

Simpson Versus Engineering*

Contributed by Stewart L. Tubbs

When our seventh level supervisor, Bud Thomas, retired after 37 years of service, the people in the department threw one of the biggest retirement parties that Engineering had ever seen. Bud was well liked by everyone, and we were sorry to see him go. As far as the sixth level engineers he supervised were concerned, he was the ideal boss. Bud was the type of supervisor who provided support when an employee needed it, while managing not to supervise so closely that his employees felt that they had someone constantly looking over their shoulders. He was the type of supervisor who always made sure that we received credit for the jobs well done.

After Bud's retirement, everyone was speculating as to who would be promoted to fill his vacancy. The majority of the engineers felt that one of our department's older men with several years' seniority would be promoted. We were wrong.

Upper management decided to promote one of the younger engineers who had seven years' seniority in another engineering section. His name was John Simpson; he was 29 years old and a competent engineer. He had come to our division in 1985 as a fourth level College Graduate in Training. By 1992 he had worked his way up to sixth level—not an easy accomplishment in so few years with the company. Now, with Bud's retirement, he was moved to a seventh level position over our section.

All went well for the first few weeks. The older employees with more seniority were a bit resentful at first, but after a couple of weeks the initial "grumbling" faded away, and the department resumed its business-as-usual atmosphere.

After John had been our supervisor for about three weeks, he called a meeting of the 11 people he supervised to announce some changes. He announced: "From now on, we are going to have a group meeting every day at 7:00 A.M. to give me a better picture of what is going on in the section. In addition, since I work from 6:30 A.M. to 3:30 P.M. each day, I expect each of you to be on the same schedule."

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Sounds of complaints came from nearly the entire group, and one engineer spoke up, saying, "John, this violates our current flex-time program, and also conflicts with what is being allowed in the other engineering sections."

John responded, "Flex-time is my prerogative, and as your supervisor, I am going to decide the working hours from now on."

Some of the engineers were so mad about the schedule changing that they took their case for flex-time to the chief engineer. He told them that flex-time could be waived at the discretion of the supervisor. So, we had to start work at 6:30 each morning.

Thereafter, at the 7:00 A.M. required staff meeting, John did all the talking, with the other engineers speaking only when asked to. They also managed to limit the amount of information about their jobs. So John really never did get a clear picture of "what was going on."

The only change John achieved with the elimination of flex-time and the mandatory attendance at morning meetings was to alienate himself from the other engineers. This became more and more evident as each week passed.

When John asked for volunteers to attend a conference and to give a brief presentation about an engineering topic, everyone turned him down. The same was true on the issue of overtime. John always had a hard time convincing anyone to stay any extra hours at all.

John further contributed to his alienation from the section when he announced that the company car we used to go from one building to another (our plant complex is over two miles long) would be eliminated. He told us that this was an upper management decision that he had no control over.

Our productivity sagged so much after this that we started missing deadlines (for the first time ever). For the first time, also, the group started having morale problems. Some people started sending out their résumés for other jobs. Absenteeism also reached new record-high levels.

At this point John decided that the best way to solve our problems would be to have a Quality of Work Life meeting where we could air our problems. When the meeting was held, John opened by asking, "What do you think could be causing this drastic decline in performance for our section?"

One of the oldest and most respected members of the group responded, and told him, "John, *you* are the problem. We had a great, productive group until you came along and screwed it up. If you want to get along around here, *you* are going to do a hell of a lot of changing. Most of us have already forgotten more than you will ever know. Things aren't going to get any better here until you decide to play ball."

Three weeks later John was transferred to another division.