



## Time Well Spent

It is often an ongoing challenge to decide how much attention is afforded from the supervisor to the employee. There are so many issues to consider in deciding who will get the attention, why, and when.

First of all, there is all the communication needed for the job itself. Clearly, new employees require more time with their supervisor than the longer-term employees. In fact, it sometimes feels like the longer-term employees don't need any communication at all, and that feels like a bonus for the supervisor. Then, we can add the new hires who are treated as unskilled new employees when, in fact, those "new" employees may have come from other companies and might be highly skilled. They do need time with the boss, but it is much different communication than it is for new, inexperienced workers.

Knowledge and job skills together help supervisors know how much one-on-one an employee needs and, of course, knowledge and job skills are perhaps the best indicators. But other aspects come to mind as well. What about the employee who views all conversation with the boss as punishment or criticism, regardless of the content or reason for the talk? The attitude the employee brings to work with them every day can have a direct and sometimes serious effect on communication with the boss.

Our experience results in often finding the boss at either end of a spectrum of how much and to what purpose the supervisor spends time with the employees. At one end is the boss who doesn't connect nearly at all with the best

performers. The other end is the boss who spends inordinately long periods with the best performer. Those employees are often dubbed "teacher's pet." One result of that outcome can be that less experienced employees stop talking to the longer-term employees about their work, significantly slowing the learning curve for the team overall.

Occasionally, we meet managers who lament that "they didn't think the job would require me to be Dr. Phil." Surely, it sometimes does seem like that is the message. But the research is clear. Employees need contact and direction from their boss. It should be employee needs that drive the communication content, volume, and timing. The key is figuring out what those needs are.

Let's look at a simple progression that directs the amount of time and content the supervisor offers. Imagine that the supervisor has a brand new employee join their team. If we look at it from the employee's viewpoint, it is very likely that the employee hopes that the boss will spend time with them, offer direction to do the work, and answer questions and explain rationale. But clearly the primary focus is on the job details. While this set of needs of the employee might result in lots of time with the supervisor, that time is largely devoted to making sure the job is being done correctly.

Roll ahead a few weeks and we see that the supervisor is pleased with the employee's development. Now the time the boss spends changes. Instead of telling the employee what to

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do in every new situation, the supervisor starts to spend time asking questions and seeing if the employee can begin to answer their own questions. The boss is listening more than before but, ultimately, is still the voice for the right way to do things.

As the employee becomes more and more adept at solving problems, now the time the supervisor spends is in two-way discussions, listening more than before and giving the employee leeway to try his/her own solutions. The boss is a coach now, and needs to spend less and less time with the employee altogether. This is also an ideal time to introduce cross-training. Aside from increasing the overall capability of the whole team, it also challenges the employee to continue to grow and develop.

Perhaps the last way the boss assesses employee needs is when the employee can and does work independently. In fact, he/she needs very little one-on-one time with the boss. At this point in the employee's development, the needs have shifted and the time the boss spends with the employee is designed to give the boss information.

So, the landscape of the workplace and people within it is a fluid, moveable target. The amount of time a supervisor spends with employees is often a real challenge for supervisors, shifting and changing as the company and employees change. Assessing each worker's need is the first place to start to figure it out.

