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WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Responses to “Does Substance Trump Style?”

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In the May issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I posed the question “*What would you do?*” to the management situation below. Here are your responses, and the real-life conclusion of the situation. I have lightly edited the responses for clarity and space. Send your own ideas for situations to pose in upcoming issues to SteppingStone@JHACareers.com.

DOES SUBSTANCE TRUMP STYLE?

Joan is an actuary who finds any new assignment extremely stressful. She’s terrified of missing deadlines, and the uncertainty makes her very grumpy. As a result, even though she generally does a terrific job, people complain about working with her. In fact, in the five years she has been at Bingham Life, they have on three separate occasions begun the paperwork that would lead to firing her. Each time she has agreed to a corrective action plan, followed through, and has been reinstated.

Bill is the nicest actuary, who everyone loves to work with, but is incompetent. He never asks questions, and simply proceeds with his work in whatever way he has interpreted the assignment in the first place, of-

ten making mistakes and rarely meeting deadlines.

Bingham goes through a reorganization, and both Bill and Joan are moved to new units. The head of the operation warns their new managers of their shortcomings. One month later, both managers come to see him:

- Joan’s new manager tells the head that he needs to fire Joan because no one in his area can work with her.

- Bill’s new manager tells the head she can’t believe he gave Bill up, because he is so good and everyone loves him.

What would you do as either the operation head or the new managers?

Several respondents felt Joan was more of a problem than Bill:

Actuary 1

I find that technical incompetence is easier to fix than character flaws. So, I’d consider Bill easier to deal with than Joan. With Bill, I can train him to be a better actuary. I can communicate with him regularly to make sure he understands his assignments and meets deadlines. If he still can’t perform competently, then I’d probably move him to a less critical role or advise him to move on. Given that he’s a nice guy, I ex-

pect to be able to build an open, honest relationship with him.

As for Joan, I wouldn’t fire her just yet. I’d find out the root of her issues. Perhaps she’s not in the right role. If deadlines stress her out, she can work on projects that have “soft” deadlines. If she doesn’t like uncertainty, then she can work on routine tasks. If nothing works, and her attitude affects other team members, then letting her go would be the right thing to do.

Actuary 2

As Joan is in a new department, it may be best to put her under review for a couple of months before initiating the paperwork to fire her. However, based on prior behavior, it is unlikely that her interactions with others will improve. As this would now be the fourth time in five years that a manager has want-

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ed to fire her, and she persists in recurring behaviors that cannot be corrected via an action plan, it would make sense for the operations head to fire her.

Bill, too, has only been in the new role for a short time. He may not yet have had the opportunity to miss that many deadlines or make repeated mistakes, as he did in his prior roles. As a manager knowing Bill’s prior behaviors, I would pay close attention to his work style to see if any of his past behaviors reappear before making any decisions. Perhaps Bill’s new department is truly a fit for him, and he will be engaged and have a more proactive work style going forward.

Actuary 3

If I am the operations head, and the manager wants to fire Joan, I won’t try to argue—being able to get along is a necessary but not sufficient condition for being successful. If she’s been around that long, she should have learned by now how to manage herself, which includes stress level, attitude, etc. If you’re not capable of that, then you may need to find a different role where you can be more successful.

OTHER NOTABLE COMMENTS

Joan clearly does not work well with anyone if three people already want to fire her and now another one does.

Multiple managers want Joan to be fired—sounds like she should be fired.

If I have to choose one or the other to work with, I’d choose Bill.

Neither was properly coached and expectations weren’t properly set in advance.

While one felt Bill was clearly more of a problem:

Actuary 4

I prefer substance over style. There’s really nothing you can do to fix incompetence. But you can always provide training and support to help Joan better handle stress.

Some felt it largely came down to faulty management:

Actuary 5

A quote by Dr. Henry Cloud: “Remember, when you select someone, talent doesn’t equal character. Their character will ultimately determine whether their talent is usable.”

I believe style has a strong correlation to character and attitude. A person who can’t communicate well or get along with people doesn’t really catch anyone’s attention.

Both people showed talent and potential since they both got hired. Who do you want leading you? The one you like or the jerk that goes it alone?

What actually jumped out to me first was the lack of proper coaching for both employees. Neither was properly coached and expectations weren’t properly set in advance.

Ultimately, skills are easy to teach but character is a whole different ballgame.

Actuary 6

Put Joan on another performance plan. She does good work and has responded in the past. The new manager was warned, and if they want her next issue along these lines to be fire-able make it a longer-term condition of the performance plan instead of having them always end with her emerging from it.

It could be that Bill’s new gig is one that matches what he thinks should be done so that his shortcomings are minimized. If I thought this was unlikely, I would start to question the new manager as not competent enough to see Bill’s shortcomings.

Two gave suggestions for what the head of the operation should tell the two managers:

Actuary 7

To Joan’s new manager:

- You know, I did mention that she’s been a constant problem, and it wasn’t really fair to pass her along to you. Someone who has had an improvement plan three times for basically the same issue is going to fall into their old habits under stress.
- That said, the main issue is how she works with others—are there any projects that she can more or less get done independently? It is pretty expensive to have to try to find a hire at that level, and if there were a way to structure the work so that the number



of contacts are low, it may work.

- If not, I apologize for just passing the buck.

To Bill's new manager:

- That's great! We had problems with Bill in our team not due to his personality, but due to the amount of supervision he needed to get the job done. I'm glad that he's a good fit for your team.
- ... you do have somebody else review his work, right?

Actuary 8

I might give Bill's manager my opinion, or might not, depending on our relationship. There's nothing wrong with saying "Yes, everybody liked him here too, but we had a few problems (cite specific examples to give new manager an idea what to look for), so I'm glad he's gone. I'd keep an eye on (mention performance measures—quality, deadlines, whatever), but if he's solved those problems, he's certainly a nice guy with a great attitude, so I'm glad to hear it's working out."

Now it's no longer my problem.

And one respondent advocated patience:

It doesn't seem like anything needs to be done for Bill—he's now in a team where his manager thinks he's great. Either the manager hasn't noticed yet, or he's in a role that suits him better than the old one.

It sounds like time for yet another sit-down with Joan to see how she can fit into the new team. Don't fire her a

month into the new job—the corrective plans must have shown some improvement in the past, try another one for the new team. This should be a last chance though—people get away with being obnoxious when they're irreplaceable, and she isn't anymore, so if she can't sort it out now she should be shown the door.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

Joan reacts positively to coaching, but probably hasn't received consistent coaching. What likely happens is that she reacts positively to coaching, and her managers then feel like they are doing her a favor by letting up. It isn't a favor to her or anyone else.

Joan knows that she is not always a people-friendly person and she needs the reminder about how to behave better. At the next yearly review, her new manager gave her a negative review, telling her honestly how she needed to change. The result was that she made the changes requested. She gained confidence from the frank feedback and offered to help others working on similar projects.

It's questionable whether she should ever play a leadership role, but not everyone needs to be a leader. Even as actuaries, we need workhorses and Joan is a workhorse. A workhorse job sitting in the corner without stressful deadlines might work fine. But is there such a thing?

Bill's manager left the company, leaving Bill reporting to yet another person. He was thrilled when Bill met his quarterly

deadlines for the first time in three years, assuming this was due to his superior leadership. However, the week after the deadlines, it was discovered that all of the numbers reported were wrong. Bill's newest manager then required that all numbers be peer-reviewed before leaving the area.

Bill does not respond well to coaching, but is so very nice that if he gets through one quarter without mistakes, everyone assumes the problem is solved and they stop checking. Everyone always believes that he is on the road to redemption, even though he has only had one quarter with deadlines met and one quarter mistake free—not the same quarter.

It is safe to say that both employees are treading on iffy ground, but both are believed by their current managers to be on the path to redemption. ■



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