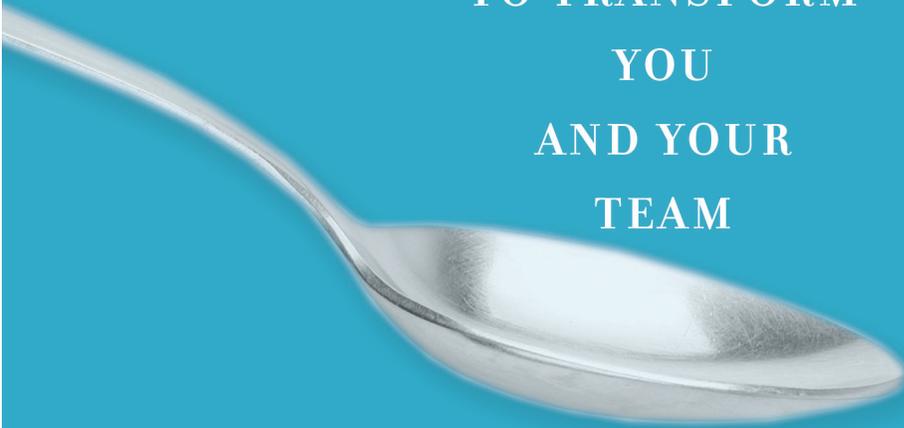


Supervision Matters

100
BITE-SIZED
IDEAS
TO TRANSFORM
YOU
AND YOUR
TEAM



R I T A S E V E R

©Rita Sever, MA
All Rights Reserved
Do NOT Share This Document
without express written permission

Much of this work has been previously published in the “Matters of Supervision”
newsletters published by Rita Sever over the last ten years.

Chapter 1: How You Relate to People

It's About You

I don't always give money to people who are asking for money on the street, but when I do, I remind myself that the act is more about me than about them. I figured this out a few years ago and it's helped me immensely. Before I clarified this intention, I would wage a little argument in my head: "They'll just use it to buy alcohol," or, "This guy is probably a scammer." One day I realized, so what? My giving away my money was not about what the other person did with the money. If I choose to give someone a dollar, then it's not my dollar anymore and they can do what they want with it. The question for me was, "Am I the kind of person who gives money to homeless people?" Sometimes I am and sometimes I'm not. But the lesson I realized was that it is much more about me than about them.

This holds true in supervision too. What kind of supervisor are you? What kind of supervisor do you want to be? Are you controlling or are you collaborative? Are you focused on a coaching approach or a monitoring approach? Do you engage in two-way conversations or deliver one-way lectures? Are you focused on results or methods? The answers to these questions will help you determine how you want to act in any given moment.

I was recently coaching someone—let's call her Joyce—who wanted to be a supportive supervisor but kept talking down to her staff. We were talking about the difference between being authoritative and being respectful and clear. The difference between these two ways of being shows up in tone and language. I asked Joyce to consider the difference between these two statements: "Stop your gossiping and pay more attention to your work," versus "It is important that the work take precedence over social visits at work. I need you to cut down on your personal visits with your coworkers. How can you do that?"

Joyce listened to my examples, then immediately replied, "It won't make a difference what I say to them or how I say it." She was so focused on the actions of her staff that she overlooked her own actions.

In helping Joyce to understand that we needed to focus on her actions, I reminded her that, even as a supervisor, you can't control what other people do. This is a bottom-line truth of life, and it's an important truth to remember in the workplace too. The only person you **can** control is you. You can influence other people's actions but you cannot make anyone change. What can **you** do differently? What changes in your tone or approach might work to influence the employee to change? It's true that what you do might not make a difference, but you won't know until you try it. And if you're going to try something, you need to try it clearly and carefully by focusing on your own actions.

Granted, the authoritative approach may get immediate short-term results, but at what cost? Chances are that when you're out of the office the employees will revert to bad habits **and** that they will leave their jobs when presented with the opportunity. They also might develop resentment that will affect their work in other ways.

None of this is to suggest that your staff can do whatever they want with no consequences. If you try something and it doesn't work, then you need to figure out

another strategy, whether that strategy is to try another approach or to move on to a discipline process. The point is that you can only directly control what you do and hope to affect what your employees do through your actions.

Actively changing what you say and do can indeed make a difference. You can choose to be collaborative. You can choose to listen. You can be respectful **and** clear and direct. You can support your staff to make choices about their actions.

So the question remains, what kind of supervisor do you choose to be and how does that transform your actions? It's about you.

Coaching Corner

- Take two minutes to write out an answer to the question in this section: What kind of supervisor are you? Then take one minute to reflect on how that image of yourself matches up with your daily actions.
- Are there particular times when you seem to act in a way that doesn't reflect who you want to be as a supervisor? What are the circumstances? Are there particular actions, or people, that trigger a different response from you?
- Do you tend to worry about how others will respond to your words and actions? How might it be different if you focused on making sure you are saying and doing what you need to say and do instead of spending your time in hypothetical "what if"-land?

It's About Them Too

I was minding my own business sipping a cup of tea at a local Starbucks when a man and a woman sat down near me and started talking. I couldn't help but overhear their conversation, and it soon became clear that this was their first meeting. They had apparently met online. During the half hour that I remained sitting there before I left to attend to the rest of my day, I heard more of their conversation than I wanted to. And what did I hear of their conversation? I heard the man talking. And talking and talking. Establishing his pedigree and expertise. Clearly trying to impress. I couldn't help but think: "Shut up. Ask her a question! Let her have a chance to talk!"

This happens far too often in supervision as well as on first dates. The supervisor is so intent on showing her staff that she is an expert that she doesn't stop talking. The conversation is one-sided and becomes a lecture. That doesn't work well when you're trying to communicate information and it works even less well when you are also trying to build relationships.

We all have an instinctive need to be seen. We want to be recognized, known, and valued for who we are and what we bring to the world. This need does not stop at work. When staff members feel unseen, they disengage a little bit—or a lot. And you, as a supervisor, are the person most responsible for seeing them.

This seeing is not about making them feel good, although it might do that. It feels good to be seen for who you are. This kind of seeing is about knowing who people are in terms of their work. It means seeing the strengths and weaknesses they bring to the job at hand. The relationship building that needs to happen as a part of supervision is based on the basic principle that people are different from each other and we all want to be seen

and respected. It is about basic respect. When you can respect who people are, and understand how to help them succeed, you will be a more successful supervisor and the organization will be more successful. It is that simple—and that complex.

One of the foundations of being a good supervisor is cultivating strong, healthy, and appropriate relationships with the people you supervise. This does not mean being friends with people. Being friends can get in the way of good supervision. “Healthy” means respecting the boundaries of the relationship. You’re not trying to know everything about your staff. You’re not trying to heal their childhood wounds. You are trying to help them do their job well.

Relationships, whether personal or professional, grow through time and talk. That’s how we get to know people, by talking to them and spending time with them. We like to think work is different and we can just throw directions at someone and everything will be fine. And it might be, for a while. But if you want your team to be successful, you have to actually know who the team members are and how they work—individually and together. And that means you have to set aside time to connect with them, individually and together. It doesn’t have to be a lot of time, but it does need to be consistent time.

Your relationships with your staff are built, or eroded, every time you talk. When you stop to say hello, when you scream at them that they did something wrong, when you explain a new work assignment, or when you ask how their injured dog is doing. It all matters.

Your time and your conversations with your staff are the foundation of a strong relationship with the people you supervise. These relationships continue to evolve based on the way you give assignments, how you give feedback, how you collaborate with your team, and how you display your power and authority. You make the relationship stronger when you keep your appointments with your staff. When you are trustworthy you let people know that you respect them and the work. All of these actions show how you see people, or how you don’t.

In the overheard date at the coffee shop, the man was definitely being seen and heard. The woman, not so much. I have no idea if this initial date progressed to a second date, but unless the guy changed his approach, I doubt it. People need to be seen—on dates and at work.

Coaching Corner

- Think of your relationship with someone close to you. How did you build the relationship? Did you ever stay up all night talking? Did you do things together? Did you talk it through when you had misunderstandings? Think about the parallels of these kinds of interactions in supervision. You’re not going to stay up all night talking, but you can commit to regular meetings so you know you have time to talk.
- When have you felt unseen or unheard? What did it feel like? What did you do about it?
- What comes up for you if you think of getting to know your staff? Perhaps you already know them well? When I suggest you can support people by paying attention to who they are, does that make sense to you or do you have an argument? Perhaps you have been advised to not get too close to your staff. Make

a list of your concerns and then reread this chapter to see if your concerns are answered.

My Way or the Highway

I coached a supervisor, Diane, who practiced many good supervision habits. However, when she had me interview her staff, I found out that she drove them nuts! The reason? She insisted that each and every member of her team accomplish their tasks the way she would accomplish them.

Robert was a strong assistant to her but he was not overly organized. Although he responded to every request from Diane in a timely manner and had never misplaced a file, Diane continually rated him poorly on “organizing skills” and reminded him at least monthly that he needed to clean his desk.

Another one of her staff members, Katri, worked with clients and had never had a complaint about her work. Diane berated her for being too chatty and for letting her client documentation pile up throughout the day. If Diane was in Katri’s job she knew she would be friendly but not chatty, and with the time she saved she would complete the paperwork after each client and file it away immediately. Katri preferred to chat with each person and keep a pile of paperwork to be completed in her desk. At the end of the day, she filed all the paperwork.

Diane’s third employee David was another matter. He handled the financial records for the organization. He was an exempt employee, and he insisted that it worked better for him to come into work after hours to do his work. Diane was frustrated when she needed reports or data and David was not there to give them to her. They communicated through e-mail and David would get her the information she needed in the evenings when he came into work. She didn’t doubt that he was working, but she was constantly begging him to shift his work hours to match the rest of the team.

Diane was a well-intentioned supervisor but she needed to let go of her “my way or the highway” attitude. There are times when it is essential to change the manner in which staff members are doing their jobs. For example, Diane was well within her rights to insist that David work during regular business hours. His absence affected her ability to do her work, and impacted other members of the team also. I worked with Diane to tell David that his work was part of the team process and that he needed to participate accordingly. While he was exempt, that did not mean he got to set his own hours. Diane reviewed the meaning of being an exempt employee with David and then told him that the basic hours of this job were eight to five. If those hours had not worked for David, Diane could have considered whether some compromise hours would work or if she did in fact need to find someone who could work the regular schedule. Fortunately, David adjusted his schedule and his team involvement improved.

For the other staff members, however, Diane was confusing the way **she** would handle a situation with the requirements of the job. The basic question for Diane and other supervisors is “How does this impact the employee’s ability to do his or her work?” If the answer is that it doesn’t, then the concern may just be a matter of style differences. If the work is adequately completed but the way someone does it annoys you, then you might need to look inward for the solution to the problem. Can you articulate how a person’s style is impacting the work in a negative manner? If not, consider letting it go

and focusing instead on the results.

Instead of a “my way or the highway” attitude, develop an approach of “my way or your way—as long as the requirements of the job get done.”

Coaching Corner

- Are there any members of your team who have a different style than you? How do you usually respond to that difference?
- Reflect on what meaning you give to the fact that someone does something in a completely different way than you do. Do you think they are wrong? Or that they might be criticizing your style? What do you tell yourself about the difference?
- Is there any staff member who you struggle with about how they do something? If so, use the basic question of “How does this impact the employee’s ability to do his or her work?” to ensure that the change is required by the work and not your own personal style.
- Imagine how you would frame a conversation with Robert, Katri, or David to either change a work practice or apologize for your hypervigilance and tell them you’re willing to try it their way as long as they get the needed results.