

## **JIM GOODMAN'S CHALLENGE**

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### **TEACHING NOTE**

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### **Critical Incident Overview**

This critical describes a recent college graduate settling in to his first supervisory position on the production line in a food processing plant. The crux of the incident is a blatant challenge to his authority by a subordinate who provokingly breaks a plant rule and then directly confronts the supervisor and asks him if he intends to "write him up" for the act. Students are asked to put themselves in the supervisor's place and respond to the situation.

This incident can primarily be used as a power and influence incident, but it also raises related issues concerning communication and motivation. It is appropriate for use in introductory or advanced courses in organization behavior or managerial skills development.

### **Research Methods**

This critical incident was written based on interview information secured from a former student who experienced the situation described. The names of the individual, the company, and its location have been disguised to preserve anonymity.

### **Learning Objectives**

The learning objectives of this critical incident are for students to:

1. Comprehend the deeper implications that may be present in such seemingly simple situations as that which is portrayed in this incident.
2. Recognize the possible long-term implications of the various supervisory options available.
3. Analyze a situation from a power and influence perspective.
4. Decide on a response to the situation and analyze its likely outcome effects.
5. Evaluate their own initial response and its implications for their development.

## Questions

After reading the critical incident, and before focusing on the questions below, the instructor can increase student involvement in the discussion by asking them to take a stand regarding the action they recommend Jim Goodman take in response to the subordinate. This may be done by asking the following questions and recording the votes for further reference during the discussion:

- a. How many students support Jim Goodman in exercising his authority to discipline the subordinate by writing him up?
  - b. How many students assert that Jim Goodman should not punish the subordinate, but rather should attempt some other approach to managing the situation?
1. What arguments can be made in support of punishing the subordinate in some way?
  2. What punishments would you consider? Why?
  3. From Jim Goodman's point of view, what are some of the possible undesirable effects of using punishment?
  4. Some managers may react to the situation described in the incident by passing it off as if it had not occurred. What do you think of such a managerial strategy?
  5. If you were a consultant to Jim Goodman, what approaches would you advise him to use in dealing with the subordinate?

## Answers to Questions

### **1. What arguments can be made in support of punishing the subordinate in some way?**

An argument can be made for following established disciplinary procedures and formally writing up the offense or even for termination or dismissal of the subordinate. The reason is that negligence of cleanliness standards and regulations in a food processing plant may not only violate product handling rules, but also constitute the violation of an essential value of the company culture. A punitive response to this instance of spitting may reinforce the message to all employees in the plant, and even to future employees and others in the community, that this company does not compromise cleanliness standards.

From the point of view of Jim Goodman himself, writing a reprimand or recommending termination sends a message that he is strict and demanding and will use his authority whenever needed.

### **2. What punishments would you consider? Why?**

An argument can be made that the severity of punishment should be determined in congruence with the culture of the company. Even within a system of progressive discipline for rule violations, beginning with perhaps an oral warning and progressing through steps such as a written warning and suspension, one could argue that termination is perhaps a proper punishment if the plant paid a lot of attention in policy and in practice to hygiene standards. Termination might not be as appropriate in situations where less organizational attention was routinely paid to these issues.

### **3. From Jim Goodman's point of view, what are some of the possible undesirable effects**

**of using punishment?**

Since Jim is in his entry phase in this organization, his initial behavior might be magnified in determining how other subordinates and supervisors will relate to him. In this particular incident, reprimanding the subordinate may send the message that Jim Goodman is likely to uphold the rules, but it also communicates that he is going to rely on his position power (legitimate, coercive, and reward powers) to manage subordinates. It might also send the message that he is not very interested in his people, and that he may be weak and/or insecure in his position and can be goaded into a reactive stance by actions such as this subordinate has taken. Thus, people might begin to fear Jim and perhaps resent him. They might avoid him in the future, or do the very minimum that is required, in order to avoid possible punishment.

**4. Some managers may react to the situation described in the incident by passing it off as if it had not occurred. What do you think of such a managerial strategy?**

An argument can be made that ignoring the situation does not really give the subordinate any concrete feedback and, furthermore, might leave the impression that the supervisor is weak and afraid to uphold the rules. If the supervisor takes no action, the subordinate may also interpret that as positive reinforcement and decide that the behavior in question is acceptable.

**5. If you were a consultant to Jim Goodman, what approaches would you advise him to use in dealing with the subordinate?**

In addition to actually punishing the subordinate, as discussed in Questions 1 and 2 above, the supervisor has several other approaches available to exercise power and influence, each of which will result in different outcomes (Whetten & Cameron, 2011, p.298-303). For example, he could rely on fear of retribution and intimidate or threaten the employee ("I will write you up for this," or "If you ever do that again I will write you up."), approaches likely to result in resentment and lack of commitment on the part of the subordinate. It may, however, gain at least momentary compliance with the rules.

Another approach is to invoke norms of reciprocity ("If you promise not to do that again, I will not write you up this time"). This tends to lead to the subordinate's viewing the situation as negotiable and may engender expectations of specific outcomes for performing or not performing specific actions. This can be a trap for the supervisor, who then must manage everything as a trade off. In addition, it often leads to differences in treatment among subordinates, opening one up to charges of inconsistency or unfairness. In a union situation this could lead to all kinds of new precedents being established, or grievances being filed, and probably would be an impossible course of action.

A third, and probably the most desirable, approach is to use persuasive arguments based on reason and appeal to personal values ("Spitting violates plant rules and potentially detracts from the quality of our product and our reputation in the community, which we value highly. I am asking you to agree to not do it anymore."). This avoids the defensiveness and resentment resulting from a direct attack and also avoids creating a bargaining environment to get the job done. This approach treats the subordinate as a responsible person who is expected to do the right thing--it is reaffirming to him as an individual. At the same time the need for correct behavior is reinforced without the punitive tone and the negative outcomes that punishment would engender. In this sense, the situation actually presents an opportunity for the supervisor to

improve relations with this employee, and with other onlookers as well, while simultaneously eliciting better behavior in the future. All he has to do is see the opportunity and act on it.

### **General Discussion**

The critical incident deals with the entry of a new supervisor into an organization, the emergence of a subordinate's provocative behavior defying the supervisor's authority, and reactions to the perception of this emergent behavior. The incident points to the continuous struggle a manager encounters in responding with sensitivity to an unpredictable social environment. The issue is not simply the breaking of a rule for which clear sanctions are available. Rather, how this incident is handled by the manager sends a message to all subordinates and other supervisors about what kind of person this supervisor is and what type of relationship he intends to develop with the work force. At the same time, this incident affords the opportunity to consider various communication approaches to influencing the motivation and behavior of a subordinate.

No prior assignments are necessary. The incident is short and can be reproduced and distributed in class as a basis for discussion. It is primarily intended for use in undergraduate or graduate courses in organizational behavior, preferably following students' exposure to issues of power and authority, leadership, communication, and motivation. Hence, it is a good incident to use toward the end of a course dealing with these issues.

The incident can also be used as the basis for role playing, where students take on the role of the supervisor and attempt to respond almost instantly to the subordinate's defiant behavior. This gives students the opportunity to receive feedback on their personal "theories in action" and the extent to which they have assimilated concepts and developed skills for managing the situation.

Basic to a thorough analysis of this critical incident is an understanding of the relationships between power and influence. Power is the ability to influence others to modify their behavior or thinking. Different types of power are identified in the literature based on their sources. Legitimate or formal power (authority), reward power, and coercive power stem from one's position in the organization. Expert power and referent power (charisma or personal appeal) are personal attributes residing in the individual (Robbins & Judge, 2010, p.182-183).

To have influence means to have followers who meet the objectives of the influencer by altering their behavior or attitudes. The followers may do this willingly with an internalized commitment to the influencer's objectives, or they may merely comply due to pressures being applied. Clearly, in most supervisory situations willing commitment leads to better long term relationships and results than does mere compliance. Although power is the base and a necessary precondition for influence, it does not necessarily guarantee influence (Whetten & Cameron, 2011, p.298), and the type of power and how it is exercised determine whether one gains commitment or compliance.

Research results indicate that personal sources of power have a generally positive impact on work outcomes, while position-based sources of power have from slightly positive to negative impacts.

Thus, use of expert and referent powers usually achieves the best combination of work results and favorable subordinate reactions (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2009, p.332).

In teaching the incident it is essential to transmit to students the notion that holders of formal

position power are not guaranteed influence. Jim Goodman, as a supervisor, has formal power (authority), which grants him the right to seek compliance (Aldag & Kuzuhara, 2009, p.456). However, the primary teaching issue in the incident is how Jim Goodman should go about influencing subordinates to willingly cooperate with him to accomplish organizational objectives. To have willing followers, the supervisor needs the skill to transform his positional or personal power into influence over followers in ways that minimize their resistance and resentment (Whetten and Cameron, 2011, p.298).

Thus to meet the challenge posed in the incident, Jim Goodman should give priority to influence strategies that are based on personal power (expertise or personal appeal) as opposed to retribution strategies such as coercion and intimidation which are based on position power (Whetten and Cameron, 2011, p.298). While retribution strategies have some merit in achieving rapid compliance, over reliance on punishment will result in resentment and lack of internalized commitment to cooperate with the punisher. Reliance on strategies based on reason is more likely to elicit internalized commitment from subordinates. This is especially important in this situation since the supervisor is new to his position and to the organization. His future career is highly dependent on securing the internalized commitment of his subordinates to meeting organizational standards of cleanliness and product quality. Without such cooperation he is not likely to do well in his supervisory career.

### **Additional Pedagogical Materials**

This incident lends itself readily to role playing. One approach is to have students form into groups of 3 or 4 to role play the confrontation between Jim Goodman and the subordinate. The role play begins immediately after the subordinate has spit on the floor in Jim's presence and said, "You saw what I just did. Are you going to write me up?" The role-play can be limited to 10 minutes.

The primary objective of the dialogue should be to secure the subordinate's cooperation with the supervisor and commitment to following company rules. Two students play the roles of Jim Goodman and the subordinate, while the others in each group act as observers to provide feedback to the role players at the end of the role play. Each group then reports to the entire class about the approach taken, decisions reached, the resulting satisfaction level of the two participants, and the commitment of the subordinate to any course of action agreed upon.

If desired, observers can be provided with Observer Feedback Forms prepared by the instructor based on the basic attributes of supportive communications that have been covered in the course (or based on models of influence, motivation, or conflict management, depending on what learning the instructor wishes to emphasize in the role play).

A supportive approach involves responding in a problem-oriented (not person-oriented), congruent (not incongruent), specific (not global), and descriptive (not evaluative) manner that is owned (not disowned), and validates (rather than invalidates) the individual (Whetten & Cameron, 2011, p.242-243 and 247-256). The supervisor can accomplish this by: 1) describing the event as objectively as possible, 2) describing his own reaction and feelings about the event and the consequences likely to flow from it and, 3) suggesting or asking for suggestions of a more

acceptable alternative.

Specifically, in this situation the supervisor could respond with something like the following supportive statements:

1. "When you spit on the floor in this area you violate plant hygiene standards and potentially affect the quality of the product we are able to produce" (describing the event and its consequences).
2. "I am concerned with the possible effects of this behavior on the quality of our product, and I am also concerned with the example we set for other employees. As a new supervisor I feel obligated not to ignore these standards. If I do not do anything in response, that might send the wrong message to others" (describing his own reaction and feelings about the event).
3. "What do you suggest we do about the situation at this point?" (asking for suggestions for an acceptable alternative).

This approach is problem-oriented by being directed toward the behavior rather than attacking the person, it is congruent in that the supervisor is not overlooking the problem or minimizing it, it is descriptive and specific rather than evaluative and global, and it validates the subordinate rather than invalidating him by treating him as an adult capable of accepting responsibility for his actions and being involved in creating an acceptable solution to the situation. All of these approaches together constitute the essence of supportive communication.

### **Epilogue**

The actual supervisor confronted by the subordinate as described in this incident reported that many things were going through his mind at the time, but he knew he had to react almost instantly. He had some previous experience supervising fire fighting crews for the U.S. Forest Service, and so was not a complete novice in dealing with subordinates. He felt this particular individual was challenging him as the new supervisor to see the kind of relationships he was going to have with subordinates. Jim didn't want to give the written warning, but did want to assert his authority in some way, so he turned to the subordinate and said, "Look. I'll make you a deal--I won't write you up, and you won't spit on the floor anymore. Okay?" The outcome was that the employee got to know him a little better, saw he wasn't going to react reflexively to provocation while still emphasizing the rules mattered, and left with increased respect for his new supervisor. The plant where this incident took place happens to be unionized, with labor-management relations tending to be fairly cooperative. However, in recounting the incident the supervisor made no mention of the union or of any possible repercussions related to it.

### **References**

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