



SUPERVISOR'S Signpost

CT Training & Technical Assistance Center

Supervisor's Signpost 2022-1

Positively Motivating Personnel

You want to attract and keep the most creative, innovative, energetic, smartest people, right? Of course, you do; everybody does. So how do you create the environment at your agency that puts that little mission statement into action? You've told yourself you can't pay your people more. Okay, let's stipulate to that. So, what, now you're out of ideas? That's it? Good grief, let's dig into our manager's training notes and see what we can find.

First, create a positive, encouraging, supportive work environment free of all the toxic waste that tries to find its way in. Just look around and you'll probably see six webinars and news articles a week with tips on how do that.

Second, sit back and take a good long listen for clues about what is frustrating your employees. Is there equipment that is always broken down? Can't get it fixed right now? Ok, say that. Tell them that. Make them feel heard. Tell them what you do have in mind. Maybe you're programming it into next year's budget or some other longer-term plan. Share that and keep them updated.

Are there processes or rules that hamper their progress or make it unnecessarily hard? Is it possible they are outdated and can be updated or just go away? Why not solicit their thoughts on how they should be evolved? Ok, you will have to sift through some griping and moaning a bit, but you might be surprised to learn some of the road blocks your team encounters as well as their ideas for what could be done to clear them. Chances are you will find a few solutions in there – why not try one or two?

Are team members not getting opportunities to take on new challenges they believe they can handle? Are you outsourcing work to contractors that your crews have the time, equipment, and expertise to perform? Why aren't you reinforcing their skill sets with these tasks? Perhaps you have good reason, but they will feel a lot more respected if you address it with them. Again, the discussion might help you see it in a new light. Of course, the opposite could be true – the crew might feel that there are certain activities that could be more efficiently handled by a specialty contractor and thereby free them up for the things that they can uniquely address.



Do they perceive that there are rules that apply to some but not others? Maybe their perception is off. Or perhaps they've stumbled upon the truth and you're too close to see it? Dig in a bit, attempt an honest evaluation, and if there's some truth to the matter, make some corrections...and find an appropriate time to thank them for bringing it to your attention.

Do team members worry about the security of their job, regardless of how dedicated they are? Do they feel respected? By you? By their colleagues? By higher-ups? By the public? By contractors? Being respected isn't the same thing as being agreed with. All of us want to be heard when we think we have an innovative approach, a new idea, a concern. We could be wrong and may be told so, and we'll accept that. But if we can't even get an audience, we can feel disrespected. Now, granted, there is the occasional Michael Keaton with 30 ideas a day ("Why don't they just FEED mayonnaise to the tuna?!" – name that movie), but even a chucklehead like that will, statistically speaking, come up with a good one here and there. It's just the law of averages.

Here's an idea. Once a quarter, once a year, whatever, maybe pull the crew together for a pizza lunch (throw in some of those parmesan bread bites, and you are gold) with a little agenda. Call it Turbo Tuesday or something corny like that, and tell them that the smartest ideas (while you're waiting for the pizza to arrive) eat first. Maybe you have a couple of those Wawa gift cards on hand when someone throws out a particularly thoughtful challenge with an equally thoughtful idea for a solution.



In your organization, do you do those annual reviews? Let's face it – ah, never mind; it's not worth the rant. Suffice to say, these can too often be an exercise that doesn't yield much. Turn it around and make it into something that can unearth limiting factors for a crew member or the team at large. Ask questions. Do you think your skills are being put to greatest use, and if not, how should they? Are you getting the kind of training and opportunities to expand your skills, and if not, what are you hoping for? Which piece of equipment frustrates you the most, and what do you think we should do about it? Is your solution financially realistic, and how do you think it will improve the operation? Is there a policy or operating procedure that limits the team's effectiveness, and what do you suggest? Do we have the right kind of safety procedures in place and the correct personal protective equipment; if not, what do you suggest?

These kinds of discussions, either as a team or one-on-one can be very proactive management. Done right, they can demonstrate the respect you have for crew members, their experience, their skills, and their insight on the operation. They can reveal limiting factors that you weren't aware of or didn't recognize the significance of. They can teach you who on the team is most wired to propel the operation to greater excellence (and yes, who likes to gripe but doesn't have any solutions).

You won't be able to correct every challenge or deploy every good idea, because you have your own limitations (budget, optics, politics, etc.), and you should be as transparent as you can with the team about those things. But even if you implement a suggested solution here and there, you are going to encourage a positive approach to improving the organization. Think of the satisfaction that anyone enjoys when they put forth a suggested improvement and it is tested – for most of us, it encourages us to look for the next opportunity because we don't think our energy will fall on deaf ears.



The best organizations encourage innovation and educated risk taking. A crew that is paralyzed by fear of failure won't put forth new ideas and innovations. A crew that is supported to try new approaches, even when the idea doesn't pan out, will be motivated to think in those terms, and if thoughtful ideas are tried, more will work than fail. When an idea works, the win should be celebrated – we don't take enough time out to celebrate wins.

Speaking of celebrations, what about the tried-and-true concept of the employee of the month? Okay, it can be annual or quarterly (anything but bi-monthly, because no one knows if that's every two weeks or every other month, and who needs that confusion?), but why not create a couple of awards or recognitions that recognize the crew or team member that has achieved excellence? These don't need to be elaborate or costly – it's the recognition that really matters. If awards are aligned with organizational goals and the winners are chosen in a way that the rest of the crew recognizes as legitimate, it reinforces the notion that good habits are noticed, are appreciated, and are important.

Depending upon your approach, these can take the form of a wall plaque with the monthly, quarterly, or annual winner, they can be a trophy, they can be a framed certificate, or even a gift card for a local restaurant or sporting goods store. You can throw a crew lunch – maybe bring in one of those food trucks everyone seems to love these days. For the big one, maybe the winner is the honorary Mayor for a day (how much damage could they do in a day). Recognizing these champions in front of the City Council is a way to elevate the team's good works for the elected officials and residents to witness.

The form of these awards or recognitions should be shaped by the goals of the organization, which is to say they should be aligned with the things that are important to the community. For example, you could recognize the most productive crew – maybe with a hoagie (sub, grinder, hero, blimpie, whatever you call them) lunch for the crew. How about best at dealing with a concerned resident? The most innovative crew or team member can encourage positive approaches (maybe, for instance, someone who was a finalist in the Build a Better Mousetrap competition) that save money, increase safety, or just make things easier. You can recognize those with the least sick time – maybe with a day off. You can recognize the most improved skill set for a team or an individual. To encourage positive team dynamics, you can recognize the most supportive crew member. Look at what is important to your organization and then get creative. Perhaps even ask the teams what their ideas are for meaningful and achievable awards that anyone in the organization can aspire to.

These are just a sampling of ideas to get your creative juices flowing. The point is that management should be a proactive endeavor. As a manager at any level, take some time out to think about ways in which you can draw the best out of your most energetic and innovative team members and recognize them for their good work. Look, more pay can certainly be a positive motivator, and you should do your best to compensate employees appropriately, but your managerial toolkit shouldn't end there. The more you can remove frustrations of the job from the equation (be them faulty equipment, caustic team members, outdated policies, or procedures that don't work) and recognize excellence, the better environment you will create to attract and keep team members that will shine.

Get creative. Be proactive. Build a great team. Make a great team even better. It is within your power, and as a manager, it's an important part of the job.

For more information on the T2 Center's Educational Programs and other copies of the Supervisor's Signpost, visit our website at: www.t2center.uconn.edu



Originally published by:

