



Hello and welcome to another session of troubleshooting here in the Supervisors Circle.

Troubleshooting is an opportunity for us to come together as a community to talk about our troubles and to support one another and come up with some ideas about how to address a particular situation.

You are welcome to submit your own trouble and we can speak about it on your behalf. You are welcome to come on live to talk about your trouble. You are welcome to watch the video later to hear what other people have to say.

We also post about it in the forum for people to continue the discussion.

Lots of ways to participate because for better or worse, there are a lot of troubles and issues when we are supervising other people along with all the joys.

So, let's get started. Here is today's trouble:

"I've been a supervisor for about a year and a half and I'm finally starting to come up for air. Things seem to be going well overall. One thing that I'm concerned about though is that my staff never give me feedback. I ask them for feedback all the time and they always say everything is fine. This can't possibly be true, can it?"

I love the questions that come in.

Each is valuable and important and every time I read them it seems that in some way, shape, or form, this could apply to anybody, to everybody, to all of us, no matter how specific the situation might be.

A lot of what we encounter as supervisors is very similar to what anyone as a supervisor will encounter.

Even when this trouble isn't your own, it isn't one you submitted or it's not something that's a huge issue for you, chances are there is some similarity there and always an opportunity to learn and grow.

This one I would imagine is true for everybody because feedback is this monster for a lot of us when we first become supervisors and the challenge is, it is equally a monster for people on the receiving end.

It is loaded.

I'm not surprised to receive something like this because I've experienced it, and any manager I think I've ever talked to has some sort of challenge when it comes to feedback.

The question that is posed is about staff always saying everything is fine.



This can't possibly be true. Can it?

Yes and no.

Depending on what we mean by fine, and that is for a lot of us, we recognize in an important and helpful way that no job will ever be perfect. There's always going to be something that isn't our ideal. Something that we would change if we could, but we recognize that not everything is going to be perfect.

If staff are always saying everything is fine, there may be truth to that and the truth may be that everything is fine, fine, fine, not great, not terrible, fine.

For some people, fine is fine. They don't expect more than fine.

For a lot of people, fine is a bit of a resignation of not only do I not expect everything at work to be perfect, I don't even really expect it to be all that good. This is my job. I come in, I put in my hours, I go home. It's annoying, it's boring, it's challenging, it's whatever negative thing, but that's fine because it's work.

For a lot of people, fine isn't good enough. I don't want to spend all my time in a place where I've resigned myself to the fact that I don't need to enjoy it. I just need to put in my hours and get my paycheck. I don't need it to be fulfilling. For a lot of people, fine isn't good enough.

If your staff consistently and unanimously are saying things are fine, then it could be any number of these things.

The possibility is yes, things are fine in a way that works great for some people, it's fine for other people and simply isn't good enough for others.

It's also possible that things aren't fine, at least for some of the staff you're supervising. The default to say fine is a bit of a self-preservation technique. If I'm honest about how things really are or how I really feel, I might then experience the repercussions of that.

I might have a supervisor who then doesn't like me very much or holds grudges or doesn't put me up for that promotion or doesn't give me that raise or in extreme cases ends up firing me.

There's a lot of vulnerability in asking a staff to give you the supervisor feedback.

There's also a ton of value because nobody can give you feedback better than the people you're supervising when it comes to your supervision and how effective it is.

The people with the best information are the people you're supervising. Yes, you can get important feedback from your own supervisor or from colleagues. They have lots of insight and wisdom to share too. None that will be more valuable than the people



you're supervising. Creating an atmosphere where there is enough trust for staff, to be completely honest with you, that's the work. The feedback- learning how to give it and solicit it and receive it well- those are all pieces to the work, but in order to get there, your role as a supervisor, as team leader is to create a culture and an environment and relationships with your team so that they know they can trust you and that when they are honest, which is what you say you are asking for, that you're able to receive it in a way that maintains that atmosphere of trust.

Let's look at some things to consider.

The first is that loaded nature of feedback. We've already talked a little bit about the potential for repercussions and that most of us have experienced feedback that has gone wrong and in some cases with disastrous consequences.

It's important that we always remind ourselves and that we are transparent and open with our staff and anyone who is part of that feedback conversation, a recognition of what might be really hard about it and as a human being, being honest and open yourself that sometimes the feedback you receive is hard to hear, that you're still grateful for it, you still want it, but that you might feel some kind of way about it and that's human and okay.

The feeling is not the issue. How you respond in a way that shows staff, I do want to hear this and I'm grateful for it, even if what you said stings a little bit, if your reaction is defensive, it's dismissive, you have indicated to your staff you don't really want them to be honest, and they're going to pick up on that really quickly.

One of the suggestions I always make is removing that word altogether or maybe not all the time, but the word itself carries so much history and weight that the minute the word is spoken, people clam up.

*Do you have any feedback?*

For me it's like it becomes this neon sign, feedback, feedback, feedback, and suddenly people start remembering their history with feedback and past instances that didn't go well.

Consider asking for what you're asking without even using the word. Instead of saying to staff, do you have any feedback for me? Asking what are some ways that I can support you better?

Where do you think our working relationship is going well and where do you think it needs some help?

Asking good, pointed questions, and just removing that word. Nothing we ever talk about is the magic answer that fixes everything, but hopefully each idea, strategy, or tip that we share helps a little bit, helps chip away at things that are really difficult.



Which leads to number two, and that is being specific and being proactive.

So many times, when we are soliciting feedback, we ask the question so broadly, do you have any feedback?

For me, it's an easy way for someone to say, no, everything's fine. Being more specific gives people a starting point.

When we just ask, do you have any feedback for me? Even if people do have feedback, it's hard to know where to start.

Starting in a specific way helps a lot. For example, you might say,

*Hey, staff, I'm really trying to work on making our team meetings more valuable, more efficient, and more inclusive.*

*How do you think I'm doing so far?*

*What tips or strategies do you have for me to help accomplish that goal?*

*I'm trying to work on my email and making sure my emails are clear. Do they seem clear to you? What could I do to make them clearer?*

Or something along those lines.

I recommend that you be proactive. This isn't realistic in all cases, but in a lot of cases this is possible and extremely helpful.

Most of the time when we ask for feedback, we ask for it in the moment or we ask without any preparation or the opportunity for staff to give a thoughtful answer. We'll sit down in a one-on-one or in a team meeting and throw out an idea or simply ask staff, can I get some feedback on...?

Due to the delicate nature of giving feedback up and that loaded nature of feedback for a lot of staff, they don't want to fumble through how to respond to something they haven't had any opportunity to think about.

When possible, I recommend being proactive instead of asking in the moment, letting people know that you're going to ask and giving them an opportunity to really pay attention to what you're asking for feedback on.

In that previous example, I'm trying to make our meetings more engaging, efficient, and inclusive. You can ask your staff ahead of time,

*This is what I'm working on. I would love during our next team meeting for you to pay attention to how efficient or inclusive or engaging our meetings are. Next time we meet, I'm going to ask you for one or two observations you had during that meeting.*



It gives people notice; I won't say warning. It gives them some notice. It gives them the opportunity to really pay attention to the thing you're asking for feedback on. It gives them time to be intentional and you're setting up the expectation not for a yes or no answer.

*Do you have any feedback about yesterday's meeting?*

Which can be an easy no.

Instead, you are telling them, I will be asking for one or two observations. Again, you don't need to say feedback or one or two suggestions next time we meet. So, they know what to expect when that's coming.

The best source of information is always the person you're asking about. I can speculate, I can use my own experience, I can congregate the experiences of people I've worked with over the years to say, this might be what's going on, or this is a strategy that might work for you.

But again, your best source of information is going to be the people you're supervising.

What a powerful question during your one-on-ones or if you want to have this conversation collectively as a team to say,

*You know, every time I ask for some feedback or some suggestions from you, you always say everything is fine and I'd like to talk more about that.*

Or

*I imagine that there's some things you'd wish I did differently or that I would change, and what is the hesitation in sharing that?*

This does put people on the spot and it's a bit of a catch 22 because in order to have this conversation and get an honest answer, there needs to be a level of trust and to build that level of trust, you need the feedback, but you can't get the feedback until you've built a level of trust.

It is a bit of a challenge to ask people why they're not giving you feedback. If the reason is that there's not enough trust, then why would they think there's enough trust to give you an honest answer about that?

It's not necessarily true or guaranteed for sure that you'll get an honest answer, a complete answer, or even an answer at all. It's quite possible if you start this conversation, the response will be, well, everything's fine. They might not be ready yet, and that's okay.

We meet people where they are.





What's helpful about having this conversation is that even if you don't get an immediately valuable answer from staff, what it does do is it sends a message and it opens the door to, I want this from you that I'm not just paying lip service.

I'm not just asking for feedback because I think that's what I'm supposed to do as a supervisor. It's showing and demonstrating that I really do want this from you.

You've opened that door to have that conversation and to have it again and again. If staff aren't ready yet to give you feedback, they might be ready to share why they're not yet comfortable giving you that feedback.

Maybe not, but maybe in any case, you've opened the door to say, I do want you to be able to share these things with me. I do want you to feel comfortable.

How do we keep working on that?

How do we keep building up that trust?

You can't force trust and you can't rush it, but you can certainly cultivate it.

Continuing to demonstrate that you are open to their honesty, continuing to demonstrate that you're not going to hold their honesty against them helps build up that trust.

Of course, trust is very delicate, and the one time you react in a way that is uncomfortable or intimidating to staff, that could be enough to then close the door on that trust at the very least temporarily.

This is hard stuff.

Outside of the implications of people's job and their job future as human beings, having another person tell us things they think we could improve or that we aren't doing very well can often sting, I've used that term before, but hey, let's use it again, right?

That, that sometimes just doesn't feel good as a person, and we're not, most of us are not really used to receiving that kind of information.

We're used to stopping at everything is fine.

You may want to consider if there's a part of you that while you're seeking additional feedback and honesty, that you might be appreciating the comfort in hearing that everything is fine.

It feels good for people to say, Nope, everything's great. You're doing a great job.

My sense from the question is, even if there is some comfort there, you recognize that it isn't an entirely truthful answer and certainly not for every staff.



There's always going to be something we can do better. There's always something staff wish were different.

I appreciate you sending this question in.

It's so important and it is almost universal. I do want to go out on a limb and say it's universal.

That feedback in some way, shape or form poses some challenges to all of us.

Consider these three things and at the core, what you're doing to build up that trust, what you're doing to enhance your relationships, what you're doing to continue to be explicit, that you want a culture where people are comfortable and people are encouraged to share what they really think.

It's long work, it's hard work, and it's incredibly valuable work. I appreciate you wanting to do it and to do it well.

I encourage all of you, I encourage me, I, I encourage us to keep working at this because self-awareness is an important piece of how we're doing as supervisors, but it is a limited piece. We need to hear from the people we're supervising.

If you want to shoot your own trouble, you are welcome to come on here live or you're welcome to submit your question and we will be happy to discuss it on your behalf.

Just send an email or you can post in the forum, and we will make sure to get to your trouble as well.

Thank you so much.

It's always a joy to be with you and I already look forward to seeing you next time.