

## What Your Supervisor Wants

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### Respect

What do most supervisors want out of their relationships with the people they supervise? Some want to be liked, while some simply want people to like their work and do a good job. Some want honesty and openness, while others simply want people to do an honest day's work. Different supervisors have different priorities and styles. Yet, all supervisors do want respect.

Does this mean supervisors expect employees just to agree and do what they are told? It is not necessarily respectful for an employee to say yes and follow instructions that he knows will not work. Unfortunately, some people mistake agreement with respect because they do not know how to clearly, firmly, directly, and respectfully disagree with an authority figure.

Most employees come to the work place with inadequate skills for resolving disagreements with authority figures. They grew up with parents who were not open to disagreement. Think about it – in the middle of an argument, how often did your parents say, “I’m sorry, what would you like me to understand about your point of view?” Few did. Consequently, most employees do not expect supervisors to be open to disagreement either.

### Tell Me When You Disagree

Many people think that supervisors want them to be “yes men” by doing what they are told to do and by saying what the boss wants to hear. The old saying, “If you don’t have something nice to say don’t say anything at all,” is taken too far. “It’s disrespectful to disagree with your elders” is amended to include, “with your authority figures.” Consequently, people withhold. The boss must then make decisions with inadequate information. The result is an atmosphere of distrust in which it is difficult for anyone to feel respected.

One problem is that many supervisors do not know how to invite people to disagree in such a way that makes the employee feel safe and

respected in return. Everyone wants respect, and yet everyone is waiting for the other person to give it first.

So, what do supervisors want? They want to know when you disagree with them! Or at least they should want to know this. Some supervisors do not realize it can be dangerous for an employee to disagree without the supervisor knowing it. If the supervisor knew about the disagreement and listened carefully to the employee's concerns, maybe she would change her decision. Or maybe she could clarify a misunderstanding. But the supervisor is often the last person to find out when a disagreement exists.

If you are an employee who can express your disagreements respectfully, knowing how to stand your ground while remaining open minded, your value will multiply in the eyes of your supervisor.

### How To Disagree Respectfully

Here are a few key steps to get you started:

- **Rule out any misunderstandings.** Check to make sure that you are clear about the supervisor's instructions or viewpoint. Interview the supervisor with *The Five Levels of Clear Communication* (Facts, Opinions, Emotions, Importance/Priority, Expectation/Action). You can download a handout about the Five Levels at the following link: <http://www.resource-i.com/PDFs/5Levels+HIC.pdf>.
- **Confirm your understanding.** Don't just think you understand. Make sure the supervisor confirms your understanding is accurate. S/he will be more open to considering your point of view when you take the time to consider hers/his. This is the essence of respect.
- **Build on common ground.** Before emphasizing in what way you disagree, build common ground by acknowledging anything the supervisor said that is a good point. Again, check *The Five Levels* for clues (facts, priorities, actions, etc.)
- **Build a link to your point.** Connect the supervisor's points to your point. If you can't do it, how could you expect the other person to do it? Use *The Five Levels of Communication* to outline how you disagree. Connect the points of agreement to your new points [*i.e., This task is a high priority (importance). And we agree that this other task is also important. I need help to get both done on time, or to determine which to set aside (expectation).*]

- **Fundamental requirement or preference?** On a scale of 1-10, consider whether your recommendation is a slight preference (1) or an absolutely fundamental requirement (10), meaning it is not debatable. Be clear with the supervisor about this, and don't go to war over your preferences!

- **Be open-minded.** Always be curious about what information you might not know. Don't get stuck in the right/wrong blame game. In a respectful interaction with your supervisor, the two of you might find a new solution that neither of you had considered.

### It's Easier Said Than Done

This balancing act is certainly easier said than done. RI's web-based training, *High Impact Communication: Reducing the Resistance in Another to Your Ideas*, could assist you in learning how to communicate better in challenging situations. You can take this training online by going to the following URL:

<http://www.resource-i.com/webbasedtrainings1.html>

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