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WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Responses to “Sufficient Preparations”

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In the November issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I posed the question “*What would you do?*” to the following work situation faced by a young actuary. Here are selected responses and excerpts, edited for space and clarity, followed by the real-life conclusion. Send your own ideas for situations to pose in upcoming issues to SteppingStone@JHACareers.com.

SUFFICIENT PREPARATIONS

Martin was an ASA who had recently rotated into his first financial role, in one of his company’s core financial units. So far, things were going well, and he had good relations with everyone in the operation. He had mastered the work for which he was responsible, and his first year-end financial cycle was several months away.

A year before, there had been both an ASA and a more junior student in the operation, but this year Martin was on his own. Joanne was that junior student who had rotated into another operation, where she failed one too many actuarial exams, and needed to find a new role. Martin’s boss asked his opinion, as he was considering hiring her to be a programming and technical resource for the department. Martin agreed that Joanne had a good reputation and was well-liked, and she was brought in.

Although Joanne wasn’t hired to assist Martin in his role, she had a year under her belt with the area’s year-end financial processes, so she offered to train Martin on what she and his predecessor had done the prior year-end. There was good documentation, which Martin reviewed thoroughly, and he quickly reached a point where he felt that he was as prepared as he needed to be.

Joanne wasn’t satisfied that Martin was taking her advice as to how to prepare seriously enough, and worried that at year-end she would be forced to work overtime to assure the deadlines were met. Martin didn’t expect to ask Joanne to do any of the financial work at year-end, and was fully prepared to put in whatever additional hours might be required of him to meet the deadlines, so he moved on to other work.

What would you do if you were Martin? Joanne?

I think many read this case as very clear-cut, which is easy to see in retrospect. All but two respondents felt strongly about the need for more communication. This is obvious to those of us with years of experience in the business world, but for two very young actuaries, that might not be as natural. Or they might not be as effective in how they go about it. Here is one respondent’s take:

This is clearly all about communication. Whether Joanne goes directly to Martin or to her boss to express her concerns, it is important that she say what she thinks needs to be said so that Martin understands her position. Hopefully, Martin is listening and, hopefully, he does have things under control. If this is the case, his job is to help Joanne understand his position. I always think that these discussions are best done directly without the boss, which builds communication skills and trust. But if after talking directly they aren’t on the same page, one of them can say, “Since we still disagree, I am going to mention it to our boss and then he can decide if further discussion is needed.” Hopefully, it doesn’t come to that.

One respondent felt Joanne might be overstepping:

If Joanne’s new responsibilities do not include supporting Martin’s role, and she is very clear with her direct manager and Martin on that, then Joanne should focus on the work she is directly responsible for. She thoughtfully reached out to Martin to offer to train him, which may be above and beyond the scope of her current responsibilities. However, assuming her current role is not responsible for the process this year, Martin is now fully accountable for the work and the hours that are to be spent on it.

Another went further, providing the advice she wished she had been given in a similar situation:

Obviously, Joanne is worrying, and if I were her buddy, I would tell her to not worry about it; it’s not her responsibility. Yes, Martin may be underestimating what it will take to get the year-end work done, but she has done her best in documenting and communicating what’s involved.

Also, if I were Joanne’s buddy, I would recommend that she take a holiday around the year-end reporting time and be incommunicado during that week (as long as her new position has nothing to do with year-end reporting).

I’m exaggerating a little bit, but this is important: Joanne sounds like the kind of person who martyrs herself to the corporation, but partly by making herself available to that martyrdom or convincing herself that she’s critical (which may or may not be true). She needs to remove herself from that situation—after all, she gave ample documentation and advance



notice so that she could be asked about the process during a slack period. People learn from their bad decisions only if they suffer the consequences. So don't let Martin have an easy "Get out of Jail Free" card.

Also, Martin may be correct about knowing enough, in which case Joanne has had a nice holiday and everything is just fine. Joanne needs to move on and focus on her current position.

And a third shared this:

They both need to get over themselves. Some honest communication might help. Has Martin told Joanne that her job duties do not involve helping at year-end?

One actuary responded that this case was "a great example of a situation many of us have faced in our careers, me included," and provided this analysis:

If I were Martin, I'd put any potential ego (or other) issues aside and spend time with Joanne discussing the work. Even if I didn't consider it "training" per se, Joanne is a colleague with experience and valuable insight and there's absolutely no downside to investing an hour with her. My own philosophy is that every situation is a learning opportunity—there is no work and no one who is "beneath me."

If I were Joanne, I'd formally offer (or offer again) my assistance to Martin. If he didn't accept, I'd mention my concerns to my supervisor so he/she knows that if Martin runs into trouble, he declined this learning opportunity and I don't want to be stuck with the work, especially if it's in a terrible state and deadlines are looming. While I'm happy to help Martin if he needs it, I'd rather be proactive and approach it now rather than later.

One actuary mapped out the type of communication Joanne needed to engage in:

Joanne should go to her boss to discuss her concerns. Don't approach it from the angle that Martin isn't taking her seriously. Instead, inquire about any contingency plans around year-end work, and if anyone foresaw her needing to jump in. Offer that she can help if needed, but express a concern of having current duties as well as helping out, which, hopefully, wouldn't mean a lot of overtime.

Most felt Martin was missing an opportunity, captured well in these five excerpts:

Martin is suffering from actuarial student myopia and a fundamental fallacy of the actuarial profession: the belief that he who has passed more exams is “smarter” than he who hasn't. Nothing is further from the truth. Experience makes good actuaries (and employees in general), not exams.

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Martin should take Joanne up on her conscientious offer to help train him and spend at least a few minutes with her discussing last year's process. This would enable Martin and Joanne to further build their working relationship as well as potentially bring to light a topic associated with the process that may not be included in the documentation.

Martin might be too idealistic and naïve regarding his new role and responsibilities. A key to success is listening and learning from those who came before you. By ignoring concerns, he is potentially alienating the people who can provide him assistance. At some point, Martin will need Joanne's help, and she is going to say or think “I told you so.”

Martin should ask Joanne more probing questions about whether she feels he is ready, or if there is more he should do to prepare. This should bring out some of her concerns about readiness. From there, he can determine if he wants to do more preparation or learn it on the fly as he goes along, but at least he will understand what concerns she has.

Martin is new to the team and maybe Joanne has a reason to be nervous. Sometimes documentation does not explain the process fully, especially the small details or unexpected issues. I would schedule a meeting to catch up with Joanne to let her explain why she is unsettled and possible unexpected issues that could happen. I would also show my commitment to Joanne that I would not make her work overtime.

Finally, had Joanne and Martin followed this respondent's suggestions, it might have avoided some drama:

Joanne needs to talk to Martin about whether he expects her to participate in the year-end process. This will bring to light Martin's view that he does not expect to ask for any help.

Martin should ask her if it is OK that he asks her questions from time to time or even if she is OK providing him some help during year-end. This will give them the chance to level-set and work out an arrangement ahead of time that works for both of them.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED?

Joanne wasn't expected to work on the year-end financials, as that was not the role for which she was hired. Martin was able to handle the work smoothly based on their prior sessions and the thorough documentation. While he may have needed to put in a few extra hours, he did not need or seek Joanne's help with any of it, and he met all of the year-end deadlines.

Unfortunately, when he went to rotate to a new area in the spring, he found that his reputation had taken a hit. Joanne had been complaining about him to others in the department prior to year-end, talking about how much work she was going to have to do to make up for his lackadaisical attitude. Although his immediate boss felt he had done outstanding work throughout his rotation, the boss' superior had heard the scuttlebutt, and the end result was that Martin got an “average” rating.

Two years later, Martin was the financial manager in another large department considered desirable by many. The operation's VP (Martin's boss) came to him to ask what he thought about Joanne, as she had applied for a position. Martin told the VP that he was sure she was a hard worker, and would support whatever decision the VP made, but would prefer that she not be in his unit. The VP insisted on the full story, and then tore up Joanne's application. ■



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