

case 5 Working at Wal-Mart

Claude had a problem. His father was celebrating a major birthday this Saturday and Claude was scheduled to work from 4:00 to 8:00 p.m. Claude came from a close-knit family where all family milestones were celebrated together over an extended meal. If Claude worked his shift, he would have to miss his father's birthday dinner. If he called in sick, he would feel like a liar since he was not actually ill; he did not even feel a cold coming on. He was sure that his manager would not give him the time off. When Claude first started this job, he had asked that he not be scheduled to work on his day of Sabbath. His manager simply said that the auto scheduler, a computer program designed to create employee work schedules, could not accommodate this, and then walked away. There was no room for discussion. "How much is this job worth to me, anyway?" Claude asked himself.

Claude was a 22-year-old fourth year Engineering student living at home. Wanting to avoid student loans, Claude applied to work at Wal-Mart as an associate in the photo lab processing film. Since the store was new, all the associates had to undergo orientation before the store could be opened. Groups of 30 to 40 associates met in the basement meeting room of a hotel. Each associate received a copy of the Wal-Mart associate handbook. The store manager reviewed portions of the handbook related to codes of conduct and told the associates, "At Wal-Mart, you should never hear the phrase 'it's not my job,' since associates are empowered by Wal-Mart." He explained the profit sharing program and the stock ownership plan along with the benefits. The associates then watched a video entitled "You've Picked a Great Place to Work" that described Wal-Mart's success as a business and how it had grown from a single store that Sam Walton had opened to become the world's largest retailer. Various quotations from Sam Walton such as, "If you want a successful business, your people must feel that you are working for them—not that they are working for you" were sprinkled liberally throughout the videos. The manager also outlined Sam Walton's guiding principles:¹

1. Be committed to your work. Your passion will be contagious to those around you.
2. Treat associates as partners and be a servant leader.
3. Make your work exciting and motivational by setting high goals, using job rotation, and encouraging competition.

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4. Communicate as much information as you can to associates. Associates with information feel empowered and care about the organization.
5. Demonstrate appreciation on a regular basis. Praise is priceless.
6. Have fun at work, show enthusiasm, and celebrate successes.
7. Listen to your associates. They know what the customers are thinking and they have ideas about how to improve operations.
8. Go beyond meeting your customers' expectations.
9. Pay careful attention to expenses and keep them to a minimum.
10. Be open to trying things that haven't been tried before. Take risks.

The manager then taught the associates the infamous Wal-Mart cheer:

Manager: "Give me a W"

Associates: "W"

Manager: "Give me an A"

Associates: "A"

Manager: "Give me an L"

Associates: "L"

Manager: "Give me a squiggly"

Associates: "Squiggly" (while doing something that resembles the twist)

Manager: "Give me an M"

Associates: "M"

Manager: "Give me an A"

Associates: "A"

Manager: "Give me an R"

Associates: "R"

Manager: "Give me a T"

Associates: "T"

Manager: "What's that spell?"

Associates: "Wal-Mart!"

Manager: "Who's number one?"

Associates: "The customer always"

Manager: "What store is number one?"

Associates: "[Store number] 999 customer service all the time"

The associates were required to sing this song at every morning meeting and after the store had closed for the evening. At these meetings, the associates would also be informed of how the store was doing in terms of sales levels. The orientation ended with a presentation in which each associate's name was called and the associate was

presented a nametag that doubled as a swipe card to be used for the time clock. Claude left the orientation session feeling excited about being part of the Wal-Mart team. It was his first real job and he was impressed with the "family" approach that the managers talked about during the orientation. The managers had encouraged employees to become passionate about Wal-Mart, to share in Sam's vision, and to put Wal-Mart's needs first.

A few days after the orientation session, Claude began working in the photo lab. During his four-hour shift, he placed the film in one end of the developing machine and out the other end came the negatives. Next, he placed the negatives in a scanner, made adjustments for color, and ordered prints. He then placed these prints and negatives in an envelope and started the process over again with another film. Although Claude sometimes enjoyed looking at the prints, Claude found his job to be rather routine. He looked forward to troubleshooting when a machine would break down. He tried to process the film as quickly and perfectly as possible so that the customers would be happy with the service that Wal-Mart provided. As did other employees, he learned his job within a few days. There were very few skills to master and the procedures were clearly laid out. Claude realized that employees could be easily replaced (and were) but having the right attitude, one of commitment and a sense of duty, seemed to be particularly important.

At first, having the right attitude was not a problem for Claude. Claude believed that it was better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.² Because he always thought the best of others and let any problems slide off like jello nailed to a wall, he had simply dismissed any doubts that he had about his work as unimportant. After a few weeks, however, Claude began to notice that his coworkers were complaining about many things such as shifts, management, procedures, and, especially, the song that they were taught as part of their orientation. Ever since his manager criticized him for suggesting some new procedures (or "complaining" as his manager called it), Claude thought that it was best to keep quiet. When he had an idea, he thought of a line from a poem that he had read in high school, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*: "Theirs not to make reply, Theirs not to reason why, Theirs but to do and die." Whereas Claude used to "go the extra mile," now he did only as much as he needed to keep his job. He would tell himself that Wal-Mart was a means to an end, just like he was a means for Wal-Mart. He was glad that he was getting an education so that he wouldn't have to be a Wal-Mart "lifer." He almost felt bad for the lifers. In a year or two, he'd be a professional engineer, a prestigious occupation paying more than they could ever dream about. More importantly, he had choices; they did not.

Within a year, most of the people that had started at the same time as Claude had left. There seemed to be an increased focus on following rules. For example, although they brought water into the photo lab for the equipment, associates were not permitted to bring in water or other beverages for themselves. Also, although the photo lab employees were able to develop a workable holiday schedule for themselves, the manager refused to accept this schedule because the auto scheduler "would not permit it." Exceptions, negotiation, and relaxation of the rules were not possible.

There were four additional incidents along the same theme that stood out for Claude. After doing an inventory count for several hours, an associate named Roger stepped outside the store for his coffee break. Once back on the job, he noticed that he had left his electronic inventory scanner outside. So, Roger went outside and found his scanner where he left it. However, when he went back into the store, his manager confronted him, indicating that it was inappropriate for an associate to take

two coffee breaks and that this formal warning would be placed on Roger's personnel record. Roger quit his job that afternoon. On her last day of work, another associate, Judy, came into the store wearing a pair of khaki shorts. Her manager rushed toward Judy, stopped her within a few feet from the door, used his badge to measure her shorts, and told her to go home and change her clothes because her shorts were more than the length of a badge above her knees. Judy did go home but did not return to work.

Similarly, Colette, a cashier, had joined the army reserves and then informed Wal-Mart that she would require every third weekend off. Colette thought that this minor unavailability could be inputted into the auto scheduler and that all would be fine. Even during weeks in which she could not work weekends, she was available for 30 hours of work. However, as with Roger, Colette was informed by her manager that he would not be able to schedule her for the minimum 12 hours per week and that she would have to make a choice between the army and Wal-Mart. Colette then requested a leave of absence that was also denied by her manager. Although she was only one of a handful of employees to receive the four-star cashier award for excellent work and customer service, Colette was subsequently dismissed.

Claude thought about another incident in which Michel, a high-school student, requested holidays during the first week of August so that he could participate in an annual family camping trip. Although Michel had submitted his request four months in advance, his manager waited until the middle of July to inform him that he could not find anyone to cover for Michel and, that, as a result, he would have to either work those days or lose his job. Michel decided to miss his family holiday. He didn't want to work at McDonald's or some other place that paid new employees about two dollars less per hour than Wal-Mart did.

On this day at work, Claude was especially apprehensive. Besides having to make a decision regarding his father's birthday dinner, Claude was also concerned about some material that he had come across while surfing the net. Several websites reported that Wal-Mart is sued, on average, two to five times per day by customers, employees and other parties.³ The case that really stood out for Claude dealt with the issue of religious discrimination.⁴ A store manager who was displeased with the unwillingness of a Seventh Day Adventist to work during her Sabbath made disparaging comments about the plaintiff's religion and provided an inaccurate account of the activities of the plaintiff and another employee who had both accessed the company's computer system using a management password. Although he fired the plaintiff, he did not fire the other employee who did not practice the plaintiff's religion.

Even though most of these sources contained actual court documents, Claude was sceptical. After all, it is reasonable to expect that any organization would experience these sorts of issues, especially one as visible and as large as Wal-Mart with its \$244.5 billion in sales in the 2002-2003 fiscal year, more than 1.3 million associates worldwide, over 3,200 facilities in the United States and 1,100 units in other countries, and more than 100 million customers per week.⁵ In fact, it may well be that Wal-Mart is the target of even fewer lawsuits than other companies its size. And, after all, Claude thought to himself, Wal-Mart has earned the title of top Corporate Citizen by the 2000 Cone/Roper Report of philanthropy and the third most admired company in America by *Fortune* Magazine in 2001.⁶ However, after reflecting on what was happening in his own workplace, Claude did not know what to think.

As he walked into the store, Claude felt as though hundreds of eyes were watching him from every direction. He ducked into the rest room but this only reminded him of

a case⁷ in which a Wal-Mart manager had secretly set up a camera in a unisex wash-room in an attempt to catch potential shoplifters in the act. Two employees, however, found this to be invasive and the courts agreed. Although the camera did not actually record anything, the jury considered this irrelevant. "Rightly so," Claude thought, "The rest room is the last sanctuary of mankind." After glancing at the ceiling, Claude slipped into the employee lunchroom.

The walls of the lunchroom were plastered with posters containing slogans such as "Our people make the difference" and "Associates are partners." On the table was an open can of cashews. Although Claude and the other associates normally enjoyed eating whatever food was on the lunch room table, on this occasion, Claude muttered, "I'd have to be nuts to eat any of those!" He was reminded of another case⁸ in which Wal-Mart was ordered to pay 20 million dollars in damages to four employees for defamation, eavesdropping and outrageous conduct. A manager who was concerned about theft in the store set up a video camera in the employee break room and placed several open packages of nuts and candy on the table as bait. After the manager viewed the tape, he fired four employees without notice. During the resulting trial, another Wal-Mart manager testified that opened packages of nuts and candy were regularly donated to charity or given to employees.

Claude normally has a friendly chat with Monique, a visible minority woman who worked in electronics, but "Not today," he thought, "Why take chances?" Claude was referring to a case⁹ in which Wal-Mart was fined \$40,000 for secretly recording employee conversations. Claude waved at Monique as he proceeded to the photo lab. He also thought about a case¹⁰ in which a manager fired a white female employee, telling her that she "would never move up with the company being associated with a black man." Wal-Mart was subsequently ordered to pay her \$94,000 in damages. "What's the deal here?" Claude thought, "Wal-Mart seems to concern itself with associates' choice of marital partners, elimination of bodily fluids, and religion. If this is how the world's largest retailer treats its employees, what do I have to look forward to in the rest of my career? Maybe, I'm expecting too much. After all, this is just a job."

Having reached the photo lab, Claude started loading film into the processor, something he would do for his entire shift. He tried to block out all the questions that he had about his workplace. One question that he was unable to stop thinking about, however, was what he should do about his father's birthday dinner. "Should I not go to dad's birthday party at all, should I try to ask my manager for time off (and, if so, how), should I pretend to have a cough and ask to go home early on Saturday?" Claude was contemplating his options when another possibility entered his mind, "Or ... should I just leave for 20 minutes or so and get my coworkers to cover for me?"

Reflection Questions

1. What are Claude's alternatives regarding attending his father's birthday party? What should he do? Why?
2. What are Claude's alternatives regarding his general employment situation? What should he do? Why?
3. How representative is Claude's job of jobs that you have held or the kind of work in which youth normally engage? What may be the longer-term implications of this?
4. What other organizational behaviour concepts are illustrated in this case? How?