

Interacting With Employees

By Gregory Encina Billikopf
University of California
3800 Cornucopia Way #A
Modesto, CA 95358-9492
209-525-6654
fax
gbillikopf@ucdavis.edu



Interacting With Employees

Interpersonal relations at work (and away, too) serve a critical role in the development and maintenance of trust and positive feelings in a dairy farm. Although the quality of interpersonal relationships alone is not enough to produce worker productivity, it can significantly contribute to it.

An effective supervisor or herds manager needs to abstain from showing favoritism; make difficult, sometimes unpopular, decisions; show concern for subordinates without appearing to pry; and avoid misusing supervisory power.

In fulfilling responsibilities, supervisors need to strike the right note in their interpersonal relations with milkers and other employees. New supervisors, especially those who have moved up through the ranks, are often counseled to keep a healthy distance from workers. Supervisors must be approachable and friendly, yet fair and firm. A good sense of humor also helps.

In this paper we look at basic concepts of human interaction as they affect workers in general and supervisors in particular. At times individual and cultural differences may complicate working relations. Supervisors may be called on to listen to employees and give advice.

Basic Human Interaction

The most basic unit of wholesome human interaction is the stroke—a verbal or physical way to acknowledge another person's value. A ritual is a mutual exchange of strokes: a sort of reciprocal validation of each person's worth promoting a sense of trust between people. The term "stroke" connotes intimate contact, such as what is received by an infant who is caressed, pinched, or patted.¹

As adults, people generally do not go around patting, caressing or pinching other adults (except in the sports arena), but they may shake hands, wave, or say hello. At work most stroking takes place in the way

of verbal communication and body language. Examples may include waving, smiling, a glance of understanding, shaking hands, saying hello, or even sending a card or flowers.

Physical strokes may include placing a hand on another person's shoulder, elbow, or back. While some persons do not mind, others feel these gestures, unlike the handshake, may be inappropriate.

Women, especially, may resent these strokes. Not necessarily because they are sexual in nature, but because they often represent a show of superiority. One woman's boss, Dexter, tended to frequently put his arm around her shoulder. Dexter was visibly uncomfortable when she put her arm around his shoulder.

The need for personal validation is great. People may prefer negative attention to being totally ignored. Try to imagine how awkward it would be to meet a fellow supervisor and not greet him in any way, through either gesture or word.

The opposite of a stroke is the "cold shoulder" treatment. A farmer was so uncomfortable when his otherwise excellent mechanics stopped talking to each other, he was ready to fire them both.

Before job-related information is communicated, an exchange of strokes normally takes place. At the same organizational level either person can initiate or terminate a stroking exchange. In contrast, most workers understand it is the supervisor who often controls the length of exchange.

Even so, workers expect some sort of greeting from their supervisor. For example, a manager began to give orders to a farm worker but after his long explanation, the employee simply responded, "Buenos días (good morning)!" In essence, the worker was saying, "You forgot the ritual, I am not a machine."

Some strokes may be quite neutral or uncommitted, such as "I see." Others show more care or interest: "I heard your daughter is getting married, that's exciting!" Body language and tone of voice



also play an important role in the intensity of stroke exchanges. Generally, when individuals know each other well, have not seen each other for a while, or when there has been a catastrophe or other special circumstances, a more forceful stroke is expected.

At times, the intensity of a stroke may make up for its brevity. For instance, a herd manager may realize special circumstances call for a longer stroke exchange, yet he may not be able to deliver at the moment. The herd manager may enthusiastically welcome the cow feeder returning from a vacation, "Hey, I'm so glad you're back, you'll have to tell me everything about your trip at lunch! I've got to be running now to get ready for the veterinarian who is coming today." This stroking still validates the employee's existence while simultaneously acknowledging more is owed. A drastic change in ritual length or intensity, for no apparent reason, may affect a person's self-esteem or make them wonder what is wrong with the other.²

Cultural Barriers

In 1993, I had my first opportunity to visit Russia as a representative of the University of California. I was there to provide some technical assistance in the area of agricultural labor management. "Russians are a very polite people," I had been tutored before my arrival. One of my interpreters, once I was there, explained that a gentleman will pour the limonad (type of juice) for the ladies and show other courtesies.

Toward the end of my three week trip I was invited by my young Russian host and friend Dmitri Ivanovich and his lovely wife Yielena out to dinner. At the end of a wonderful meal Yielena asked if I would like a banana. I politely declined and thanked her, and explained I was most satisfied with the meal. But the whole while my mind was racing: "What do I do?"

Do I offer her a banana even though they are as close to her as they are to me? What is the polite thing to do?"

"Would you like a banana?" I asked Yielena.

"Yes," she smiled, but made no attempt to take any of the three bananas in the fruit basket. "What now?" I thought.

"Which one would you like?" I fumbled.

"That one," she pointed at one of the bananas. So all the while thinking about Russian politeness I picked the banana Yielena had pointed at and

peeled it half way and handed it to her. Smiles in Yielena and Dmitri's faces told me I had done the right thing. After this experience I spent much time letting the world know that in Russia, the polite thing is to peel the bananas for the ladies. Sometime during my third trip I was politely disabused of my notion.

"Oh no, Grigorii Davidovich," a Russian graciously corrected me. "In Russia, when a man peels a banana for a lady it means he has a romantic interest in her." How embarrassed I felt. And here I had been proudly telling everyone about this tidbit of cultural understanding.

Certain lessons have to be learned the hard way. Some well meaning articles and presentations on cultural differences have a potential to do more harm than good and may not be as amusing. They present, like my bananas, too many generalizations or quite a distorted view.

Commonality of Humankind

Differences between people within any given nation or culture are much greater than differences between groups. Education, social standing, religion, personality, belief structure, past experience, affection shown in the home, and a myriad of other factors will affect human behavior and culture.

Sure there are differences in approach as to what is considered polite and appropriate behavior both on and off the job. In some cultures "yes" means, "I hear you" more than "I agree." Length of pleasantries and greetings before getting down to business; level of tolerance for being around someone speaking a foreign (not-understood) language; politeness measured in terms of gallantry or etiquette (e.g., standing up for a woman who approaches a table, yielding a seat on the bus to an older person, etc.); and manner of expected dress are all examples of possible cultural differences and traditions.

In MEXICO it is customary for the arriving person to greet the others. For instance, someone who walks into a group of persons eating would say *provecho* (enjoy your meal). In Chile, women often greet both other women and men with a kiss on the cheek. In Russia women often walk arm in arm with their female friends. Paying attention to customs and cultural differences can give someone outside that culture a better chance of assimilation or acceptance. Ignoring these can get an unsuspecting person into trouble.

When I attended the University of California, Davis (not long after arriving to the U.S.), I was going up the stairways of my dormitory when a fellow student came down the stairs and said: "How're you doing?" By the time I turned around to tell him, he was out the door. I discovered that "How're you doing?" really means "Hello!" For the most part, the right response to the question, regardless of how one is doing or feeling, is something like, "Fine."

This phenomenon is quite international, of course. Latinos, for instance, are famous for their open-ended invitations. You will typically hear, "you'll have to come over for a swim [a ride, dinner, etc.] one of these days," and is equivalent to the American businessman's "we'll do lunch sometime." A true invitation is normally more specific. When nothing ever comes of these invitations, then the strength value of these strokes diminishes.

Language barriers can cause misunderstandings with people. Words with similar roots may have unlike meanings in different languages, and can also get us in trouble. Thus, a non-native speaker who exclaimed, "°Estoy embarazado!" was saying "I'm pregnant," when he thought he was saying "I'm embarrassed." A woman who told the dairy worker "Estoy caliente," was not telling the milker she was hot, but rather, that she was in heat. The Hispanic who intended to tell a co-worker "I'm sorry for bothering you," was saying something quite different when he told her, "Sorry for molesting you."

Punctuality can also have cultural connotations. Sometimes it is a matter of communication, however. During a visit to Brazil a multicultural diversity scholar developed a clever way of determining how punctual he had to be on a given engagement, by asking: "Hora brasileira? (Brazilian time?)" If the answer was yes, he knew the event would not be expected to start on time. This did not mean Brazilians did not know how to be prompt. When meeting time was more critical, they would specify either "Hora inglesa (British time)," meaning, on time, or "Hora alem., (German time)," calling for strict punctuality. In Japan time may take on an even stricter meaning: a group of international visitors was asked to attend a reception honoring a Japanese dignitary. At the precise appointed time, the Japanese hosts closed the

doors, locking out all the non-punctual guests.

There are cultural and ideological differences and it is good to have an understanding about a culture's customs and ways. But the danger comes when we act on some of these generalizations, especially when they are based on faulty observation. Acting on generalizations about such matters as eye contact, personal space, touch, and interest in participation can have serious negative consequences.

While I have not conquered this disagreeable human inclination to generalize, I feel I am beginning to see the way. Often, observations on cultural differences are based on our own weakness and reflect our inability to connect with that culture.

Cross-cultural observations can easily be tainted and contaminated by other factors. Perceived status differences can create barriers between cultures and even within organizations.

Only through equality of respect between races and nations can we reach positive international relations in this global economy (as well as peace at home). Cultural and ethnic stereotypes do little to foster this type of equality.

Breaking through status barriers can take time and effort. As we interact with others of different cultures, there is no good substitute for receptiveness to interpersonal feedback, good observation skills, effective questions, and some horse sense.

There is much to be gained by observing how people of the same culture interact with each other. Don't be afraid to ask questions as most people respond very positively to inquiries about their culture. Ask a variety of people so you can get a balanced view.

Making a genuine effort to find the positive historical, literary, and cultural contributions of a society; learning a few polite expressions in another person's language; and showing appreciation for the food and music of another culture can have especially positive effects.

My contention, then, is not that there are no cultural differences. These differences between cultures and peoples are real and can add richness (and humor) to the fabric of life. My assertion is that people everywhere have much in common, such as a need for affiliation and love, participation, and contribution. When the exterior is peeled off, there are not so many differences after all.



When one adds language barriers to cultural differences, additional challenges are posed. Below are suggestions (for working with interpreters when dealing one-on-one with another stakeholder. Some of these suggestions can be adapted for working with multiple participants. The objective is for those holding the conversation to be able to forget they are working through an interpreter.

Punctuality is often a cultural issue, also. During a visit to Brazil a multicultural diversity scholar developed a clever way of determining how punctual he had to be on a given engagement, by asking: "Hora brasileira? (Brazilian time?)" If the answer was yes, he knew the event would not be expected to start on time. This did not mean Brazilians did not know how to be prompt. When meeting time was more critical, they would specify either "Hora inglesa (British time)," meaning, on time, or "Hora alem," (German time)," calling for strict punctuality. In Japan time may take on an even stricter meaning: a group of international visitors was asked to attend a reception honoring a Japanese dignitary. At the precise appointed time, the Japanese hosts closed the doors, locking out all the non-punctual guests.³

Conversational Skills

Longer speaking exchanges may take place as required by job-related assignments or by social interaction (e.g., at a company picnic, time spent working along the milk tester or veterinarian). Poor conversational skills may hinder interpersonal as well as working relations.

A key conversational skill is being able to take and pass along talking turns. In social interaction, being limited to speaking about just a few topics, or being excessively negative, can make for a dull partner.⁴

Keeping comments short and checking to make sure the other person is still interested are two essential conversational skills. In a mutually productive conversation, individuals will normally share equally in speaking and listening.

Difficulty arises when people take more than their share of the talking time. This may happen when people feel others are not listening or when they suffer from lack of self-esteem.⁵ If they let someone else speak, they fear, they may not get another turn.

Whatever the reason, monopolizing a conversation is likely to alienate others. To combat this vicious cycle, it is more effective to fully listen for a few minutes than to half listen for a longer period.⁶

At the opposite extreme, it also reflects negatively on a person when she is given a turn to speak but pouts or refuses it. A person who has nothing to say or is not sure she can express her feelings at the moment, can instead say something like, "That is an interesting issue," and then indicate who the turn will go to next,⁷ "Inesa, what do you think of that?"

Social conversation may include discussion of a matter of interest to the individuals involved such as talking shop, sports, health, weather, family, recreational activities, food, travel, or discussion about a mutual acquaintance or experience.

Working With Interpreters

(1) Speak directly to, and maintain eye contact with, the person-not the interpreter. It is preferable to say, for instance, "Tell me what you think ...," rather than, "Ask what he thinks of"

(2) Express yourself through brief comments, pausing to allow for translation. Otherwise, the interpreter may abridge or misinterpret your remarks.

(3) Do not use profanity as it may be offensive to the interpreter if not to the recipient.

If you are acting as the translator, explain to the individuals involved that:

(1) They should address each other,

(2) They should speak in brief statements, pausing for translations. (Let them know you may have to interrupt them at times.)

(3) You will repeat exactly what they say.

(4) If profanities are used, let the originator know you will not translate these.

Almost any topic can be of interest as long as people realize they do not have to stay on that subject forever. People do tire quickly of negativity, though, and of those who seem to carry around a dark cloud.

Often people talk about a subject of interest to all participants. If not, there is an unspoken agreement, "we will talk about what interests you now, and later we will talk about what interests me."

Valuing Employees

Supervisors and employees alike place a value on each other's inputs (or "contributions," such as a person's job, education, skills, or efforts). The best way of preserving inputs is by valuing inputs held by others.

A dairy manager may be considered charismatic by most, holds a position of leadership, represents the establishment, and is highly skilled and knowledgeable in dairy science: those are his inputs.

Even though he may not spend much time with the workers, the time he does spend is greatly valued by them. The value placed on a person's time is a good proxy for power, and this helps explain why quality time spent with employees by the supervisor, manager, or farmer is so meaningful to them.

Careful selection, training, and appraisal is one way for management to show it values its human resources. So is paying good wages, providing safe and sanitary working conditions, and communicating company policies. Just as critical are factors affecting interpersonal relations such as involving workers in decision making, effective communication styles, listening to employees, and avoiding

one-way communication.

Increasing Employees' Value

A personal visit to a worker's home by the dairyman may be positively remembered for years to come, and result in an increased sense of loyalty toward the farmer. A dairy farmer who makes an attempt to speak in a foreign worker's native tongue, will likewise be held in high esteem by the employee.

Significant contrasts in perceived inputs may lead a farm worker to avoid addressing the manager in a personal exchange, unless addressed first. Sometimes farm workers who can hardly afford to feed their families will bring a gift to the farm owner. This gift-their generous reciprocation for the job held or for a small attention on the part of the farm owner-may be homemade tamales, empanadas, a basket of eggs, or even the chicken that produced the eggs.

Depending on individual and cultural differences a number of rites of passage observances, such as birthdays, weddings, and funerals can be quite significant to employees. Dairymen and supervisors may often be expected to attend these observances or show support in some way. Workers are likely to remember who sent flowers, a card, and especially, who attended the event. The absence of a supervisor, manager or farm owner may be just as conspicuous.

Sending flowers, plants, cards, and personal notes of condolence are good ways to show concern without being intrusive. Notes are more effective when they are more personal. "I'm sorry about

Helping Employees Deal With Grief⁸

I conducted a study in an attempt to find answers to difficult questions surrounding how we treat the death of an employee's family member. For the most part, employees did find support in the workplace. People attended funerals, provided food, sent flowers or cards, provided time off and a good listening ear, reduced work loads, and helped in many other ways. Support tended to wane, however, after the initial mourning period. Employees who found little support in the workplace were deeply hurt, even several years later. In a number of instances, the lack of support ended up with the employee quitting or being fired. Some had difficulty concentrating or needed more time off. "[Those I worked with] let me grieve for about two weeks and then I was expected to give 100% and act like nothing happened ... I resigned my position three months later."



the loss of your father," for instance, is better than "I'm sorry about your loss." It is preferable to do something concrete for someone than just offering to help. Several talked about how much they appreciated hugs, especially at first, when it was difficult to communicate verbally.

Some felt they had been given a time limit to be over their grief, "Odd you haven't got over it yet: it's been six months." Or, "Go see a movie. Take your mind off yourself."

Co-workers and supervisors need to be sensitive to the emotional needs of the survivor. A person who lost a child was told, "You can have another child." She wrote, "I could have ten more but there will only ever be one Jonni."

Those who are grieving, when ready, may want to talk to you about the loved person rather than be sheltered from the pain. One person wrote, "Virtually nobody initiates conversation about our daughter ... I think they just don't want us to hurt, but by doing that, we're being robbed of the only thing we have tangible, and that's to talk about memories of her."

I suspect those employees who were allowed to fully grieve were more likely to return to work sooner and concentrate better than those who lacked support.

Employees going through divorce or other personal challenges also need support and understanding at work.⁹

Another way to value employees (besides treating them as human beings with needs, desires, aspirations, grief, and successes) is to find ways of putting aside traditional sets of inputs. You may want to take advantage of the opportunity to participate next time workers invite you to join them in a soccer game, or challenge you to a race on foot or horseback, or to a game of chess. In these instances traditional inputs related to societal position may lose importance.

Reducing Another's Value

Conflict may arise when other people's inputs are not valued. One supervisor, a college graduate, may look at his formal education as an input, for instance. Another supervisor may view his seniority, or having worked up through the company, as his. Neither may value the other's inputs. Both may fight for resources on the basis of their perceived

contributions. Instead, both would be better off by acknowledging each other's strengths.

Reduction in the value of an input may also come from a misunderstanding of cultural values. A Mexican cowboy in a cattle ranch cooked up a special native meal and took it to the American ranch foreman. Unfortunately, the foreman did not accept the gift. The worker was acknowledging the value of the ranch foreman's organizational position and, perhaps, his membership in the predominant racial group. The feelings of the Mexican cowboy were hurt. Now he has little loyalty for the foreman and is less concerned with being helpful.

Asking For Advice

When asking for help, employees do not always ask the most knowledgeable person. They also consider factors such as who offers help cheerfully and without condescension. Asking for help includes costs of time and possible disclosure of sensitive personal matters.

There is an additional cost when competitive behaviors are involved. Competitive conduct seeks to establish predominance in a given field and may see asking for help as a sign of weakness, or as a way of recognizing the other person's superiority.

Those who are asked for help also weigh the advantages and disadvantages of either fully helping, offering a brief suggestion or two, or withholding help. Rewards an expert may gain from helping include increased self-esteem and a good feeling from being of service. Costs may include time, and encouraging overly dependent behavior. Experts with poor self-esteem may fear they may reduce the knowledge gap. Those who ask for help often rotate requests among several people. The profit margin experienced by experts normally decreases with each subsequent helping episode – unless these are sufficiently well spaced¹⁰ or there is a mentor relationship.

Mentors

People have different attitudes about helping others. Those who benefit from another person's help may carry a sense of gratitude or obligation towards that person and toward society in general. For instance, a herdsman who obtained help from the veterinarian in improving his artificial insemination skills may not be able to return the favor.

Later on in life, however, he may be able to pass this skill on to someone else.

While some experts acquire their rewards by maintaining a feeling of distance and superiority, mentors attain enormous joy in passing on what they have learned.

Mentors look for people they feel will be capable of matching or surpassing their own skills. In this way they enhance their own reputation through their students. Some organizations assign official mentors to new employees. These mentors may act as counselors or advisors and may also be responsible for passing on subject matter knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Mentor-apprentice relationships are not free of challenges. At times, the mentor continues to consider the apprentice a beginner long after the student has started to make valid contributions of his own. Some mentors dislike having their apprentices surpass them. Competition may develop between the two, resulting in a disruption of the relationship while new roles are established. Organizations and individuals can plan ahead to smooth the way for such changes.

Employee Needs

A few workers seldom ask for help, unwilling to admit they do not know how to approach a work challenge. Even though it is not their intention to do so, these employees sometimes ruin equipment, animals, or crops through their attempts at self-sufficiency. Other workers often exasperate their supervisors by their apparent lack of confidence. They need to be constantly reassured that what they are doing is right.

Often supervisors feel uncomfortable about even listening to an employee's personal difficulties. In one agricultural enterprise, a first-line supervisor adamantly felt workers should keep their home related problems at home, and work related challenges at work. As ideal as it sounds, this goal may be difficult to attain. Have personal challenges ever made it difficult for you to concentrate at work?

There are plenty of personal difficulties, as well as events in the community and elsewhere that may act as distracters. These may trouble workers and affect their capacity to perform on a given day. Some workers may not have anyone to turn to outside of work. Many people lack social networks of

family and friends with whom to share difficulties. Trends show the number of divorced and single-parent families are increasing.

Accepting an occasional request for a sympathetic, listening ear, or for advice, is simply part of a supervisor's job. A supervisor who can help workers cope with their difficulties may deflect industrial accidents or serious errors. The sooner workers cope with their problems, the sooner they will put all their efforts back into the job. This is not a suggestion to set up a counseling practice, nor should supervisors routinely snoop into the personal lives of workers.

Some difficulties may be serious. In one operation an employee returned to work distraught after lunch. The worker's wife had just announced her intention to leave the home. He tried to approach his supervisor to discuss the problem but was turned down. A few moments later he committed suicide at the work site.

In another operation a worker shared his intention to commit suicide but happily encountered a sensitive listener. Instead of committing suicide, this employee was able to complete a productive career. Listening was a small price to pay.

Workers may also turn to their supervisor for help in dealing with an alcohol or chemical dependency. Sudden performance deterioration or unusual behavior may also demand attention. At other times, performance may worsen over a long period of time. A supervisor may inquire about the drop in performance but it is up to the employee to choose to talk about personal problems. If performance does not improve, supervisors may need to resort to the disciplinary process.

Supervisors vary in their approaches to answering requests for advice or help. Some prefer to have employees take as much responsibility as possible for finding solutions and feel uncomfortable being directive. Most supervisors have little trouble telling others what they should do, even when not asked.

Some employees ask for help before carefully thinking through the problem on their own. Giving employees advice-work-related or personal-may also be looked at as the other side of the delegation coin. If supervisors are not careful, employees will delegate their problems to them.

One hog operation supervisor has found it help-



ful to ask overly dependent employees to suggest alternative solutions to a difficulty. The workers often discover the best solution in the process. A similar approach requires both supervisor and employee to make a list of alternative solutions. After the worker expresses his ideas, the supervisor offers other alternatives without advocating any of them. Then, the supervisor asks the worker to evaluate each alternative by listing its pros and cons. Finally, the worker is left to weigh the various solutions himself.

Sharpening Listening Skills

When helping employees the key is not in trying to solve their problem but in being a good listener. On occasion, supervisors may need to suggest the employee seek professional help as in the case of alcohol or chemical dependency, prolonged depression, or serious psychological dysfunction.

A supervisor who is asked for help, either on a personal or work-related problem, can provide it by (1) giving advice as an "expert," or (2) being a good listener and facilitating the worker's solution to his own difficulties.

Regardless of the approach taken, a critical first step is to clearly understand the nature of the difficulty. Often, the presenting problem is not the issue that is really vexing the employee. In trying to understand the employee you may use the reflective approach. In essence, it requires restating what the other is saying to make sure you have properly grasped the meaning. For instance, "If I understand

you correctly, you find it difficult to work with Guillermo?"

The reflective approach can be overdone, though. Workers will become impatient or irritated if you mirror everything they say. Mirroring is especially crucial in highly emotional situations or where possible misunderstandings exist.

Other approaches to help workers express themselves or clarify their feelings include allowing for longer periods of silence or expressing confusion. In the process of listening for understanding, asking for clarification, and examining possible solutions, a supervisor's understanding of the worker's difficulty evolves.

Expert Approach

The expert or "medical" approach is directive. The supervisor listens to problems presented by the employee, makes a diagnosis, then recommends the best solution. A skillful advice giver will try to diagnose the situation through a series of questions. Sometimes more involved diagnostic procedures are needed.

A rough rule of thumb is that technical problems may be best solved through the expert approach. Also, the expert approach can be quite effective when (1) there are great differences in knowledge, (2) there is one right answer, or (3) there is an emergency (e.g., a rancher calls the veterinarian to handle a colt with colic).

Often the person asking for help knows little about the subject or even what questions to ask. A

Your Monkeys

One clever analogy compares problems to monkeys. Everyone carries a few on their back. One day four employees came to see the farm manager who agreed to look into each of their difficulties. The employees left each of their monkeys in the manager's care. The manager had less time for his family and was not really helping the workers either. The workers were irritated when problems did not get resolved as quickly as they wished. One weekend while at work taking care of their monkeys, he saw four very familiar faces playing soccer. After some serious thinking he devised ground rules for employees:

"At no time will your problem become my problem. If you no longer have a problem I cannot help a man without a problem. When you leave, the problem will leave as it came-on your back."

The monkeys could still visit his office but usually they would have to leave with the employees. The manager has regained control over his time. He learned the important difference between listening to employees and agreeing to take their monkeys.¹¹

worker may ask his supervisor what fertilizer to use, how to properly mix it, and how to calibrate the nozzles for spraying. The supervisor might answer these questions and provide other useful advice. An important part of the process is ascertaining how much the person knows before starting to give advice.

The expert method does not always work well, however. Diagnostic skills vary, and experts may fail to properly detect "where it hurts." Increasingly, people want multiple expert opinions and do not want to rely on a single opinion. The expert approach, however, can be frustrating to the employee who has "her problems solved" in a manner incompatible with her philosophy or style. As we have alluded to earlier, there is also the danger that the expert approach may contribute to overdependence on the advice giver.

At times people appear to be asking for help but only want someone to listen. They may even tell the person who tries to help to be quiet and listen.¹² Likewise, employees may be more interested in impressing you with the impossibility of solving the problem than in finding a solution. Such a person may respond with a "Yes, but," to every suggestion you make, as if to say, "I dare you to find a solution to this problem."¹³ If you sense this trap it is a good indicator that you may be trying to answer as an expert when a listener is needed instead.

Listener Approach

The listener approach is one where the supervisor helps the employee figure out his own solution to a difficulty. The rule of thumb here is that relationship issues, as well as challenges that have existed for a long time, may require a listening approach. Supervisors who are asked for "listening-type" advice in the workplace have the advantage of knowing more about the situation-compared to outsiders. This can also be an obstacle. Someone who is too close to the situation may already be part of the problem, have preconceived ideas, or may have trouble listening very carefully.

Supervisors may hold very definite opinions. At times you may be sure of what approach you would take while realizing others may benefit from a different approach. In this case, you may function as an effective listener. Sometimes, supervisors may find alternative solutions reprehensible or morally

incorrect. You will want to let employees know when this is the case. The employee can then choose to seek help from someone else if he so desires. Often, however, people will seek your opinions because they respect your values.

As in the expert approach, in the listening approach the supervisor asks diagnostic questions about the situation. The focus of these questions is to understand the challenge the worker is facing. The supervisor avoids giving direct suggestions on how to solve a problem. Questions may include: "What approaches have you tried?" "What alternative are you leaning toward?" "What do you plan to do about it?" "How would you feel if you followed his advice?" "What are you trying to accomplish?" "What will happen if you take a month before acting?" "Have you ever told him you felt this way?" "What are you planning to do if that does not work?"

At some point the supervisor may have to ask the employee "What can I do to help?" in an effort to search for closure. If the worker says, "I just wanted someone to listen to me," you know the listening approach was appropriate.

It is not the asking of questions alone that makes the listening approach. Some advice givers may come across as experts even though they have used no direct statements. For example, they may use questions such as, "Don't you think ...?" Advice givers will want to avoid being direct while trying to come across as an open minded listener.

This listening approach can be frustrating to the employee who wants an expert. In the listener approach, the assumption is that the solution lies within the person with the problem-this may not be the case.

Flexible Approach

A mixed style combines aspects of the expert-directive model and the listener approach. This style may be the hardest to conquer. The process involves moving back and forth between the listening mode and offering possible suggestions. Most persons using a mixed approach tend to be overly directive. The natural tendency is to switch from a listening to a directive approach in the course of a counseling session. Your effectiveness is often lost if you solve the problem before the person you are attempting to help does.



Cristina shared her uncertainties as Julia and Elena listened. Julia asked good questions of Cristina and was at first an excellent listener. When Julia was sure she had grasped the problem and its solution, however, she tried to convince Cristina. Cristina complained about the solution but Julia insisted she was right and even interrupted Cristina's pleadings that the solution would not work. Finally, since Cristina was "not cooperating" in having her problem solved, Julia began trying to convince Elena—who had been a silent observer-of her idea.

Part of being a good listener may require consciously fighting to keep an open mind and avoid preconceived notions. A supervisor may want to continually assess her advice-giving style in a given situation. For instance, she may ask herself: Am I:

- Allowing the person with the problem to do most of the talking?
- Avoiding premature conclusions based on what the employee is telling me or on information I have obtained from other sources?
- Assisting the employee in solving his own problem or am I being overly directive?
- Permitting the employee to retain ownership of the problem?

A final point to make here is the need for strict confidentiality. There may be a few exceptions where information may need to be shared with other individuals on a need-to-know basis.

Specifics often need not be mentioned. Permission may be solicited from the affected worker if appropriate. A supervisor may also want to seek advice from a qualified professional on how to handle sensitive or troublesome topics.

Summary

Interpersonal associations, on and off the job, have an important place in labor management. In this paper we have tried to understand relationships among co-workers and supervisors and subordinates. We also looked at personal and cultural differences affecting interpersonal relations.

Strokes tend to validate a person's sense of worth. Most employees expect some stroking exchange, or ritual, before getting down to business. Being able to hold a conversation, a key work and interpersonal skill, is based on the participants' ability to give and take.

Everyone brings a set of "inputs" into the job. Little trouble may occur as long as there is agreement about the value of these inputs. Individuals who want to preserve the benefits of their inputs, whether personal or organizational, need to value the inputs held by others.

Among the many activities supervisors are involved in, employee counseling is one of the most difficult. It is often too natural and easy to use an expert or directive mode, even when an active listening approach would be more effective.

Let The Phone Ring!

The next time a worker comes in to talk to you, put down what you are doing and give him your full attention. Show the employee you are concerned about his time, too. You can ask your secretary to take messages rather than allow interruptions. If the telephone rings in your office, well, let it ring! Sure, why not? When you are out on the farm many calls miss your immediate attention. If you are very busy give the employee a specific alternate time to meet with him. If you are always too busy for employees, something else may be wrong.

If you are expecting an important call, you may want to let the worker know right away: "I can't talk very long right now, I'm expecting a call." This can be followed by an offer to reschedule the visit for a more appropriate time. If the employee decides to speak to you now, he knows the importance of being brief and the risk of interruption. Of course, there are exceptions, but letting the phone ring often makes good sense.

A dairyman will find out more about what his employees are thinking, including wonderful money saving suggestions, by going out and spending time with them at the barn and working side by side with them from time to time.

References:

1. Berne, Eric. *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, Grove Press, Inc.: New York, 1964. Also see Berne for a discussion on stroke intensity, cultural differences, and dysfunctional communication patterns.
2. Berne, Eric. *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, Grove Press, Inc.: New York, 1964.
3. Cortes, C. *Cultural Shock: Managing a Diversified Workforce*. *Agricultural Personnel Management 11th Annual Forum*. Modesto, California. Mar. 7, 1991.
4. Elgin, S. *More on the Gentle Art of Verbal Self Defense*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall Inc. 1983.
5. Dobson, M. *How to Solve Communication Problems*. Fred Pryor Seminar. Stockton, California. July 17, 1991.
6. Dobson, M. *How to Solve Communication Problems*. Fred Pryor Seminar. Stockton, California. July 17, 1991.
7. Elgin, S. *More on the Gentle Art of Verbal Self Defense*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall Inc. 1983.
8. Billikopf, Gregory Encina. "Coping With Grief in the Workplace." *Modesto Bee*, January 12, 1994, pp. G1, G3 (Living). Also special thanks to La NaciŪn and to Rosa Ibarra, Employment Development Department, who interviewed agricultural workers in Spanish. Ag and non-Ag responses are included.
9. Pelzer, M.R. "Workplace Sensitivity Part II: Helping Colleagues Cope With Divorce," *People in Ag: Managing Farm Personnel*, May-June 1994.
10. Brown, R. *Social Psychology: The Second Edition*. New York: The Free Press. 1986.
11. Based on Oncken Jr., W., & Wass, D. *Management Time: Who's Got the Monkey?* *Harvard Business Review*. Nov.-Dec. 1974, pp. 75-80.
12. Dobson, M. *How to Solve Communication Problems*. Fred Pryor Seminars. Stockton, California. July 17, 1991.
13. Hendricks, J.J. *Organizational Development and Group Dynamics* course. California State University, Stanislaus. Spring 1986, and Berne, E. *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1964.

This paper is based on Chapter 12 of the author's book, "Labor Management in Ag: Cultivating Personnel Productivity" which can be downloaded on the internet at:
<http://www.cnr.berkeley.edu/ucce50/7grisha.htm>.

Notes