

THE CASE OF THE UNDERPERFORMING EXECUTIVE¹

The Problem

Bill, a senior administrator for several years and a long-time employee of the company, was not performing up to his capacity, nor at an acceptable executive level. His performance seemed to be based on a combination of factors, including lethargy, insufficient responsibility in an unchallenging job, lack of commitment to developing better results, and lingering bitterness. Two years earlier, he had been transferred from his position in Office A to a position in Office B. This transfer was one of several that resulted from internal problems (poor communications and excessive conflict among managers) at Office A.

We had decided to offer Bill a final opportunity to show that he could perform at an effective level by relocating him to a new position in Office C. Office C was growing rapidly, and needed an experienced manager with Bill's background.

My Strategy

I wanted to meet with Bill to review his performance in the recent past. I wanted to be certain that he had a current evaluation of his performance, to provide him with an opportunity to discuss his lack of desire, and to be certain that he knew the transfer to Office C would be made only if he were committed to making a success of it.

Scene from Meeting with Bill

My underlying thoughts and feelings:

What was said:

He's aware of his current level of under-achievement. Why does he want to know if everyone noticed?

This old chestnut should be behind us.

S: Bill, during the past year, your performance has not been acceptable. You seem to be carrying a chip on your shoulder. I've heard words like lethargy, uncommitted, and disinterested in describing your recent performance. Administrators cannot have those characteristics. Let's discuss your feelings about your performance.

B: I recognize that I have not been performing up to my capability. Before we discuss that further, I'd like to know how widespread the perception of my lack of motivation is.

S: I think everyone in the firm has noticed.

B: I have not been treated fairly. I worked hard as a leader at Office A, and the record shows it. I have not received recognition for my accomplishments. Instead, I've been kicked in the teeth.

S: You know that I'm not familiar with the specifics of the problems at Office A. I don't see any point in reminiscing about something that happened several years ago. Nothing constructive

¹ This case was written by "Sandy", a senior executive in a major U.S. firm. The case was edited and modified to disguise the identity of the company and the individuals by Lee Bolman, Bloch School of Business and Public Administration, University of Missouri-Kansas City.

will come of it. I want to talk about you today – matters pertinent to your present and future performance.

That is a valid point, but what's he doing with all his time?

B: There's not much I can do here with the weak economy.

S: Senior managers have a responsibility to communicate their feelings if there's more they can do. There is an impression that you can do much more to improve your operation, but you don't want to. I agree – there's not much challenge here. But let's talk about another position where there is an immediate need for a mature, experienced manager. I'm talking about Office C. But this move will only be considered if the VP at Office C and I get a commitment from you for enthusiastic, all-out performance, putting the past behind, and only if there is an understanding that you will be expected to prove yourself during the next year and continue such performance into the future. You've got to make the decision yourself, because we're talking about your career, a career with our company.

He understands.

B: Are there other alternatives with the firm?

S: No.

Maybe he doesn't understand.

B: The cost of living will be much higher there. Will there be any compensation adjustment?

S: If you're suggesting that you should receive a compensation adjustment, you don't understand the seriousness of the situation. There will be no discussion about a pay increase until you have proved that you earned it.

B: I got a lousy increase last year. I must be on a 'bad list.'

S: There is no such thing. Senior managers' increases are determined on the basis of individual performance. Your performance was not good last year. There's got to be commitment and there's got to be performance. I would like you to meet with the VP at Office C. Have a candid discussion. Then, if you feel you can fit and enthusiastically commit, we'll go ahead. If not, we won't consider this move.

B: I'll talk to him, and be back in touch with you within two weeks. There are some things I need to discuss with him.