

# The Up-Front Manager

**E**stablishing a positive, productive, and open relationship with employees is one of the most important goals of an effective manager. The first step in this worthwhile goal is writing an up-front agreement with each employee. An up-front agreement identifies what you expect of the employee and what the employee can expect from you. Clear understanding is encouraged by clearly stating specific goals and the activity or action steps required for their achievement. The manager's responsibility is to encourage the commitment of each employee to carry out the action steps required for success.

An up-front agreement provides a springboard for developing a productive working relationship. An up-front agreement requires the manager to carry out these actions:

1. Define your goals and your goals for each employee.
2. Outline what you expect from each employee and what the employee can expect from you.
3. Summarize the rewards each employee can enjoy when goals are reached and penalties if they are missed.

When two people understand clearly what they can expect from each other and commit themselves to the action steps, or work, required to fulfill those expectations, a positive basis for effective management is initiated. Managing employees' attitudes or feelings is not the manager's responsibility, but managing their commitment to work activity and results is.

The goal of effective management is to create results through people. The goal of management is more likely to be reached when a clear agreement exists between employer and employee about their joint objectives and expectations. Without such an agreement, a condition called "mutual mystification" is likely to develop. The atmosphere created by mutual mystification seems to communicate the message, "I won't tell you what I want, if you won't tell me what you want. When nothing happens, we can both be disappointed." Consider the contrast outlines between "mystification" managers and effective managers:

## "Mystification" Managers

1. Complain that an employee has a bad attitude.
2. Spend increasing time in meetings.
3. Spend increasing time counseling employees about personal problems and managing their moods to help them feel good.

4. Assume more of their employees' work.
5. Waste increasing time and effort complaining.

## Effective Managers

1. Point out specific behaviors that need to be changed.
2. Work with employees to improve their skills in specific situations.
3. Invest time helping employees to stay focused on their goals and to increase their productivity.
4. Empower employees to carry out their responsibilities.
5. Work with each employee to identify specific problems and to outline action steps each can take to produce better results.

Managers are responsible for avoiding the pitfalls of mutual mystification. Their responsibility includes taking action to prevent or discourage employee mystification. When an employee complains, "My boss doesn't understand me," instead of working, the manager's responsibility is to attempt to understand the employee and use that understanding as a basis for helping identify the employee's position. The manager's responsibility also is to provide training and coaching to more nearly ensure that employee's success. When an employee says, "My job is different," instead of looking for ways to improve the job and be productive, the effective manager helps that employee identify specific ways to improve job performance.

Another common employee mystification is commiserating with other employees and emphasizing what is wrong with little effort to increase work activity. Sometimes employees have legitimate complaints. If so, recognize them, explore with the employees ways to "right these wrongs," and encourage a commitment for each team member to assume responsibility for it.

The greatest tragedy of mutual mystification is its extremely contagious nature. When one person suffering from mutual mystification comes in contact with a coworker, the destructive effects of mystification spread almost immediately. The epidemic of mutual mystification can threaten the entire workplace. Effective managers understand mutual mystification and are totally committed to preventing it or eradicating it. An up-front agreement with each other employee is the most rigorous measure to guard against mystification.

**Managers who understand mystification and take positive steps to prevent it or to cure it can enjoy certain benefits and avoid certain negative outcomes:**

1. Clear, reasonable expectations about the actions of others rather than confused expectations and disappointment.
2. Enthusiastic, positive attitudes toward co-workers and work instead of negative attitudes or even hostility.
3. People committed to carrying out their work responsibilities rather than blaming external circumstances for failure and problems.
4. Diminishing need for excessive paperwork and reports rather than drowning in a sea of paper.
5. Brief, meaningful meetings focused on accomplishments rather than long meetings with disappointing results.
6. The required work schedules filled with productive efforts and increased pride in work rather than longer work hours, unmet goals, and increased sense of failure and guilt.
7. Increased decision-making effectiveness rather than failure to assume responsibility for one's decisions and actions.
8. Increasing confidence in employees in their productivity rather than loss of confidence, damaged self-esteem, and little motivation.

Without clear objectives expressed in an up-front agreement, people experience difficulty growing and succeeding. Because they are not sure what is expected of them in the organization, they cannot be certain what to do, or how to do it. Consequently, they fill the day with busy work rather than purposeful activities that lead to the achievement of goals for the organization. In contrast, clear understanding creates a synergistic workplace where personal and organizational goals are achieved.

Guidelines for writing an up-front agreement with an employee will be provided in next month's column. Begin now to clarify the goals and expectations you hold for each of your employees. Clearly knowing these goals and expectations form the basis for writing an up-front agreement and becoming an even more effective manager.



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