

The Seventh Rule: Creating a Learning Culture

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When you focus on the human side of your work, what are the most important issues for you? A recent study by an international consulting company cites as most important “improving teamwork between supervisors and subordinates” and “improving skills regarding the performance management of subordinates.” Why do we keep coming back to these issues? Stacks of books and articles offer advice of how to improve teamwork and how to manage and motivate. The answer, I believe, is that the advice is usually limited to improving relationships between individuals when these issues call for developing the organizational culture in which these relationships take place. This is the culture of a learning organization.

There are six rules that I believe a supervisor can follow to improve teamwork with subordinates. But their full effectiveness depends on the seventh rule of building a learning organization. This is something individual supervisors can't do by themselves.

Here are the rules.

1. Describe the purpose of the work you and the team are doing. What are you trying to achieve? Who are your potential customers and how will you create value for them? When people are clear about the purpose of their work, they are better able to understand their manager's concerns. When they are not clear about purpose, they don't feel part of a team. Furthermore, they won't think about innovative ways to achieve purposes they don't understand.

2. Clarify roles and responsibilities. Let people know who are the team members and how their roles relate to each other. When roles are unclear, people don't feel empowered to take responsibility. Or if the role is unclear, people may bump into each other's territory, causing unnecessary conflicts that undermine teamwork. If a second baseman and a shortstop don't understand each other's role and responsibilities, that baseball team can't execute double plays. Make sure the role fits the person. If people lack the needed competence, they won't be able to perform. If the role isn't challenging, they won't be motivated. In technology organizations, it's a good bet that subordinates know more about their jobs than do their managers. Your managerial role is to clarify goals and facilitate teamwork by following these rules.

3. Make sure managers and subordinates understand each other's personality. You may be motivated in different ways. It makes a big difference if one is a loyal productive obsessive who pushes for perfection according to inner standards while the other is a productive marketing personality, interested in what will sell and with a self-image as a free agent, always seeking better opportunities, either inside or outside your organization. You can find these types, as well as descriptions of visionary narcissists and the caring erotics in my book *The Productive Narcissist*. This book includes a questionnaire to discover your own personality type and its

significance for relationships at work. The more you understand each other, the better able you are to communicate and to avoid conflicts.

4. *Communicate and facilitate communication.* You can never communicate too much when it is a question of how work is progressing, what are the problems encountered, and what is needed from each person. The best teams have the most open communication and don't avoid creative conflict. A few years ago, I interviewed technology managers in Europe, Asia and the United States. I found the German team was most effective, because managers allowed constructive debate based on facts and transparent logic. However, once a decision was made, they fully supported it. In contrast, members of the American team avoided conflict. Some went along, even if they were not convinced about a project's logic, and others got themselves transferred from projects they believed would fail. To avoid this happening, managers have to seek the views of team members, even if they may not like what they hear.

In their insightful article "The Failure Tolerant Leader" (*Harvard Business Review*, August 2002) Richard Farson and Ralph Keyes maintain that effective supervisors engage a project team in a continual animated discussion about what they are learning. "They try to break down the social and bureaucratic barriers that separate them from their followers. They engage at a personal level with the people they lead. They avoid giving either praise or criticism, preferring to take a nonjudgmental, analytic posture as they interact with staff. They openly admit their own mistakes rather than covering them up or shifting the blame."

5. *Managers need to create trust by treating people fairly.* Relationships deteriorate when managers play favorites. Managers can and should be demanding and challenging as long as they are consistent in their treatment of people. Some managers believe they can stimulate productivity by pushing subordinates to compete with each other. Inevitably, this kind of leadership breeds distrust and undermines teamwork.

6. *Make evaluation a continuous and honest dialogue rather than a bureaucratic process.* Documenting inadequate performance may serve as a legal protection, but it doesn't improve the relationship between manager and subordinate. Often evaluations are made long after the events they evaluate have taken place—they are no help for improving performance and, furthermore, they may provoke angry disagreements. The Gallup Organization recommends emphasizing people's strengths and putting them in roles where their weaknesses won't cause problems and this can be good advice in most cases. (See *First, Break All the Rules* by M. Buckingham and C. Coffman, Simon & Schuster, 1999, and *Now, Discover Your Strengths* by M. Buckingham and D. Clifton, The Free Press, 2001). But let's face it. Many managers shy away from honest and prompt negative feedback either because they want to be liked, or they are uncomfortable with the feelings that criticisms provoke.

Create A Learning Culture

Follow these six rules and you are on the way to developing a learning culture. But the rules are not enough to optimize performance. In a learning culture, people take responsibility and support one another. They share experience and learn from mistakes as well as successes. Good ideas are heard, acted on and rewarded. A learning culture can only be developed from the top of the

organization. If supervisors are themselves afraid of being punished for mistakes, if they fear giving their boss bad news, if their roles are unclear and they are confused about organizational purpose, then their ability to develop teamwork will be crippled. Furthermore, the measurements and incentives can either reinforce or undermine teamwork and learning together.

The seventh rule, create an organization that learns, is essential to developing the cultural context in which supervisors can practice the other six rules. Even the best of individual relationships will only be sustained within an organizational culture with the values that maintain trust and the processes that stimulate learning. The failure of top management to understand this is why, despite all the how-to-do-it books, improving teamwork remains the top issue for research technology managers.