

The Case of Mark Whiting¹

Mark Whiting's crisis began when word came to him that he had been passed over in favor of an outsider for the corporation presidency. It was a day on which he expected to achieve the high point of his career. The Board of Directors was meeting, and he felt certain that before they were through he would be named president of the Universal Chemical Corporation. The years he had spent as manager in marketing and sales, the last four years as vice-president seemed to be coming to a logical conclusion. He went over in his mind the achievements, the careful planning, the long hours of work that had brought him to this point. Who else knew the corporation well enough to energize its sprawling resources. Few men knew marketing and sales as well he.

He was, in fact, credited with many "firsts" in the chemical industry. He had been appointed, in recognition, to numerous important committees in various industry associations. He had been elected to the Presidency of the American Chemical Manufacturers Association. He travelled extensively, giving lectures and speeches before university audiences. He was a familiar figure in Washington, testifying before the Federal Trade Commission, the Pure Food and Drug Administration, and various other agencies concerned with chemical manufacturing. His home life, religious practices, and community associations were exactly as they should be for an executive who conscientiously attempted to be the man on top.

Recent events had seemed to assure his promotion to the presidency. A rumour had been circulating that his long-range program had been adopted by the Board of Directors. A friend had called him that morning and reported that the board had definitely rejected the manufacturing vice-president's program. His confidence had increased. After all, there were only two, good, competing reports before the board, and the rejection of one would automatically spell the adoption of the other.

¹ Adopted from E.E. Jennings, Executive Success: Stresses, Problems and Adjustments

His reminiscences were interrupted. The telephone was ringing. It was the same friend who had reported the favourable rumour earlier in the day¹. He apologized and expressed his sympathy to Mark. Mark learned that the board had arranged a press conference to announce that a new president had been appointed - a man from the outside with whom the board had been in contact for several months. In utter disbelief, Mark muttered a few incoherent words. Mark sat at his desk in a state of shock, not knowing what could possibly have gone wrong. The sympathetic remarks of his friends and subordinates, the formal announcement by the board that he was to remain as vice-president of marketing, the assurances of the retiring president that his future career with the corporation was secure, failed to draw him out.

When Mr. Gray agreed to become president and chief executive officer, he reserved the right to select his own team. This kind of arrangement is not uncommon in corporate affairs. If the new executive is to be held responsible, he must be free to draw upon managerial personnel as he sees fit. It is usual in such cases for each of the in-house executives to offer his services. Mark Whiting did not do this. He could not even bring himself to congratulate the new president, a man ten years his junior.

It was not long before Whiting and Gray clashed. Whiting could not stomach "an outsider coming in and making changes before he knew what the corporation needed and did not need". He felt that the board had made an honest mistake and everything had to be done to protect the corporation.

In this frame of mind, Mark attended the first executive committee meeting only to be told that a new vice-president - brought in from Gray's former corporation - would be in charge of marketing. He, Mark, would now be in charge of sales only, although he could keep his vice presidency. Whiting immediately attacked the new set-up. Gray's response

¹ The friend, who was a long-time associate, was director of the corporations' public relations department

was to give Mark the floor, putting aside all other business and encouraging Mark to develop his personal views.

The result of this was that Mark showed plainly to the group present that he was emotionally incapable of working with the new team. Gray in concluding the meeting praised Mark, recognizing his many fine, past achievements in the chemical industry, and emphasizing his importance and his potential asset to the corporation. Consequently, the clash fizzled, and the incident set the tone of the relationship for the next two years. Whiting tried repeatedly to assert himself, he could never find the fighting front.

Although Mark and several other original members of the old executive team, were included in the new executive team, they were effectively kept from those areas of operation that Gray considered important. Soon after things had settled down, Mark discovered that the new executive team had been meeting twice a week regularly and without him! His separation from the heart of the corporation now seemed complete. Mark felt both shame and humiliation. His exclusion amounted to a personal rejection. The management of sales, which was his current responsibility, was dictated by sales policies made by an executive team of which he was not a member.

Mark rebelled by not leaving his office for the field, where an effective sales manager must perforce spend a good part of his time. If the new president was trying to keep him from exerting any influence by keeping him busy in the field, he simply would not go to the field offices. And he didn't.

After eight months of impasse, Mark was appointed vice-president of special projects. No mention was made and no criticism voiced for the poor performance in the sales field due to his lack of attention. Rather, he was congratulated by all the new members of the executive committee for his promotion.

He was assigned a bigger and better office. His office had the furniture and "extras" of a corporate president - private toilet and shower, liquor cabinet, etc. Once again there was no fighting front.

He was assigned problems which were so broad or vague that he could not really come to grips with them. When he appealed for clarification, Gray sent him on various trips, first to Europe and then to Japan as special representative of the president. An inspection trip, a good will mission, whatever it was, he never did much of anything that really tied into the administrative decision-making process. He was never invited to attend executive committee meetings. But Gray himself, regularly had luncheon meetings with him privately when they discussed in detail his special project trips, his impressions and recommendations. Gray apparently did this with no one else. Whiting came to look forward to these meetings. He almost convinced himself that his work was important enough to make Gray need these luncheon meetings. Mostly, however, he alternated between moods of mild elation and deep depression. When he felt weak or inadequate he would search for signs of support and appreciation. A favourable nod by a member of the new executive committee became critical to his state of well being.

In the ensuing eighteen months the Universal Chemical Company grew considerably. New faces appeared at high-level positions. Scientists and engineers began to occupy more of the managerial positions. The character and direction of the corporation had changed. Many of the old managerial team had retired, some earlier than expected.

In an effort to salvage a respectable role for himself, Mark attempted "on the quiet" to find suitable employment elsewhere. For eight months he pursued this new goal, only to be rejected because of his age¹, or because he demanded too high a salary for the jobs that were offered to him.

¹ Mark was fifty-two at this time.

At this point, he sought help from a clinical psychologist with a practice devoted to managerial and administrative problems.