

NATALIE THE RETAIL MANAGER

Five years ago, Natalie graduated from a large state university in Pennsylvania with two important possessions—a combined marketing and management degree and high aspirations. She believed that her education, abilities, and ambition would lead to a rewarding career in management. As she interviewed with several companies for her first postgraduate job, it seemed that retail organizations offered the best opportunity for a quick rise to the management ranks. Also, retail firms seemed to give her a good chance to apply her dual majors. The “fast-track” program offered by Enigma,¹ a chain of upscale department stores, was especially intriguing to Natalie. The program included an intensive training course for aspiring managers combined with challenging on-the-job assignments. The recruiter told Natalie that those selected for this program could expect an unencumbered rise to upper management. Natalie was also impressed by what she had seen in the literature the recruiter had used to describe Enigma’s proactive development programs and corporate culture. Natalie was so pleased with her choice of Enigma as her first employer that in all the excitement she did not get much of a chance to talk to her parents or friends about it. Also, the preparations for graduation and the end-of-year parties did not leave much time for her to check into Enigma as an employer. In Natalie’s view, the recruiter gave her a fairly balanced overview of the company. One month after graduation, Natalie began the 3-month course that blended textbook learning with real life, store-based training at the company’s Dallas headquarters.

Natalie found the training course to be demanding. Substantial emphasis was placed on individual initiative and accomplishments, often pitting trainees against one another in business simulations. Natalie thought the emphasis on individual action to be somewhat strange because the recruiter had stressed that Enigma’s success was based on teamwork and esprit de corps. Although she was in a class with 40 other trainees, Natalie found it difficult to make friends with her cohorts. The rigors of the training and the emphasis on individual competitiveness left little time or inclination for personal bonds to be established. Near the end of the training period, Natalie received her first performance evaluation. The instructors saw her intelligence and technical skills as strong points but also noted that she needed to be more decisive, become more sensitive to customer needs, and develop a “killer instinct” when dealing with employee behavior difficulties. Even though the training was not exactly what she had expected, Natalie still believed that she was well prepared for a regular store assignment.

After completion of the training course, Natalie was filled with confidence as she began her career as an assistant manager at one of Enigma's busiest and most profitable stores in suburban New Jersey. Although the competitiveness of the training course was a surprise, she looked forward to the assignment in New Jersey because it was close to her parent's home in eastern Pennsylvania and it was within easy driving distance to New York and Philadelphia. As an assistant manager, Natalie was given significant responsibility for the Housewares department. She was told that her duties covered all aspects of the department, including inventory control, customer service, staff scheduling and hiring, and merchandise presentation. It was explained to Natalie that her "normal" work week would be Tuesday through Saturday, from 9:30 AM to 6:30 PM but that Enigma's culture dictated that the managers see their responsibility to their stores as being 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

ONE YEAR LATER

Natalie has really begun to dread these visits to the physician's office. The regular migraine headaches she developed from the very beginning of her time at Enigma were bad enough, but now the heartburn and stomach distress are almost unbearable. While she sat in the physician's office, Natalie began to reflect on the past year at Enigma. The first 6 months had been really overwhelming. It took her a while to comprehend Enigma's use of a Darwinian "survival of the fittest" approach to employee development and retention. She had been thrown into the Housewares department with virtually no advance preview on the workings of the operation or the personnel. When she did meet with her boss in the afternoon of her second day, Natalie was told, for the first of many times, that this is a "sink or swim assignment, so you better dive in and start swimming."

The staff in Housewares included a mixture of full- and part-time employees. Generally, the full-time staff were assigned to Housewares on a permanent basis, whereas part-timers could be assigned to any department in the store, depending on such factors as absenteeism or promotional campaigns. From the start of her assignment, Natalie felt a sense of hostility toward her from three full-time staff members, each of whom had been with Enigma for more than 5 years. Natalie believes that the hostility, which had subsided somewhat just in the past few weeks, resulted from two factors. First, the longer-tenured staff resented her being given the job of assistant manager without having paid any "dues" on the front lines of the department. Second, nearly all the staff at the Enigma store had a negative view of management, primarily because of what were seen at Enigma's abusive demands and "factory-like" approaches toward the supervision of its employees.

Natalie could accept the first factor because it was true that she was only out of college for less than 6 months and she was supervising people who had been with the store for many years. Natalie was dismayed over the second factor but saw its validity. During her recruitment, Enigma portrayed itself as a

progressive and caring organization that was concerned about the quality of life of its employees. Yet the 3-month training program and her work experiences clearly pointed to a different organization, one that saw its employees as nothing more than human capital that could be used up and then replaced. Horror stories (and turnover) were commonplace. Employees were regularly called on to work ridiculous hours or abandon personal plans at the last minute because they were needed at the store. Also, the managerial culture dictated that employee difficulties were dealt with in an aggressive and dispassionate way. The abusive attitude toward the staff and the culture were troubling to Natalie because they went against the grain of her personality. She had always viewed herself as a friendly and caring person, but the store demanded that she think and act differently or risk being seen as not a team player.

Natalie's relationships with her boss and her fellow assistant managers were strained, to say the least. The competitiveness that was fostered in the training program carried over into operations of the stores. Natalie's boss, a single woman in her mid-30s, was overtly ambitious, and she had no qualms about telling everyone who would listen that her goal was to be a vice president and regional manager by the time she was 40. The boss appreciated the contributions of the people who worked for her, but only to the extent that they could be instrumental in taking her to the next level. Natalie believed that if she showed too much ambition or in any way tried to question the established procedures or culture, she would be seen as a threat and labeled a maverick and not supportive of the management team or Enigma's mission. So, Natalie learned to implement changes and improvements in her department in a quiet fashion. Also, she tried to create a new culture within Housewares that encouraged teamwork as a way to improve performance. Through her efforts, Housewares had shown steady performance gains, and by the end of Natalie's first year, it was one of the top two departments in the store.

When it came to her relationships with her contemporaries, Natalie continued to find it difficult to create any sort of personal or emotional ties with the 11 other assistant managers. The encouragement of individualistic behavior, brought on by the store's penchant for interdepartmental performance comparisons, created a working environment in which everyone was most concerned with his or her own performance, not the performance of the store in total. This environment also led to a variety of political behaviors being used, from backstabbing to outright sabotage. Although it took a little while, Natalie caught on to the self-serving games and had learned how to act when confronted with political behaviors.

In her personal life, it was tough for Natalie to engage in any social activities, let alone find an intimate relationship. She had been putting in 70-hour work weeks throughout her first year with Enigma, and the grueling schedule left little time for leisure or exercise. She realized that her health problems were partly attributable to a lack of outside interests that could have served to reduce stress. Just within the past 2 months, Natalie has vowed to spend more time in activities outside of work. She joined a health club and started socializing more with family and friends.

Despite all the tribulations of the past year, Natalie believed that she had grown in the managerial position at Enigma. The work culture was not real positive, and she still felt some residual hostility from her subordinates, but she had learned to cope and had actually been successful in putting her own imprint on the workings of her department and the store. After 6 months on the job she had wanted to quit, but now, even with the migraines, the heartburn, and the advice of her physician to find a less stressful job, she thought she would stick it out for a while longer.

FIVE YEARS LATER

Natalie's career at Enigma is now at a crossroads. She is confronted with some rough decisions concerning both her professional and her personal lives. Enigma has recently offered her the chance to become the manager of its Seattle store. She would be given complete responsibility for the store operations, would receive a 40 percent salary increase, and could garner a sizable performance bonus after 1 year. Although flattered by the opportunity, Natalie has other factors to consider. She is engaged to be married, and the wedding date is just 8 months away. Her husband-to-be has made it clear that he is not in favor of a move to the West Coast. Besides, they had talked about starting a family in the next 2 years and a move to Seattle would take them far away from their parents and other relatives who would willingly satisfy any child care needs that might arise if they did have children.

Natalie needed some time to ponder her choices. The past 4 years at Enigma had been an emotional roller coaster. She had thought about leaving Enigma on several occasions but had never "tested the waters." She always believed that the pros of staying with the company outweighed the cons. The extensive demands of the job had kept her busy, and the corporate culture still served to create unnecessary animosity and obstacles. But Enigma showed that they believed in her ability by promoting her a year ago to deputy store manager and by paying for her to attend a number of executive development programs. Most of her friends from college were still trying to move into an initial management position. They were amazed at the experiences Natalie had already encountered. Natalie had likened her situation to being in quicksand, the deeper she had gotten into Enigma, the harder it was to get out. In the back of her mind, she often wondered whether other employers or another type of career would be a better fit for her and her aspirations. In fact, she often dreamed of becoming an entrepreneur by opening up a high-end housewares store. Five years of her life had been devoted to Enigma, 5 years of headaches, stress, and various political battles. But the 5 years of rewards had been there, too, nice salary increases, bonuses, and a major promotion.

The West Coast regional manager wanted an answer in 2 days. If Natalie did not take the promotion, it would please her fiancé and her family, but she knew it would be difficult to get another opportunity to be a store manager anytime

soon. If she did take the promotion, she was looking at escalating demands, with even more stress and headaches. Natalie believed that if she really pressured her fiancé he would, reluctantly, agree to move to Seattle. And she rationalized that they could always find some sort of child care arrangement out there when they did have kids. But she still had not ruled out the possibility of starting her own business. One way or another, this was the toughest decision she had ever faced in her life.

CASE ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

1. Critique the process Natalie went through in her selection of Enigma as an employer. Do you think the selection of Enigma was right for her? What could she have done differently in her job search?
2. Do think Enigma was right in the approaches it used to recruit Natalie? Should an employer have a moral obligation to always use realistic recruitment?
3. Do you believe that the "survival of the fittest" approach that Enigma used in developing its managers was an appropriate strategy? Do you think Natalie should have been more forceful in trying to correct managerial and cultural wrongs that she observed?
4. Do you agree with Natalie's decision to "stick it out for a while longer" with Enigma after she had been on the job for a year? Should Natalie have been more proactive in considering other employment options at this point in her career?
5. If you were in Natalie's shoes after 5 years with Enigma, what career and life choices would you be prepared to make? What are the key factors that you would consider in making your choices?
6. If you were to write a continuation to this case, what would you predict for Natalie for the future, say, 10 or 15 years after her college graduation? Would it be a happy or an unhappy future?

ENDNOTES

1. Enigma is a fictitious name and should not be confused with any real company.