

WORKING WITH THE BUDGET

Barbara Flynn Buehler

The American people deserve a budget that invests in the future, protects the most vulnerable among us, and helps to create jobs and economic security.

Carl Levin, United States senator



SNAPSHOT

This chapter covers what Mayor Henry Maier of Milwaukee once called the “world series of municipal government”—the budget. Chapter objectives are to

- Provide a comprehensive overview of local government budgeting, from initial development through planning for the next budget cycle
- Increase understanding of your role as a supervisor in all aspects of the budget process
- Examine how the local government budget affects day-to-day operations
- Increase your confidence in carrying out budgetary responsibilities.

The chapter will help you answer these questions:

- Why is a working knowledge of the budget important to your supervisory success?
- What is the difference between the operating budget and the capital budget?
- What is your responsibility in budget planning?
- What budget format does your local government use, and what are its benefits?
- How can you get the budget allocation needed to carry out division and program work goals?
- How can you have an impact on the overall direction of the budget?

An annual budget is a local government’s single most important financial responsibility. It establishes plans and priorities for service delivery and communicates them to all stakeholders. The budget is where an organization allocates its resources to accomplish its vision and carry out agreed-upon strategic priorities. And, in most local governments, the budget ultimately determines the level of taxation.

The budget is an important resource for you as a local government supervisor. It gives you the authority to operate and provides clear guidelines and boundaries for your day-to-day activities. That’s why it is important for you to understand every dimension of your local government budget and your role in preparing and

Author Barbara Flynn Buehler appreciatively recognizes the contribution of Sabrina Wiley Cape, who wrote the version of this chapter included in the previous edition.

implementing it each fiscal year. *Fiscal year* is the term used to describe the annual (twelve-month) budget cycle; sometimes it coincides with the calendar year, but just as often it does not. Preparation for any fiscal year budget can begin as much as five to eight months prior to the onset of the fiscal year.

Functions of the budget

The local government budget serves three important functions:

- Control
- Management
- Planning.



THE BUDGET: A MULTIPURPOSE DOCUMENT

The annual budget is

- A statement of priorities for the community
- A management blueprint for providing services
- The document that translates policies into action
- The legal authority for local government officials to raise revenue and spend money
- A tool for protecting the local government's long-term financial health
- A communication document for citizens that outlines services they can expect and how their tax dollars will be spent
- A guiding document for local employees to deliver agreed-upon services within established financial boundaries.

Leading Your Community: A Guide for Local Elected Leaders (Washington, DC: ICMA and the National League of Cities, 2008), 20. ©2008 ICMA and the National League of Cities.



Control tool

A local government budget is a legal document that defines how much money can be spent for day-to-day operations. Generally, state law defines the steps for approving an annual balanced budget so that expenditures don't exceed revenues for the fiscal year. Once the governing body approves the annual budget, it binds you and other government officials to work within the established financial framework. That means that unless you have approval, you may spend only the allocation in the budget for your department or division. During the fiscal year, expenditures will be monitored carefully to make sure all departments spend funds in accordance with the adopted budget. For example, if the budget calls for you to buy a new police car, you can't decide to hire a new police officer instead without a clear justification and approval from your department head, chief administrative officer (CAO), or the governing body.

Operating within approved budget parameters is an important supervisory responsibility. Because the programs and services for which you are responsible are supported by public tax dollars, it makes sense for you to be held accountable for spending decisions that you make while managing the resources entrusted to you. In addition, closely monitoring expenses during the year helps you make adjustments as needed to meet agreed-upon targets and provides valuable data for planning future budgets.

Management tool

The budget defines what your department plans to accomplish during the coming year. One of your budget responsibilities is to help your department head educate the CAO and elected officials about what you need in order to do the job they want you to do. Once the budget is set, your role is to constantly examine service delivery methods to ensure that they are as efficient as possible. For example, you may determine that the funds budgeted for the parks and recreation department can be spent

most efficiently if large parks are maintained by municipal crews and small traffic medians by private contractors. Understanding your operating budget and the costs for services for which you are responsible will help you make wise decisions and use tax dollars effectively.

Planning tool

The budget

- priorities for the fiscal year
- Provides a roadmap for carrying out program and policy objectives set by elected officials
- Serves as a resource for planning outcomes in future years.
- A well-designed and carefully administered annual budget helps local government leaders think about how to make the best use of limited dollars. Some local governments prepare multiyear budgets to show how expenditures in the current year will affect future resource allocation. This maximizes the planning component of the annual budget.



Types of budgets

Most local governments have two separate budgets:

- The *operating budget* covers revenue estimates and planned expenditures for the year for all ongoing government activities.
- The *capital budget* covers revenue sources and planned expenditures for nonrecurring, multiyear items such as construction, equipment acquisition, or improvement of public facilities.

These two budgets are sometimes combined into a single budget document for the current fiscal year to show all current expenditures, but they are generally developed separately and considered as two distinct budgets by elected officials.



Operating budget

The operating budget is the local government's plan for allocating resources for personnel, supplies, equipment, and the operation of facilities during a fiscal year. Local governments use several kinds of operating budget formats. The most frequently used budget formats are line-item, program, and performance.

A **line-item budget** organizes financial information into categories of expenditure for each department, division, or agency. Generally, there are two broad expenditure categories: salaries and other expenses. A line-item budget provides a clear explanation of what will be purchased with tax revenues, offers strong central control over departmental expenditures, and helps elected officials compare the new budget with previous budgets. It is the most traditional budget format and is often used by smaller local governments.

A **program budget** presents financial information according to services to be provided, such as solid-waste collection, street sweeping, vehicle repair, public safety, and recreation. It shows the purposes for which money will be spent, focusing on program goals and outcomes rather than expense categories such as salaries and

supplies. Program budgets often include some line-item detail in order to identify and control the cost factors for each program. Many large- and medium-size local governments use program budgets to connect major outcomes to expenditures. In addition, grant-funded activities that cross departmental lines are best presented in a program format.

A **performance budget** carries a program budget one step further by describing the amount of services to be provided for money spent. For example, a performance budget will list the number of miles of streets to be swept in a year and the cost per mile. Its focus is on what the local government will do during the fiscal year rather than what it will buy. This format is easier and more feasible to use than in the past because technology has improved the capacity to manage and monitor performance costs. Many local governments use a combination of formats, including program outcomes, performance measures, and line items in their annual budgets. This provides a broad picture of how public revenue will be used to deliver public services.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT

Performance measurement involves collecting data in a systematic and objective way to determine the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery. A well-designed performance measurement system provides data to support decision making, justify budget requests, improve overall performance, communicate progress, and provide accountability. Performance measures generally fall into these categories:

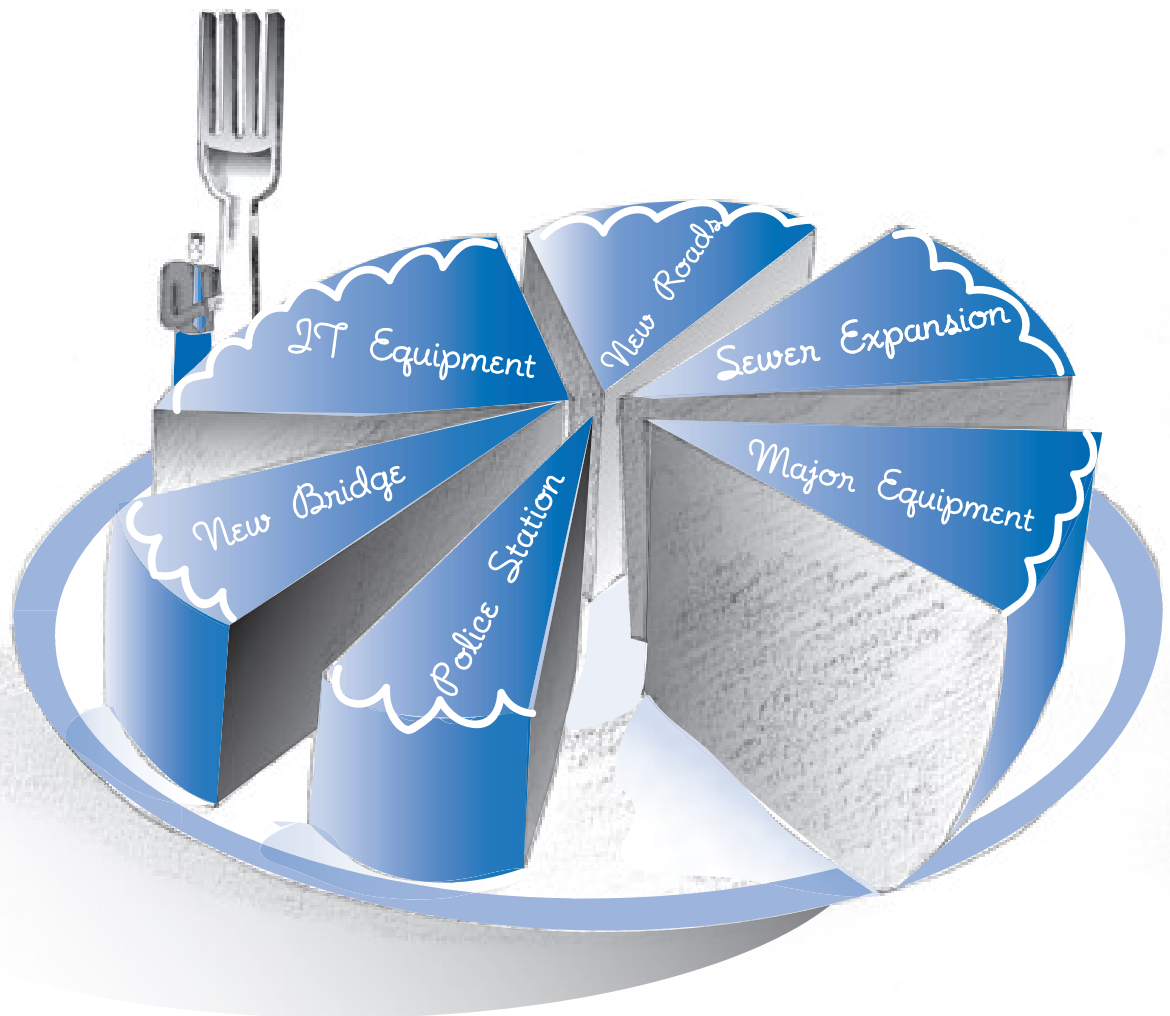
- **Inputs:** resources required to accomplish an activity
- **Outputs:** quantitative measures of what the activity produces
- **Outcomes:** impact or results of the activity focusing on service quality
- **Efficiency:** cost per unit of outputs and outcomes
- **Effectiveness:** quality of the work performed.

As a supervisor, you are likely to be involved in developing performance measures for your work unit, regularly tracking progress toward achieving the measures, and gauging how meaningful and useful the measures are for decision making.

Adapted from Performance Management: When Results Matter (Washington, DC: ICMA, 2003). © 2003 ICMA.

Capital budget

The capital portion of a local government's annual budget is often drawn from the capital improvement plan (CIP). The CIP is a multiyear plan for financing major equipment or infrastructure improvements including new buildings, additions, or improvements; new roads or bridges; a sewer expansion; or new information technology equipment that will be used for several years. The capital budget, developed



in conjunction with the annual budget, explains the spending plan for one year of the CIP and its impact on the current fiscal year.

A CIP does not include anything that is used or consumed in the day-to-day operations of the local government. Local governments usually establish a financial threshold to determine which items will be included in the CIP. For a small local government, \$5,000 may be appropriate, whereas for a larger local government, \$100,000 may be appropriate. Financing for the capital budget may come from local government tax revenues, a state or federal grant, long-term borrowing, or a combination of funding sources. While a CIP is an important planning tool, not all local governments have either a plan or a separate capital budget. Some smaller local governments, for example, have sections in their operating budget, called capital outlay, where capital items are listed.

A capital improvement plan helps a local government

- Minimize fluctuations in tax rates by scheduling and financing the costs of capital facilities over a number of years
- Anticipate the impact of capital projects on the operating budget, such as the costs of staffing and operating a new fire station
- Manage strategic planning for bond issues to achieve more favorable borrowing rates
- Schedule capital projects to take advantage of state and federal aid to fund the projects
- Provide clear information to taxpayers about the community's long-range infrastructure and facility and equipment needs, and how they will be met
- Identify the reasons for a tax increase and show whether the increase is related to operating costs, capital costs, or both.

Other budgets

Some local governments require other budgets in addition to their annual operating and capital budgets. These other budgets are usually for programs whose delivery is funded by dedicated revenue sources. For example,

- Enterprise funds that cover services based on user fees for such things as water and sewer systems, electric utilities, and housing programs

- Intergovernmental agreements to provide joint services across jurisdictional boundaries with funds coming from participating governments
- Debt service that covers the payment of principal and interest on bonds
- Federal aid for dedicated programs with no local revenue or expenditures involved.

The budget document

The annual budget is a legal, technical, and public document. It meets state requirements, provides a blueprint for operations, and reports to the citizens on how their taxes will be used to deliver public services. Major components of a local government budget include

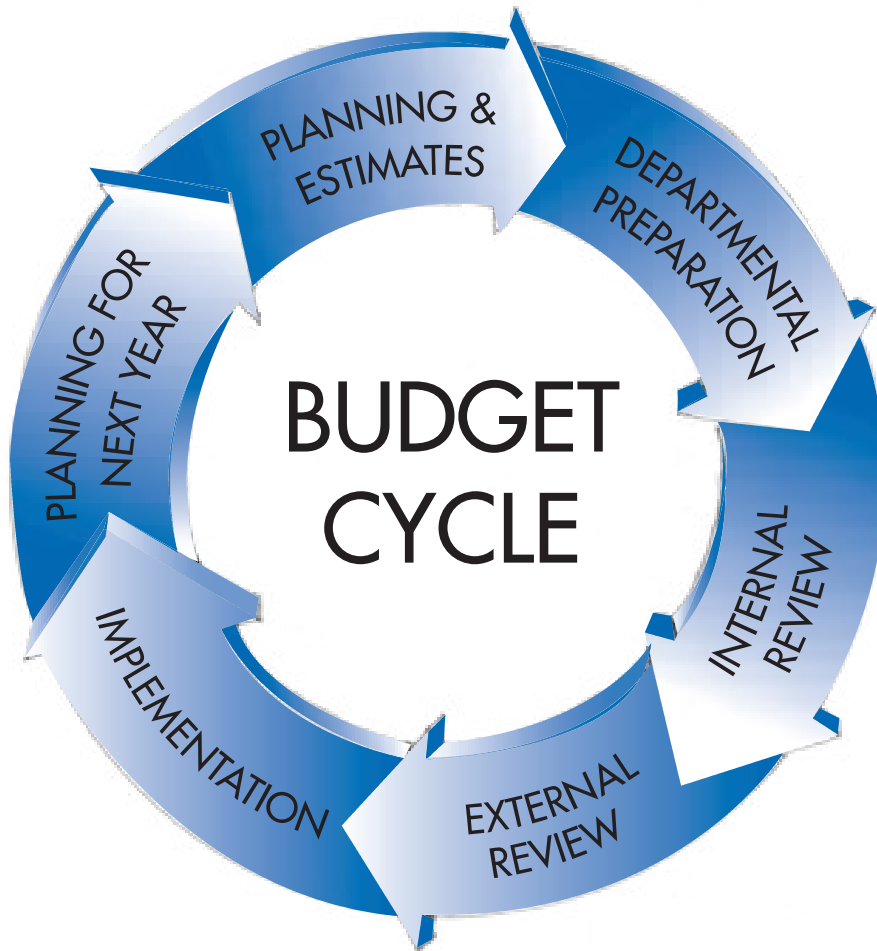
- **The budget message** communicating to citizens, the governing body, and the media the major elements of the budget. Usually submitted by the mayor or CAO, the budget message describes goals and objectives for the coming year; indicates the priority assigned to services; analyzes the local government's overall fiscal health; and identifies total projected expenditures, new or increased taxes or user fees, and new programs and activities.
- **Revenue estimates** showing both the sources and total amount of projected revenues necessary to fund government operations. Comparative information from one or two preceding years is usually included to show revenue trends. Any new revenue sources may also be explained.
- **Program expenditures** showing where money is being spent and for what purposes. The budget for the activities of your work unit may or may not be shown separately depending on the budget format your local government uses.

Some local governments link their budget document to their strategic plan by including goals, objectives, and performance measures in the budget document. Your work team's strategic goals may be published here on an annual basis, along with agreed-upon performance measures associated with expenditures.

Unless other state or local laws give directives on this matter, local governments typically use the standardized financial terminology provided by the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA), which provides general guidelines and best practices to support local government budgets.

The budget process and your role in it

In all likelihood, you will work closely with your department head to organize and prepare the budget for your work unit. However, regardless of your specific role in budget preparation, it is important for you to learn how to develop and present a well-thought-out budget request on your own. The more skilled you are at developing and presenting your budget to your department head and, ultimately, to elected officials, the more likely it is that your request will be approved. The next sections describe the six steps in the budget process and your role in each step.



Step 1: Budget planning

Budget preparation begins about five to eight months before the beginning of your local government's fiscal year. The CAO, working with the governing body, will launch the process by defining broad goals and guiding principles for all departments to use in developing their budget proposals. Citizens may be involved in the budget process at the planning stage, such as through the use of citizen advisory groups that may help shape priorities and guidelines. As a supervisor, you need to be aware of the planning process and familiar with the strategic guidelines that emerge from this step so that you can develop the budget for your work unit in alignment with the organization's priorities.

During this period, local government staff members responsible for the overall budget prepare estimates of revenues for the coming year on the basis of tax projections, past revenue trends, anticipated state and federal grants, and estimates of fees and other revenue. If you oversee a service for which a fee is charged, such as building inspections or recreation programs, you may be asked for information to help prepare the revenue estimates.

Step 2: Department budget preparation

Approximately four to six months before the new fiscal year, department heads and supervisors will prepare their individual budgets.

Generally, budget staff will provide forms, instructions, and work sheets to prepare the budget. If you have never used these forms before, you will need to review them carefully so that you understand exactly what is required. Before completing the budget forms, you and your department head will consider the work and activities your unit will be involved in for the coming year and will refine the unit's strategic goals and objectives. Once goals and objectives for the year have been established for your unit, you will calculate the personnel, equipment, material, and other costs needed to accomplish them.

For example, if five major snowstorms per year are typical for your area and the governing body wants all primary streets cleared within twenty-four hours, you should determine the number of miles of road involved and the number of miles each snowplow can clear per hour. You can then calculate and justify the need for specific levels of personnel and equipment. The budget staff or your department

head can assist you in calculating personnel, supply, and equipment costs. Often, supervisors are also asked to include pricing information on items such as benefits, consumable supplies, and small equipment.

In preparing your budget request, keep these three guidelines in mind:

- **Keep it simple.** Use clear language and basic terms that can be easily understood and explained. Don't assume that everyone who reads the budget will understand the abbreviations used in your field. Your goal is to make sure others understand your budget. Elected officials will more readily approve budget requests that are clear, complete, and easily understood.
- **Provide enough detail.** Citizens and elected officials need to understand what is being requested and why. Miles of streets to be maintained, number and type of inspections to be performed, and details on staff needed to do the job—including hourly rates and number of hours worked for part-time positions—are examples of valuable decision-making data.
- **Separate capital items from operating expenditures and justify the need.** Be sure to follow your local government's policy on capital expenses and show how the requested capital items meet local needs. Any capital equipment request should describe which items are replacements and which are new. In the case of replacements, you should show the age of the existing equipment as well as its original cost. The need for any new equipment should be explained and related to a new or expanded service. If a new vehicle is needed, include a thorough explanation of the need as well as the trade-in value of the old vehicle.

Step 3: Internal budget review

In the third step of the process, the CAO and other key staff members review budget requests with department heads. Many changes are likely to be made during this stage. Requests may be reduced to reflect the redirection of funds to another service provided by another department. Reductions may also come about if estimated revenues for the local government as a whole are less than requested expenditures.

If your department head cannot easily justify your budget request to senior leadership, it may be sent back to you for more details. You may be asked whether



you can do the same work with fewer staff, or whether you can find less costly ways of performing some tasks. At the conclusion of the internal budget review, the budget should be very close to being in balance and will be forwarded to elected officials for consideration.

Step 4: External budget review

In this step, elected officials review the budget and hold public hearings so that citizens have an opportunity to comment. Often, elected officials and the CAO will hold work sessions to reshape the budget, as needed, to respond to citizens' requests. Both the revenue and expenditure sides of the budget will be reviewed in the context of policy considerations, and either may be changed. The outcome of this stage is a final, balanced budget for the next fiscal year.

Step 5: Implementation

Once the budget has been approved by the governing body, it is up to department heads and supervisors to carry out their programs and activities within the approved budget. Your follow-up actions to launch budget implementation in your unit include

- Letting your staff know how the new budget will affect them and their work, and answering their questions about budget changes
- Reviewing goals, objectives, and performance measures for your work group that are included in the budget
- Monitoring implementation of the approved budget, and keeping your department head up-to-date on progress toward achieving the objectives and any possible changes.

You will likely receive monthly or quarterly budget reports showing how much your unit has spent so far during the year. You should always review any budget reports about your division carefully to ensure accuracy and to stay on top of how money related to your work is being spent. If you are spending funds faster than was expected, your department head will probably want to know why.

Unforeseen circumstances may require a change in your budget. For example, if a tornado or hurricane strikes your community, the public works department may have to spend many hours of overtime clearing downed trees. Or if tax receipts are

lower than expected, you may be required to cut your budget by a certain percentage. Your department head will work with you if your budget needs to be changed. It will be your responsibility to determine the effect of budget changes on your activities and staffing levels.

Step 6: Planning for next year

What can you do to make the budget process go more smoothly next year? Here are some tips to keep in mind throughout the year, whenever you monitor or evaluate your team's work:

- **Prepare early.** Identify possible changes you want to make in your plans for next year based on successes and challenges in the current year. Will these changes have an impact on your budget? Is there a new piece of equipment that will help you operate more efficiently?
- **Keep track of changes in your workload.** Are some activities taking more or less time than they did before? If so, why? Is the overall volume or work increasing or decreasing compared to what your unit did last year?
- **Look for ways to make your work unit more efficient.** Listen to suggestions from your employees about new work processes that might save money. Evaluate every step of every activity to determine if value is being added. Are there steps that can be eliminated to increase efficiency?
- **Focus on performance measures to make sure you are measuring the right things.** Are the performance measures providing useful information about your unit's accomplishments? What changes would you recommend in performance measures for next year?
- **Talk with other supervisors.** Have they identified new ways to prepare for the budget process? What techniques are they using to stretch every dollar?
- **Practice.** You will be doing a budget every year, so it is important to become comfortable with the process and skilled at preparing a clear, effective budget. Think about ways of doing it better. Talk with your department head about your ideas. The budget process is the one time during the year when your activities will be looked at and evaluated very closely. Take advantage of this by presenting yourself, your employees, and your work in the best possible way.

How you can affect budget outcomes

As a supervisor, you can have a significant impact on the local government's finances and its budgetary success by how you run your division and how you lead your staff. Here are three ways that supervisors affect budget outcomes.



Well-maintained equipment

The cost of damaged or destroyed equipment directly affects the budget. Teaching your employees to use equipment safely and correctly is an important supervisory responsibility. Using equipment as it is meant to be used and servicing it on the recommended schedule will prolong the life of the equipment. Replacing equipment is expensive; making sure items have a long life could free up money for other division needs.

No worker injuries or claims

Your goal is a positive and safe work environment for your employees. If an injury does occur, a claim can have significant costs. For example, a workers' compensation injury on your team takes money away from activities your planning process identified as being valuable. Likewise, a successful discrimination claim involving your work unit could be very costly to your government.

Minimal employee turnover

Finally, the cost of turnover can be significant for a local government. There are recruiting costs to attract new applicants, followed by the time required to interview and select candidates. Some organizations also incur training costs to bring a new employee's performance up to a basic level. Finally, there are the hidden costs of decreased productivity and reduced morale when current employees must perform extra duties until a new employee is hired. Your success as a supervisor can help you retain good employees and prevent the cost of turnover.



CHECKLIST

- Align your work group's strategic goals and objectives with your department's strategic goals and objectives and with the mission of the organization.
- Think of your budget as a tool to help you achieve your unit's goals.
- Learn how to do your part in your local government's budget process.
- Start collecting information for your budget request early in the fiscal year.
- Ensure that your budget request can be easily understood by your department head, the CAO, elected officials, and citizens.
- Promote understanding of your budget request by detailing the costs of services provided.
- Keep your employees informed about budget decisions.
- Use the budget process as an opportunity to highlight the accomplishments of the unit.

Supervisory situation 6-1

Nate is the supervisor in the public works department. The community normally has four to five snowfalls per winter, each with one to three inches of snow. Because of previous budget cuts, 75 percent of the local government's snow plows have more than 150,000 miles on their odometers. A month ago, the community had a twelve-inch snowfall in a single day. The heavy, wet snow caused many of the trucks to hit curbs or hidden objects, which put several plows out of service. Citizens and the media were frustrated because it took three days for the streets to be cleared.

1. What are the budget implications of this incident?
2. What do you think Nate should request in the next budget cycle to deal with this problem?
3. In which budget should this request be included?
4. What budget details do you think Nate should include to document his request?
5. What adjustments do you think Nate might have had to make in this year's budget because of his response to this storm?

Supervisory situation 6-2

Nedra is a supervisor in the parks and recreation department. Because of an increase in gang violence in the community, the mayor decided to launch an after-school program to give teens somewhere to go. Nedra is responsible for establishing this program by the end of the current fiscal year. At the same time as the mayor decided to introduce a new program, the CAO asked all departments to reduce their current budgets by 5 percent because sales tax revenues are coming in at 5 percent less than projected.

1. What budget activities would you suggest Nedra conduct before putting in a request for the after-school program?
2. How might Nedra's approach to the budget process help her to make decisions?
3. What other information does Nedra need to prepare to justify her budget and avoid budget cuts?
4. How can Nedra determine whether she has collected the information that matters to the leaders involved in this new program, particularly the mayor?



7

TEAM BUILDING

Mike Conduff and Lewis Bender

Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.

Henry Ford, American industrialist and founder of Ford Motor Company



SNAPSHOT

As a supervisor, your job is to get the work of your unit done working with and through your employees. Consequently, transforming a group of individuals into a team is a vital part of your job. This chapter focuses on strategies for building a successful team. Chapter objectives are to

- Increase understanding of what makes a group of people a team
- Explore stages that groups go through on the way to becoming a team
- Introduce critical steps in building a team
- Provide tools for empowering a team to achieve its goals.

The chapter will help you answer these questions:

- How can you organize your employees into a high-performing team?
- What impact does a tight economy and austere times have on building and sustaining a team?
- How can you shift your operating environment from reactive to proactive?
- How can job enrichment, career growth, and mentoring help empower your team?

Local government today has embraced teamwork in a big way. Modern management practices, a lean economy, and citizen expectations all require achieving efficiencies wherever possible. Nowhere is the commitment to teamwork, collaboration, and efficient operation more important than in supervising local government employees.

Teamwork is more than people getting along and liking each other. It is about improving work processes, the work culture, the quality of internal and external services, and the results citizens get for their tax dollars. Teamwork is good business for local government.

Authors Mike Conduff and Lewis Bender appreciatively recognize the contribution of E. Gordon Maner, who wrote the version of this chapter included in the previous edition.

Advantages of focusing on using teams to accomplish the business of local government include

- Bringing together different perspectives, views, and skills to strengthen the group and produce better decisions
- Breaking down structural barriers within the organization, bringing out hidden talents, and creating synergy
- Creating a structured environment for employees to work together to improve the quality of services, which promotes communication and participation, develops skills, and enhances the quality of work life.

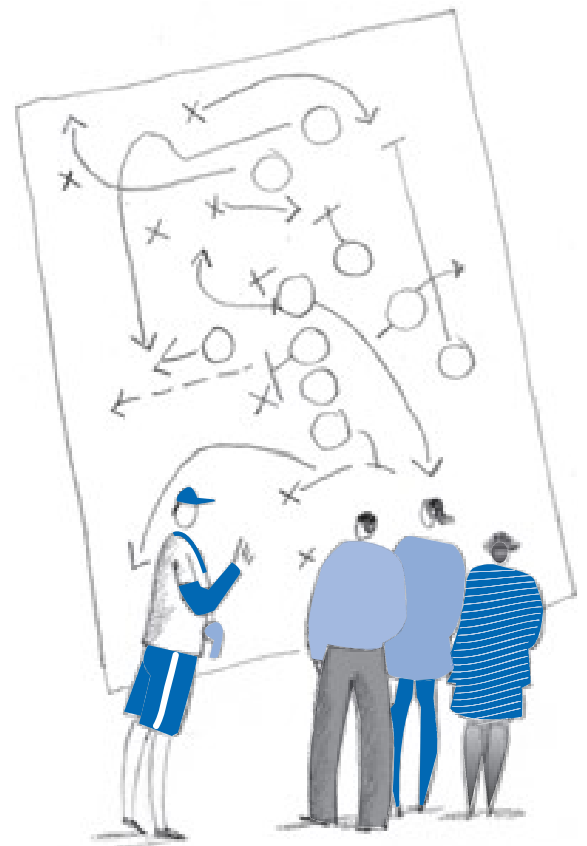
Characteristics of successful teams

Think for a moment about a successful team you were a member of at some point in your life. Maybe it was your high school soccer team, or a civic organization committee, or your family. What made that team successful?

You probably remember that everyone on the team knew its goals. Maybe the team looked at differences as assets rather than liabilities, or team members worked hard to seek different ideas and opinions. The team may have had many leaders, depending on changing needs, and team members knew each other so well that they could anticipate each other's next move. And, you probably remember celebrating both large and small victories together.

Here are other questions to consider when recalling that great team experience:

- What did the coach or leader do to create successful teamwork?
- Did the coach have high expectations of all team members?
- Did the coach talk about goals?
- Did the coach communicate effectively not only when things were going well, but also when the team members' performance needed improvement?

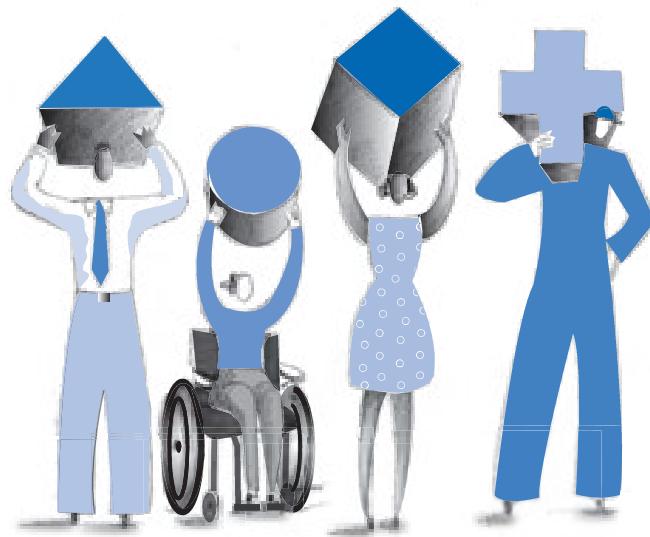


- Did the coach listen and treat everyone fairly?
- Did he or she avoid conflict or work to resolve it to strengthen the team?
- Was there a game plan created with player input?
- Was there a rewards system for recognizing outstanding performance, as well as a system for correcting inappropriate behavior or poor performance?
- Were there agreed-upon rules or standards that set the boundaries for team members' behavior?
- Did the coach trust and respect team members?
- Did the coach lead by example?

These characteristics and more are what it takes to build a good team on the athletic field, in a family, or in the workplace.

Transforming a group into a team

In most work situations, you start out with a group of individuals who are supposed to work together based on the formal organizational chart. Important informal con-



nections may also influence how the group functions. For example, in most work units, employees spend time with the co-workers they like and know best and may avoid those they don't like or with whom they have little in common. All veteran employees may be in one group, for example, and newer employees in another. Sometimes departments actually compete instead of cooperate. If enterprise-based departments get new equipment while tax-funded departments only get used equipment, resentments can occur throughout the organization. Resentments may interfere with collaboration.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN ONE COMPONENT OF THE TEAM FAILS

Teamwvrk

Sxmexne txld me that teamwvrk depends xn the perfxrmance xf every single persxn xn the team. I ignxred that idea until sxmexne shxwed me hwx the xffice typewriter perfxrms when just xne single key is xut xf xrder. All the xther keys xn xur typewriter wxrk just fine except xne, but that xne destrxys the effectiveness xf the typewriter. Nxw I knxw that even thxugh I am xnly xne persxn, I am needed if the team is tx wxrk as a successful team shxuld.

Even though this paragraph illustrates how different the work output looks when just one member fails to perform properly, you can still understand the word and grasp the message. When teams see the broader and larger organizational vision, they, too, can fill in the blanks and get the job done.

Understanding the roles and responsibilities of all team members makes it easier to get past breakdowns when they happen.

People are more motivated to work toward shared goals and objectives when they feel that they are part of a team effort. The support that comes from other team members is invaluable in helping individuals maintain interest in a project and persevere through difficult times. When team members let each other know that they are valued for their participation, that they trust each other, and that they won't let the team down, productivity and overall effectiveness are likely to increase.

Groups, on the other hand, are collections of individuals with no strong sense of responsibility to each other. Because there is no collaborative effort to accomplish common goals, group members have little concern for successful project outcomes. The absence of unified effort and camaraderie distinguish a group from a team.

Forming, storming, norming, performing

A group generally passes through four stages on its way to becoming a team¹

- **Forming** is the first stage when members come together and are uncertain of the nature and role of the group. People are asking themselves questions such as: Why are we here? Will I fit in? Do I have anything to offer? Do I really want to be a part of the team? As people begin to discover the answers to these questions, they become comfortable with their involvement. This stage is finished when members see themselves as part of the group.
- **Storming** is the second stage of group formation and is marked by conflict over who will lead the group and how group members will respond to the leader. If the leader is less competent or not respected, a group may get stuck at this stage and never become productive.



- **Norming** is the third stage, characterized by the beginnings of cohesiveness and closeness among group members. The group has embraced its value structure to govern behavior, and members accept the rules and standards.
- **Performing** is the stage when the group moves forward to accomplish its goals. As this stage is sustained through continuous cooperative activity, the group can be considered a team. The supervisor's role then shifts to maintaining the team's energy level, continuing to build team rapport, and challenging the team to become better.

Groups do not always proceed through the four stages in this exact sequence, and some groups may function in two stages at the same time.

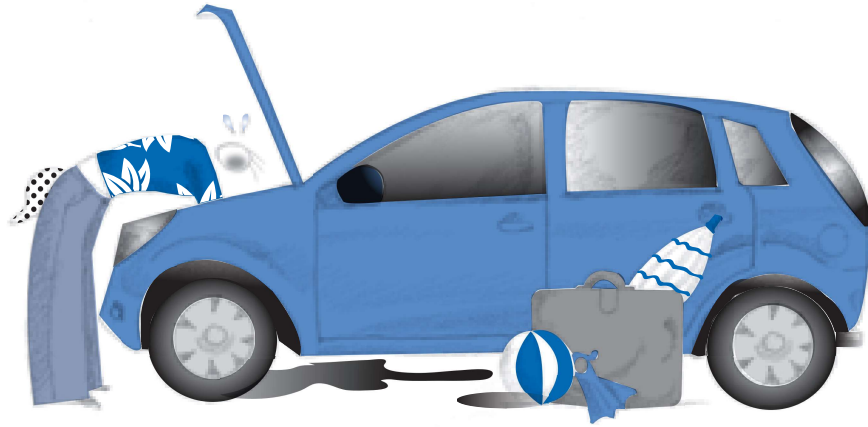
Team building during tough economic times

Building high-performing teams can be more challenging than ever during austere times. Budgets have been cut. Positions have been eliminated. Equipment and materials aren't being replaced. Yet, in many cases, public services haven't been cut or reduced, and demands on public sector teams have actually increased.

The day-to-day response to these challenges by supervisors and their teams is often reactive. They react to this issue, that emergency, this citizen, and that demand. Supervisors may plan to get specific tasks done at the beginning of the day, but never even get a chance to think about those items in the press of the day's demands. The irony is that higher-functioning teamwork is essential in a challenging environment, yet many supervisors are too busy to take the necessary steps to strengthen team dynamics. Work may be unfairly distributed, or collaboration may break down. Teams that are constantly asked to do more with less may become frustrated and feel out of control. Productivity, effectiveness, and morale are early casualties of these dynamics.

Take the time to tune the engine

In a reactive organizational environment, time is the primary driver. Problems that could have been easily addressed early on fester and grow, consuming more time than they should. The metaphor of a car illustrates this point. Few people would jump in a car and take a coast-to-coast road trip without first servicing the car. If



you don't take this proactive step, the odds of the car breaking down during the trip increase. If you wouldn't consider driving a car that is likely to break down on a long trip, why drive a team without any support until it breaks down?

Building a team is a proactive process. As the leader, you must invest time in developing and nurturing your team by establishing performance expectations and desirable behaviors to establish a foundation for collaborative work. When team members understand each other's roles and responsibilities, they will be able to hold each other accountable.

Establishing clear expectations

Team success depends on establishing clear expectations, particularly during tough economic times. You can use the following questions to develop and nurture your team and monitor growth, progress, and outcomes.

1. What should all members of the team expect of the team leader?
2. What should the team leader expect of every member of the team?
3. What should every member of the team expect of each other?
4. What are the ground rules that every member of the team must follow, such as honesty, openness, and advance preparation?
5. What does the team need to do differently to be more effective?

The questions can be the basis for a group process to agree on expectations. Over time, the responses to these questions will serve as a basis for holding individual team members accountable for their behavior. For example, if team members agree to do their fair share of the work and not engage in negative behavior, individual discussions with the team leader become more valid.

Team ownership and accountability

Accountability starts with the team leader. You must hold yourself accountable and serve as a role model for desired behavior. And your team should feel comfortable holding you accountable for agreed-upon expectations. Accountability is a two-way street.

Personal ownership supports accountability. Involvement in the decision-making process, whenever possible, increases understanding of expectations, desired outcomes, and accountability. These decision-making rules for teams provide a framework for involving your team in some decisions:

- **Team leader:** Ask for and discuss opinions. Ask team members about their views and ideas. Listen to their ideas, discuss them, and make sure that everyone is heard and understood.
- **Team members:** Share opinions and contribute ideas. Bring objections or concerns to the attention of the right person or to everyone in a meeting before a decision is finalized.
- **Team leader:** Make the decision. You make the final call after seeking and considering the input.
- **Team leader:** Explain how you arrived at the decision. If you intend to hold team members accountable for follow-through, they have a right to know the reasons behind your decision.
- **Team members:** As long as the decision is legal, ethical, moral, and safe, every member of the team owes 100 percent follow-through.

Process rules like these clarify expectations and avoid misunderstandings. Involving your team in decision making is a powerful step to building a strong, engaged, and accountable team.

Seven steps to building a team

How do you as a supervisor build a close-knit, highly motivated, productive work team? These seven steps can serve as a guide.

Step 1: Show team members where they fit into the system

Many people do not know what goes on beyond their immediate boundaries. Broadening their perspective to show how they fit into the bigger picture will help them understand how the unit operates, the extent of your authority in the department, and how their work matters to the government and the public. Ideally, the elected and appointed leadership has taken the time to set clear outcomes and targets for the organization so that you can articulate how your team is critical to achieving important outcomes.



EXAMPLES OF GROUND RULES FOR MEETINGS

- Start on time and end on time
- Come prepared
- No cell phones/texting
- Treat each other with respect
- It's okay to disagree
- Listen to others; only one conversation at a time
- Everyone participates; no one dominates
- All ideas are worth real consideration
- Keep an open mind
- In decision making, silence = agreement
- Everyone is responsible for the success of the meeting.

Step 2: Hold regular team meetings

Try to set aside about fifteen minutes at least once a week for a meeting to discuss overall progress, seek input, and plan ahead. Your meetings will be more successful if you encourage engagement and stimulate discussion. If you're doing most of the talking, the team probably isn't engaged.

Work with your team to establish ground rules for meetings. Ground rules allow you, and all members of the team, to hold participants accountable to agreed-upon expectations of behavior that support respectful, creative conversation and shared commitment to successful outcomes.

To ensure that your team meetings are productive, prepare a brief agenda. Include items that you think are important to team progress as well as items suggested by team members. Examples of agenda items for regular staff meetings include

- How are we progressing in getting our job done?
- What problems are we facing?
- What can we do as a team to solve those problems?

- Is there anything bothering any team members? If so, what can I do as team leader, or what can we do as a team, to work it out?
- Is there anything that I can do, as your supervisor, to make the work environment more satisfying, interesting, and productive?

To ensure continuity, confirm all follow-up actions, deadlines, and responsibilities at the end of the meeting and start the next meeting by reviewing agreed-upon action steps.

Even though you are the leader, you should guide or facilitate your team meetings to encourage maximum participation. You may even want to rotate responsibility for conducting the meetings among team members. And a little fun at each gathering will make for a better meeting and contribute to team cohesion.

Step 3: Set goals with your team members

Team members should understand the major outcomes of the organization and how your work unit affects those outcomes. To meet that expectation, team members should have some say in answering these questions:

- Where are we going?
- Why are we going there?
- What are the best ways for us to get there?

It is your job to help your employees understand what specific goals must be reached by the team, and then to let team members help you set objectives and strategies for achieving the goals.

Step 4: Encourage team members to suggest solutions to problems

You are taking a big step toward gaining respect when you welcome suggestions, and an even bigger step when you invite feedback and do not take criticism personally. Your employees will feel valued and respected when you demonstrate that you want to improve their work environment.

When an employee makes a suggestion, express your thanks even if the suggestion cannot be used, and explain why it cannot be used. When an employee points out a problem, listen carefully, think about it, and investigate it. Above all, let the employee know that you are looking into the matter and that you take the sugges-

tion very seriously. Then report back and explain what was done or why nothing could be done about the problem.

Step 5: Let team members tell you things you may not like to hear

Effective supervisors don't want to be surrounded by "yes men" and "yes women" who always say what they think you want to hear. Instead they embrace team members who speak honestly, raise concerns, and share frustrations. For example, just when your team seems to be coming together, an employee may tell you something that has been bottled up for some time. This may happen at a meeting or in a private conversation. Either way, remember that it is usually better for employees to get information out into the open rather than harbor private misunderstandings and resentments.

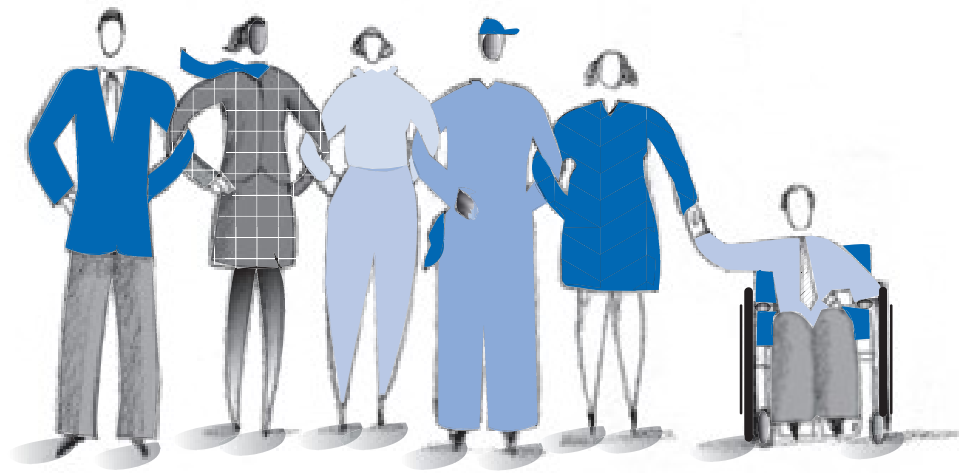
When team members are willing to level with you and with each other, they can begin to deal with the situation and arrive at a better understanding. The result of this process should be increased respect among team members. They may not like each other any better, but respect and understanding are worth more than superficial friendships. Teamwork isn't about getting along; it's about getting results.

Conflict is not a detriment to teamwork, but unresolved conflict can deeply damage a team. You must learn to be comfortable with conflict, recognizing that it is only dysfunctional when it isn't handled fairly and efficiently.

Step 6: Let team members help set standards

You cannot build or maintain a true team if some employees feel that you are unfair in any way. If employees have a say in setting standards and deciding how well employees are measuring up to those standards, complaints in your unit should be few, and judgments are more likely to be seen as fair. Allow team members to help you decide what the value of each member's contribution is or how successful the team's performance as a whole has been. And be sure that everyone has the team's goals in mind when these decisions are made.

Great organizations allow as much flexibility as possible in setting standards without ever compromising core principles. High-performance organizations set a handful of key values and principles and consider them sacred. Beyond that, teams have as much latitude as possible to use their skills and talents to achieve organizational outcomes.



Step 7: Respect diversity

Supervising a diverse work team means understanding and appreciating the different backgrounds and perspectives of your team members. Here are several valuable approaches to managing a diverse team:

- Communicate clearly. Avoid using slang that is familiar only to your own culture.
- Recognize that a perspective that is different from yours is no less valid and may in fact be particularly insightful.
- Make sure team members understand what your priorities are, what aspects of the job you feel strongly about, what drives you, and how your role as supervisor differs from their roles.
- Treat all of your employees as individuals who bring special talents and skills to your work team and to the organization.
- Be sure that all members of your team model this behavior, and that a safe process exists for raising concerns.

Empowering a team

A team is more likely to achieve its goals if members are empowered. Being empowered means giving employees control over their work and the authority to make

decisions within established boundaries. A key concept of teamwork is shared leadership, in which management and employees work together. This means actively involving employees in areas of decision making traditionally reserved to management including defining mission, goals, and objectives; establishing values, norms, and organizational climate; and improving work systems and processes. Involving employees in these important decisions produces good results because employees know their jobs better than anyone else, know where changes are needed, and, given the power and authority, can take the initiative to make the improvements.

From the employee perspective, teamwork involves accepting more responsibility and participating in improvement efforts and activities. Employees are encouraged to develop leadership skills and to understand and participate in group decision making and problem solving. However, team members must have support to be successful.

Empowering team members to take control of their work means helping them develop confidence in their abilities and encouraging them to respect themselves and each other. To do this, you have to give away some decision-making power to the team and pay attention to each individual team member: what is each person best at, what motivates each person, and how does each person handle challenges and setbacks?

Self-evaluation instruments, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) or the DISC (dominance, influence, steadiness, conscientiousness) Personal Profile, can help you and the team get to know decision-making preferences and operating styles that may affect individual and team performance. Using an assessment instrument can be a great team-building exercise for your unit because the results help participants understand not only their own styles and preferences but also those of others.

Three specific tools that supervisors can use to empower employees are job enrichment, career growth, and mentoring.

Job enrichment

Job enrichment gives employees the opportunity to develop their skills and bring new talents to the job. For example, if a member of your team is a good photographer, you might ask him or her to take the team's annual group photo, or to photograph a work process for use in the unit's procedures manual. As the supervisor, your task is to develop ways for team members to participate in structuring their jobs and using their special talents to improve operations and strengthen the team.



Career growth

Creating a career ladder within your work unit will enable those who achieve work success to take on new challenges. As the supervisor, you are in the best position to know when an employee is ready, willing, and able to try something new and when to encourage an employee to step up to a new challenge.

Helping an employee prepare to take on new tasks or additional responsibilities may not be something you can do alone. Usually, the organization provides a system that supports and encourages career growth through job classification, training, counseling, and education. As a supervisor, however, you can have a significant impact on your team's career growth by encouraging members to take advantage of the job and career development programs your organization offers.

Mentoring

One of your roles as supervisor is to plan ahead for the future needs of your organization. You can do that by being a mentor to employees you believe have potential. You can also connect your team members with other supervisors in the organization who can serve as mentors.

Mentors offer encouragement, serve as role models, and guide employees to growth opportunities. Mentoring can play a major role in how the organization plans for its future by making sure skilled people are available to move up when positions open up.

Summary

If you are committed to building a strong team, you are also committed to

- Sharing decisions with your employees about planning and scheduling work
- Encouraging employees to give their honest opinions and to make suggestions about their work

- Helping each team member clarify expectations, understand the work, get personal satisfaction from doing it well, and grow and develop on the job
- Maintaining a balance in how you interact with your employees
- Ensuring productive resolution of conflict
- Recognizing and valuing diversity within your team.

When you work with your employees in these ways, your group becomes a true team made up of capable, independent, and productive individuals. They cooperate easily with each other and with other organizational units, take responsibility for doing the work properly and for handling emergencies on their own, and successfully resolve conflicts and move forward together.

Once you have reached this point, you have successfully organized a working team. Your next job will be to keep this team together, to help it grow, and to help it produce even better work.

CHECKLIST

- Establish clear expectations.
- Use the seven-step method for team building.
- Show employees in your work unit how they fit into the entire organization.
- Always keep employees informed.
- Involve your employees in planning, scheduling, and assigning work.
- Look for ways to make your work unit more democratic.
- Encourage employees to give you their honest opinions, suggestions, and feedback.
- Engage with individual employees to help them understand their work, gain satisfaction from doing it well, build self-esteem, and grow and develop on the job.
- Become a mentor for someone in your organization who has potential and could benefit from one-on-one support.



Endnote

- 1 B.W. Tuckman, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," *Psychological Bulletin* 63, no. 6 (1965), 384-389.

Supervisory situation 7-1

Jack is a recent junior-college graduate and a newly hired buyer in the county's purchasing department. Brenda, the director of purchasing, has noticed that Jack keeps to himself and doesn't socialize with the other members of the staff. Jack is quiet at staff meetings and seems to be most comfortable working by himself.

Jack's work is thoroughly researched and presented in a concise and detailed format; however, Brenda is uneasy about Jack's lack of sociability. She has overheard members of her staff referring to him as unfriendly and stuck up.

Brenda believes that it is very important for her staff to share ideas and cooperate closely so that the purchasing department can improve its service to the line departments. Brenda is now wondering whether she made a mistake in hiring Jack because she isn't sure he fits into her team.

1. What are the issues being raised by staff and by Brenda?
2. How would you suggest that Brenda deal with Jack and the rest of her staff?
3. What specific tools could Brenda use to help Jack become an accepted member of the work team?

Supervisory situation 7-2

Traditionally, the stormwater drainage department has had the poorest safety record in the government and the highest incidence of citizen complaints about appearance, attitude, and performance. The new department head recently called the front-line supervisors together and laid down the following challenge:

"We've got to do something about our department to improve both our safety record and our image with the citizens. I'll admit that we face a lot of challenges because of the nature of our work, but I believe we can do better. Now, I'll let you have first crack at coming up with recommended changes. If I don't think your recommendations will do the job, I'll be forced to take some further action."

Over the next several weeks, the supervisors spent a lot of time on the problem and came up with the following recommendations:

- New uniforms and safety equipment for the crews
- Construction of a new washroom with showers and lockers
- Air-conditioning and a new paint job for all vehicles

- Regular training in safety and public relations
- Replacement of obsolete and damaged tools.

1. How is the department head likely to react to the proposed changes?
2. What are some ways the department head could have encouraged the supervisors to include all the members of their department in resolving the problem?
3. Do you think the solutions offered by the supervisors will resolve the problems? Why or why not?
4. If you were one of the supervisors being asked to come up with solutions, what solutions would you offer, in order of importance?
5. Would you talk to the employees to get their ideas and suggestions? What might be the benefit of talking with employees?
6. What further action do you think the department head could take that would promote team building and better results?



COMMUNICATING WITH EMPLOYEES

Mike Conduff

To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others.

Tony Robbins, author and motivational speaker

8



SNAPSHOT

This chapter covers the importance of communication to successful supervision and looks at communication concepts, skills, and barriers. Chapter objectives are to

- Increase understanding of the power of effective communication in getting work done and improving employee performance
- Improve communication skills
- Explore unique communication challenges in today's work environment
- Reinforce the importance of effective communication to successful supervision.

The chapter will help you answer these questions:

- What is effective communication?
- What are the important components of an effective communication process?
- What gets in the way of effective communication?
- How can you be a better communicator?
- How can you harness the power of electronic communication?
- How can you communicate with others from diverse cultures and backgrounds?

“Those guys never do what’s expected of them.”

“Susan can’t follow the simplest instructions.”

“I can’t figure out where they got an idea like that!”

“How was I supposed to know Ray was upset? He said he was okay.”

“Why didn’t someone tell me there was a problem?”

“I told them exactly how to do it! Why doesn’t anyone ever listen to me?”

How do you feel when others misinterpret what you say? Frustrated? Surprised? Angry? Disappointed? These are all normal reactions. Because we have been communicating all of our lives, most of us assume that we are good communicators. In fact, a majority of people in organizations think of themselves as excellent communicators although they also often recognize that organiza-

Author Mike Conduff appreciatively recognizes the contribution of Allison McWilliams, who wrote the version of this chapter included in the previous edition.

tional communication is a major challenge. If that's actually the case, then who is responsible for poor organizational communication?

Think about the last time you asked one of your employees to do something. Were your instructions clear and specific? Did you define the outcome you desired? Was the employee listening to you, or was she distracted? Did you pay attention to the employee's nonverbal cues, or were you also distracted, perhaps already thinking about your next meeting?

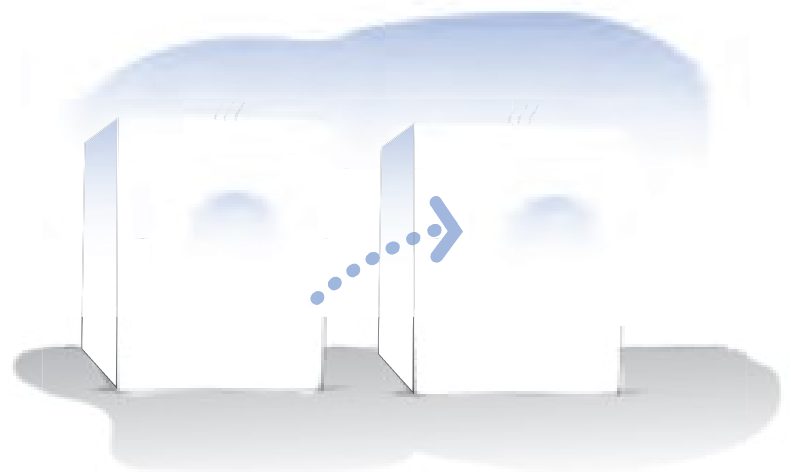
Effective communication is an essential part of successful supervision. Generally, 80 percent or more of a supervisor's day is spent communicating in some form. Communication occurs in face-to-face interactions with large groups or with individuals, over a telephone, through written memos or letters, and through e-mail, texting, or instant messaging. Communication also occurs nonverbally through gestures, facial expressions, posture, or even silence. Each of these methods of communication requires skills that can be learned and must be practiced.

Poor communication can lead to conflict, resistance, and low morale. Effective communication, on the other hand, helps your team operate smoothly and work together toward a shared and well-understood goal.

What is effective communication?

Communication is the exchange of information, facts, ideas, and meanings. That definition seems simple enough, but experience shows that communication is considerably more complex. The communication process has at least six parts:

- **The sender:** the person who is talking, writing, calling, or communicating nonverbally.
- **The message:** what is being sent such as an instruction, a suggestion, an invitation, a new idea, or some other signal.
- **The medium:** the means by which the message is sent, including face-to-face, over the phone, by e-mail, or by text message.
- **The receiver:** the person who gets the message.



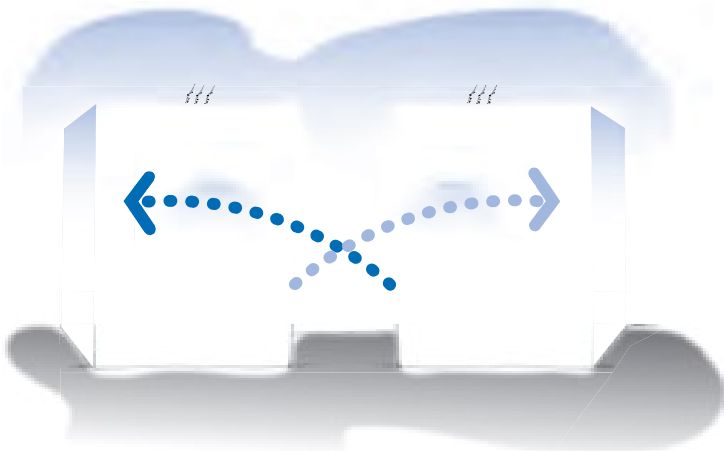
- **Feedback:** the return message that the receiver gives to the sender.
- **Noise:** factors that distort or block the message. Noise can be literal, such as ringing telephones and interruptions, or figurative, such as composing an e-mail while holding a conversation.

There are two types of communication: *one-way* and *two-way*.

Two-way communication occurs when the sender transmits information, facts, ideas, and meanings to the receiver and gets a response. This is the more effective form of communication, particularly in organizations. However, some circumstances call for one-way communication when no feedback from the receiver is either encouraged or allowed. As a supervisor, you should use one-way communication sparingly, and only when you are absolutely certain that no part of your message will be misinterpreted.

Effective communication is behavior that transmits a meaning (the message) from one person (the sender) to another (the receiver) in a way that the message is understood. In the communication process, both the sender and the receiver have responsibilities. The sender needs to make sure the message was understood, and the receiver should confirm that he or she actually heard what was said. In an organizational setting, communication often breaks down when neither party takes responsibility for clarity. This can lead to feelings of confusion and frustration—feelings that could have been avoided through two-way communication and clarification of the message.

How do you seek clarification when you are concerned the message may not have been understood? As the sender, you might say, “To make sure we’re on the same page, would you describe how you plan to tackle this assignment?” As the receiver, you could say, “Just to confirm, are you saying you want me to *work* on this report today or to *finish* this report today?” Both questions ask the other party to



give more detailed information to add clarity to the message.

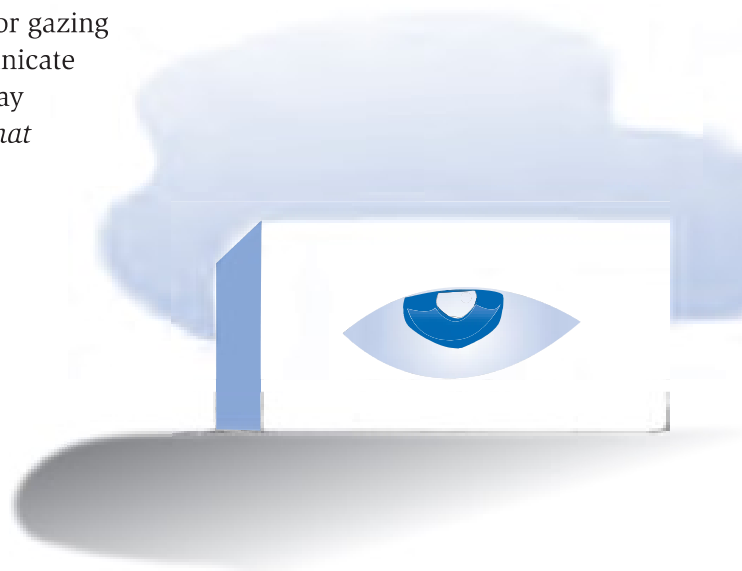
Another useful tool for seeking clarification is to accept responsibility for understanding by saying, “I’m not sure I communicated that very well. Can you tell me what you heard me say?” Acknowledging that you recognize your message may not have been clear eases the receiver’s feelings of uncertainty and allows for questions without fear of insulting you. It is always better to ask for and to give more information *now* than it is to be disappointed by the results *later*.

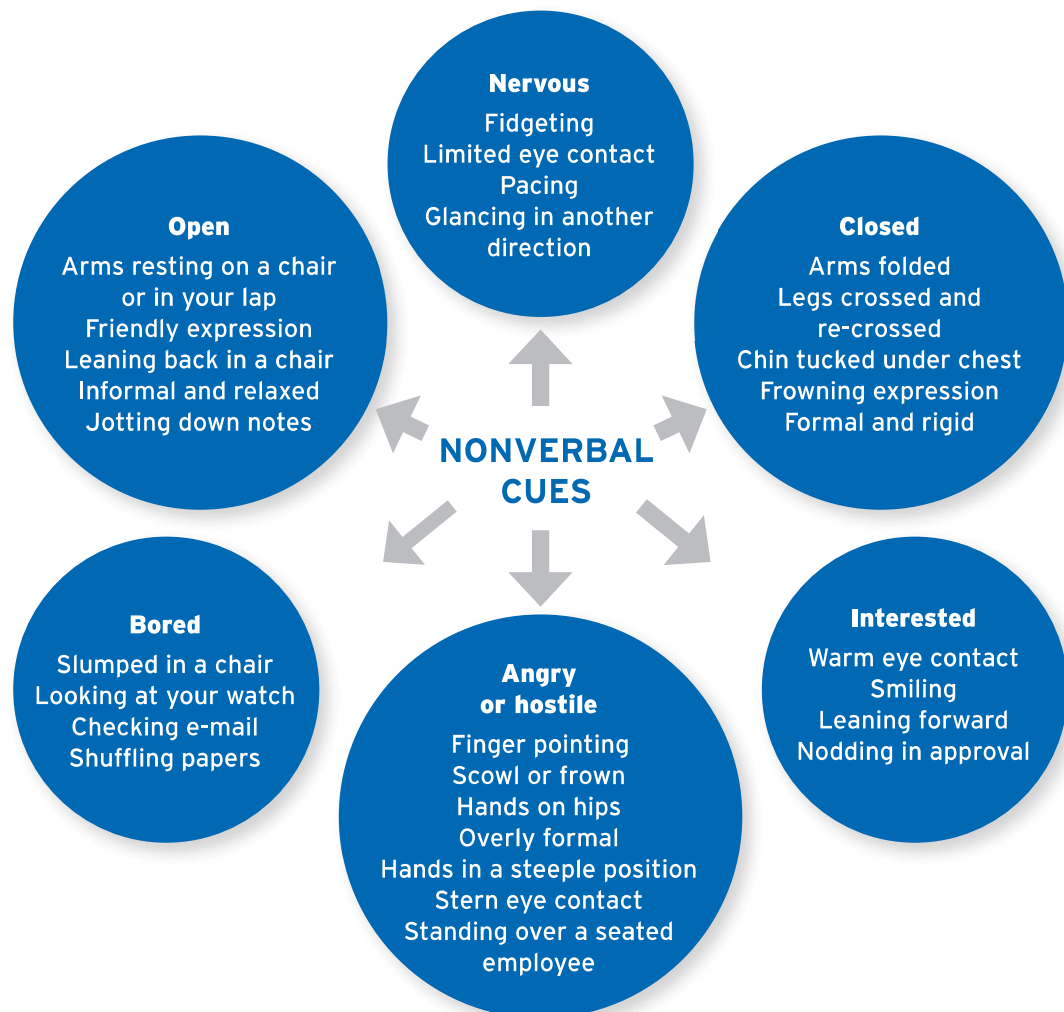
Nonverbal messages

Although you probably think you communicate verbally most often with your employees, much of your communication doesn’t involve words. Paralanguage, for example, includes the tone of voice, pitch, emphasis, speed, loudness, and pauses you use when speaking. It is closely related to verbal communication but concerns *how* something is said rather than *what* is said. Paralanguage can communicate meaning in ways that words alone cannot.

Body language involves the position or movement of the body such as posture, gestures, and facial expressions. Unintentionally, you may communicate a great deal to an employee through body language. A clenched fist may signal anger, worry, or tension. Eye contact may communicate honesty, attention, or interest. Playing with a pencil, tapping fingers on a desk, or gazing out the window when an employee is talking may communicate boredom or lack of interest. To be effective, you need to pay as much attention to *how* you are communicating as to *what* you are communicating.

How the sender treats the receiver’s personal space is another form of nonverbal communication. Everyone has a comfort zone; it is bigger for some than for others. When you move beyond someone’s comfort zone by getting too close, it sends a message that can be misinterpreted. For example, if you come into a co-worker’s office and touch items on the desk, your co-worker may experience this as an invasion of personal space. He or she may feel irritated or even angry, and may





then misinterpret or not even hear the verbal message that you are delivering. You need to be conscious of how you use personal space, and respect employees' space.

Finally, personal style is a form of nonverbal communication. As noted earlier, communication takes place through symbols. Your clothes, your way of carrying yourself, and the volume you typically use when speaking are all symbols that accompany your words. Your personal style, in turn, reflects who you are—including, for example, your age, your cultural background, and your life experiences. You

can't change who you are, but you can become more aware of how your personal style affects your communication. You should also be sensitive to the variety of personal styles among your employees. There may be times when you will want to adjust your style to accommodate those with whom you are communicating.¹

To enhance your communication skills, you must pay equal attention to non-verbal as well as verbal aspects of communication, such as intonation, inflection, gestures, and use of personal space.

Barriers to effective communication

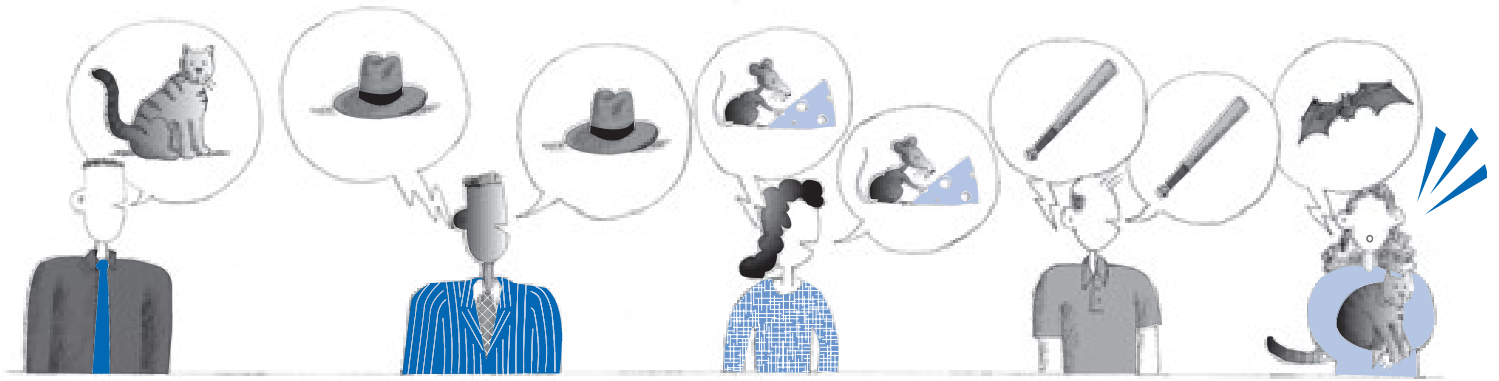
One metaphor for communication depicts it as a conveyor belt moving packages: a bundle transported along a conveyor belt from Point A to Point B arrives as the same package, unchanged. Unfortunately, communication is often more like the telephone game in which children sit in a circle and take turns whispering a message to the next person. What started out as "I'd like a lollipop" may end up as "I have stripes on my socks" at the end of the circle. The message you send to a receiver can easily become something entirely different when the receiver interprets the message.

Barriers to effective communication can occur anywhere in the communication process. When the barrier originates with the sender, it is often because the sender is not clear about the goal of the message or has failed to adapt the message to the intended receiver. For example, the sender may

- Incorrectly assume that the receiver has the knowledge necessary to understand the message
- Fail to consider different language, background, experiences, and attitudes that will shape understanding
- Choose a communication medium that is not suited to the message
- Use language that causes the receiver to stop receiving.

Other barriers to communication arise in the feedback loop. For example, the sender may fail to ask for feedback, may interpret feedback incorrectly, or may fail to clarify the message based on feedback from the receiver.

When the barrier originates with the receiver, it is often because the receiver misses or misinterprets part of the message. For example, inattention, distractions, or emotions may lead the receiver to jump to conclusions or to hear only what he or



she wants to hear. Sometimes a receiver may reject a message because it contradicts his or her beliefs and assumptions.

No matter what the barrier, either party in a two-way exchange can try to improve communication by asking for *feedback*. If you are not sure an employee has understood what you said, check for understanding by asking the employee to report what he or she heard. Feedback does not have to be given in the same medium as it was received. A spoken message delivered today may be one that you respond to tomorrow by e-mail. That is still feedback, although now there is the added noise of time and distance.

When you are the sender, keep these guidelines in mind:

- Think carefully about who the receiver is, including his or her emotional state.
- Know what your objective is in sending the message.
- If you are communicating face-to-face, take steps to ensure that the physical surroundings are as comfortable as possible and with minimal distractions for the receiver.
- Review the message in your head before you say it. Think about the meaning and clarity of the message from the point of view of the receiver.
- Use language and nonverbal cues that will be understandable to the receiver.
- Ask for feedback.
- If the receiver reacts negatively, try to figure out what's happening.²

Active listening

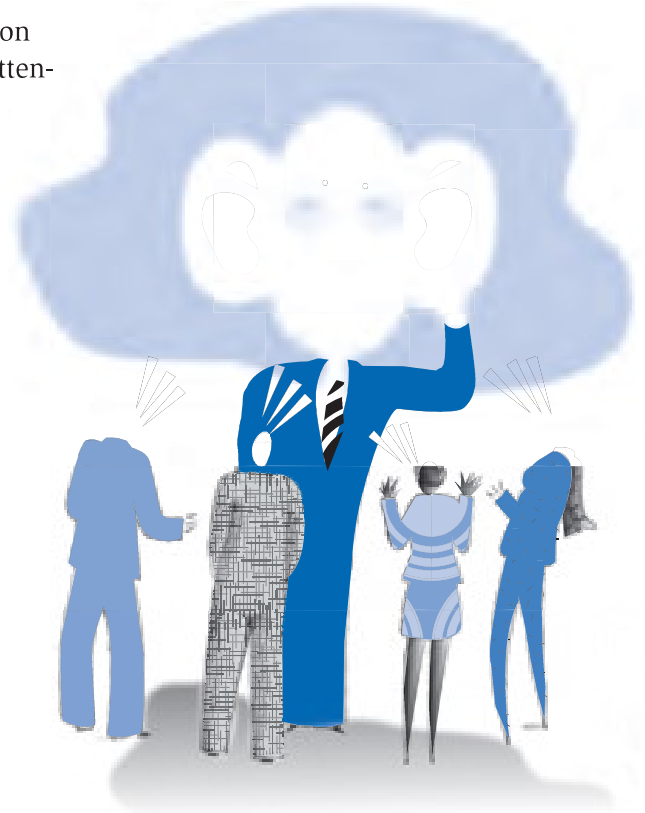
Listening is a key component of effective communication. True listening goes beyond merely hearing: it means understanding what the other person is saying.

Why is listening successfully so difficult? For starters, humans think much faster than they talk. The average rate of speech for most Americans is 125 to 150 words per minute; the brain can process information by as much as four to five times as fast. Instead of slowing down the brain to concentrate on what the person is saying, many people use that extra capacity to think about something else.

Noise, such as people talking in the hall, a radio playing in the background, or a ringing telephone, can also disrupt your concentration and keep you from listening to the message. Thoughts about the report you were working on before the other person walked into your office or worries about an overdue project create a different kind of noise that interferes with effective listening.

Becoming an active listener will improve your communication capacity. Active listening requires you to give your undivided attention to another person and to attempt to understand what is being communicated. As a supervisor, you can show that you are listening actively by:

- Looking directly at the speaker. Be aware of your body language: if your eyes move to the clock or around the room, the speaker will think you are bored or disinterested.
- Showing that you are following the conversation by using appropriate facial expressions, by nodding occasionally, or by saying, “I see.”
- Waiting patiently if the employee talks slowly or becomes silent. This gives the speaker time to collect his or her thoughts and to consider what has been said. It also demonstrates your respect for and interest in the conversation.
- Letting the speaker finish without interruptions such as finishing sentences, answering telephone calls, or checking text messages.



- Listening not only to what the person is saying but also to the feelings being expressed; take note of both verbal and nonverbal cues.

Feedback is an integral part of the active listening process: it lets your employees know that you are truly listening. Sometimes it's helpful to paraphrase the employee's message. You might start by saying, "What you seem to be telling me is..." or "It sounds like you're feeling..." or "What I think I hear you saying is..." and then asking for feedback.

Here are some basic guidelines for active listening:

- ***Listen to what the employee is saying without judging.*** Really listening requires discipline. You may want to share your own ideas before the other person has finished his or her thoughts or agree or disagree without fully processing the information. One technique for avoiding an early interruption is to allow for a thoughtful pause after the other person has stopped talking. This gives the person a chance to continue if he or she wants to add more, slows you down so that you don't interrupt, and demonstrates the value you place on the employee and the interaction.
- ***Try to identify and acknowledge the employee's feelings.*** First try to sense how the employee may be feeling and then say what you're thinking so you can verify your perception. This also helps your employee feel that he or she has been heard. Saying, "If that happened to me I might feel..." or "My impression is you are feeling..." gives the employee the space to clarify or affirm your impression.
- ***Paraphrase by using your own words to restate what you heard the employee say.*** Paraphrasing is a form of feedback that helps you demonstrate you have understood correctly and that gives employees the opportunity to make themselves clear.
- ***Ask open-ended questions.*** When you ask questions, you are trying to figure out exactly what your employee is saying. Open-ended questions such as, "In what way does this work procedure make the job safer?" will provide more useful information than close-ended questions such as, "Does this work procedure make the job safer?" Yes or no answers don't tell you much.

By listening actively, you can better appreciate your employees' concerns and may be able to help resolve them.

Consider the following situation: Avery says to his supervisor, “This job really depresses me. I no sooner finish one thing than they bring me something else to do. Sometimes I feel like I’m just a cog in a machine.” A supervisor who considers only Avery’s words might immediately try to help Avery do his job faster or might get a colleague to share some of Avery’s work. But a supervisor who is listening for the feelings behind Avery’s message may realize that he is bothered by more than the workload. He might be saying that his only reward for doing his work quickly is to receive more work. And he may be frustrated because his supervisor has not recognized his efforts with a word of praise or appreciation.

To discover what sparked Avery’s comment, you could start by saying, “You know, Avery, we have been very busy lately. I can see how it would be frustrating to you, and I’m sorry that I haven’t let you know how much I appreciate the good job you’re doing.” This approach opens the door for the employee to share what is really on his or her mind and gives you a chance to listen further.

Giving feedback

Feedback is the receiver’s response to a message—an important part of the two-way communication process. There is another kind of feedback that is important in your role as a supervisor, and that is feedback on performance. Effective supervisors supply regular, unsolicited feedback to their employees.

You may find when you first start giving your employees regular feedback that you encounter resistance or even resentment. In general, it is difficult to take criticism, no matter how constructive it is. Draw on these guidelines when you are giving feedback on performance:

- **Examine your own motives.** Be sure your intention is to be helpful, not to show how perceptive you are.
- **Consider the receiver’s readiness to hear your feedback.** Usually, feedback is most effective when people seek it. When possible, look for signs that an employee is ready to hear the feedback. It is also helpful to remove any external distractions by meeting in a private office or conference room.
- **Give feedback promptly.** Feedback given soon after an event or incident means the details remain clear. However, if the receiver is upset or otherwise not ready to listen, wait until emotions will interfere less with the information.

THE EIGHT ATTRIBUTES OF SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION

Congruent, not incongruent

A focus on honest messages where verbal statements match thoughts and feelings.

Example: "Your behavior really upset me."

Not: "Do I seem upset? No, everything's fine."

Descriptive, not evaluative

A focus on describing an objective occurrence, describing your reaction to it, and offering a suggested alternative.

Example: "Here is what happened; here is my reaction; here is a suggestion that would be more acceptable."

Not: "You are wrong for doing what you did."

Problem-oriented, not person-oriented

A focus on problems and issues that can be changed rather than people and their characteristics.

Example: "How can we solve this problem?"

Not: "Because of you a problem exists."

Validating, not invalidating

A focus on statements that communicate respect, flexibility, collaboration, and areas of agreement.

Example: "I have some ideas, but do you have any suggestions?"

Not: "You wouldn't understand, so we'll do it my way."

Specific, not global

A focus on specific events or behaviors and avoid general, extreme, or either-or statements.

Example: "You interrupted me three times during the meeting."

Not: "You're always trying to get attention."

Conjunctive, not disjunctive

A focus on statements that flow from what has been said previously and facilitate interaction.

Example: "Relating to what you just said, I'd like to raise another point."

Not: "I want to say something (regardless of what you just said)."

Owned, not disowned

A focus on taking responsibility for your own statements by using personal "I" words.

Example: "I have decided to turn down your request because..."

Not: "You have a pretty good idea, but it wouldn't get approved."

Supportive listening, not one-way listening

A focus on using a variety of appropriate responses, with a bias toward reflective responses.

Example: "What do you think are the obstacles standing in the way of improvement?"

Not: "As I said before, you make too many mistakes. You're just not performing."

From David A. Whetten and Kim S. Cameron, *Developing Management Skills, Eighth Edition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2010), 243. Used with permission.

- ***Be descriptive rather than judgmental.*** Explain, in a nonjudgmental way, what happened. This statement is *descriptive*: “We had a report to turn in Friday morning, and because we didn’t receive your section until late Thursday afternoon, everyone else had to scramble to meet the deadline.” This is *judgmental*: “Do you ever turn in anything on time?”
- ***Deal in specifics, not generalities.*** Describe concrete events such as, “You interrupted me when I was reviewing the information” rather than, “You always interrupt.”
- ***Own the statements you make.*** Use sentences that start with “I” such as “I have a concern about your work” rather than “others have been complaining.”
- ***Offer feedback but don’t impose it.*** Present the information as something the receiver can consider and explore rather than only accept as a command.
- ***Avoid overload.*** Focus only on what is most important and changeable.
- ***Focus on the problem to be solved or the issue to be confronted rather than on the person.*** Refer to what a person does rather than who you think he is. For example, you might say that a person “talked more than anyone else in this meeting” instead of he is a “loudmouth.”
- ***Avoid words or phrases that trigger emotional reactions.*** If you suspect that your employees see you as threatening or intimidating, ask a peer for feedback on your use of language. Do you routinely use words or phrases that send a message you don’t want to send?
- ***Remember that not providing feedback is a message in itself.*** Employees may interpret the absence as disappointment, hostility, or lack of interest in them.

Dealing with resistance to feedback

A good way to overcome resistance to feedback is by asking your employees to give you feedback on your performance. A regular, private meeting with each employee is a great opportunity to take stock of how the team members are feeling, and what they are truly thinking. Are there resources that could help them do their jobs better or more efficiently? Is there something you could do (or not do) that would create a better work environment?

When you ask for feedback, monitor your reactions carefully. Responding angrily or with any suggestion of negative consequences will make employees reluctant to trust you in the future.

The following guidelines will help when you seek feedback from employees:

- Be ready to hear comments that may make you uncomfortable.
- Ask for clarification, explain your actions as needed, but do not debate the validity of the employee's observations.
- Thank the employee for the feedback. It may not have been easy to give, and you want to be sure that the person will be willing to do it again in the future.

Electronic communication and social media

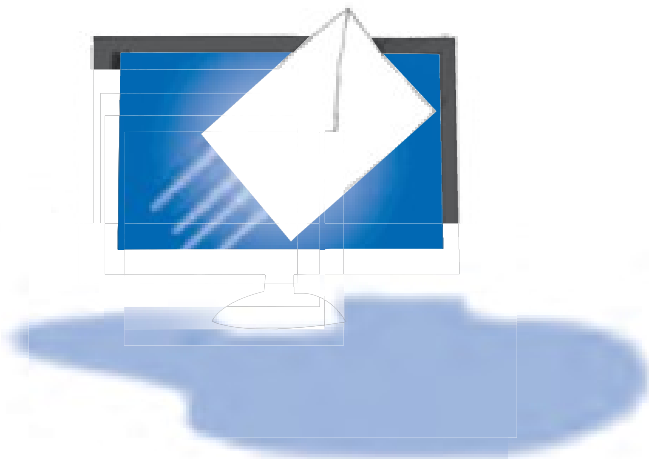
Electronic communication such as e-mail, texting, instant messaging, and tweeting are valuable resources for today's supervisors. For example, e-mail can communicate the same message to many employees at once, can confirm a message delivered in a meeting or over the telephone, and can serve as a record of past communication. A brief text message can clarify a situation immediately to improve productivity rather than waiting for a meeting to deal with an issue.

Improperly used, however, these tools can be alienating. The problem with e-mails or tweets is that they cannot communicate tone (not even with emoticons, such as smiley faces). As a result, the receiver may experience a tone that isn't what was intended. For example, the sender's attempts at humor can be misinterpreted as insensitivity. Unless the receiver lets the sender know that he or she found the message upsetting or offensive, the exchange may break down entirely: what

was intended to be a dialogue may end up as one-way communication.

Sensitive messages are best delivered in person; that way you can make sure you are taking into account the receiver's feelings. And when you use e-mail to deliver the same message to multiple employees, not everyone will interpret the message the same way.

Remember, too, that e-mails, texts, and tweets are all saved in accordance with record retention policies and are subject to freedom-of-information inquiries. A brief text meant to clarify can be interpreted much differently a week, a month, or a year later.



Here are some guidelines for using e-mail to communicate with your employees:

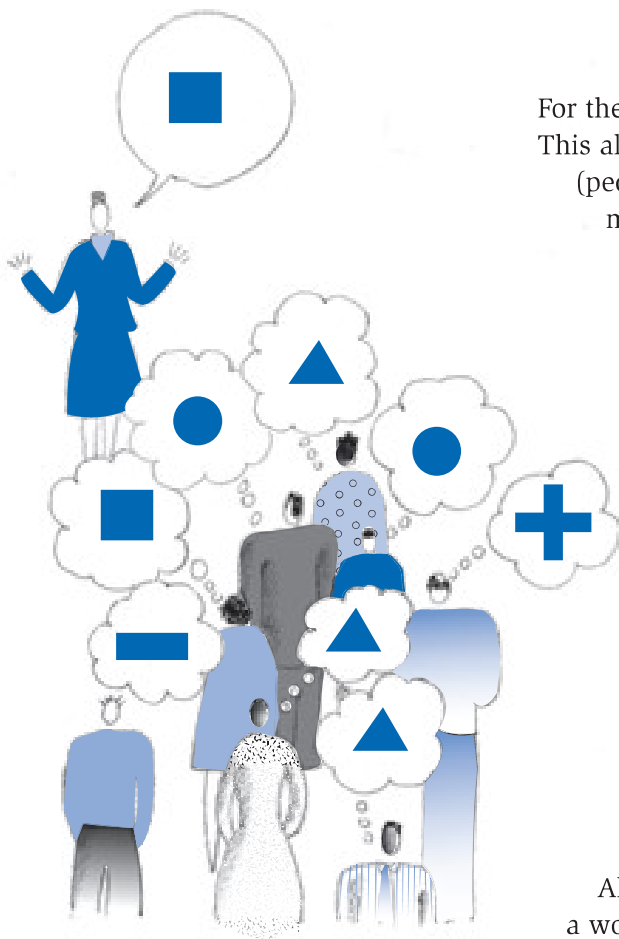
- Reread each message before hitting the send button. Is the message clear? Is there potential for misinterpretation?
- **Ask for feedback.** Encourage employees to come see you in person about the message if needed. Some employees respond better to face-to-face communication.
- **Don't overuse e-mail.** Your employees receive lots of e-mails and may make quick judgments about what they think is important. So if you send them e-mails constantly, it will be hard for them to distinguish the important from the general. Eventually none of the messages will carry any weight in their full inboxes.
- **Never pass along joke e-mails in the workplace, no matter how cute, funny, or inoffensive they may seem.** What is humorous to you may be offensive to someone else, and those e-mails add more inbox clutter.
- **Before using the "reply to all" button, check who received the original e-mail.** The golden rule with e-mail is that if you don't want to see it in print later, don't send it.

Electronic communication seems to have almost unlimited potential to increase workplace efficiency and effectiveness. Employees carrying smart phones and tablets can now check e-mail and access the Internet constantly. Workers can stay in touch with each other as never before, which ensures a well-informed team.

Communicating with a diverse workforce

Today's effective supervisor understands and appreciates individual differences, whether those differences are based on background, culture, age, or gender, and knows that good communication is essential to good management of a diverse workforce.

Diversity in the workplace has wide-reaching effects on the entire organization. Effective management of differences can increase creativity and improve problem solving by introducing new perspectives and ideas. Diverse teams of people process more information and arrive at more effective solutions. In contrast, ineffective management of differences—which often includes poor communication—can undermine group cohesion.



For the first time ever there are four generations in the workplace. This alone often creates communication challenges. Traditionalists (people born between 1922 and 1945) are of retirement age but many remain in the workforce. Already, some baby boomers (people born between 1946 and 1964) have reached normal retirement age and are beginning to move away from full-time employment. Behind this group are Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) and Generation Y or millennials (born between 1980 and 2000). Being aware of each generation's preferred working and communicating styles will help you better manage team relationships.

In broad terms, men and women, people of different cultures, and people of different ages tend to use different styles of communicating, working, and managing. Understanding these differences can help people work together more effectively. Remember, though, that behavior ultimately stems from individual preferences rather than group generalizations.

Avoiding stereotyping

Although generalizations may increase understanding within a work group, it is important to avoid stereotyping—that is, mentally placing individuals into various groups and interpreting their behavior in light of what you think you know about that group.

Stereotypes are reflected in comments such as, “Oh, you work for a woman. You know how manipulative women can be,” or “Bob’s a good worker, but you know people his age don’t take anything seriously.” Stereotyping often occurs when something in our own background, culture, or experience makes us see people as members of a group rather than as individuals. As a supervisor, you must make sure you are not encouraging or allowing stereotyping within your group. It’s your job to create the most harmonious work environment possible.

When working with a diverse group of employees, you should

- Use clear, concise language and avoid slang. An employee whose first language is not English may have trouble understanding idioms and jargon.
- Be particularly alert to nonverbal messages. Is there something in the employee's facial expression that indicates he or she does not understand you? Are you sending an unintended nonverbal message by standing too close, pointing, or insisting on eye contact?
- Accept different perspectives as valid. If a conflict occurs, consider the possibility that it is based on differences in background.
- Be aware that your organization has a culture. The organization culture and way of operating should be explained to new employees.
- Treat all employees with respect.

Everyone has preferences, values, attitudes, and behaviors that reflect backgrounds and experiences. But everyone is an individual first. Acknowledging individuality will go a long way toward understanding, acceptance, and improved communication.

Summary

Communication is an essential component of building a strong, productive team. You spend the majority of your workday communicating in one way or another—whether face-to face, over the phone, or through memos, e-mails, or texts. Fortunately, communication is a skill that can be learned and practiced.

Communication is the transmission of ideas, facts, information, and meaning. Because communication is filtered by both the sender and the receiver, what is sent may not be identical to what is received. Therefore, effective communication depends on active listening and on giving and receiving feedback. Communicating successfully is rarely easy, but the results are worth it: increased efficiency and effectiveness, higher morale, an honest exchange of thoughts and opinions, and a more harmonious work environment.

In many ways, effective communication is the very essence of effective supervision.



CHECKLIST

- Be aware of the importance of effective communication.
- Recognize that communication is a process and involves a number of components.
- Understand the various forms of verbal and nonverbal communication.
- Recognize the major barriers to effective communication.
- Use active listening.
- Understand the importance of giving and receiving feedback.
- Appreciate the relationship between good communication and good supervision.

Endnotes

- 1 Christine Becker, "Interpersonal Communication" in *Effective Communication: A Local Government Guide* (Washington, DC: ICMA, 1994), 153.
- 2 Robert E. Quinn et al., *Becoming a Master Manager: A Competency Framework*, 3rd ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2003), 43.

Supervisory situation 8-1

As the long-time supervisor of the local government's summer aquatics recreation program, Jordan is responsible for more than 100 seasonal workers between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two and six full-time employees. While Jordan is not directly responsible for interviewing or hiring the seasonal workers, he does develop and maintain the daily work schedules to ensure that every program is well handled and fully staffed.

Typically this time of year, Jordan feels overwhelmed and begins to get irritable and short-tempered at times. Since Jordan's regular full-time staff is also stretched thin, a couple of years ago his supervisor suggested that he use one of the seasonal workers for additional administrative support. Although initially reluctant to let go of some of these tasks, Jordan has found the additional support very helpful.

This summer Jordan has had Cathy, one of the more experienced of last year's seasonal workers, provide his additional administrative support. Because of the large influx of employees, Jordan sought and received permission to bring Cathy on board a month earlier than other seasonal workers. In addition to the daily tasks, Jordan has also assigned Cathy preparation of the weekly payroll for his review.

Cathy is twenty-nine years old and the single mother of two small children. She is well educated, excited about this role, and hoping to do a good job so that Jordan might offer her a full-time position. Cathy is eager to earn more money at a steady job she can count on with working hours that fit the demands of caring for her children. She has a cheerful personality and seems popular with other employees and customers alike.

In a typical week, Cathy will be late for work on one or two occasions. It is also not unusual for her to have two or three phone calls a day from her child care provider. At least once each week, Cathy texts Jordan and asks for permission to leave a little early so she can pick up medicine or run an errand associated with her kids.

Because of Jordan's busy schedule, he finds both the tardiness and leaving early frustrating. Because of a heavy workload, he has had little chance to talk with Cathy about her attendance and tardiness, but has given her two verbal warnings.

Today was the last straw. Jordan was in the middle of orientation meetings with the new lifeguards when he got a text from Cathy that said, "J, 911 at home. Gotta go. CUL8R. Thx, C"

At this point, Jordan is considering terminating Cathy since he feels he cannot count on her, and she doesn't seem motivated to change her work habits. With such a heavy summer workload, Jordan feels he can't afford to have an employee who doesn't pull her weight. "I am drowning here, and all she cares about is rescuing herself!"

As soon as he is done with the orientation Jordan texts Cathy back and says, "F2F, 8:00 a.m. sharp!!"

1. What approaches, short of termination, might Jordan try in order to help Cathy understand how her work habits are affecting him and her employment?
2. What are some communication techniques Jordan could use to assist Cathy in understanding the importance of her role?
3. What advice do you have for Jordan?

Supervisory situation 8-2


Chet has been a supervisor in the purchasing department for the past four years. Jim and Miguel are buyers in his division who have had problems working together. Jim is fifty-two years old and has been involved in various aspects of purchasing for the past twenty years. He is in charge of coordinating all capital purchases for the city, and prides himself on having worked his way up to senior buyer.

Chet hired Miguel two years ago. Miguel speaks with a strong Spanish accent, and his English is sometimes hard to understand; at Chet's urging, he is taking courses in English at night school. Chet assigned Miguel to work with Jim as an assistant buyer, but Jim and Miguel have not been able to work cooperatively together. Each worker continually complains to Chet about the other. Jim's major complaint is that Miguel does not follow directions and often turns in work that Jim has to redo. Miguel complains that Jim is far too demanding and impatient.

Determined to resolve the long-standing issue between them, Chet finally called both employees into his office. He asked Jim and Miguel to sit down and face each other. He then said that he wanted to help them resolve their argument by laying down some ground rules: each employee was to take five minutes to tell the other exactly how he was feeling about the issue. When one was speaking, the other was to actively listen.

Jim began by telling Miguel that he liked his sense of humor and unassuming manner. He then told Miguel that what he really didn't understand was why Miguel didn't follow his directions. Jim's voice grew louder as he recounted the latest incident, when Miguel had been instructed to contact the police department to clarify questions about the specifications for a police sedan that the department had submitted: "Because you didn't contact the department, several of the specifications were inaccurate. Your failure to follow through could cost the city an extra \$2,500 per vehicle. That's a waste of taxpayers' money," Jim fumed.

When it was Miguel's turn, he first said that it sounded as though Jim was really angry and frustrated. "You feel that I don't follow directions because I didn't contact the police department as you had told me to do. I guess you're right. I didn't follow through. But that's because I thought you told me to check the police sedan specifications and to call the police department if I had any questions. I read the specs and didn't see anything wrong with them. I'll admit that there were a few phrases I had



trouble understanding, but I thought that if I asked you to explain them, you'd be angry. You don't like me, do you, Jim?" Miguel asked.

After the session, Jim and Miguel admitted that they at least had a better understanding of the other's point of view.

1. What were the active listening steps that each employee was asked to follow?
2. How do you think active listening may have helped in this case?
3. In the future, what should Jim and Miguel each do to avoid a repeat of this situation?

