

Case 12.1: Bluebird Care

Robin Martin started Bluebird Care, an in-home health care agency, 20 years ago with a staff of 2 and 5 clients. The agency has grown to a staff of 25 serving 50 clients.

Robin started in elder care as an aide at a reputable assisted living facility. She liked caring for patients and was good at it. When she began running Bluebird Care, Robin knew all her staff members and their clients. But as the demand for in-home health care has increased, Bluebird Care has grown as well—hiring more staff and expanding its service area. For Robin, this means less time with the company’s clients and more time managing her growing agency. She admits she feels as if she is losing her connections with her clients and staff.

When asked to describe a time when the agency was really running smoothly, Robin talks about when Bluebird Care had just 10 employees. “This was a good time for us. Everyone did what they were assigned and did not complain. No one called in sick; they were very dependable. But, it was different then because we all lived in the same area and I would see each of our employees every week. On Tuesdays they had to hand in their time sheets, and every other Thursday they stopped to pick up their paycheck. I enjoyed this.”

Because the agency’s service area is much larger now, encompassing many of the city’s suburbs, Robin seldom sees her employees. Time sheets are emailed in by employees, and paychecks are sent through the mail or directly deposited into employees’ bank accounts. Robin says, “Because they never see us, the staff feels like they can do what they want, and management has nothing to say about it. It’s not the same as when we were smaller.”

There is a core of agency staff that Robin does interact with nearly every day. Terry, a staff member who has been with Robin since the beginning, is Robin’s go-to person. “I trust her,” Robin says. “When she says, ‘Robin—we need to do it this way,’ I do what she says. She is always right.” Terry is very positive and promotive of the agency and complimentary of Robin. When other staff members challenge the rules or procedures of the agency, Terry is the person to whom Robin goes to for advice. But, Terry also challenges Robin to make Bluebird Care the best agency it can be.

Terry is a direct contrast to Belinda, another employee. A five-year staff member, Belinda is dogmatic and doesn’t like change, yet frequently challenges Robin and the rules of the agency. Robin describes Belinda as “a bully” and not a team player. For example, Belinda and Robin had a conflict about a rule in the agency’s procedural manual that requires staff to work every other weekend. Belinda argued that it was unfair to force staff members to work every other weekend and that other similar agencies don’t have such policies. To prove her point, Belinda obtained a competing agency’s manual that supported her position and showed it to Robin.

Robin, who does not like confrontation, was frustrated by Belinda’s aggressive conflict style. Robin brought up the issue about weekends with Terry, and Terry supported her and the way the policy was written. In the end, Belinda did not get the policy changed, but both Belinda and Robin are sure there will be more conflicts to come.

Two other key staff members are Robin’s son, Caleb, who hires and trains most of the employees, and her son-in-law, James, who answers the phone and does scheduling. Robin says as a manager James does his work in a quiet, respectful manner and seldom causes problems. In addition to handling all the hiring and training, Robin relies on Caleb to troubleshoot issues regarding client services. For both James and Caleb, the job can become stressful because it is their phones that ring when a staff member doesn’t show up to a client’s for work and they have to find someone to fill in.

Caleb also says he is working hard to instill a sense of cohesiveness among the agency’s far-flung staff and to reduce turnover with their millennial-age staff members. Caleb says while the agency’s growth is seen as positive, he worries that the caring philosophy his mother started the agency with is becoming lost.