

The 9 Pitfalls of New Supervisors and How to Avoid Them!

By Cheri Baker, SPHR
Principal, Emergence Consulting

Congratulations on your promotion! All of your hard work has paid off, and now you've been given a team of your own to manage. Supervision can be a highly rewarding endeavor, both professionally and personally. For those of you who have been a non-supervisor for a long time and thinking "If only I were the supervisor I would..." this is your chance to shine. This article will help you avoid some of the common pitfalls that new leaders often fall into.

Pitfall One: Creating Perceptions of Favoritism

This pitfall is particularly dangerous if you are now supervising people that you used to work with. As soon as your employees decide that you like certain people and you don't like others, it is the kiss of death for your effectiveness. Don't fall into temptation. Even more challenging, you are working to avoid perceptions of favoritism. Even if you are truly fair and impartial, perceptions can still exist, and it is your job to go the extra mile to avoid all appearance of favoritism.

I'm starting this article with one of the hardest messages to accept. Your employees cannot be your friends. If you are now managing people who are friends, and you want to be effective as a leader, you're going to need to distance yourself gently from that relationship. This can be a hard thing to hear, but it is true. Don't misread this, I encourage you to be "friendly" with all of your employees, but it is important to be friendly to them in an equal way. This means that if you invite one employee to your house for a barbeque, you invite them all, or at least you make sure you rotate who is invited.

Think I'm overreacting? There is going to come a time when two of your employees are going to be in conflict, and you are going to make a decision that pleases one better than the other. If you allow perceptions of favoritism to exist, every time you make a decision people will assume it is because of whom you like, and who you don't like. Your credibility will go down, and so will your ability to influence your team.

If you have friends on your team, this is going to be a tough one. Gently sit your friends down and explain to them that your role has changed, and that because of it you won't be able to hang out with them, go out to lunch, or whatever you used to do that might create perceptions of favoritism. This distance may feel cruel, but it is a requirement if you are going to be a competent leader. Am I asking you to choose between your friends and your job? Yes. Remember though, you won't be their boss forever. Ignore this pitfall at your peril.

Pitfall Two: Getting Visibly Upset

Yes, you will get frustrated early on in your supervisory role and I'm not asking you to be a robot. Nor am I suggesting that you give up your humanity or your vulnerability - you'll need both! However, accept that you may get angry and frustrated when you are a supervisor, and that you'll need to put a lock on demonstrating those feelings for a while.

It's not unusual for a new supervisor to be challenged by an employee. Anything bad you ever said about management is about to come back to haunt you. You may say that the CEO has decided that all employees will attend a mandatory training session, and an employee laughs and said "You always said those training sessions are stupid!" It may even be a more direct attack, such as "You don't know any more than I do about this, why should you decide?" Be prepared for attacks, and be prepared to keep your emotions under control.

It can be hard to imagine this in the beginning, but your team will be looking to you as a source of confidence and also as a model of how to behave. It's not the end of the world if you get upset, but you will be well served to take any of these conflicts "offline" and into a private location. Model calm behavior, and if you get angry, hurt, or upset, try not to put those feelings on display in front of the group - at least not in the beginning.

Why? As a new supervisor you lack the experience that will help you deal with challenges to your authority. Because of this, it is easy to sound defensive and crabby when you respond. Being defensive and crabby will damage your relationship with the witnesses. Therefore it's best to keep your cool. School your tone, your words, and your facial expressions.

Pitfall Three: Venting or Listening In to Venting

In the old days you could confide in a coworker when you needed to vent. You could grab a friend and talk about the meeting, your annoying officemate, or the latest company policy. As an employee, it was OK to vent from time to time. As a supervisor, you can still vent, but you'd better make sure you're venting to another supervisor. Why?

Imagine this scenario: You are talking with an employee, perhaps even an employee from another team. You remark casually that you think the new dress code is annoying, even though you have to stick with it. Three days later you are asked by your boss to talk about the dress code, and when you do, an employee remarks "You think the policy is annoying, so why should we care about it?" Assume that anything you say to any employee is written on a postcard and mailed to your staff. The grapevine is real.

Imagine another scenario: One of your employees is constantly picking her nose. Two other employees are talking about this at the water cooler and you walk up to get some water. You overhear the conversation and smile. One employee says "it's so gross!" and you nod your head. A week later the nose-picking employee is in tears and uncommunicative with you, she heard from a peer that "the boss thinks her nose picking is gross" and she is humiliated.

Don't vent to non-supervisors. Don't talk about other people when they are not present. Don't listen in casually to employee venting. Got it?

Pitfall Four: Relying on your Experience of Other Supervisors

When you become a supervisor, you are probably going to be tempted to act like your former supervisors did. When something happens, you will search your memory banks and say "how did Jane handle this?" as a point of reference. While this is normal, keep in mind that your former manager Jane may have been an ineffective supervisor. When you're looking to do something you have not had experience with, ask a trusted resource.

Get a mentor, whether that is your boss, an HR manager, or another supervisor. Say "This happened and I'm planning on doing X. How does that sound?" Don't become a carbon copy of whomever you worked for, unless you are certain they were a fabulous manager. Even then you'll want to develop your own style. Also, ask people for references to great books on management, and read widely. Talk to other supervisors about what works for them. Remember that your education is ongoing.

Pitfall Five: Being Bossy

You may be the boss, but keep in mind the most effective bosses listen to their employees. Keep in mind that you have one brain, with a certain amount of knowledge, and that by using the brains of everyone in the room, you'll make better decisions. So when you suggest a course of action, and you get pushback from your team, consider asking them why they are concerned and what they would do differently. You won't have time to do this in every situation, but being open to dissent and feedback is a key competency of leadership. There is a difference between being decisive and being bossy. Usually you'll only be accused of being the latter if you never take the time to include others in the discussion.

Leadership is about listening. Keep that in mind.

Pitfall Six: Not Clarifying your Expectations

If you have not been clear with your staff about what your expectations are for them, they have no reason to meet them. Keep in mind that your expectations of them may shift, and that they may be different from that of your predecessor. If your predecessor was lax with the time clock but you won't be, say "I expect everyone to be on time. I know this is a change, but it is my expectation." Don't be afraid to be direct. Clarity is a good thing.

A powerful way to clarify your expectations is to meet with each staff member within a few weeks of your promotion. Tell them that you want to know how they feel about the department, what they expect from you, and then tell them what you expect of them. Be friendly and relaxed, but be clear. It's much easier to clarify expectations **before** the train has gone off the rails, not afterwards.

With this, be sure that you are clear about what your boss expects of you! What is your job description? What meetings will you need to attend? How will your performance be measured? How will you know if you are off track? Where can you go for help?

Pitfall Seven: Using a Hammer when a Nudge Will Do

Let's say you have an employee who didn't turn a report in on time. If you've worked for authoritative managers in the past, your inclination may be to leap right to "writing the person up" for making a mistake. The truth is, all you have is data. A report was due, and it is missing. Ask the person why the report is not in. Then decide what to do.

Consult with your boss and your HR person about how to handle performance issues. Remember that as a new manager you're flying blind, and that by using a hammer when a nudge will do, you may damage the relationship. Disciplinary action is like a hammer - it is powerful and gets people's attention. As a new supervisor, keep the hammer under glass, and ask for instructions when you think you want to use it.

Pitfall Eight: Being Afraid to Say No

Recognize that as a supervisor you may be asked to do more than is humanly possible. Let's say that you are scheduled to meet with your team to complete a project under deadline, and that the timing is very tight. Your boss calls you and says he needs you to interview a candidate for another management job, and that it is very important. What do you do?

You tell your boss "I'm scheduled to take care of X today, and if that is delayed we won't get it out the door until tomorrow. I think it is more important that we finish X, which would make me unavailable for an interview. Do you agree?"

As a supervisor you'll find yourself managing scarce resources: money, people, and time. Don't be afraid to point out that prioritizing one thing may harm another. Get good advice from your boss on what comes first, and when things clash and you can't figure it out, ask for help. Overtime is common in management positions, but avoid the temptation to work excessive overtime simply because you are afraid to tell people no. If you do so, you'll burn out and lose effectiveness anyway.

Pitfall Nine: Giving Up Your Personal Life

Leadership by design requires sacrifice, and often what you will be sacrificing is your time and energy. It is entirely normal for your first 3-6 months as a supervisor to involve extra hours because you're learning and catching up, but it is also unhealthy for you to let your job consume your life.

As a self-acknowledged workaholic, I loved my management job and often worked it to the tune of eleven hour days. When combined with a long commute, this took a toll on

my health, attitude, and relationships. I found myself overweight, chronically tired, and with little energy for friends and family.

Find the balance. Set some limits and live by them. Whether that means that you always leave work on time on Fridays, or that you take a long weekend once a quarter, find a way to make it work. Supervision is a wonderful opportunity, but it can't take the place of your spouse, children, or friends. Nor can it make up for an unhealthy lifestyle. There are going to be times when you are exhausted and ineffective, and at those times I recommend you take a day off of work. Yes, those days off will occur at the worst times, but if you grind yourself down to a stub your work will suffer. Suck it up. Have a life.

Your time as a new supervisor will be exciting, and you have a lot to learn. Keeping a log or journal of your experiences can help you keep track of the "lessons" you'll accumulate as you go along. I wish you the best of luck.