

Case Study "Bridging The Two Worlds –The Organizational Dilemma

By William Todorovic, University of Waterloo, Canadian Organizational Behaviour by Steven L. McShane, pages 336 to 338.

I had been hired by a Toronto based company, ABC Limited, and it was my first day of work. I was 26 years old, and I was now the manager of ABC's customer service group, which looked after customers, logistics, and some of the raw material purchasing. My superior, George, was the vice-president of the company. ABC manufactured most of its products from aluminum, a majority of which were destined for the construction industry.

As I walked around the shop floor; the employees appeared to be concentrating on their jobs, barely noticing me. Management held daily meetings in which various product issues were discussed. No one from the shop floor was invited to meetings, unless there was a specific problem. Later I also learned that management had separate washrooms and separate lunchrooms as well as other perks, which floor employees did not have. Most of the floor employees felt that management, although polite on the surface, did not really feel they had anything to learn from the floor employees.

John, who worked on the aluminum slitter, a crucial operation required before any other operations could commence, had had a number of unpleasant encounters with George. As a result, George usually sent written memos to the floor in order to avoid a direct confrontation with John. Because the directions in the memos were complex, these memos were often more than two pages long.

One morning, as I was walking around, I noticed that John was very upset. Feeling that perhaps there was something I could do, I approached John and asked him if I could help. He indicated that everything was just fine. From the looks of the situation, and John's body language, I felt that he was willing to talk, but John knew this was not the way things were done at ABC. Tony, who worked at the machine next to John's, then cursed and said that the office guys only cared about schedules, not about the people on the floor. I just looked at him, and then said that I only begun working here last week, but thought I could address some of their issues. Tony gave me a strange look, shook his head, and went back to his machine. I could still hear him swearing as I left. Later I realized that most of the office staff were offended by Tony's language.

On the way back to my office, Lesley, a recently hired engineer from Russian, approached me and pointed out that the employees were not accustomed to management talking to them. Management only issued orders and made demands. As we discussed the different perceptions between office and floor staff, we were interrupted by a very loud lunch bell, which startled me. I was happy to join Lesley for lunch, but she asked me why I was not eating in the office lunchroom. I replied that if I was going to understand how ABC worked, I had to get to know the people better. In addition, I realized that this was not how things are done at ABC, and wondered about the nature for the apparent division between management and the floor. In the lunchroom, the other workers were amazed to see me there, commenting that I was still new and had not learned the ropes yet.

After lunch, when I asked George, my supervisor, about his recent confrontation with John, George was surprised that John had got upset, and explained, "I just wanted John to know that he had done a great job, and as a result, we will be able to ship one large order from the west coast on time. If fact, I thought I was complimenting him."

Earlier, Lesley had indicated that certain behaviour was expected from management, and therefore from me. I reasoned that I didn't think this behavior worked, and besides, it's not what I believed or how I cared to behave. For the next couple of months, I simply walked around the floor and took every opportunity to talk to the shop floor employees. Often when the employees related specific information about their work places, I felt that it went over my head. Frequently I had to write down the information and visit it later. I made a point of listen to them, identifying where they were coming from, and trying to understand them. I need to keep my mind open to new ideas. Because the shop employees expected me to make request and demands, I made a point of not doing any of that. Soon enough, the employees became friendly, and started to accept me as one of their own, or at least as a different type of management person.

During my third month of work, the employees showed me how to improve the scheduling of jobs, especially those on the aluminum slitter. In fact, the greatest contribution was made by John who demonstrated better ways to combine the most common slitting sizes, and reduce waste by retaining some of the "common-sized" material for new orders. Seeing the opportunity, I programmed a spreadsheet to calculate and track inventory. This, in addition to better planning and forecasting allowed us to reduce our new order turnarounds from four to five weeks to in by 10 a.m. out by 5 p.m. on the same day.

By the time I had been employed at ABC for four months. I realized that members from other departments were coming to me and asking me to relay messages to the shop employees. When I asked why they were delegating this task to me, they stated that I spoke the same language as the shop employees. Increasingly, I became the messenger for the office to the shop floor communication.

One morning, George called me into his office and complimented me on the level of customer service and the improvements that had been achieved. As we talked, I mentioned that we could not have done it without John's help. "He really knows his stuff, and his is good," I said. I suggested that we consider him for some type of promotion. Also, I hoped that this would be a positive gesture that would improve communication between the office and shop floor.

George turned and pulled a flyer out of his desk: "Here's a management skills seminar. Do you think we should send John to it?"

"That's a great idea," I exclaimed, "Perhaps it would be good if he were to receive the news from you directly, George." George agreed, and after discussing some other issues, we departed company.

That afternoon, John came into my office, upset and ready to quit. "After all my effort and work, you guys are sending me for training seminars. So, am I not good enough for you?"