

Production slowdown

INCIDENT

Frederick Woolsey had been made supervisor of a production line at Metal Fabrication, Inc. The plant manager made him responsible for operating the entire production line efficiently and effectively. Woolsey supervised 6 foremen and 48 assembly line workers. His job was to keep the assembly line going at the scheduled 71 units per hour.

When Woolsey took the supervisor's job two months previously, the production line was losing 90 minutes of production a day. Line stoppages, maintenance problems, absenteeism, and workers stopping the line for repair were some causes of lost production. The 90-minute loss was approximately 20 percent of the daily operating schedule.

Woolsey reduced absenteeism and took other steps to prevent the loss of scheduled production time. He kept the main line going even when some feeder lines stopped. "The workers don't like it," said Woolsey. "They resent working the required 7 hours and 45 minutes a day instead of only 6 hours and 30 minutes."

The disgruntlement of the production line workers toward Woolsey seemed to be centered in Robert Long and Vic Green. The complaints against Woolsey were varied and included the following. Both Green and Long said that Woolsey laid off workers for being two minutes late. They also said that Woolsey had foremen picking up trash. Long said that Woolsey had threatened him with an iron bar about eight inches long and claimed that Woolsey was guilty of using "speed-up" tactics. As a result of these events, the two filed a formal grievance targeting Woolsey.

The plant manager knew that Woolsey was the target of increasingly vitriolic verbal protests by Long and Green. Both were openly defiant and implied that they were ready to take matters into their own hands.

Confronted with this high and rising level of employee unrest, the plant manager reflected upon Woolsey's inability to achieve simultaneously adequate production and adequate behavioral relations with his workers. He wondered "Are these two goals necessarily incompatible? Does the problem lie with Woolsey, the assemblyline workers, or the situation?" More importantly, the plant manager knew that prompt decisions and actions were essential to defuse the explosive situation.

While action was immediately needed to extinguish the agitation among the assembly line workers, the plant manager wished to use Woolsey in a positive role, and he desired to maintain the improved production rates achieved under Woolsey's leadership. For the longer run, he reasoned that developing specific operational policies would be essential in areas such as supervisory training, introduction of change, team building, and other areas relevant to balancing supervisory concern for task performance with concern for behavioral relationships. Implementation of these policies would be difficult, and he knew it. As the plant manager pondered his plight, his stress increased. He was uncertain where to begin.