

Staff Clarification Process

Introduction:

Metaphorically, managers tend to fall into two broad categories: Shop Foreman or Leader.

A **Shop Foreman** is concerned with how things are done and making sure that jobs are performed perfectly, people are not allowed to make mistakes and whatever can be measured is measured...especially individual performance. If it is necessary to “correct” someone, more emphasis is put on correction and the mindset is one of confrontation. An important word...Confrontation. It bespeaks a “command and control”, “reward and punishment” style of management as well as an expectation of conflict. The intent is to get the job done with the highest financial yield and the least possible mistakes. The focus is on the present and possibly the past.

A **leader** shares the same or better goals and expectations; but they see their role as not **JUST** getting the job done; but developing the people that report to them. While they are concerned about mistakes and financial yield they realize and accept that to accomplish sustainable results for the long run requires that they develop their people rather than control them. They understand that part of their orientation requires they be equally present **AND** future oriented. They start developing people where the person is not where the supervisor wants them to be and they work to lead the staff member to higher personal achievement. Their perspective is organizational rather than personal. So, when “correction” is necessary they do not prepare for confrontation but **clarification**.

I prefer to think in terms of developing people and clarification rather than confrontation. Yet, we live in a litigious society. So, I have followed a simple process when clarification is called for that has stood me in good stead the few times I have been challenged. It is set forth as follows:

Cardinal Rules

- #1 Never, ever react or respond to a challenging situation in the heat of anger.
- #2 Always be sure of your facts.
- #3 Be clear, be specific, be succinct.
- #4 Never make it personal, always be objective.
- #5 State what you want first and what you don't want second.
- #6 Whenever possible, explain why it is important.
- #7 All expectations extend to ALL members of the organization including your dad.

The Process

1. **All job expectations** should be explained as clearly as possible. Explain clearly the expectations of the job in terms of both duties **and** their desired effect.
 - a. For instance: "We answer the phone by the third ring and clearly state our name and thank the caller for calling. This helps convey a professional impression and cause the caller to feel warmly welcomed."
2. **Verbal Clarification:** In the event a staff member demonstrates they don't understand the expectations or appear unwilling to perform them it is your role to clarify, once again, in a professional manner, those expectations. If necessary this will constitute a first warning. If, however, the staff member responds appropriately and the issue is resolved it is the end of the matter.
 - a. Whenever I needed to clarify something with a staff member I made it a habit to write myself a note reminding myself of what I said, what they said and what action had been agreed on. This is an informal note to keep in my files so that, if necessary, I am able to recall the conversation as accurately as possible. At a minimum it contained the date and time and place of the clarification as well as a clear description of the issue, what was said to the staff member and their response. Again I stress THIS IS NOT A FORMAL MEMORANDUM AND IT DOES NOT GO IN THE STAFF MEMBER'S PERSONNEL FILE NOR IS IT NECESSARY AT THIS STAGE TO HAVE THE STAFF MEMBER SIGN IT. It is simply a note to myself. It is not to be shared with anyone else. At this stage I consider the issue a private matter between myself and the staff member.
3. **WRITTEN WARNING:** In the event a staffer member continues to demonstrate inability or unwillingness to comply with expectations it is time for a written warning.
 - a. The written warning should be prepared in advance citing the instances observed and the conflict with expectations. Once again, you should clearly outline expectations and effects in the same language you used for training and your verbal warning. You should acknowledge the previous verbal warning so as to officially document it. Any consequences for non-compliance should be clearly set forth. I do not bring out the original note I made to myself but do use it as a source document for the preparation of this memo.
 - b. The staff member should be asked to sign the memo and date it indicating they understood what they were being told. If they refuse to sign it then you should sign it in their presence writing "refused to sign" on the document. Make sure they have a copy. THIS MEMO SHOULD BE MADE A PART OF THE STAFF MEMBER'S FILE. You should make sure they understand this before they leave the conference. In an effort to be kind I used to promise to destroy the memo once I was satisfied with their cooperation and compliance. I stopped that practice because most people are capable of temporary

compliance and destroying the memo meant that I had to start all over again. Further, it didn't matter if I promised to destroy it. If a staff member chooses to carry a grudge they will carry it no matter what I do.

4. **IF THEY STILL DON'T COMPLY:** In the event the staff member continues to demonstrate they are unable or unwilling to comply with expectations whatever disciplinary action you committed to at step 3 should be implemented. Again a formal memo should be prepared with the staff member given the opportunity to sign it or you sign it in their place.

5. **OTHER ISSUES:**

- a. **DISMISSAL:** In the event you have decided to dismiss a staff member you should be completely prepared before you engage the employee in conversation. I offer the following advice:
- i. The decision at this stage should be irreversible
 - ii. If necessary, you should consult with your attorney
 - iii. Termination letter including any acknowledgements like eligibility for COBRA, terms of termination (severance and / or vacation pay)
 - iv. Final check including any severance pay.
 - v. If there is more than one officer in your company I always like to have someone sit in as a witness.
 - vi. Keep the interview brief. Nothing is served by attempting to solace the employee or let them vent. A typical termination should not last more than a few minutes.

b. **PRIVACY:**

- i. Problems with staff members should be kept private. Even when other staff members complain about them you should keep your actions between you and them until the formal memo time. At the time of the formal memo you can acknowledge the matter with others by saying things like: "I have talked with them" or "I have addressed the matter". Going into detail or expressing your feelings about the person with their peers is a very bad idea for so many reasons. You may, however, discuss the matter with a partner or co-owner or the individual's supervisor and, of course, your attorney.

c. **DON'T MAKE IT PERSONAL:**

- i. If you are an owner or supervisor you are in the "people development business". This obligates you to be continually making expectations clear in terms of duty and effect. It will frequently be necessary to clarify things as they occur. You should:
 1. Address issues as they occur. Preferably on the same day.
 2. Be calm or wait until you can be.

3. Never make it personal
4. Treat every person's non-compliance equally
5. Maintain an attitude that you are helping them be the best at what they do...not punish them for disappointing you.

d. NOT EVERY INSTANCE IS SERIOUS:

- i. In the course of business, clarifications are always necessary. As long as you treat everyone the same not every issue or encounter will require documentation. I have never met a supervisor or owner who didn't know when it was time to be intentional and when it was not. If, however, you are in doubt it never hurts to write a note to yourself as long as you don't share it with anyone but yourself unless and until you need to start the formal process.

DISCLAIMER

I am not a lawyer. This advice is provided based on a process of people development that has proven effective and reliable and has protected me on those few occasions when a lawyer was involved. In the event that you are dealing with a difficult employee it is advisable you consult with your attorney.

Final note: In general we are all nice people. Few of us like confrontation. By repositioning this management responsibility as clarification and development I found it easier. Avoiding difficult conversations only makes everything harder in the long run. I used to keep this quote on my desk. Now I have it memorized:

"If you fail to walk in your God-given authority someone will take it away from you and use it against you."