

## **Supervisor-Supervisee Primer:**

### **How just about anyone can make a mess of things at work.**

By: Karl Laves, Ph.D.

WKU faculty and staff ombudsperson

After twenty five years of working in the counseling field I have come to some conclusions about getting along at work that I would like to share with you. I offer these ideas in hope that you can find a way to reduce stress or tension at work. Why? Because there is way too much stress and tension already; that is the nature of work, and sadly we all seem perfectly able to create more stress than is necessary.

Don't get me wrong; this isn't one of those feel good /everyone is wonderful discussions of how we all need to be friends and then everything will go well. No, not even close. Conflict is natural and sometimes important at work. But too much conflict, unresolved conflict, or unnecessary conflict leads to misery. We are our own worst enemies. Each year we risk our physical health, our romantic and platonic relationships, and our job security by getting all worked up over work.

This is my point; though it is not in my nature to be brief or succinct. Feeling overlooked, overused, undervalued, and/or even hated is an unfortunate experience but one that we all have to face routinely in our adult lives. It happens when people come to work with their own values, interests, and agendas. We need to accept that it will happen and find less upsetting ways to deal with it. So here is what I have to contribute to the discussion of how we can reduce (probably can't avoid) feeling personally dismissed, marginalized, or ignored while at work.

And this advice is for supervisors and supervisees. As my mother used to say "it takes two to tango." And when you have a problem with someone, you are a part of the problem. You may be right, you may have the higher ground, and the other person may be the devil incarnate. But you are still a part of the problem, and, most of the time, you are more of the problem than you want to think.

Anxiety and fear tend to be contagious among humans. A boss may be scared of not being in control, so he/she overreacts to a worker coming in late, which makes that worker feel marginalized, so the worker becomes angry, which justifies in the boss's mind the harsh criticism for being late. So maybe the boss "started it" but the worker threw fuel on the fire.

Or say a worker used to be teased by a former supervisor but now works for a new supervisor. The new supervisor tries to break the ice by telling a joke but the worker hears it as more teasing. The supervisor didn't mean to be "wrong" but it felt that way to the worker.

So, here are some ideas to help reduce the accidental tension that can so easily occur on the job. These ideas are not meant to be solutions to behavior that is flat out illegal, unethical, corrupt, etc. But in my experience, most of the problems people have with others at work never involves illegal behavior. Most of the problems come from misunderstanding, old wounds, or different values.

#### Leave it at home

As much as older psychological theories have lost their popularity there is a lot of truth to the idea that we tend to treat people the way we have been treated growing up. And we tend to react strongly to people that are doing things to us that bothered us when we were young. For example, I recall being questioned a lot by my father, as though I couldn't be trusted to think on my own. So even now I am quick to become upset when someone questions me at work. I was also not allowed to challenge my father, so I tend to not challenge people at work when they question me. Instead I go around brooding with my feelings hurt. Here is the deal; the people at work might remind you of your family, but they aren't your family. It's a whole new world at work. Leave your family issues at home. Go ahead and assume that whatever happens at work isn't a repeat of what happened while you were growing up. It is okay to bring your personality to work, just don't bring your personal resentments and hot buttons. Assume any strong emotional reaction to another person at work might be something left over from your family life. Just because something might look like a duck doesn't mean it is a duck.

#### Don't play favorites

We all have favorites. Supervisors have favorite workers, department heads have favorite faculty, and staff have their favorite administrators. That is natural, that is normal, but don't let it affect your work. You can avoid a lot of conflict and tension if you treat everyone equally and fairly. It is natural to want to give your favorite employee more money and it is natural to want to work harder for your favorite boss; but try to avoid this at all costs. There is no law that says you have to like everyone at work but there are laws and principles that say you need to use your power, authority, and talent in a fair manner. Playing favorites is a quick way to kill any unity in a department or office. It creates a sense of mistrust that takes a long time to correct. How can you tell if you are playing favorites? Ask your

workers or supervisors. They will tell you. If they say you play favorites, then take their word for it. It isn't something that people just make up. In sum, if you are a supervisor (dean, director, supervisor, department head, etc. then DO NOT play favorites. If you are a supervisee, DO NOT assume that someone is a favorite just because he or she has different rules, certain privileges, etc. Those privileges might come with that person's particular job.

### All rules apply

Related to playing favorites is the idea of not holding everyone to the same rules. For example, if you ask everyone to come in on time but let one person come in late, you are messing up. Even if that person has a good reason to come in late, and he/she makes up the time after hours you are still messing up. As a supervisor, department head, boss, etc. you are responsible for your authority. Having two or more sets of rules breeds contempt. It puts the worker getting the slack in an awkward situation. Granted, everyone has to pull their weight and everyone has to earn their keep. It is your right to set expectations as high as you want, but you have to let everyone have access to the rewards. That is; you only have to give the reward if it is earned, but you also have to make sure everyone gets a fair shot. Don't let people with kids off early but expect those without kids to stay late. Flex time is fine, as long as everyone gets to use it if they want to use it. Sometimes bosses will try to reward workers by letting up on the rules. This is a mistake. Reward workers with rewards, not by changing the rules. Or if you are changing the rules be sure everyone knows that the rules have changed.

Another instance of rules not being enforced fairly is when you make up a rule in your head but you don't spell it out for your staff. Maybe you think people should stay late without extra pay because that is what you would do. But it isn't always about you. You might be the kind of person that skips lunch to do work, but don't expect others to do the same. This kind of unspoken expectation leads to playing favorites which in turn leads workers to become upset, unproductive, and confused. Workers cannot read your mind; you have to spell out your expectations and make sure that your expectations are available to all workers.

Likewise, supervisees need to understand that there are times when a rule doesn't serve a particular situation. We need to be flexible to get our work done. It isn't okay to change the rules to suit one person, but from time to time we all might need a special consideration. As long as it isn't a constant thing it should be okay.

### Don't hide your hurt

While it certainly helps if we all stay in a happy frame of mind, there are times when we are angry, hurt, scared, anxious, etc. and sometimes it is okay to let it out. Don't dump on the people around you, don't demand their attention, and don't make a big scene, but it is okay to express how you feel. Most of us can't hide strong feelings for very long. Sooner or later they come out. If we hold them in too long they come out with even more anger, rage, spite, etc. Do yourself and those around you a favor and calmly share when you have a strong reaction. Own it and don't blame it on someone else. Don't say "I am

really sick and tired of Jim goofing off and making me do all the work.” Just say “I am angry because it feels like I am doing other people’s work.” Start with the feeling, and then talk about the details of the situation. Maybe Jim was told to do another job, maybe Jim is sick and can’t keep up, or maybe Jim is the biggest goof up to ever work here.....but either way, protect yourself from being labeled the hothead by sharing your concerns calmly.

Related to not hiding your hurt is pouting. Some people can really make a stink at work by pouting. It is childish, it slows things down, and it is selfish. Hey, if you are mad, then be mad. Just understand that pouting is an unproductive way to get people to see your side of the story. So the point here is that it is okay to have strong feelings but you need to consider what you do with them. Whatever you think you are risking by talking about your feelings will usually not be as bad as what happens if you keep it all bottled up or blow up at the drop of a hat.

### It isn’t illegal to be unpleasant

This might be awkward, but I think it is the truth and so it needs to be said. We have all kinds of laws in America about what bosses can and cannot do. We have anti-discriminatory laws, sexual harassment laws, hostile work environment regulations and ADA compliance mandates. What we don’t have are laws that regulate being unpleasant. That is right, folks. It is not against the law to be unpleasant. It is perfectly legal to be a butt-head in America. Your boss can be as rude, egotistic, or clueless as can be, as long as he/she doesn’t run afoul of the above mentioned laws and policies. Your boss might really irritate you, but he/she is well within his/her rights to do so. Sure, it might be ineffective leadership and it might ruin the comradery of the staff, but it isn’t illegal.

So you can see how hard it is to accept that a boss can be unpleasant and there is nothing that can be done about it. It just feels wrong....but it isn’t. Just like McDonalds doesn’t have to make a burger that I like, my dentist doesn’t have to tell funny jokes, and my kids don’t have to worship me. It would be nice, or it seems like it would be nice, but it isn’t required by law. In a perfect world your boss would be one swell person. In a perfect world you would be one swell person too. But bosses can be mean and workers can be lazy, and no law is being broken.

My point is that too many people take this frustration to a higher level and spend their days brooding over the unfairness. They almost become paranoid about how unfair things are and then the misery really sets in. You don’t skip a picnic because of the ants, you don’t cancel a camping trip because it might rain, you don’t stay at home because you might be hit while driving, so why spend so much time thinking about how unfair it is for your boss to be mean, rude, or clueless? He/she has to answer for that. Yes, it is unfortunate and things could be better if the boss was pleasant, but things could be better anyway. You don’t have to wait for the boss to be happy in order to be happy. Life is short, death comes quickly and unexpectedly, and you don’t deserve to be miserable because of what someone else is doing.

And for the bosses reading this, your workers won’t always be happy either, and it might not be your fault. It isn’t illegal for a worker to be rude, egotistic, or clueless. As long as he/she does the work, it is legal for that person to be unpleasant. Yes, it is unfortunate. It would be better if he/she could grow

up, catch up, or catch on. But you don't have to go home each night and brood over how unfair it is that you have a worker that is rude, crude, or unaware.

### On your death bed, will this matter

Another way to reduce the intensity of an emotional reaction to a supervisor or a supervisee is to remind yourself every day of why you are here. It is easy to get caught up in the moment with anger or jealousy. But ask yourself, the next time you are getting mad at someone, if it will matter when you are on your death bed? Ask yourself is this something that will bother you twenty years from now? Ask yourself if you want to waste life worrying about this problem? If you do, then do it. Take action, don't hold back. But if it isn't that important then let it go. It isn't personal, the world will still function.

### Cutting people some slack

Whether you are a supervisor or a supervisee, cut people some slack. None of us are at a hundred percent all the time. The idea of giving a hundred and ten percent came from someone that did not understand math at all (yes, that was a cheap shop at my high school coach). The only way you can give one hundred and ten percent is if you were giving about eighty percent last time. People are complicated but generally well intentioned beings. We get sick, our kids get sick, we run out of money, our parents get sick, our marriages fail, our pets die, stuff happens. Cutting slack doesn't mean changing the rules....it means having rules that allow for people to have rough periods in their lives. Bosses need slack too. Sure, they get paid more, but they also have to answer for more. It all works out in the end. Maybe you have less money but you have more free time to enjoy it. Have you ever seen those big houses in town where no one is ever in the yard? They have to work too much to afford the house that they never get to enjoy it. So cut your boss some slack too. He/she is learning just like everyone else.

### What if you are wrong

So I hope so far you aren't feeling put down or scolded. That isn't my intent. I just want us all to own up to what we all do. It is normal for humans to assume that they are the smartest. We all feel like we know best. At least I hope we do. We should, because for the most part we do know what is best. BUT.....what about those times we are wrong?

Brilliant people can be wrong. It happens all the time. If you are wrong, just own up and offer an apology. If you mean it, people will accept it.

Thanks for taking the time to read these thoughts. I hope they are helpful in reducing tension at work. And remember that I am available as the Ombudsperson to meet with you privately and confidentially to find a solution for your work distress.