

Cannonball!

Sondra Simpson, Elmhurst College

This critical incident was prepared by the authors and is intended to be used as a basis for class discussion. The views presented here are those of the authors based on their professional judgment and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Society for Case Research. The names of individuals, the firm, and its location have been disguised to preserve anonymity. Copyright © 2015 by the Society for Case Research and the authors. No part of this work may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means without the written permission of the Society for Case Research.

Introduction

Late one night Laura received a call from the president of a homeowners' association regarding one of the community swimming pools she supervised. "Laura! We need you to get here immediately! I found two of your guards using the pool after hours," he shouted. Promising to get there as quickly as possible, Laura hung up the phone and raced to the pool. Laura wondered how she should respond to this situation. This was her first management crisis and Laura knew she would have to address her employees' behavior while also appeasing the homeowner's association leader. Her heart was pounding and her thoughts swirled as she raced through her options on her way to the pool.

Laura was a 20 year old college student going into her third year of school. For the past three summers she had worked as a lifeguard for a large pool management company, Private Pool Services (PPS). In her position she served as a lifeguard for a single guard, private community pool. At the beginning of her fourth summer she had been promoted from lifeguard to supervisor.

While she had three years of experience as a lifeguard, this was her first management experience and Laura was excited for the opportunity. She was optimistic about the summer season because, despite her lack of experience, she knew the industry and was eager to apply concepts she had learned in her management classes.

Background

Private Pool Services had staffed and maintained private community pools in a large suburban area for the past 20 years. Services they provided included training lifeguards in both lifesaving capacities, as well as the maintenance of the pools and their surrounding pool area. Their aim was to provide customers with a safe and clean swimming environment.

PPS supervisors' responsibilities included maintaining seamless operations for upwards of ten pools within a thirty mile radius. Laura was in charge of a total of nine pools and roughly seventy lifeguards within her territory. Her responsibilities included the staffing, training and disciplining of lifeguards for each individual pool. She was also in charge of scheduling the lifeguards, resolving any issues as they arose, and ensuring that the pools were properly

maintained. The position had no lifeguarding duties, but Laura would occasionally cover a lifeguarding shift due to several pools being understaffed.

Each pool had two shifts (morning and afternoon), with one lifeguard per shift each day. Each shift was six hours long with a ten minute “safety break” each hour to ensure guards remained properly hydrated and alert in the hot weather. The lifeguards generally consisted of students in their junior or senior years of high school and some college students.

In addition to lifesaving and safety services, PPS also provided pool cleaning and maintenance services. In order to keep in line with industry standards all guards were required to be properly trained and managed closely in these areas by PPS. The company routinely performed mandatory health and safety checks and submitted monthly reports to industry regulators.

Laura was very happy in her new position as supervisor. They were halfway through the summer and everything was running smoothly. Other than some of the individual pools being understaffed, the season had progressed without any major incidents.

The Challenge

After hanging up the phone, Laura jumped in her car and sped off toward the pool. As she drove she anxiously analyzed how to deal with the situation she would have to resolve at the scene.

Upon arriving, the homeowners’ president brought her up to speed on what had transpired. Two guards employed at the pool, Jessica and Emily, had been found using their company keys to access the pool after hours in order to allow themselves and a group of ten friends to swim. The president of the community’s homeowners’ association discovered the group sometime after 10 p.m. He immediately sent the ten friends packing, but told Jessica and Emily to stay and wait for Laura to arrive. He had not involved the police, despite the trespassing violation due to the fact that Emily lived in the community.

Company policy stated that employees “are only allowed in the pool facilities during the time of their scheduled shifts, with a 15 minute buffer window on either end of their shift.” This had been made clear to all lifeguards under Laura’s employ. The girls’ performance prior to this was adequate but not outstanding. The homeowners’ association president demanded immediate action on Laura’s part in resolving the incident. Laura knew that whatever decision she made would impact the pool for the rest of the summer season.

After he left, Laura considered what to do. She realized the homeowners’ association President was not clear about what he thought was appropriate “immediate action” and had left that up to her. She also felt that she could handle this on her own and did not seek her corporate supervisor’s assistance at this time of night. This was within her responsibilities to manage.

How should Laura respond to the situation and what would the implications of her decision be? Should she fire the guards on the spot since they were in flagrant violation of company policy? She had the authority to do so. She was not sure if that was the action the president of the homeowners association meant. Laura wondered, should she put the girls on a probationary period since the pool was already so short staffed? If she fired them, she was not sure she could staff the pool this late in the season. So, perhaps another action would be more suitable?

