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WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Responses to “A Difficult Discussion”

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In the March issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I posed the question “*What would you do?*” to the following work situation faced by an experienced 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.

A DIFFICULT DISCUSSION

Sam is a senior VP, and Jonas is VP and actuary who reports to him and runs the actuarial department. Stuart is an actuary in that operation many years Jonas’ senior, and Sam likes him. Stuart comes to Sam to ask him to sign a software purchase agreement, because Jonas is out of the office and has been slow to act on the purchase, which will support a new application Sam is developing.

Sam is out for a few days, and when he returns the next Monday, Jonas is already on vacation for the Christmas holidays. Sam gets angry when he finds that Jonas asked the CIO to hold the purchase agreement until his return. He calls Jonas to tell him that was inappropriate, and to report to his office first thing upon his return.

If you were any of the principals in this situation, would you have done anything differently? And what would you do next?

Several respondents felt Sam clearly overreacted, as captured here:

Sam should not have allowed Stuart to go over Jonas’ head, but it need not have caused a firestorm. Jonas did not cancel the order; he only delayed it until he could discuss it with Sam. Sam should have respected that. Nothing in the scenario indicates the purchase is urgent; Sam should have waited for Jonas to return and let him explain his misgivings about the purchase.

And one made an excellent additional point—after all, Sam did pick up the phone to call Jonas about having a meeting ...

In the end, Sam has no business making a decision on the matter unless it is a make-or-break situation. And for that, there’s always a phone to be used to contact someone who’s on vacation.

Here’s one actuary’s take on their lack of respect for the chain of command:

Stuart had already discussed this matter with Jonas who was slow to act. Stuart took advantage of Jonas being out to go above his head and get his request approved. Jonas made the same error by holding up a purchase that his boss had already approved while he was out. Lack of communication and too much backdoor activity all around.

If Stuart was not satisfied with Jonas’ lack of action, his discussion with Sam should have been about the best way to get Jonas to approve the purchase, not to go over Jonas’ head. If Jonas felt he needed to put the purchase on hold, he should have notified Sam via email the reason he did this, and why it was important to him.

It is not always easy to defer to your boss if you do not agree with the decision. But if it is something that is really important to you, it is your responsibility as an employee to make this clear and state the reason for it. Use your connections to influence your boss’s decision, but not to go around or circumvent him or her, for doing that will surely be the beginning of the end of a productive working relationship.

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This actuary gave Stuart a bit of a pass on going over Jonas’ head, if Jonas had not specifically told him not to:

I assume Jonas had to do this because he has a history of Stuart going above his head to Sam. I will also assume that Jonas has had clear and direct conversations with Stuart on this and even documented that in weekly one-on-ones, performance reviews, and so on. If Jonas has never talked to Sam about this, then Jonas can’t get mad as he has never given clear direction on how he wants things to work in his area (go through me, go directly to my boss, combination of both depending on what it is, etc.) and—most important—why Sam needs to operate this way.

I am also assuming that Jonas had had these conversations with Sam. If not, then he needs to have them immediately. Without



clear communication and expectations, it is no wonder that this is not a well-functioning workplace.

If Jonas has never had these conversations, then he has no one to blame but himself and needs to begin that day with setting expectations.

And provided a road map for how Jonas should conduct himself in the meeting with Sam, and then with Stuart:

First, Jonas, remain calm. Explain how you have asked Sam to support you (cite previous conversations/examples/etc.) and that he is undermining your authority when he does this. Share what you had wished Sam would have done: told Stuart to wait and address the purchase with you when you got back. Try to get Sam to empathize more with an example of how he would feel if you did this to him—went to Sam’s boss instead of Sam over noncritical matters.

Formally reprimand Stuart and state your disappointment in him. Ask why he did this and whether he can work on your team, respecting your role. If he can’t, he needs to go. If he agrees he can, create a performance plan to monitor that he can do this over the next three months ... and if he does it again, fire him.

This actuary felt the case illustrated a few important management principles:

Sam mishandled the situation. If you do not want subordinates ignoring the chain of command, then you must respect it. When Stuart comes to you, explain that the ball is in Jonas’ court and before you will consider anything, Stuart needs to bring Jonas with him.

Jonas seems to be acting in a passive-aggressive manner, delaying instead of approving or denying Stuart’s request. Jonas needs to make the decision in a timely fashion. He compounds the problem by vetoing Sam’s decision.

Stuart should think long and hard before usurping the chain of command. If he is not happy with Jonas' actions, he needs to express his feelings to Jonas first, and then—only with Jonas' full knowledge—continue up the chain.

At that meeting, Sam should apologize to Jonas for his actions and coach Jonas about his passive-aggressive behavior. Then both should apologize to Stuart. At that point, Stuart should recognize his errors as well and the three of them can discuss the merits of the software package and resolve the situation.

This respondent likened this to a common family situation, with plenty of blame to go around:

My first thought is that this feels a little bit like the kid asking Daddy for something when Mommy is not home. Maybe Mommy has already said no.

The bottom line is that Stuart said Jonas has been dragging his feet, but Sam does not know why and does not really know if this is the whole story. Perhaps Jonas is looking for a better solution than having Stuart develop a new application. Perhaps he is negotiating a better price. Sam should not have signed off without talking to Jonas. I would question why this needed to be signed off on so quickly. Unless there was a compelling reason, I would have met with Jonas first before signing off.

I don't have a problem with Jonas putting the order on hold if he had a good reason, except that he did not even bother to tell Sam and that was inappropriate.

Finally, when the dust settles, whether I were Sam or Jonas, I would have a talk with Stuart. Going behind someone's back to get an approval without the other person in the loop is a bad move. It shows a lack of respect for the other person, and their position.

And if I were Sam, I would have a talk with Jonas about why I was not being kept informed of all of this to start with.

This actuary pointed out the need for particularly good communications around vacation time:

When leaders go on vacation, they should provide an update to their boss and staff on status of projects and any potential open items that may come up, as well as assign a deputy to act on their behalf for critical issues. All three people did not seem to do this. If Stuart's need for approval was time-sensitive, he should have resolved it or raised it before Jonas left, and Jonas should have updated Sam via email to his subsequent action before he went out for the holidays.

And this one noted that Jonas' motives were important in assessing the situation:

If Jonas held the contract out of real concerns for the company, then I think it was appropriate. If he held the contract out of a hurt pride for being bypassed, then that was the wrong decision.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED?

One aspect on which I expected a comment was that Sam interrupted Jonas on his vacation to tell him he had done something wrong, and that they would be meeting about it first thing on his return. This strikes me as telling about Sam's management style. Perhaps if I had added that he actually told Jonas he would not like the discussion?

Jonas felt a cloud over the rest of his Christmas holidays, worrying about the coming meeting. On Monday, Sam told him that this was not the first time Stuart had come to him about Jonas. He had finally lost his patience, and Jonas needed to get out of Stuart's way. He didn't give Jonas any chance to explain himself, and told him he was acting like an administrator rather than a leader. He said they would now be meeting frequently, and Jonas would either shape up or be put on official corrective action.

Jonas thought about what Sam had said. This was the first indication of dissatisfaction with his performance, and he hadn't been aware that Stuart and Sam had been talking about him. He realized he had been neglecting to explicitly communicate his accomplishments (and those of his unit) to Sam on any regular basis, and he resolved to put together a weekly results report. He released the first one the next Monday, and that seemed to have the desired impact: Sam never requested any follow-up meetings on his performance, never put him on corrective action, and his next performance review showed him "meeting all expectations."

Stuart seemed satisfied with having gotten his software package, and his models absorbed his time and energy. Jonas was careful in his dealings with Stuart, and they had a cordial, professional relationship going forward.

Some time later, Sam left the company and Jonas was promoted to chief actuary. ■



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