

SECRETARY-BOSS RELATIONSHIPS

*discussion sessions lead
to improved behavior
on both sides*

Managers often ask, "Why doesn't my secretary assume her responsibilities without my having to constantly remind her?" "How can I get my secretary to understand what I want her to do?"

Secretaries, in turn, often think about how to find out what the boss really wants done or how to tell him about the critical remarks made by others. Whether each person is afraid of the other, too busy to find time for conversation, or too preoccupied with his own concerns is hard to tell; but it is apparent that many concerns and irritations don't get resolved simply because managers and their secretaries don't take the time to talk about them.

As a result of this questioning, we felt it would be valuable to have managers and their secretaries exchange views about the problems they experience with each other. Therefore, we have done this with several of our clients in the following way.

EXCHANGE OF VIEWS

Secretaries and managers meet for an hour and a half in separate groups, with an instructor assigned to conduct the discussions. At the end of this time, the groups are brought together to hear summaries of each discussion.

When the managers and their secretaries reassemble, each staff member (instructor) summarizes the discussion he attended. These summaries do not include identifying incidents, but do present positive and negative feelings of one group toward the other. The summarizer attempts to distinguish between the comment made by only one person and a general point of view; however, he tries to avoid identifying the secretary or the manager who may have made the statement while conveying the idea that: "Here are some feelings secretaries and managers have about each other . . . if possible, identify yourself."

The summaries are made honestly, but potentially humorous situations used wherever possible, to relieve tensions. After each summary, managers and secretaries are invited to comment on the reports.

Then the session is opened to further comments. Sometimes a manager acknowledges they are talking about him and sometimes more information is requested — the summarizer tries to supply it (the secretary or manager involved does not need to comment unless he or she so desires).

At future sessions, secretaries and instructors consider ways in which problems can be worked out in the office. Secretaries and managers often engage in similar problem-solving situations in their own office after these sessions.

With an "If the shoe fits . . ." attitude, the following are some of the major concerns frequently mentioned by managers and their secretaries.

PROBLEMS RAISED BY SECRETARIES

- A. **The need for more information about the job.** This is expressed in several ways. One assistant wanted to know how the manager felt about the relationships between several secretaries in one office? "Is one secretary supposed to be in charge, and if so, why doesn't he tell us?" "He never tells me what he expects from me, and regardless of what I do, I feel that he doesn't find me satisfactory," said another. "I wish he had told me something about the personalities of a few of the difficult people we meet. If he had, I could have handled them a lot more tactfully."
- B. **Skills aren't used.** "I haven't had a chance to use my shorthand at all." "I'm a former English teacher — I could write and edit many letters for him but he doesn't let me." Comments like these are made very often by a number of secretaries.
- C. **The need for guidance.** The secretaries want to know how to handle a variety of problems such as:
 1. How to handle an irate person who insists on talking to the manager and won't accept the statement that "He's busy — can he call you back?"
 2. How to handle special requests

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over the phone?

3. How to make people feel comfortable while waiting?
4. How to process special reports and procedures? According to one secretary, "The boss told me to handle all questions about any area, but didn't tell me how to do it. When I pressed him for some answers, he said handle it the way you feel best suits the situation. When I did, he bawled me out!"
- D. **The boss doesn't review the secretary's performance with her.** Secretaries want to know how well they are doing and how to improve. Frequently managers' comments are too vague to be useful, overly critical and compliment lacking.
- E. **The boss is insensitive to the secretary's feelings.** "He bawls me out in front of the entire staff. I don't feel that's the way anyone should be treated." "He never says a word to me, I'm just part of the office furniture!" "He thinks he's funny and keeps making sarcastic comments all day until I'm just about ready to explode!"
- F. **The boss isn't approachable.** "Gosh, you can't tell him anything!" said one secretary. Another comments that she kept getting the brushoff from her boss. "He's always talking about time to sit down and talk over the office problems, but he never does." "I'd like to tell him about some procedural changes we could make, but whenever I say anything about it, he makes me feel as if I had no right to criticize his ways of doing things."
- G. **The boss doesn't realize the impressions he's creating.** "He schedules appointments and keeps them waiting for long periods of time." "He's very brusque with people and I've heard more than one person complain about his manner." "The people who work for him often ask me why the boss doesn't bother to discuss things with them".

- H. **The boss often forgets to communicate important things to his secretary.** He forgets to tell her about special arrangements he has made. He may not tell her where he's going or how he can be reached when he leaves the office. He may expect her to have something ready for someone, but hasn't told her where it is.

PROBLEMS BOSSES EXPERIENCE WITH SECRETARIES

- A. **The secretary forgets to do important things.** "I have to keep reminding her to get that filing system up-to-date." "I asked her to clean up after I was finished, only to find out that it wasn't done." "She was supposed to call several people and cancel a meeting but forgot and I had several angry people on my hands."
- B. **The secretary doesn't face up to her responsibilities.** "She's always late from lunch!" "Instead of telling someone I absolutely refused to see him, she could have asked whether I would be willing to make a special arrangement." "I always have to ask her to prepare things for me, she just doesn't seem to anticipate what I need to have ready!"
- C. **The secretary is too sensitive to criticism.** Sulking, crying and irritation are reported as frequent responses by the managers when they attempt to criticize secretaries. Consequently, some managers feel reluctant to mention anything to their secretaries. "I figure the time it would take to patch the feelings up isn't worth it. I grin and suffer!" stated one bitter manager.
- D. **The secretary isn't sensitive to people's feelings.** "She just doesn't seem to recognize when someone is anxious, uncomfortable or irritated." "She makes everyone feel as if they irritate her!" "She talks about people in front of others who may be around."
- E. **The secretary is too inquisitive about matters that are not her concern.** "She butts into conversations even

though they don't concern her." "I find her looking into files even when she has no need to do so." "Mail which is marked 'Personal,' I'd like to feel is my business!"

- F. **The secretary is overbearing.** This is mentioned in instances where one secretary is in charge of others. "It almost seems as if this were her office instead of mine!"
- G. **The secretary is uncooperative.** "She doesn't get along with the other secretaries!" "She seems to feel that she doesn't have to help with the more routine matters." "She won't take direction from anyone but me!"

SUCCESSFUL SECRETARY-BOSS RELATIONSHIPS

Naturally, both sides also mention some of the fine points about each other. Some relationships apparently engender great loyalty and satisfaction. Many secretaries speak with pride about "their office" and "their bosses." In fact, from some of the positive experiences which are reported, other managers and secretaries are able to get help with their problems. For example, one manager now holds periodic meetings with his staff to review office procedures. One manager now delegates considerable responsibility to his secretary.

SUMMARY AND RESULTS

This procedure has been employed with several groups of managers and their secretaries. It is, to be sure, an experience which has some degree of discomfort and embarrassment in it. The "shoe" fits all too often. But because it does, this confrontation of feelings often makes people want to change their own behavior. There have been many highly favorable reactions from participants who report on changes which were made in their offices as a consequence of these discussions. Managers and secretaries who have been made more aware of each other's concerns and have made some behavioral adjustments, seem to find the everyday events in the office more pleasant and comfortable.