

A WAR OF WORDS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Howard Garland and Doris Smith were having a heated discussion in the office cafeteria. The usually quite and reserved Doris slammed down her cup of coffee and was almost yelling at Howard. “Why am I being punished for working in the wrong department? I follow the rules and you don’t have to,” exclaimed Doris. As other employees overheard the loud exchange between Doris and Howard they gathered into a small crowd. What began as a heated discussion among two individuals became an all out war of words. As the discussion grew, many other employees entered into the disagreement and tempers flared.

Background

Doris and Howard started to work for the same local government entity three years ago. Howard started in June and Doris in August. They both held similar jobs, but for different departments of the organization. Doris worked for an appointed official while Howard worked for an elected official. The structure of the organization was unique in that it was divided into several legally autonomous departments that functioned as separate entities. Six departments maintained their own set of payroll and personnel related records. The public’s perception and understanding of the entity itself was that it operated as one single unit of government.

For some time now, Doris had been bothered by pain in her lower back and had been putting off a visit to her physician. On this morning she was in such pain that she knew that she had no other choice but to see the Doctor. The Doctor explained to Doris that he was certain that she was experiencing a ruptured disc that would require surgery. He sent her over to the x-ray lab where further tests were performed that confirmed his diagnosis.

As Doris drove to work from the Doctor's office, she determined that she would miss at least six weeks of work and several paychecks. Having only been on the job for about three years, Doris had not accumulated much sick leave and had only a couple of unused vacation days. She knew that the personnel handbook prohibited the granting of advanced sick leave. Although frustrated because she really needed the money, by the time that Doris arrived at work she had resolved herself that she would just have to do the best that she could for the three weeks that she would not be paid.

Later on that afternoon Doris went to the cafeteria to get a cup of coffee. Howard stopped by her table and asked her about her impending surgery. Doris thanked him for his concern and added that she would sure miss her not getting paid for part of the time she would be off. Howard asked why. She explained the lack of accumulated sick leave and low number of vacation days. Much to her surprise, Howard looked at her and said that he had missed seven weeks the previous year and had been paid for the entire time. Doris then asked the obvious question of how.

Howard then explained that his boss had allowed him to take advanced sick leave to cover the entire period of his illness. Doris then out of amazement said heatedly, "How can you do that when the personnel handbook as explained by my boss does not allow advance sick leave". Howard then made a smart remark that "I guess I have a better boss than you do". Doris thought for a second and then angrily replied "Why am I being punished for working in the wrong department? I follow the rules and you don't have to." Other employees who had gathered around soon added their own versions of "preferential treatment". As one angrily said, "it just depends on who you are and who your work for. That determines how you are treated in this organization". Doris quickly realized that she wasn't the only one who was being treated differently, and in her eyes and that of others, unfairly. By this time several people were angrily debating the unfairness question with others.

2. PROBLEM

It immediately became apparent that there were major differences in the way each of the six departments treated their employees. Individual offices didn't adhere to any guidelines or complied with the organization wide personnel handbook. Each semi autonomous official applied the handbook when it suited him or her and chose to ignore it when he or she felt that it was in their own interest to treat their employees differently. In this case, the handbook explicitly prohibited advanced sick time. Howard's boss allowed him to be advanced sick time while Doris's wouldn't.

An organization wide personnel handbook had been published and adopted a year earlier and that outlined policies and procedures intended to cover all employees within the organization. The personnel handbook as adopted by the organization was supported by the vast majority of the employees and unanimously supported by the department heads during its development and adoption. The focus of the handbook was to ensure that all employees of the organization were treated equally and fairly in all personnel matters. However, after the handbook was adopted, department heads and employees chose to ignore the provisions of the document whenever they saw it in their best interest to do so. The result of this approach created the perception among employees and department heads that preferential treatment was acceptable and that the handbook could be ignored when it suited the individual department head or employee. Even though department heads supported the creation of the handbook, the organization had no authority to enforce or administer guidelines set forth in the handbook. Constant and immediate conflict between employees resulted.

As demonstrated by the angry debate between Doris and Howard, and the group that gathered around them, considerable resentment and bitterness between employees reflected an underlying and deep-seated sense of unfairness between employees and departments. This resentment resulted in hostility between employees and other departments and caused a general uncooperative work environment. This perception also caused several lawsuits that were filed on behalf of employees that didn't feel that they were being treated fairly.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

- http://www.melcrum.com/cgi-bin/melcrum/eu_content.pl?docurl=article%20cc%20identifying.
Identifying the value of internal communication and productivity.
- <http://www.wren-network.net/resources/benchmark/13-OrganizationalCommunication.pdf>.
Theoretical background to organizational communication: definition, scope, horizontal, vertical, diagonal communication, media, strategies.

CORPORATE CULTURE AND PERFORMANCE

- http://www.thinkhdi.com/HDI2007/files/high_performance.pdf.
An example of corporate culture enhancing.

- http://www.deloitte.com/dtt/cda/doc/content/us_consulting_hc_highperformanceculture_080107.pdf Strategies for building corporate culture.
- http://www.takeda.com/pdf/usr/default/ar2007_19_27797_5.pdf Strategies for building corporate culture.

4. QUESTIONS

1. Which assumptions about the corporate culture in both speakers led to such “war of words”? Which was the trigger that led to the misunderstanding?
2. Why did Doris get upset with Howard’s smart remark? Which are the assumptions behind Doris’ interaction?
3. In terms of Language analysis, which ironies or inferences can be drawn from the conversation? Give examples and explain.
4. Which actions can the company take to make the department heads comply with the existing handbook even though they are not legally obliged to do so? How can they improve the corporate culture and organizational weather?

