



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

The Stepping Stone

February 2015 – Issue 57

What Would You Do?

Responses to “No Good Deed Goes Unpunished”

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

NO GOOD DEED GOES UNPUNISHED

Jonathan has just taken his final actuarial exam, is in charge of a small product group and has been assigned a student in the company’s minority summer program. While Greg presents himself well, the work he does is substandard. Although Jonathan goes to great lengths to explain what needs to be done, and why it is important, Greg regularly delivers work that is sloppy, containing careless errors.

Jonathan is scheduled for a two-week vacation midway through the summer. Although there are no official ratings for the summer program until the end of August, he decides that it would only be fair to have an in-depth discussion with Greg to give him plenty of time to correct his work habits.

The day before he leaves, he sits down with Greg privately. He tells him that this discussion is not an official appraisal, and will not go into Greg’s record. He explains that Greg’s work is substandard, and that were it the end of the summer he would be compelled to give him a poor rating, but that he wants to give him the chance to correct his work during the second half of the summer. He tells Greg that if he does so, the only rating that will matter will be the one he receives at the end of the summer, and that this discussion will be forgotten.

The day Jonathan returns from vacation, he is called into his boss’s office. Len tells him that as soon as he left, Greg complained to the vice president in charge of the minority program about an inappropriate performance appraisal. Greg told the VP that Jonathan had it in for him, had unfairly

criticized his work, and was impairing his future career potential.

Len told Jonathan that he would reassign Greg for the remainder of the summer to work directly for Len, and asked Jonathan to sign a document stating that Greg’s work had been fully adequate to date.

If you were Jonathan, would you have handled the mid-summer discussion differently, and what would you do now?

Editor’s Note: My thanks to everyone who weighed in. There were so many thoughtful responses that I could only include selected sections within this. In some cases, I lightly edited the quoted passages for clarity.

Once one knows the reaction to Jonathan’s well-intentioned feedback session, it’s not hard to find ways in which he could have handled the situation much better. Most respondents severely criticized his actions, with these four clear exceptions:

“Greg needs to grow up. End of case.”

“I probably would have handled the situation similarly, thinking that I was helping Greg learn where he needed improvement. We do this informally day to day all the time.”

“I like what Jonathan did in concept, he just went about it slightly incorrectly.... A midsummer review is essential for interns to know where they are at, what their strengths are, and where they need to improve. The change you see after a midsummer review goes a long way in making an informed hiring decision.... So I think it is clear that Jonathan had great intentions and was in the right to do a review.”

“I think Jonathan is being unfairly criticized after the fact. Who knows when an employee (temporary or otherwise) is going to be unethical or manipulative?”

“Jonathan explained along the way what work expectations were and why. It’s hard for me

to imagine explaining expectations without a reference to how past performance may have been lacking.

“There is no intimation that Jonathan violated any established protocol for employee discussions. We can suggest why Jonathan should have first discussed things with Len or the VP, but there must not have been concerns about such off-the-record conversations within the organization; otherwise there would have been guidelines.

“I think he handled it well and fairly with Greg. Unfortunately, Greg misunderstood or doesn’t want to listen (or doesn’t care). And Greg’s response could happen at any time from anyone.”

And another respondent made this observation:

“The outcome of this case shows the difficulty some people have in taking constructive criticism, which in my opinion is part of the reason why so few managers are prepared to give such criticism in the first place. Our workplaces are littered with mediocre performers who might be much better if they only had good guidance.

“I can’t say Jonathan took the wrong road in meeting with Greg, unofficially, and one-on-one. There are many management textbooks that promote doing exactly that.”

One person also noted that Jonathan may not have had the support he needed:

“Jonathan did not receive sufficient performance management coaching and training before taking on this intern. It also sounds like Len was too hands-off, and Jonathan didn’t inform him or seek help along the way.”

All of those who commented on the request that Jonathan sign a document stating that Greg’s work had been fully adequate agreed that he should not sign it. Some pointed to the impact on Jonathan’s credibility and professional reputation, and even his self-respect. One respondent raised additional issues:

“This should be rather frightening from Jonathan’s point of view as it may constitute an ethical and legal violation either to require it or to provide it. These actions appear to me to potentially violate

Precept 1 of our Code of Conduct. In addition, if Jonathan signs the document, he appears to be confessing to actions which may violate federal law.”

A few suggested that Jonathan should now be considering a career move:

“I’m very disappointed that Len wanted Jonathan to sign a document certifying adequate work. That is unethical and not professional. This whole situation sounds like a reason to look for another career opportunity.”

“... [M]y first step would be to go to the job boards because this guy does not respect me.”

Many good suggestions were provided for how Jonathan could have improved his handling of the situation. Several commented that it is never a good idea to give feedback like this immediately before leaving on vacation, encapsulated in these two responses:

“... [H]e would have been more effective to tackle this conversation earlier and in particular not drop the bomb on Greg the day before vacation. Jonathan’s timing on the news left Greg stranded and perhaps panicked, even if the news was well-intended and honest.”

“Delivering bad news right before a two-week absence is unfair. It is very normal for people to have an emotional reaction to bad news and need to discuss it. Dropping a bomb and walking out is unwise and not sensitive to the other person’s needs. If the person is open to hearing and changing, they deserve to have you there to coach them through the turnaround in their behavior. If they are not open to changing, they still deserve to have you there to bear the brunt of their anger —as your reaction to this may help them to see your side so that they can turn around.”

One respondent explained how putting feedback in writing could help in a number of ways:

“When you have a conversation with no paper in hand, it can feel like a personal attack. When you have a written document with concrete examples of the substandard performance and what steps need to be taken to improve the performance, you facilitate clear communication. It doesn’t have to

Delivering bad news right before a two-week absence is unfair.

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Putting it in writing protects you and makes it more likely that the other person will truly listen to what you have to say.

go into a formal written record with HR, but giving something in writing indicates clearly that this is an attempt at constructive criticism rather than a personal attack. It also gives them something to read and reread... Putting it in writing protects you and makes it more likely that the other person will truly listen to what you have to say.”

A few suggested peer reviews as a useful tool:

“Jonathan could suggest that Greg and another co-worker do peer reviews of each other’s work before they submit it. Or Jonathan could assign another member of the product team as Greg’s mentor to coach him on his proofing and spot-checking skills.”

“It would have been helpful for Jonathan to get some peer feedback on Greg’s work. With multiple perspectives it would not have been Jonathan’s word against Greg’s.”

As to what to do next, these suggestions were made:

“Jonathan should have a meeting with the VP, explain the situation, and bring examples of Greg’s poor work to support him if needed. Greg does not appear to be someone most companies would

care to hire and the VP should be aware of the full situation, not just Greg’s side of it.”

“I’d try to get a better understanding of where I went wrong and what skills and habits I need to learn to be more effective as a manager. (At this point, any failings on Greg’s part are moot.) If I found Len unable to help me, I’d look elsewhere, perhaps to HR or for a mentor.”

“I would set up some time with the minority program VP and Len to explain what happened and why I felt the performance wasn’t up to par. I would bring specific examples and ask for their feedback and whether they agreed that the work was substandard. If they did, I would agree not to manage Greg in the future....

“Next I would sit down with Greg to try to understand his motivations.... I would ask if it was true that he told the VP I had it out for him. I would explain that this wasn’t my intention, that I wanted to improve in the future so as to not create that perception, and I would ask Greg what behaviors he saw in me that made him feel that way. I would try to use this feedback to improve my own management style. Even if I didn’t agree, I would try to use this as a learning opportunity and thank Greg for sharing with me.”

Of course, there were many suggestions as to how Jonathan could have acted differently and perhaps changed the outcome, more than we have room to present. Here are two of the more concise offerings:

“First, he should have discussed this with the VP in charge of the program. He could have given insight on how they dealt with past interns in similar situations and given pre-approval to a review. Second, Jonathan should have documented his review. Even though it was meant to be informal, he should have written up his review, and potentially had Greg sign that he had received it, so there could be no case of he said/she said.”

“Interns need lots of attention to be successful. It sounds like Jonathan provided regular feedback to Greg, which is good. Jonathan should have discussed the intern experience with Len in regularly scheduled one-on-ones, so that Len was aware of Jonathan’s concerns and could help



manage the relationships with both Greg and the minority program VP. It is not appropriate for a boss to hear about a performance problem from someone else, and a boss's role is to offer support and advice. Jonathan also should have informed Len about the mid-year conversation, especially when he was leaving for two weeks. Who was supervising Greg during that time? Every intern needs a supervisor, even if their work is superior. Finally, given the minority program, Jonathan could have reached out to the VP for advice, since this person likely is familiar with intern challenges."

And here is one last response, emphasizing the special needs of interns:

"Arguably, a new employee (intern or minority or not) deserves guidance and training. This is especially important for an intern who can be presumed to lack experience. Jonathan should provide written feedback to Greg on each work product, with positive feedback for each task performed adequately and suggestions for improvement and remediation on each task that is substandard. Once Jonathan's reaction to Greg's progress rises to a level of concern, he should seek guidance from his management on the proper course. If he has not been providing written feedback to Greg, this should be discussed with his management as well. Learning to deal constructively with a difficult employee does not come naturally to most of us, and we are likely to need help.

"It would be wise for Jonathan to consult with Len, an appropriate human resources person, and the VP of the minority program to lay out a course of action before speaking with Greg. The action plan might call for Jonathan to not speak with Greg.

"Most large corporations have formal review processes. This structure is also something of a safe harbor for the manager. Stepping outside the formal process as Jonathan appears to have done is very likely an error on his part."

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

Jonathan refused to sign the document, and it was agreed that Greg would work directly for Len for the remainder of the summer. Although his work

did not appear to dramatically improve, Len gave Greg a "fully adequate" rating for his summer-end performance appraisal, which meant he would be eligible for a second summer internship the next year. Jonathan did not participate in that appraisal, and was not asked to provide comments on Greg's performance in the first half of the summer.

Jonathan realized he had much to learn about delivering bad news, and navigating the landscape of politically sensitive situations. ●

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