



Personality profile

Rajkumar Saraf,
Chairman and MD,
Zenith Computers

Page 49



Present when absent

T A Balasubramanian on
presence awareness—when
appliances on a network
can automatically be
detected by other devices

Page 50

FEATURE

Tackling problematic superiors

HR's intervention is a must when an employee has to deal with a problematic supervisor, as it acts as a facilitator between the two parties.

By **Nivedan Prakash**



An employee and his supervisor both work towards achieving organizational objectives, and consequently share an important equation in the progress and growth of the organization. The core to this whole equation is the nature and quality of the relationship that makes or breaks an organization.

Due to some basic differences between an employee and supervisor, this relationship often gets spoiled. Problems in most cases arise because of excessive supervision or the lack of it. While looking deeply, the crux of the whole affair would be a relationship issue down the line which got aggravated into dissatisfaction and revolt. The basic expectation out of this relationship for the supervisor is loyalty and commitment, and for an employee it is respect, motivation and welfare.

Whenever there is imbalance in meeting these expectations on either side that differences occur.

Why differences happen?

Here, we would like to highlight some of the areas where differences could exist between employees and their supervisors. There could be a mismatch of expectations due to non-clarity of role and responsibilities, there could be issues related to differences in opinion on functional matters and the inability of the supervisor to handle them in a constructive manner. Differences can also come up due to personality issues or a difference in value system. For any relationship to work, it is important that there be trust between the employee and the supervisor, an open channel of communication and transparency in

actions can go a long way in establishing a healthy work association.

Pratima Salunkhe, Head-Corporate HR and Learning and Development, Tech Mahindra, stated, "The common differences are predominantly on areas, including work related concerns which could arise due to miscommunication of role expectations or a mismatch between an employee's aspiration and aptitude; appraisal related concerns which could arise due to a miscommunication of performance expectations and/or lack of timely and appropriate feedback; and interpersonal concerns which may be due to an inability to get along with each other."

The larger responsibility in this whole equation is that of the supervisor, who needs to demonstrate trust and respect towards his/her

↳ subordinates and stimulate back similar feelings. Due to these differences, as it is commonly said, most employees leave their supervisors or managers rather than their companies.

Meanwhile, these differences could be sorted out only when the employee and the supervisor keep it to the topic of discussion and don't veer into making personal statements since acceptance for each other's comments is low. Also, a third person intervention could help sometimes.

Besides, employees should approach HR to share their concerns. HR then understands and validates the concern before deciding on any action. Employees and supervisors are then encouraged to have a dialogue in the presence of HR who acts as a facilitator in the process. In case this process does not resolve the concern, a discussion with the supervisor's manager is also contemplated depending upon the situation and its dynamics.

Analyzing the problem

When an employee has to deal with a problematic supervisor, the first step taken by him in this direction should be to try and discuss the issue bothering him with the supervisor and let the latter know why he feels wronged. He should keep a cool mind and analyze the problem from a distance as to what really is the issue, then try and address it. The way an employee deals with his concerns largely depends upon his/her rapport and relationship with the supervisor.

If it is not resolved to the satisfaction of the employee, he/she should escalate to the HR or supervisor's manager based on hierarchy or comfort level by seeking a skip level meeting. In these situations, emotional reactions are often not the best solutions. And only if he thinks that an escalation might help, then it should be done immediately.

Iti Kumar, AVP-People Development and Employee Services, GlobalLogic, explained, "An unhealthy relationship between employee and supervisor can be detrimental to work and therefore it is essential to remove these differences at the earliest. First and foremost, it is important for both the employee and the supervisor to acknowledge that there is an issue which requires attention. An open dialogue between the two is a good starting point. The employee should initiate a discussion with the supervisor with intent to iron out the differences. He/she should take this opportunity to talk about issues that are bothering him and should strive



C Mahalingam
EVP AND CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, SYMPHONY SERVICES

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to remove all perception-based concerns. In case a direct interaction does not help, there are various other channels available such as a skip level meeting with manager's manager and/or HR."

Moreover, an employee may also share his concerns with the organization's in-house counselor with the objective of seeking unbiased advice. As this is an anonymous service, it may primarily help the employee in dealing with the



Mona Gupta
SENIOR MANAGER-HR, CINCOM SYSTEMS

More than transparency, there has to be adequate checks and balances built in the processes/organizations to make sure such instances are minimized and if they do happen, they get highlighted because such instances are very internal to teams and they rarely get escalated

and seek immediate responses.

One-on-one is considered to be the best way to resolve issues, as it helps both the parties to come out with the factors that might be hidden, and also helps keep the dyadic (supervisor-employee) relationship intact.

Shobha Saji, HR Manager, Empower Research Knowledge Services, emphasized, "One-on-one is definitely a good tool in bridging the gap of understanding between

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concern on a personal or emotional level.

Surabhi Mathur Gandhi, General Manager, TeamLease Services, pointed out, "The natural defense mechanism of an anguished employee is inclination to look out for a new job. However, developing the ability to rationalize the reasons for conflict and being able to segregate the emotions from the reactions is a more effective problem-solving method. To understand the 'real' cause behind the reason why the supervisor is behaving badly will help the employee understand what corrective steps can be taken."

Here the best solution in tackling issues between an employee and his supervisor is one-on-one dialogue that provides a platform for them both to directly share their concerns

an employee and his supervisor. Again, this tool is effective only if the supervisor has the openness to take the positives and negatives that emerges during the course of discussion, and is able to justify his actions viz. larger good of the organization, and enlist support to mutually work on areas of pain."

"We at GlobalLogic lay great emphasis on the concept of one-on-one. We truly believe that it does wonders in bridging gaps between employees and their supervisors. This interaction forum helps minimize expectation mismatch between an employee and his manager and inculcates an environment for seeking and providing feedback. Regular one-on-ones between the two builds greater trust and rapport," added Kumar.

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►What if no consensus?

If there is no consensus between the two parties, changing the department is normally seen as the last resort for the employee, but only when the difference becomes purely interpersonal and the HR evaluates it as an appropriate option. Says Mona Gupta, Senior Manager-HR, Cincom Systems, "Yes, this could be an option, as it may be best to remove them from each other's direct interaction. An irritation, if it persists beyond a point would eventually lead to either an exit or ugly scenes at the workplace."

This option is always available but taken in extreme cases as it may affect the overall morale of the team. However, the same is not encouraged, as it is not going to help address the root cause of the problem. In most cases, resolution revolves around mutual dialogue giving opportunity to share individual opinions and aspirations.

"To be successful, the subordinate-employee relationship needs to be partnership, and if all interventions have failed to make this partnership work, HR could suggest changes in department or role for the aggrieved party. Again, this is dynamic, depending on the requirement of that particular skill in a different team or function. This way the organization can save its resources," stated Saji.

In another circumstances, if it is known that the supervisor is having a biased view towards a particular employee and he is at fault, then this certainly calls for immediate intervention from the HR. In line functions, it is very common that the supervisors are a biased lot, they like subordinates who speak their language and nod at every decision they make. After all, supervisors are also common mortals with emotions linked to likes and dislikes. HR understands this nuance in a relationship and addresses this issue with continued efforts in upgrading skills of its supervisor in people management. It is in extreme cases that HR resolves to disciplinary actions or separations.

Organizations, in such scenarios, also believe in providing feedback at two levels—first with the supervisor's manager and subsequently with the department head. Further, HR and the department head would collectively decide on what action needs to be taken against the supervisor. Besides, in such circumstances, unbiased investigation is carried out. In case the same is proved, appropriate action is taken.

C Mahalingam, EVP and Chief

Role of HR in resolving employee-supervisor conflict

- The role of HR is to listen to the employee's and the supervisor's views and make an informed judgment of where the problem lies.
- HR primarily acts as a facilitator in the process with an objective of resolving the concern and sharing feedback with both the employee and supervisor.
- While discussing the issue, HR should ensure that both the parties emerge stronger in their relationship.
- HR also has a major role in harnessing the benefits of one-on-one dialogue, especially in educating the supervisor on the merits of a mutual dialogue and the employee on the merits of an open dialogue.
- Whether the supervisor needs to be counseled, HR should enlist the help of the supervisor's manager and deliver the counseling while resolving the employee issue.
- HR should also make sure that the supervisor does not become vindictive going forward by keeping a tab on the behavior of the supervisor and if there is any recurring pattern of interpersonal problem with the supervisor, HR should arrange for an appropriate training with a view to help the supervisor overcome this problem.

People Officer, Symphony Services, pointed out, "HR does not have to rush to any disciplinary action unless the nature of the supervisor's behavior is such that it warrants such an action. Hence, there is a lot of due diligence, behavior pattern, past record of the supervisor, nature of the current misbehavior or misdeed and the likes should be assessed by HR before deciding on the exact nature of the action to be taken. The action can range from counseling and warning to dismissal as an extreme form of redressal, but everything depends of the nature of the misdeed or offence."

Need for a transparent system

There is a need for a transparent working system that ensures no such issues occur within an organization. A transparent system is always beneficial so that effective communication between teams and managers is enabled. HR also hosts and facilitates such communication forums whereby such concerns are minimized if not completely eliminated.

Mahalingam said, "Trust, transparency and teamwork are the 3Ts of any great company. Organizations should inculcate this at every level and weave it into the culture of the company. Having said this, in any organization, small or big, there will be from time to time differences and organizations must define systems and processes to handle this. So, it is not about avoiding conflicts, but about managing them productively."

Valuing employees is a business imperative, to tap into the potential of the workforce, organizations need to learn to value their employees, helping balance employees' personal needs and lives with work, and

treating them as partners and an integral part of the business. A transparent working mechanism will help organizations in achieving this goal.

Gandhi further emphasized, "Transparency facilitates a healthy and trusting environment with little scope of political play amongst teams. However, building the acceptable norms of protocol adherence is equally important to utilize this as an effective measure—built through clear communication."

"More than transparency, I think, there have to be adequate checks and balances built in the processes/organizations, to make sure such instances are minimized and if they do happen, they get highlighted because such instances are very internal to teams and they rarely get escalated," added Gupta.

Even creating an open and balanced environment might help in avoiding any such potential conflict, as it is always beneficial and it is HR and the management's continuous endeavor to achieve the same. Organizations must do everything they can to create an 'OCTOPACE' culture. This involves creating a culture of Openness, Collaboration, Trust, Proaction, Authenticity, Confrontation and Experimentation.

Ashok Srinivasan, Vice President-Operations Support, Expertus, concluded, "Yes, keeping an open and balanced environment helps in a great way as the employee must be able to voice his/her opinion freely. In this context, a hands on people management approach goes a long way to recognize and avoid such issues as managers become aware of such conflicts before they blow up and become unmanageable." ■

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A transparent system is always beneficial to enable effective communication between teams and managers

