

MORE HELP NEEDED—NOW!

Primary Topic—*Decision Making*

Additional Topics—*Criticism and Discipline; Employee Problems and Problem Employees; Methods Improvement*

You are manager of the health information management department of Memorial Hospital. You have 20 people in your group. Three of your employees have the title supervisor, but all are usually more involved in doing the work of the department than in supervising others. One of these, your transcription supervisor, is expected to devote 60 percent of her time to transcription duties and the other 40 percent to supervision.

Several times in recent months the transcription supervisor has mentioned that the backlog of work was growing and that she needed more help. She has never been more specific than simply saying that “more help” was needed, and her complaints seemed to be no more than passing remarks offered without preparation or forethought. Since you have been under pressure from a number of directions and your transcription supervisor’s complaints seemed to represent no more than chronic grumbling, you have not felt compelled to add the transcription backlog to your currently active worries.

However, today, Monday, the transcription supervisor sought you out and confronted you with: “I need one more full-time transcriptionist and I need her *now*. I’m tired of waiting and tired of being ignored, and I’m sick of being overworked and taken for granted. If something isn’t done about it by Friday, you can find yourself a new transcription supervisor.”

Instructions:

Propose at least three possible solutions to this problem and describe the potential advantages and disadvantages of each.

The case places you in a trap. Describe this trap, explain why it is a trap, and explain how you believe you should proceed toward a solution in view of the hazards you face.

Explain what you believe is the general condition that caused the specific problem described in the case. Who is responsible for the matter, and what can be done to address the cause?

UP FROM THE RANKS

Primary Topic—Leadership

Additional Topics—*Authority; General Management Practice; Time Management and Personal Effectiveness*

After 8 years as a staff nurse in a medical/surgical unit, Julie was appointed head nurse of that unit. After a meeting at which her promotion was announced, Julie found herself surrounded by three coworkers offering their congratulations and other comments.

"I'm really happy for you," said Sarah, "but I suppose this means our car pool is affected. Your hours are bound to be less predictable now."

Elaine said, "And the lunch bunch, too. Management commitments, you know." The emphasis on *management* was undeniable. Julie was not at all sure she was happy with what she was hearing.

Jane offered, "Well, maybe now we can get some action on a few age-old problems. Remember, Julie, you used to gripe as much as we did."

"We've all griped a lot," Sarah agreed. "That's been a way of life around here." Her tone changed and her customary smile faded as she added, "Now Julie's going to be in a position where she can do something, so let's hope she doesn't forget who her friends are."

Elaine and Jane looked quickly from Sarah to Julie. For an awkward 10 seconds or so, nobody spoke. At last, someone passing by spoke to Julie, and as Julie turned to respond, Elaine, Jane, and Sarah silently went their separate ways.

Questions:

1. What possible advantages does Julie have in becoming supervisor of the group of which she has long been a member?
2. What are the possible disadvantages that may present themselves to Julie?
3. If you were Julie, how do you believe your promotion would affect your relationships with your former coworkers?

THE SILENT GROUP

Primary Topic—*Meeting Leadership*

Additional Topics—*Change Management; Communication; Motivation*

As the admitting manager recently hired from outside, it took you very little time to discover that morale in the department had been poor for some time. As you worked to become acquainted with your employees by meeting with each of them alone, you soon became inundated with complaints and other evidences of discontent. Most of the complaints involved problems with administration and the business office and the loose admitting practices of physicians, but there were also complaints from the admitting staff about other members of the department and a couple of thinly veiled charges concerning admitting personnel who “carry tales to administration.”

In listening to the problems, you detected a number of common themes. You decided that much misunderstanding could be cleared up if the gripes were aired openly with the entire group. You then planned a staff meeting and asked all employees to be prepared to air their complaints—except those involving specific staff members—at the meeting. Most of your employees seemed to think such a meeting was a good idea, and several assured you they would be ready to speak up. However, your first staff meeting was brief. When offered the opportunity to air their gripes, nobody spoke.

The results were the same at your next staff meeting 4 weeks later, although in the intervening period you were again bombarded with complaints from individuals. This experience left you frustrated because many of the complaints you heard were problems of the group rather than problems of individuals.

Questions:

1. What can you do to get this group of employees to open up about what is bothering them?
2. How might you approach the specific problem of one or more of your employees carrying complaints beyond the department; that is, “carrying tales to administration?”

THE REPEAT OFFENDER

Primary Topic—*Criticism and Discipline*

Additional Topics—*Communication; Delegation; Employee Problems and Problem Employees*

“So I slipped up and made a mistake,” said chemistry technician Arnold Adams. “All that proves is that I’m human, that maybe I’m a little careless once in a while, like everybody else.”

“I can’t call your behavior carelessness,” said laboratory manager Elsie Clark. She slid a piece of paper across her desk to Arnold and continued, “I have to call it negligence, and that’s what this warning notice says.”

Arnold scowled and said, “I don’t deserve a warning and certainly not for negligence.” He spread his hands and added, “What am I supposed to be—perfect? I can’t make an honest mistake once in a while?”

“You can’t make mistakes like this one. The test request was clearly marked stat but you logged it in as routine and it sat for several hours.”

Arnold shrugged and said, “Nothing happened to the patient, did it?”

“No,” Elsie answered, “but Dr. Baker ordered it stat because of this particular patient’s history. Something could have happened—we’re just lucky it didn’t.”

“So nothing happened,” Arnold repeated, “but I get a warning in my file? If a warning’s supposed to be a form of punishment, how come I’m punished for something that didn’t cause any harm?”

Elsie said, “Arnold, you’re all by yourself every night at the satellite. We must be able to depend on you to process all requests according to procedure and to perform all stat work as it’s received.”

Arnold simply scowled at the warning notice as Elsie added, “And this sort of thing has got to stop. This is the fourth conversation we’ve had like this, and the most serious yet.”

“Fourth?” Arnold’s eyebrows rose.

Elsie nodded. “In 3 years,” she said.

“I can’t believe you’d hold some thing against me that happened 3 years ago. A warning that old ought to be wiped out. You’ve got no business using that against me.”

“I’m using it only to point out a pattern. You seem to go along fine for 8 or 9 months or so, then up comes a major problem again.”

“Just bears out what I said before,” Arnold said. “I’m human. I make mistakes. And 8 or 9 months since the last mistake entitles me to a clean slate.”

“I can’t agree,” Elsie said. She handed Arnold a pen and added, “Please sign the form to show that we’ve discussed this. You can write out any objections or comments in the space at the bottom. And should we have such a conversation again, you may find that more than a written warning is involved.”

Questions:

1. Consider Elsie’s statement, “You can’t make mistakes like this one.” Is this a valid statement? If yes, why?
2. What is wrong with Arnold’s description of a warning as “a form of punishment?”
3. How would you deal with the repeat offender if you were in Elsie’s position?

A GOOD EMPLOYEE?

Primary Topic—*Criticism and Discipline*

Additional Topics—*Communication; Employee Problems and Problem Employees; Rules and Policies*

Housekeeping supervisor Ellie Richards was faced with a situation that left her feeling uncomfortable about the action she would have to consider taking. In discussing the matter with Stan Miller, the other housekeeping supervisor, she began: “I have no idea how I should deal with Judy Lawrence. I just don’t recall ever facing one like this before. Her attendance has deteriorated and this once truly good employee is causing problems for the department as a whole.”

Stan asked, “What’s the problem?”

“Excessive absenteeism,” Ellie answered. “Judy has rapidly used up all of her sick time, and most of her sick days have been before or after scheduled days off.”

“What’s unusual about that? Unfortunately, we have several people who use their sick time as fast as it’s accrued. And most get ‘sick’ on very convenient days. I have a couple I can count on to do it regularly.”

“What’s unusual is the fact that it’s Judy Lawrence. She’s been here 7 years, but this apparent sick time abuse has all been within the past few months. She’s used up her whole sick-time bank in 7 months. And most recently, she was out for 3 days without even calling in.”

Stan said, “You can terminate her for that.”

“I know,” said Ellie.

“Especially when you take her other absences into account. You’ve warned her about them?”

After a moment’s silence Ellie said, “No, not in writing. Just once, face to face. I really didn’t want to put pressure on her.”

“Any record of it? Fill out a disciplinary dialogue form for her to sign? Something you’ve filed—even in your own office?”

“No,” said Ellie. “I really hated to. I know I should have taken some kind of action by now, but I can’t seem to make myself do it.”

Stan asked, “Why not?”

“Because she’s always been such a good employee. She’s always been pleasant, she’s always done what she’s been told to do, and she’s always done quality work.

She's still that way, except for her attendance problems of the past 7 months. I'm really afraid there's something wrong that she's not telling anyone."

Ellie shrugged and continued, "I guess what I'm really hung up on is: How do I discipline someone who is usually a good employee, and do it in such a way that it doesn't destroy any of what is good about her?"

Stan shook his head and said, "Good performer or not, I'd say you ought to be going by the policy book. That's all I can suggest."

Questions:

1. How would you advise Ellie to proceed in the matter of Judy Lawrence?
2. Do you feel that Ellie's failure to take action thus far affects her ability to take action now? Why or why not?

MORE HELP NEEDED—Now!

One possible solution is for the department manager to simply concede to the request and immediately authorize an additional transcriptionist. On the plus side, a greater amount of work could then be accomplished. However, it is equally possible that the manager, in conceding, would be demonstrating to all employees that he or she is likely to give in to threats.

Another solution would be to ignore the transaction supervisor's threats and allow her to step down from supervision or resign if she should so choose. However, it is possible that by calling her bluff the manager could cause the loss of an otherwise good employee.

A third possible solution would be to require that only documented requests for increases in personnel, complete with justification, can be considered. The supervisor should thus be encouraged to fully document her request. This routine might encourage the supervisor to consider all ramifications of her request. However, it could also possibly discourage a busy employee who may not have time for supervisory duties from generating a proper request.

The department manager appears to be in a twofold trap: The department apparently has employees operating with inappropriate job descriptions and titles; and persons with the title of supervisor have apparently not been given appropriate training in supervision. It is this lack of supervisory training that could well be the main genesis of the existing problem.

Also, there appear to be communication problems; the department manager has ignored the warning signs of frustration up to the point at which the supervisor is desperate for action and will risk her job to get help.

The most serious trap is presented by a threat, seemingly an ultimatum, from an employee. The employee is saying to the manager, "Do it my way or I quit." The employee's drastic step has made the manager fully aware of a problem that needs to be acted upon, but has also put the manager in a position in which immediate action, no matter how well intended, can be interpreted as capitulation to employee pressure.

The list of possible approaches could be much longer. However, any solution attempted should recognize and attempt to correct the communications problems, emphasize the correct way to go about requesting relief, and ensure that investigation and analysis come before action.

UP FROM THE RANKS

As the manager of a group of former peers, Julie will have the advantage of already knowing many of the strengths and weaknesses of the people reporting to her. She should also know, based on past behavior, which employees are likely to have attendance or disciplinary problems. As an 8-year member of the unit, she may be privy to personal information or have knowledge of idiosyncrasies that could enable her to select and apply effective motivational techniques. In short, she knows the people.

The disadvantages may be troublesome for Julie. The new supervisor may have difficulty being taken seriously by her former peer group; these people have responded to Julie in a particular way for 8 years, and it may be difficult to change their response patterns. There could also be resentment from others in the group who thought they were more qualified, or that perhaps another specific person should have been promoted instead of Julie. There may even be some who simply resent another's good fortune. Julie may also be uncomfortable giving orders to her friends or pointing out errors to them. Disciplinary matters may also present problems for Julie.

Julie must be prepared to deal with the likelihood that she will no longer be thought of as one of the gang. It is a rare instance in which one who has been promoted can remain a member of group in the same good standing as previously enjoyed. The immediate effects may be mostly negative, and unless Julie's direct superior prepares her for them, she may be in for some difficult times. Her membership in the carpool and the "lunch bunch" may be among the first things to change.

There is often an "us-and-them" mind-set in the working world, suggesting that if you are one of "them," you cannot be one of "us." If Julie realizes this and accepts the fact that she cannot be all things to all people, she should have every chance for success.

THE SILENT GROUP

One way to approach the problem presented by the quiet group begins with trying again at the next regularly scheduled staff meeting. This time, however, do not leave it entirely up to your employees to speak up and volunteer their complaints. Rather, be prepared to prime them with some information that might encourage them to open up about whatever is bothering them.

To encourage your employees to speak up, you be the first to speak. Because you have met with them individually and heard their complaints to the extent of identifying common themes, you have the ideal basis on which to begin. Share with the group these common themes, being careful, of course, to avoid saying anything that is sufficiently specific to be attributed to a single individual. The key is common; tell your group that this information you are sharing came to you in various forms from several of them so there is every reason to address these issues as a group.

At all times, tread lightly and proceed carefully. You are new to the organization, so chances are, you know very little of the history of the organization, and you have not had sufficient time to become acclimated to the environment and corporate culture. It is conceivable that the employees are silent in the group setting because they have been criticized or penalized or have otherwise experienced negative consequences for speaking up in the past. The task you face in earning their trust will be considerable even if the problem lay only with your predecessor; it will be all the more difficult if the problem resided in higher management because chances are, the perceived reasons for distrust of the hierarchy are still in place.

The possibility of one or more employees “carrying tales to administration” presents some interesting concerns. Having been there longer than you, some of these employees may have relationships with higher management that you do not yet enjoy, so you should proceed cautiously. Higher management should of course avoid subverting the chain of command by acting upon any information that comes to them from your subordinates. The very least you can do under the circumstances is to, first, make your group aware that there are concerns about some of them possibly carrying their gripes direct to higher management, and second, for you to do your job as you should, you need to hear their concerns—individually and confidentially, if necessary—directly and not secondhand or through your manager.

THE REPEAT OFFENDER

“You can’t make mistakes like this one” could very well be a valid statement, depending, of course, on the nature of the mistake. An error that can result in direct patient harm, or, in the case of the overlooked stat order, can increase the patient’s risk of a serious occurrence of some kind, can be considered a potentially serious error. Depending on the requirements of any particular state government, an error like the one Arnold admits to could conceivably cause a state-reportable incident to which the organization will have to respond.

What is wrong with Arnold’s description of a warning as a form of punishment is that a warning, properly administered, is an attempt at correction, not a form of punishment. Arnold, however, appears to regard a warning as only another “gotcha!” one more strike that ensures your position “on the list” and one step closer to the door. He has apparently never learned, or perhaps has chosen to ignore, the true purpose of disciplinary action. In all but extreme circumstances that call for immediate termination with no second chances, the essential purpose of disciplinary action is correction of behavior. That is precisely why there is a hierarchy of actions that are progressive in severity—for instance, counseling, oral warning, written warning, suspension without pay, and ultimately termination—to provide plenty of opportunity for correction.

There could be a valid point in what Arnold says about the age of a warning. We do not know how long Arnold has gone between occurrences; however, you will often find in place a personnel policy that declares a warning invalid providing there has been no recurrence of the same kind of behavior for a specified length of time.

The way to deal with Arnold is to be quite specific about the nature of the problem and write the warning to include the potential consequences of recurrence within a particular period of time. And the potential consequences need to be more specific than “you may find that more than a written warning is involved.” In Arnold’s case, it may be wise to indicate that another such error “may involve disciplinary action up to and including termination.” Then if Arnold repeats a serious error within, say, a year, it might mean termination, but if he stays “clean” for longer than a year it may suffice to repeat the last step before termination. In any case, however, laboratory manager Elsie Clark needs to be working with Arnold concerning his attitude toward errors and his apparent lack of concern for quality.

A GOOD EMPLOYEE?

Housekeeping supervisor Ellie Richards should arrange a counseling interview with the employee. Ellie needs to try to learn firsthand Judy's reasons for her excessive absenteeism and for being absent for several days without calling in.

Ellie can break the ice by stating that she recognizes Judy has problems, but out of fairness to Judy's coworkers, they must attempt to correct the situation. Furthermore, Ellie can indicate that she was hesitant to address the attendance issue because of Judy's otherwise-positive work record.

If Judy is willing to explain her behavior, Ellie will have the opportunity to indicate her understanding and offer support and guidance.

The key questions are: Does Judy have her situation resolved? Or is further absenteeism anticipated? Either way, a timetable for review should be established, perhaps 15 to 30 days or so in the future, depending on Ellie's judgment.

Ellie should make it clear that this counseling session must be recorded, but that it is hoped that Judy will be able to return to her former good behavior. If Judy remains in her job, most likely she will eventually appreciate the action taken. If Judy is unable to get back on track, then further disciplinary action can proceed. The morale of other staff could be at stake if one employee is allowed to get away with behavior that others feel would be grounds for action against them.

Ellie's failure to take action thus far does not affect her ability to take action now. What is done is done, and continued lack of action will not correct the situation. Appropriate action is both explainable and defensible, and if no action is taken, the opportunity to salvage this worthwhile employee may be lost.