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The Human Relations of a Foreman

WHY IS THE supply of men of supervisory capacity so thin?

Appointing a foreman is not a matter of giving the post to the worker who has had the longest service, but of selecting the man who has the talent to lead. How well the foremen do their leading determines whether the company operates in the black or in the red.

The foreman is the keystone in the production arch. He has to bridge the gap between responsibility for just his own job and responsibility for the work of others. He needs, if he is to do this successfully, poise, wisdom, suppleness of mind, courage and energy, besides the know-how of his technical speciality.

This *Monthly Letter* discusses the human relations of foremanship. It deals primarily with service in workshop or factory, but the principles it discusses are equally applicable to supervision of branch or office . . . indeed, they apply in organizations of all sorts and in institutions like the home: wherever one person is placed in a supervisory capacity over others. We all find ourselves in the role of leadership at one time or another, as parents, teachers, executives.

Of this be certain: you are not a born foreman, but you can grow and develop into a foreman. You must become skilled in planning, organizing, directing and controlling. That sentence points up the theme of this *Letter*: the foreman does not work with things like machines, but with people. He is the link between workers and management, holding the highest position within the ranks of the workers and standing on the first rung of the management ladder.

It is fatal to one's aspirations in these days to look upon the foreman's job as that of policeman, responsible only for enforcing laws and rules. The good foreman has intelligence, administrative competence and the power to make men follow him because of personal attributes. He is the guardian of plant morale. He plays a major role in management-labour relations.

Human relations

Good human relations is people getting along well together.

Behind the facade of every workman is a person. Become aware of that person and show sincere interest in him. Be generous and encouraging. Give him a sense of belonging on your team.

For your own good, as well as that of the plant, don't live in a private world where subordinates fear to tread. Don't turn your foreman's chair into a throne. Come out from behind your paper work every once in a while and meet your staff on the floor.

The best company to work for, and the company that gets the best work done, is the company with a strong company-group feeling.

For reasons which we are far from fully understanding, when a collection of people becomes a team, their capacity for production is astonishingly increased, and this is true even though each is performing an individual task.

This state is reachable only by foremen who obtain the collaboration of people in their work groups through loyalty and liking and co-operation.

As a foreman, you have not hired a hand but a whole person. You can buy a man's time, you can even buy a measured number of skilled muscular actions per hour, but you cannot buy enthusiasm, initiative, loyalty. You have to earn these things.

There may be a "hard-boiled" type of supervisor here and there who believes that he gets the most out of his gang by setting a stiff pace and by bawling out the slow workers, but the foreman seriously seeking production in quantity and quality knows that success is attained when he wins the willing and interested service of his subordinates.

Membership in a group is not a matter of holding a card. It is an attitude inspired and encouraged by the leader. He goes deeper than techniques: he challenges

his people's interest and brings out their desire to cooperate. They become loyal to something beyond personal interests.

The spirit of team-work may be kept in being if you give every man enough responsibility to make him feel his own importance. The ability to delegate work so as to get the job done in the most efficient way and at the same time to enhance the worker's ego: this is an ability to be developed by every ambitious foreman.

Winning support

However tall a man may stand in the hierarchy of management he is not a successful executive unless he understands the points of view and the problems of the rank and file of his workers. The foreman, close to the workers, must know these things intimately. Like the skip of a curling rink or the cox of a rowing crew, he must know the strong and weak points of his people, what incentive brings forth their best effort, and the boundary beyond which he must not try to push them.

To have and to hold workers who are competent takes more than a big brother pose by the foreman. When you are urged to cultivate workers that does not mean that you are to acquire a hypocritical way of life. Rather, you should make a sincere effort to understand their problems and give them the feeling that you are interested, sympathetic and genuine. You must really want to like them and to be liked by them.

The substance of your authority arises from your own performance, from your demonstrated ability to have yourself accepted as the leader of your group. Then, supported by the confidence and respect of your workers, you proceed to get things done by bringing out the best efforts of your people and uniting those efforts.

How are you to win your workers to give you the support you desire? It comes naturally to the man of sensibility: base your thoughts and acts upon the knowledge that every one of your workers is striving to carve out a place for himself in a chaotic and confused world; that he is searching for a good life for himself and his family; that he is hungry for human understanding.

Every man on the team has a practical stake of the most concrete kind in the leadership you give, and he is entitled to the most competent leadership of which you are capable. Your workers have put their working days into your hands. They have the right to expect that you will study your profession and keep up to date in it.

In your intercourse with those over whom you have authority you will find the ancient motto *noblesse oblige* vital. You have a position which requires you to deal with them generously, not merely justly. Whoever is under your power is also under your protection.

A foreman should have a deep sense of responsibility for the everyday conditions under which his employees work. He should not be content until he has done everything within his power to make those conditions good.

Discipline

No group of people can live together, much less work most effectively together, without organized control. Society itself would revert to the jungle if we had not rules to live by.

During his own apprenticeship the foreman has learned the first lesson of management: to obey. But discipline is more than blind obedience. The word itself comes from the same root as the word "disciple," and a disciple is one who follows the teachings and the example of a respected leader.

Having discipline in business is a clear-cut responsibility of management. This means, for the foreman, that he so arrange things that every man does his fair share of the work, that every man contributes his share to order and cleanliness, that every man is willing to pull with the team, and that every man is considerate of the wishes and feelings of his fellow workers.

Once in a great while we come across a foreman who believes that discipline in his department will be proportionate to the amount of noise and blustering he uses. But it is generally recognized that a tyrannical foreman enforces severe discipline for one of these reasons: he knows no other way to handle subordinates; he fears to "lose face" by appearing too human; or he gets a secret satisfaction from making others miserable.

The foreman who is a leader is a better man than that. His patient precept, his inspiration and his example turn the trick. There will be times when even this foreman must decree emphatically that certain work has to go through the shipping door at a certain time. Then he will be forceful, but always friendly. His people will respect his urgency without resenting it.

Praise and criticism

Probably foremost among the techniques of handling men is the building of morale through praise and encouragement. Commendation by a superior is of great consequence. It breeds loyalty and it inspires the worker to follow through.

So take time to recognize the interest your men show in their jobs. Be positive. Qualify praise as the facts warrant, but never let it be faint. Look first of all for the part of the job that is well done, and compliment the worker; then show up the badly done part by contrast and explain how it can be brought up to the standard the worker has set in the good part.

Give credit where it is due. To take credit for a job that one of your men did destroys his initiative and

lowers you in his eyes and in the eyes of his associates. The credit due to you comes from your building of an able staff.

Be constructive. Make it clear by your actions that you are not going around all day seeking faults in your staff, but to make their jobs better. Show that your reprimand is really a compliment, because it means that the worker has something that is worth bringing out. To allow a fault to go uncorrected, you will point out, is to say that the individual is not worth bothering about.

Patience is a quality which every foreman should cultivate. When a worker approaches your desk with a complaint, push aside your papers so that it is obvious you are giving him your full attention. The foreman who tries to give a complaint the brush-off is risking being thought of as too big for his boots, uninterested, or fearful of responsibility.

If a complaint is obviously (to you) unjustified or a paltry gripe, give yourself time to cool off and become master of your emotions before you start talking. Is it worth getting angry about? This is one of the tests of your ability to be a manager of men. You must be capable of controlling yourself if you are to control a group of other people.

Other supervisors

The foreman comes up against many departmental problems which have interdepartmental ramifications. These may be handled in two ways: by agreement between department heads or by a ruling handed down by superior authority.

It is gratifying to foremen and good for the business when matters affecting several departments are settled after a generous interchange of information and a meeting of minds among all who are concerned.

It is often vital to exert persuasion horizontally on colleagues of equal rank. You should seek, then, to lay the proper foundation. Take for granted that your supervisory associates are intellectually honest, well-rounded in company policy and purpose, and versed in the techniques of their own departments. Then go out of your way to express compliments, to proffer cooperation and information.

Top management has a responsibility in overcoming supervisory isolation. Wise employers recognize the need of foremen for both individual recognition and group participation. They give their foremen full trust and responsibility, and consult them about anything affecting their departments. They bring foremen together periodically to discuss company policy and plans.

A change of policy is not merely a new page to put into your loose-leaf binder. It means a change, in

whatever small degree, in your men's work or outlook or prospects. It is worthy of your thought so that you may present it acceptably and work it intelligently. Nothing can undermine morale more quickly and disastrously than not telling your people where they stand.

Communication

This raises the matter of communication. The autocratic foreman of past years tried to control communication. He would always hold something back so as to give him a feeling of being top-dog, a confidant of management. Nothing could be more futile or silly. His workers will hear the news somewhere, somehow, and his withholding it stamps him as a deceitful humbug.

Effective communication is aimed at building a team of efficient and hearty workers. It need not be a complicated thing, but it has a lot of transmission lines — up, down and crosswise. All of these lines must be kept clear.

When communication flows in upon him from all directions the foreman whose work is unorganized feels as if he were trying to shake hands with an octopus. The man who is organized does not allow memoranda, printed forms or the telephone to confuse him. He handles memos efficiently but briefly and he clips off long-winded telephone talkers. A little practice in writing and speaking will enable you to be effective without seeming brusque.

At whatever effort of organization, the foreman must make his communication with his workers produce results. Top management may write about policies and targets until their stenographers are exhausted, but their effort is worthless unless the front line man explains to his workers the day by day application of the policies to the work in hand.

Part of communicating is listening. Listening to what your workers say is the starting point of understanding them.

The good foreman is alert to learn about the shop dissatisfaction of one worker and the home unhappiness of another worker; about the gripe of the worker who has deceived himself into thinking that all his workmates are against him; about the emotional upset which is causing another worker to make mistakes. He keeps in mind that little things give rise to some of the major problems in administration, and that these little things are only to be learned by listening on the level of workers.

About personality

You need only look at any group of foremen to realize that they comprise a wide variety of social, economic and cultural patterns. There is no single set of inherent qualifications automatically fitting a person into the supervisory rank.

Nevertheless, there are some points of distinction. Sound administration is the sum total of mature imagination, mature perception, mature judgment, and mature humanism. Don't think for a minute that length of service and a title give you the right to be a foreman. Handling men today requires all the intuition and mental agility and thoughtfulness you can muster. These virtues arise out of maturity — which is not a measure of age or service but of mental development.

If you are to be a foreman of the first class, you need an inner zest for the job. You need to provide in yourself the reserve from which you radiate confidence and positive optimism. You need to discipline yourself, too, so that you set the style for your workers in regularity of habits, carefulness about work, and aliveness.

You must be, in fact, what you appear to be, even when no one is watching. There was a memorable remark made by Admiral Jervis at the Battle of St. Vincent, as he watched the way Captain Troubridge handled his ship, the *Culloden*: "Look at Troubridge! He tacks his ship into battle as if the eyes of all England were on him!"

His personal pride in his job will compel the foreman to stand on his own feet, and standing on one's own feet is a substantial part of personality. If you want your workers to behave differently or to put forth an extra effort, don't tell them the general manager wants it. Don't hide behind some superior's coat tails. Make it clear that you want it because it is best for the team.

But don't become arrogant. Think to yourself that the Roman generals had slaves behind them in their chariots to whisper: "Remember you are only human." Healthy self-criticism and continued willingness to learn are among the important attributes of the foreman.

Be sincere and fair-minded, conveying to your workers the assurance of a square deal. Your people wish to have a foreman they can look up to; they need to have faith in your integrity.

We may well be sorry for the foreman who boasts: "I'm a square shooter; I treat all my men alike." That man has not learned the rudiments of human relations. You can never in your job treat all men alike. You must study people individually if you expect to co-ordinate their activity in terms of a sound, progressive development of your department.

Do not stagnate

Many a potentially great foreman never realizes his hopes simply because he defeats himself in little ways.

If you are to lead people properly you must be ever mindful of the fact that you live in a glass house. You should be your own inspector, examining constantly

your relations with those around you. Others will look over your work, but you should be sharper than they to see opportunities for improvement.

Appraise your emotional stability. Have you an even temper which gives proper valuation to situations? A foreman with emotional ups and downs like a camel's back misleads his caravan of workers. Unless they can judge his reactions and forecast his direction, they fall apart as a team.

Laughing at yourself — at your mistakes and foibles — is a way of preserving sanity and keeping your balance. But be careful not to laugh with your workers about your responsibilities or mock at company policies. What you say, the things you laugh at, have special weight because you are boss.

It is essential to keep on learning. In fact, it is one of the attractions of a supervisory position that the opportunity is so wide open to improve personally and through one's workers. The people who succeed in leadership jobs are those who have a thirst for knowledge and go out and secure their knowledge in one way or another and put it to work.

Do not sell knowledge short: in addition to strong intuitions and insights you need a frame of reference against which to measure them. You can obtain this by learning something new every day. Knowledge on all sorts of subjects, even those quite foreign to your job, is useful in your professional growth.

This means work. Every reputation for efficiency was built by work. Self-development is not a highly formalized activity like classroom education, but one sparked by you and carried out through reading, attending extension classes and lectures, and taking part in community projects.

The dynamic foreman seeks new paths and new ideas because he must keep up with the future if he is not to find himself obsolete. He needs to absorb new points of view with a pliant mind.

Take inventory every once in a while to measure your progress in human relations. Personal inventory honestly carried out is likely to surprise you by its revelation of the resources you possess for the course you wish to follow.

Leadership means to initiate, to instruct, to guide, to take responsibility, to be out in front. There should not be a disinterested nerve in your body.

The joy of leadership and the thrill of being in charge of a group of people does not consist in doing a terrific job yourself, but in spending your last ounce of energy and encouragement to see the group crack through to success.