
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. At times individual and cultural differences may complicate working relations. Supervisors may be called on to listen to employees and give advice. (Although much of the discussion here is in the

context of farm supervision, farm family members are also called on to listen to each other.)

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 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



Jack Kelly Clark

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 meet a fellow farmer or supervisor and not greet him in any way, through either gesture or word. 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 them wonder what is wrong with the other.²

CULTURAL BARRIERS

In 1993, I had my first opportunity to visit Russia as a representative of the University of California. I was there to provide some technical assistance in the area of agricultural labor management. “Russians are a very polite people,” I had been tutored before my arrival. One of my interpreters, once I was there, explained that a gentleman will pour the *limonad* (type of juice) for the ladies and show other courtesies.

Toward the end of my three week trip I was invited by my young Russian host and friend Nicolai Vasilevich and his lovely wife Yulya out to dinner. At the end of a wonderful meal Yulya asked if I would like a banana. I politely declined and thanked her, and explained I was most *satisfied* with the meal. But the whole while my mind was racing: “What do I do? Do I offer her a banana even though they are as close to her as they are to me? What is the *polite* thing to do?”

“Would *you* like a banana?” I asked Yulya.

“Yes,” she smiled, but made no attempt to take any of the three bananas in the fruit basket. “What now?” I thought.

“Which one would you like?” I fumbled.

“That one,” she pointed at one of the bananas. So all the while thinking about Russian politeness I picked the banana Yulya had pointed at and peeled it half way and handed it to her. Smiles in Yulya and Nicolai’s faces told me I had done the right thing. After this experience I spent much time letting the world know that in Russia, the polite thing is to peel the bananas for the ladies. Sometime during my third trip I was politely disabused of my notion.

In México it is customary for the arriving person to greet the others. For instance, someone who walks into a group of persons eating would say provecho (enjoy your meal).



“Oh no, Grigorii Davidovich,” a Russian graciously corrected me. “In Russia, when a man peels a banana for a lady it means he has a *romantic* interest in her.” How embarrassed I felt. And here I had been proudly telling everyone about this tidbit of cultural understanding.

Certain lessons have to be learned the hard way. Some well meaning articles and presentations on cultural differences have a potential to do more harm than good and may not be as amusing. They present, like my bananas, too many generalizations or quite a distorted view.

Commonality of humankind

Differences between individuals within any given nation or culture are much greater than differences between groups. While at the San Francisco airport, a man caught my attention. He was conversing on the phone a distance from where I was sitting. There was something about him that made me wonder if he was Russian. Little pockets of words could be heard more distinctly at times. When I heard the word “*chilaviec*,” or *person*, my senses were confirmed. I wanted to try out my three words of Russian with him, and the opportunity presented itself about twenty minutes later when he passed next to me.



“Dobrie utra” (*good morning*), I said. This stopped him on his tracks.

“How did you know?” he asked incredulously as he turned to face me. We struck up a wonderful conversation about Russia. We had a number of common interests. Some time later, he pointed in the general direction of those boarding and indicated that there was another Russian that would be flying this leg.

When it was time for me to board, I reluctantly excused myself. As things turned out, after I sat down a quick glance at my neighbor’s reading materials indicated that he must have been the other Russian in the plane.

“Dobrie utra” (*good morning*), I said once again. Without ever looking up from his book, he simply and unenthusiastically answered “Dobrie utra” (*good morning*). End of conversation.

Education, social standing, religion, personality, belief structure, past experience, affection shown in the home, and a myriad of other factors will affect human behavior and culture.

Sure there are differences in approach as to what is considered polite and appropriate behavior both on and off the job. In some cultures “yes” means, “I hear you” more than “I agree.” Length of pleasantries and greetings before getting down to business; level of tolerance for being around someone speaking a foreign (not-understood) language; politeness measured in terms of gallantry or etiquette (e.g., a man standing up for a woman who approaches a table, yielding a seat on the bus to an older person, etc.); and manner of expected dress are all examples of possible cultural differences and traditions.

In México it is customary for the arriving person to greet the others. For instance, someone who walks into a group of persons eating would say *provecho* (enjoy your meal). In Chile, women often greet both women and men with a kiss on the cheek. In Russia women sometimes walk arm in arm with their female friends. Paying attention to customs and cultural differences can give someone outside that culture a

better chance of assimilation or acceptance. Ignoring these can get an unsuspecting person into trouble.

When I attended the University of California, Davis (not long after arriving to the U.S.), I was going up the stairways of my dormitory when a fellow student came down the stairs and said: “How’re you doing?” By the time I turned around to tell him, he was out the door. I discovered that “How’re you doing?” really means “Hello!” For the most part, the right response to the question, regardless of how one is doing or feeling, is something like, “Fine.”

This phenomenon is quite international, of course. Latinos, for instance, are famous for their open-ended invitations. You will typically hear, “you’ll have to come over for a swim [a ride, dinner, etc.] one of these days,” and is equivalent to the American businessman’s “we’ll do lunch sometime.” A true invitation is normally more specific. When nothing ever comes of these invitations, then the strength value of these strokes diminishes.

Language barriers can cause misunderstandings. Words may sound the same, yet have unlike meanings in different languages. Thus when a young woman, who was a non-native speaker, was prodded by her supervisor to say a few words in Spanish, she exclaimed, “Estoy muy embarazada.” And turning to point to her supervisor, added, “¡Y la culpa es de él!” (She thought she was saying, “I am very *embarrassed* and it is all *his* fault!” Instead, she had exclaimed, “I am very *pregnant*, and it is all *his* fault!”)

Punctuality can also have cultural connotations. Sometimes it is a matter of communication, however. During a visit to Brazil a multicultural diversity scholar developed a clever way of determining how punctual he had to be on a given engagement, by asking: “Hora brasileira? (Brazilian time?)” If the answer was yes, he knew the event would not be expected to start on time. This did not mean Brazilians did not know how to be prompt. When meeting time was more critical, they would specify either “Hora inglesa (British time),” meaning, *on time*, or “Hora

alemã (German time),” calling for strict punctuality. In Japan time may take on an even stricter meaning: a group of international visitors was asked to attend a reception honoring a Japanese dignitary. At the precise appointed time, the Japanese hosts closed the doors, locking out all the non-punctual guests.³

Food preparation can be quite different in various cultures. One farmer could not understand why his workers did not attend a specially prepared end-of-harvest meal. The lunch was cooked by the farm owners. Instead, farmers may find that workers are more likely to participate when the owners provide the beef, pork or other meat and delegate the food preparation to the workers, who can then season it their own way. A dairy farmer found out that his Mexican employees were not too excited about getting ground beef as a perk. Instead, they would have preferred the cow’s head, tongue, brains, as well as other cuts of meat that were not ground up.

At times it may appear that some workers, especially when there are social or ethnic differences, do not *participate* as easily. This is not because they do not have ideas to contribute, but rather, because these employees may need a little convincing that their ideas would be valued. Once this floodgate of ideas is opened, it will be difficult to stop them. In some sub-cultures, once a person has given an opinion, others are unlikely to contradict it. That is why some organizations ask their least senior employees to give an opinion first, as few will want to contradict the more seasoned employees. Setting up the discussion from the beginning as one where all ideas are welcome and valued, can be very fruitful. It is worth building an organizational culture where ideas are examined for their value, rather than for who offered them. Such a culture requires individuals to look for the good in ideas they do not espouse, as well as the potential pitfalls in those they advocate.

There *are* cultural and ideological differences and *it is good* to have an understanding about a culture’s customs and ways. But the danger comes when we act on some of these generalizations,



Jack Kelly Clark

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especially when they are based on faulty observation. Acting on generalizations about such matters as eye contact, personal space, touch, and interest in participation can have serious negative consequences.

Cross-cultural and status barriers

Often, observations on cultural differences *are based on our own weakness and reflect our inability to connect with that culture.* Cross-cultural observations can easily be tainted and contaminated by other factors. Perceived status differences can create barriers between cultures and even within organizations. Only through equality of respect between races and nations can we reach positive international relations in this global economy (as well as peace at home). Cultural and ethnic stereotypes do little to foster this type of equality.

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interpersonal feedback, good observation skills, effective questions, and some horse sense. There is much to be gained by seeing how people of the same culture interact with each other. Do not be afraid to ask questions. Most people respond very positively to inquiries about their culture. Ask a variety of people so you can get a balanced view.

Making a genuine effort to find the positive historical, literary, and cultural contributions of a society; learning a few polite expressions in another person's language (see Sidebar 12-1); and showing appreciation for the food and music of another culture can have especially positive effects.

My contention, then, is not that there are no cultural differences. These differences between cultures and peoples are real and can add richness (and humor) to the fabric of life. My assertion is that people everywhere have much in common, such as a need for affiliation and love, participation, and contribution. When the exterior is peeled off, there are not so many differences after all.

SIDEBAR 12-1

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.

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. Since this is not a practical option for most farmers, the next best approach is to check out language tapes at your local library.

I recommend starting with audio tape sets that have either one or two tapes only, as these are more likely to keep the vocabulary simple and expressions short. Listening to these tapes 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 cassette tape series and enjoy reading.

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When one adds language barriers to cultural differences, as we have said, additional challenges are posed. 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.

Below are suggestions (Sidebar 12-2) 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.

CONVERSATIONAL SKILLS

Longer speaking exchanges may take place as required by job-related assignments or by social interaction (e.g., at a company picnic, during a long cattle drive). Poor conversational skills may hinder interpersonal as well as working relations.

What makes a person difficult to talk to? People are apt to be dull conversational partners when they are interested in only one topic, tend to be negative, are overly competitive (that is, anything you say they want to outdo), talk excessively about themselves, resort to monosyllabic answers, or talk too much. Certainly, any of the traits above make it difficult to carry on an interesting conversation.

Some conversations are much more animated than others, involving some interruption, exchange of stories, and experiences. "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 While this



competition for sharing ideas and feelings can be invigorating at times, all too often both parties may feel discounted and dissatisfied.

Having an interest in what others have to say is a key to being a good conversationalist. Not only *having* an interest, but *showing* it, by *attending* to what the other individual is saying. In the words of Alfred Benjamin, “Genuine listening is hard work; there is little about it that is mechanical We hear with our ears, but we listen with our eyes and mind and heart and skin and guts as well.”⁵ In the process of attending or empathic listening, it is not enough to be able to repeat back what another has said, but it is just as important to show such an individual that she is important enough to give her our undivided attention. To “suspend our own needs”⁶ for a moment, while we truly absorb what the other person is telling us.

An effective conversationalist is also able to take and pass along talking turns.⁷ Keeping comments short and checking to make sure the other person is still interested are two essential conversational skills. In a mutually productive discussion, individuals will normally share equally in speaking and listening.

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.⁸ If they let someone else speak, they fear they may not get another turn. Of course, there are also times when people have a need to be listened to, rather than for conversation.

Whatever the reason, regularly monopolizing a conversation is likely to alienate others. To combat this vicious cycle, it is more effective to fully listen for a few minutes than to half listen for a longer period.⁹

At the opposite extreme, it also reflects negatively on a person when she is given a turn to speak but pouts or refuses it. A person who has nothing to say or is not sure she can express her feelings at the moment, can instead say something like, “That is an interesting

issue,” and then indicate who the turn will go to next,¹⁰ “Inesa, what do you think of that?”

Social conversation may include discussion of a matter of interest to the individuals involved such as talking shop, sports, health, weather, family, recreational activities, food, travel, or discussion about a mutual acquaintance or experience.

Almost any topic can be of interest as long as people realize they do not have to stay on that subject forever. People do tire quickly of the dark clouds of negativity, though. Often people talk about a subject of interest to all participants. If not, there is an unspoken agreement, “we will talk about what interests you now, and later we will talk about what interests me.”

VALUING EMPLOYEES

In Chapter 9 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 establishment, 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 be held in high esteem by the employee.

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 12-3). 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

SIDEBAR 12-2

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.)



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 his formal education as an asset. A second supervisor may view his seniority, or having worked up through the company, as his asset. Neither may value the other’s assets. Both may fight for resources on the basis of their 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 values. 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

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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. 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 spaced¹³ or there is a mentor relationship.

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 reassured 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 ideal as it sounds, this goal may be difficult to attain. Have you ever been so devastated by a personal challenge or by a 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. This is not a suggestion to set up a counseling practice, nor should supervisors routinely 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. Yet supervisors, especially at the farm, do wear some interesting hats—everything from delivering children to providing psychological first aid. If performance does not improve, supervisors may need to resort to the disciplinary process (Chapter 14).

Supervisors vary in their approaches to answering requests for advice or help. Some prefer to have employees take as

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much responsibility as possible for finding solutions and feel uncomfortable being directive. Unfortunately, most people have little trouble telling others what they should do, even when not asked. On the way home from a father-daughter date, I asked one of my daughters if I could give her some *free advice*. “I certainly don’t plan to pay for it,” she smiled.¹⁴

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 12-4).

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.

SHARPENING LISTENING SKILLS

When helping employees, often the key is not so much in trying to solve their problems but in being a good listener. By being listened to, employees are often empowered to solve challenges on their own. A supervisor who is asked for help, either on a personal or work-related problem, can provide it by giving advice as an “expert” or by being a good listener. Regardless of the approach taken, a critical first step is to clearly understand the nature of the difficulty. Often, the *presenting* problem (i.e., what the difficulty appears to be on the surface) is not the issue that is really vexing the employee.

In trying to understand the employee you may use the *reflective* approach. In essence, it requires restating what the other is saying to make sure you have properly grasped the meaning. For

SIDEBAR 12-3

Helping Employees Deal With Grief¹¹

A study was conducted 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 sooner and concentrate better than 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 divorce¹² or other personal challenges also need to feel care and understanding at work.



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.

instance, an individual using such an approach may say: “If I understand you correctly, you find it difficult to work with Guillermo.” The reflective approach can be overdone, though. Workers will become impatient or irritated if you mirror everything they say. Mirroring is especially crucial in highly emotional situations or where possible misunderstandings exist.

Perhaps you have asked someone you are trying to help *why* something is happening. Often, he will tell you he does not know. A related question tends to yield better results, “Have you *tried to imagine* what may have led to such and such happening?” The answer may be more instructive and increase the listener’s understanding.

Other approaches to help workers express themselves or clarify their feelings include allowing for longer periods of silence or expressing confusion, “I’m not sure I understand.” In the process of listening for

understanding, asking for clarification, and examining possible solutions, a supervisor’s understanding of the worker’s difficulty evolves.

Expert approach

The expert or “medical” approach is directive. The supervisor listens to problems presented by the employee, makes a diagnosis, then recommends the best solution. A skillful advice giver will try to diagnose the situation through a series of questions. A rough rule of thumb is that technical problems may be best solved through the expert approach. Also, the expert approach can be quite effective when (1) there are great differences in knowledge, (2) there is one right answer, or (3) there is an emergency (e.g., a rancher calls the veterinarian to handle a colt with colic).

Often the person asking for help knows little about the subject or even what questions to ask. A worker may ask his supervisor what fertilizer to use,

how to properly mix it, and how to calibrate the nozzles for spraying. The supervisor might answer these questions and provide other useful advice. An important part of the process 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.

Supervisors may hold very definite opinions. At times they may be sure of what approach they would take while realizing others may benefit from a different approach. Counselors should not suggest their clients violate their own principles or beliefs. Nor should advisors be expected to be amoral. Sometimes, as a helper, supervisors may find alternative solutions reprehensible or unethical. Supervisors will want to let employees know when this is the case. The employee can then choose to seek help from someone else if he so desires. Often, however, people will seek a supervisor's opinion because they respect her values.

Supervisors who are asked for advice in the workplace have the advantage of knowing more about the situation—compared to outsiders. This can also be an obstacle. Someone who is too close to the situation may already be part of the problem, have preconceived ideas, or may have trouble listening carefully.

The expert method does not always work well. It can be frustrating to the employee who has “her problems solved” in a manner incompatible with her philosophy or style. Diagnostic skills vary, and experts may also fail to properly detect “where it hurts.” As we have alluded to earlier, the expert approach may contribute to over-dependence on the advice giver. Increasingly, people want multiple expert opinions and do not want to rely on a single outlook. Supervisors who are asked for advice should not be so invested in their own recommendations that they take offense when these are not followed. Those who seek advice would do well to explain that they are seeking guidance from several people and will make a decision after weighing the different opinions.

Often, people appear to be asking for help but only want someone to listen. They may even tell the person who tries to help to be quiet and listen. Likewise, employees may be more interested in impressing you with the impossibility of solving the problem than in finding a solution. Such a person may respond with a “Yes, but,” to every suggestion you make, as if to say, “I dare you to find a solution to this problem.”¹⁶ If you sense this trap, it is a good indicator that you may be trying to answer as an expert when a listener is needed instead.

Listener approach

The listener approach is one where the supervisor is more focused on attending to the needs and feelings of the employee than in trying to solve a problem. Most often, it is about celebrating one person's success or sharing in another's sadness. If the situation does involve a challenge that needs solving, the supervisor should realize that the challenge is owned by the employee. The rule of thumb here is that *relationship issues*, as well as challenges that have existed for a *long time*, may require a listening approach. The listening or counseling approach can be frustrating to the employee who wants an expert. In the listener approach, the assumption is that the solution lies within the person with the problem—this may not be the case.

We spoke earlier about empathic listening, which requires that we *suspend our own needs* and preoccupations for a moment, while we truly absorb what the other person is telling us. Empathic skills are critical to the listener. There are no shortcuts here. People can tell when they have been put off.

There are those who assure us that they can listen and do something else at the same time, such as work on the computer, read a newspaper, train a horse, or attend to other business. While it is true that some individuals are better at multi-tasking than others, nevertheless, the message that is given to the speaker is discomfiting: “You are not important enough at this moment

SIDEBAR 12-4

Your Monkeys¹⁵

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 take their monkeys.

for me to attend exclusively to your needs."

There is yet another way we discount the needs of others. And that is by sharing our own story of loss, disappointment, or of success, before the individual has had the opportunity to be heard in his story. We may feel that sharing our own story is proof that we are listening, but instead, the other person feels we have stolen the show.¹⁷ This is not to say that there is no room to share our story with others, but rather, to make sure that they have actually finished sharing theirs first. We encourage others by empathic listening, by showing the person with body language, or by a "hmm," "go on," or "tell me more," that we are still listening and interested.

When a person is not listening we can often see it in his body language: "The automatic smile, the hit-and-run question, the restless look in their eyes when we start to talk."¹⁸ Some advice givers may come across as experts even though they have used no direct statements. For example, they may use questions such as, "Don't you think ...?" or, "Have you tried ...?" Advice givers will want to avoid being direct while trying to come across as an open-minded listener.

I observed a speaker, a therapist by training, who freely used the line, "I can see you are hurting," with those who were asking questions at a conference. I

was the conference interpreter and was in a position to observe the audience. One older man told his sad story, and the speaker used his line at the right moment, it seemed. The participant leaned back and stopped talking. I could see in his eyes and body posture that he had felt empathy from the therapist. The man had been touched and now felt understood. I was impressed. It seemed to me, however, that with each subsequent use of "I can see you are hurting," the catchy phrase became increasingly artificial. Fewer people were convinced of its sincerity and the line soon meant "be quiet, I want to move on." If we do not have time to listen at the moment, it is better to say so.

Often people begin with the intention of listening, but get derailed along the way, but not necessarily because they do not have time. There is a natural but unfortunate tendency to switch from a listening to a directive approach in the course of a counseling session. The listener may want closure, or forget that individuals tend to have their own problem-solving styles. People often say things like, "If I were in your position, I would have" Maybe so. Perhaps *we would have* solved the problem had we been in her place. Different personality types may approach specific challenges in predictable ways, with likewise foreseeable results. For instance, some people would not dream of complaining

to a co-worker that something the other is doing was bothering them, but instead would let it fester inside. Others might have trouble keeping their opinions to themselves. At times people may assume they are different from another, yet in the same situation would feel just as conflicted about how to proceed.

Often people listen and ask questions with the idea of confirming their own observations. A much more effective approach is to be moved by a *spirit of curiosity*. Such an approach has been called a stance of “deliberate ignorance,” or “not-knowing.” Through the curiosity stance people move away from “diagnostic matching” towards “naive inquiry.” Inquisitive listeners “never assume that they understand the meaning of an action, and event, or a word.”¹⁹ Our effectiveness as a listener is often lost if we solve the problem before the person we are attempting to help does. The good listener has enough confidence in himself to be able to listen to others without fear.

In empathic listening, we need to give the person a chance to tell us how she really feels. Avoid the desire to come to the rescue and “make it all better” with such platitudes as “next time you will do great,” “you need to worry less,” “you can get another one,” or “don’t be silly, you have nothing to worry about.” Telling an employee that with time a certain disappointment will hurt less is not very comforting at the moment. An important part of listening is allowing people to get some weight off their chest or to make their burden a shared one, even if it is only for a moment. There is great therapeutic value in being able to think aloud and share a problem or a challenge with someone who will strictly listen. The process of trying to explain a problem to another person helps us to better understand ourselves and our challenge.

Listening is not the same as being quiet. The right question or reflective comment may help the employee or colleague know that we are listening. It may well help them better explain themselves. But even good questions can be ineffective at the wrong time. Just as sharing similar experiences can



be a way to derail or take over a conversation, so can the asking of inopportune questions.”²⁰

After the initial period of listening, there may be a need to help the employee move forward. Diagnostic questions may well be appropriate at this time. The focus of these questions is to understand the challenge the worker is facing. The supervisor avoids giving direct suggestions on how to solve a problem.

Questions may include: “What approaches have you tried?” “What alternative are you leaning toward?” “What do you plan to do about it?” “How would you feel if you followed

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 12-5

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.

The listener approach is one where the supervisor is more focused on attending to the needs and feelings of the employee, than in trying to solve a problem. Often people begin with the intention of listening, but get derailed along the way, but not necessarily because they do not have time.

his advice?" "What are you trying to accomplish?" "What will happen if you take a month before acting?" "Have you ever told him you felt this way?" "What are you planning to do if that does not work?" "How is this challenge affecting you?"

After listening for a while, if you are looking for a positive closure, an effective question to ask the employee is, "So, what do you *plan* to do now?" This question allows the employee to have the last word, summarize what he is feeling, and take back ownership of the challenge. This is especially important if we have fallen into the easy trap of giving unwanted advice and thus stolen the problem from the employee.

If, as a listener, you have more time and feel comfortable with the helping process, you may take the process further by brainstorming with the person

with the difficulty in an attempt to come up with multiple and creative solutions. Each solution's positive and negative contributions are only examined after brainstorming. It is best if the person who owns the challenge offers the most brainstorming ideas. At the onset, none of these ideas are either defended or criticized. Then, the supervisor asks the worker to evaluate each alternative by listing its pros and cons. Perhaps a solution that is a combination of strategies will be chosen. The supervisor may help in this process, but at the end the worker is left to weigh the various solutions himself. Although it takes more tact and skill, an excellent helper encourages people to go past simply speaking about their difficulties, to making specific plans to reduce or eliminate them.

Those we are attempting to help may have developed *blind spots*. Blind spots prevent us from seeing our own faults. For instance, we do not always see how our actions may be contributing to our difficulties. As long as blind spots exist, we tend to blame everyone but ourselves for our predicaments. Not everyone can *challenge* these blind spots. A helper must earn the right to do so,²¹ by showing empathy and true concern. Nor can the challenge appear judgmental.

A final point is the need for strict confidentiality. There may be a few exceptions where information may need to be shared with other individuals on a need-to-know basis. Specifics often need not be mentioned. Permission may be



solicited from the affected worker if appropriate. A supervisor may also want to seek advice from a qualified professional on how to handle sensitive or troublesome topics.

Part of being a good listener may require consciously fighting to keep an open mind and avoid preconceived conclusions. A supervisor may want to continually assess her advice-giving style in a given situation. For instance, she may ask herself: Am I ...

- allowing the person with the problem to do most of the talking?
- avoiding premature conclusions based on what the employee is telling me or on information I have obtained from other sources?
- assisting the employee in solving his own problem, or am I being overly directive?
- permitting the employee to retain ownership of the problem?

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. We also looked at personal and cultural differences affecting interpersonal relations.

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.

Among the many activities in which supervisors are involved, employee counseling is one of the most difficult. It is often too natural and easy to use an expert or directive mode, even when an

active listening approach would be more effective. A good listener helps by letting people get problems off their chest, rather than by solving specific challenges for others.

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