hire the best, even people who are more skilled than he or she is; (6) is honest about what he or she knows or understands—or does not; (7) gives his or her best at all times; (8) holds him or herself and others accountable to high standards of performance, quality work, and behavior; (9) does not hide problems with equipment, people or other resources from management; (10) treats farm assets including animals, plants, equipment and people with care; (11) is not willing to be involved in—nor tolerates in others—illegal activities; (12) follows through with promises; (13) is willing to say what needs to be said even when it is difficult to do so; (14) understands that loyalty goes both ways between management and workers; (15) is willing to make the unpopular but ethical decision regardless of the consequences and (16) shares pertinent information between management and subordinates.

6. Interpersonal communication skills. This supervisor (1) is an effective listener; (2) is open minded to other ideas and approaches; (3) is open to constructive criticism; (4) elicits other perspectives and is approachable; (5) does not assume to understand what

SIDEBAR 14–7 (CONTINUED)

Qualities of a Great Supervisor

others mean but asks effective questions; (6) is clear but diplomatic about presenting his or her own ideas; (7) acts as an effective two-way communicator between management and employees (and knows how to transmit ideas without distorting them); (8) after listening, is willing to diplomatically disagree with management or employees (by politely pointing out potential consequences or proposing alternative possibilities for consideration); (9) is a peacemaker and knows how to manage conflict (his or her own as well as others); (10) is able to carry out employee discipline and correction and adapt his or her strategies to even the most difficult behaviors; (11) does not permit underperformers to stay that way; (12) continually provides feedback; (13) gives clear instructions and training and checks for participant understanding; (14) stays calm even when others around him or her are angry or agitated; (15) is an effective mentor and coach; and (16) is an engaging public speaker.

7. Leads by example. This individual leads by example (1) never asking others to do something he or she is not willing to do; (2) follows rules; and (3) is an example in terms of arriving to work on time, turning in reports, and working hard.

8. Long hours. This individual (1) is willing to put in longer hours of work when needed—but also knows how work smart as well as hard; (2) takes care of his or her own personal needs; and (3) realizes the importance of balance between work and home.

9. Safety and health. This supervisor (1) shows genuine concern for employees' health and safety; (2) conducts effective safety trainings;

(3) gives an example in terms of doing things safely; (4) inspects the work area for hazards and makes necessary corrections; (5) involves workers in safety concerns they may have; and (6) values safety over speed.

10. Sense of humor. This individual (1) knows how to make light of a situation without discounting others; (2) is willing to laugh at himself or herself; and (3) never uses humor to humiliate others.

11. Takes initiative and is a problem solver / deals well with change. This supervisor (1) is proactive, solves problems and creates an environment where others do the same; (2) can see problems developing with anticipation and takes action (e.g., regarding resources, people, climate, or other planning); (3) creates contingency plans to deal with unpredictable events; (4) understands what actions she or he can take without consulting with management; (5) keeps management abreast of actions taken; (6) even when not proceeding on his or her own, is prepared with several possible solutions to discuss with management; (7) makes sure everything is in working condition; (8) is persistent and does not give up easily; (9) is interested in how other farm operations or enterprises do things and is always thinking of ways to improve; (10) is not afraid to ask for help in solving more difficult challenges; (11) keeps eyes and ears open and the brain engaged; (12) is welcoming of change but does not look for drama drawn out of boredom; (13) has a good sense about when traditions have served well and when change may be preferable; (14) prefers to focus on understanding problems and possible solutions rather than be blame focused; and (15) is flexible.

12. Written communication. This supervisor (1) can receive and act on written instructions; and (2) leave understandable written messages for others.

a positive comment on something we have observed in the other. These brief conversations do not need to take place that often, but from time to time. They are good practice for when employees may need correction (Chapter 21).

SUMMARY

Interpersonal relationships, on and off the job, have an important place in labor management. In this chapter we tried to understand interpersonal relationships on the job.

Strokes tend to validate a person's sense of worth. Most employees expect some stroking exchange, or ritual, before getting down to business. Being able to hold a conversation—a key workplace and interpersonal skill—is based on the participant's ability to give and take.

Everyone brings a set of “inputs” or “assets” to the job. Little trouble may occur as long as there is agreement about the value of these assets. Individuals who want to preserve the benefits of their assets, whether personal or organizational, need to value the assets held by others.

CHAPTER 14 REFERENCES

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