**A HASTY FIRING AND AN ANGRY CLIENT**

**TEACHING NOTE**

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**Critical Incident Overview**

The hasty action of David, a manager at a consulting firm, in firing his employee Monica resulted in a messy situation. It placed a client firm in a tough position. Monica had been working with Ken’s group at the client firm for five years and was a key member of the group. Ken was livid that she had been fired abruptly since that impacted his group’s ability to deliver critical work-product. Ken tried to persuade Monica to ask for her job back so she could help his group finish that month’s work-product. Monica was very reluctant to do so since she had felt extremely insulted and humiliated at the manner in which she was fired. At the same time, she felt a strong sense of duty to complete her work with Ken’s group.

Monica had to choose between following a sense of professional obligation and completing important work versus honoring (and keeping intact) her professional self-esteem and pride.

This incident illustrates classic conflicts that arise between high-performing employees impatient for professional growth and bosses who are primarily administrators. It also looks at challenges employees face in balancing current work demands with the time investment required for professional growth and issues organizations face in trying to be flexible towards employees while not disrupting work schedules. In this incident, tension resulted from the divergence of organizational goals from an employee’s professional goals. Finally, the incident illustrates the importance of emotional maturity for managers and the pitfalls of not having robust systems of decision making in the organization.

Students might most readily relate to Monica, who was driven by her desire to study and propel her career forward. At the same time, students can also understand the predicament of a manager and co-workers who need to pick up the slack when an employee becomes unavailable for certain periods of time (due to study demands in this case).

This critical incident can be discussed in management, organizational behavior, and career management courses. It is relevant to discussions on management styles, decision making, employee development and developing techniques for separating from (valuable) employees.

**Research Methods**

This CI has been developed from primary sources. A former employee at the company provided details and descriptions. This employee was privy to the information and was professionally acquainted with all characters mentioned in the incident. Names of individuals and the company have been disguised to protect confidentiality.

**Learning Objectives**

After discussing the critical incident, students should be able to:

1. Outline factors for employees to consider in making work-study decisions.
2. Devise means for employees to manage their careers while pursuing a study program.
3. Identify challenges that both employees and organizations face in maintaining work-study balance.
4. Analyze consequences of letting go of (firing) employees and develop approaches to managing this process in an optimal way.
5. Identify issues related to managing high-performing employees and recommend ways of retaining them.
6. Describe organizational stresses that occur when employees work according on flexible and unpredictable schedules.
7. Understand how inter-organizational relationships are affected by employees with boundary spanning roles.

**Questions**

1. What would you do, if you were Monica? (LO2)
2. What factors should Monica have considered in her decision to sign up for the course? (LO1, LO2)
3. What would you have anticipated as the outcome of Monica enrolling in the program? (LO1, LO2, LO3)
4. Did Monica have any legal recourse with which to contest her firing? (LO2, LO4)
5. Discuss possible reasons for the poor work dynamic between David and Monica. (LO5)
6. If you had been David, how would you have managed Monica? (LO5)
7. What stresses did Monica’s decision to enroll in the program place on ExpSol? (LO3, LO6)
8. What mistakes, if any, did ExpSol make in managing the process of firing Monica? (LO4, LO5)
9. What could, or should, ExpSol do with regard to the client firm relationship? (LO7)

**Pedagogical Approach (Questions)**

**Time Horizon – Decision Making**

Immediate ----------- Short ---------------- Medium ------------------ Long

5. David/Monica

relationship

8. Managing process of divesting Monica

2. Individual decision making / career

6. Managing high performing employees

1. What to do

3. Outcome of decision

4. Parting company

9. Maintain client relationship

7. Stress on Organization

**Answers to Questions**

1. **What would you do, if you were Monica?**

Several answers are possible:

1. Nothing! This is the most obvious, and simplest, answer. Monica really did need time for the demanding program; she was not able to keep up with all the time demands of her job at ExpSol.
2. Explore options of remaining at ExpSol by escalating the issue up beyond David. This might have been possible had David given any inkling of what he was planning to do. It might even have been possible on the day she was fired. The biggest hurdle in this option was that the CEO tacitly supported David, in part since he wanted Jeff (his close relative) to have a job at ExpSol.
3. Work as a freelance programmer for Ken’s group. This would square with her personal ethics, she would only be doing the part of the job she really liked and she would maintain a good relationship with Ken and his group. *Author’s note: Monica did indeed make that offer to Ken. However, he said that his group’s work was so intertwined with ExpSol’s products that there was no way she could do the work without using those products. ExpSol’s products were proprietary and could be used only by its employees (at the client site).*
4. Use her good standing with Ken’s group and their desperation at this juncture as leverage in order to strike a deal. *Author’s note: This is what happened. See the Epilogue section.*

**2. What factors should Monica have considered in her decision to sign up for the course?**

According to Kreitner & Cassidy (2008, p.20**),** managerial learning comes from knowledge of theory that is acquired from published materials and formal education. This knowledge is then “integrated with practice and leads to managerial skills”. Thus, across professions, growth is often tied to learning and skill development; this is true in software development as well (Chung & Khan, 2012).

Before making a commitment to pursue formal education, Monica should have done a self- assessment, considering for instance various skills (Chandan & Lakshminarayanan, 2006, p. 9-11). Such an exercise might have resulted in the following assessment:

1. Technical skills – excellent (reports back from Ken’s group).
2. Diagnostic skills – excellent (problem solving).
3. Communication skills – very good (professional at providing and receiving information).
4. Conceptual skills – fair (ability to see what was good for ExpSol and potential for how ExpSol could benefit from Analytics).
5. Interpersonal and communication skills – fair.
6. Time management and organizational skills – fair.

Monica was driven by a desire to improve her technical skills, these were her strength as well. She could have decided that at this stage of her career it was the most important set of skills to develop. Technology in her area of expertise was changing fast. She was under pressure to constantly update her skills or face risk of losing her job – either because the job would be eliminated or because the job would be altered and she would be replaced by someone with requisite skills. While employment of IT professionals was strong, there was a trend away from programmers, with relatively lower skill level, to highly skilled software engineers (Chung & Khan, 2012).In all likelihood, such an analysis would have led Monica to conclude that she should enroll in a formal education program, and then this particular one.

Next, Monica should have assessed the feasibility of participating in the program. Holding down a full-time job and fulfilling demands of a difficult program is not easy (Whitney, 2007). Most employees who do so might be at a stage of their career and life where either they cannot afford not to have a job or where it might be unwise to disappear from the professional arena. Such employees might feel that they have no choice but to do both. This places a strain on both the employee and the organization. If organizational and employee goals are aligned in viewing the employee’s choice of educational program, the organization would try to adjust around employee needs. For instance, the organization could provide some time off, permit an abbreviated schedule or allow flexibility in work timings**.** These would come at a cost to the organization, and would be justified only if there was a prospect of a future benefit from the employee.

Monica’s decision making should have included these factors:

1. Interest in remaining in the general field of software.
2. Interest and enthusiasm for learning Analytics.
3. Possibility of growth within ExpSol with or without learning Analytics.
4. Potential for growth in use of Analytics and how long it was likely to last.
5. Potential for leveraging knowledge of Analytics – within ExpSol or outside.
6. Adjustments she would have to make in her life if she enrolled in the program.
7. Adjustments ExpSol would have to make if she enrolled in the program.

Monica should have (*author’s note*: *and did*) discuss the ramifications of the decision with David before enrolling. In addition, she attempted to persuade ExpSol that it would be beneficial competitively to the company to build expertise in Analytics. In the end, she was convinced that this program would be beneficial for her, she was truly excited to learn the material and she decided to go ahead with the program no matter what the cost to ExpSol.

**3. What would you have anticipated as the outcome of Monica enrolling in the program?**

The outcome was a foregone conclusion. Given that Monica was determined to go ahead with the program, all signs indicated that she would definitely change her field of expertise to data analytics and look for jobs that would give her scope to utilize that expertise. Since that field was considered as promising and “hot” it was very likely that she would get such a job. At the same time, given that ExpSol showed no inclination to move in that direction, it was unlikely that such a job would be available at ExpSol. Thus, it was inevitable that even if ExpSol had agreed to flexible time for Monica until she completed her program, she would have left ExpSol for such a job at the end of it.

**4. Did Monica have any legal recourse with which to contest her firing?**

Monica was employed at ExpSol within the context of “employment-at-will”. This would allow ExpSol, and Monica as well, to “break their work relationship at any point in time, with or without any particular reason, as long as in doing so no law is violated” (Lussier and Hendon, 2013, p.334). Thus, ExpSol was within its legal rights in terminating Monica’s employment. By the same token, Monica also could quit at any time without having to provide any reason for doing so. *Author’s note: That is what Monica’s ExpSol colleague who was also placed in Ken’s group, did; she quit at this time period to join another company.*

An employee can file a lawsuit when there is a Federal, State or Public Policy violation. Some examples of violation of the law are (Ballam 2000):

1. Discrimination on the basis of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act which includes: race, religion, gender, age and disability and, in some states, sexual orientation.
2. Retaliatory discharge – when an employer terminates an employee in response to an employee’s actions.
3. Illegal Acts – when an employer asks an employee to commit an illegal act and the employee refuses.
4. Breach of Contract violations.
5. Taking leave under the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA).
6. Violations of the company’s own termination procedure (employee manual).
7. Public policy violations as defined by the State Law, for example: Whistle Blower statute violations.

In any situation an employee could file a suit. However, barring a situation such as one above, in all likelihood such a case would be dismissed.

**5. Discuss possible reasons for the poor work dynamic between David and Monica.**

At least part of the reason the situation became unmanageable was the poor dynamic in the relationship between Monica and David. ExpSol primarily functioned as a repository of consultants who were placed with various client firms. In this organizational structure, David had little direct authority over Monica in terms of the actual work she did.

The organizational structure at ExpSol was simple and fairly flat (basically four levels)

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CEO

***(close relative of JEFF)***

Partner

Partner

Partner

………….

Project Manager

***DAVID***

Project Manager

………

Senior Consultant

7+ years experience

***MONICA***

Associate Consultant

0-4 years experience

…………

Consultant

4-7 years experience

As seen by her interactions with the client firm and by documented praise from the client group, which is where she primarily worked, Monica was a capable, competent and valuable employee. She was also ambitious and wanted to have her career move forward. However, she did not exhibit desire to move up to managerial positions. Rather, her desire was to enroll in a demanding educational program which would deepen her expertise. Her motivation would best fit within McClelland’s Acquired Needs Theory as being driven by nAch. This need for achievement is described as “the desire to do something better or more efficiently, or to master complex tasks” (Schermerhorn et al., p. 105).

Although David had started at the firm as a programmer like Monica, he had moved up to a position that was almost purely administrative. Unless he started bringing in clients and thereby generating additional business for ExpSol (the main responsibility of partners in many firms) it was unlikely that he would move higher. At the same time, he was not involved in projects at client sites – his role was mainly one of coordination. He could only exercise control over consultants who reported to him, such as Monica, in administrative terms. These administrative aspects were limited to activities like ensuring consultants filled out time-activity sheets (how they spent their time), documented their work and demanding that they asked for documented permission before doing any piece of work for the client. The last item was a bone of contention for both Monica and the client since it definitely slowed down work response time.

Given the organizational structure and the work that David had been doing, it is very understandable that he might have become nervous, even if Monica truly had no aspirations to replacing him. There was the very real possibility of his job becoming obsolete. After all, competent employees like Monica could get by very well without him.

**5. If you had been David, how would you have managed Monica?**

Gorman (2011) noted that IT professionals are often lacking in managerial skills and have a need for explicit business training on a regular basis. Even for skilled managers, dealing with an employee who is both capable and ambitious is not easy. Many “early career” professionals become dissatisfied with the workplace and employers. Hamori et al. (2012) report a gap between what such high-achieving professionals would like their employers to do and what the employers actually did. In particular, such employees want formal training or education, which employers are reluctant to make provision for. The authors state that the reasons behind the reluctance are that such programs are expensive and would take employees away from the work for periods of time. Hamori et al (2012, p.2) note that “employers are reluctant to make an investment in employees who may not stay long. But this creates a vicious circle: Companies won’t train workers because they might leave, and workers leave because they don’t get training.” Had David been a more skilled manager, he would have tried to instill a sense of satisfaction in Monica. David could have provided her opportunity to document instances where she felt she had been quick in her response and that she had been creative. He could have supported her desire to further her education and to acquire a new skill-set, if not in analytics, in some other area more relevant to the organization. Monica had been satisfied with some aspects of ExpSol and particularly appreciated their compensation policy (trusting her and readily accepting the hours she reported). While, like most technology workers, Monica may not have felt any incentive to exhibit high levels of “organizational citizenship behavior” (Chou, 2011, p. 2), she still had sufficient goodwill towards ExpSol that David could have utilized to build a better relationship with her, personally and organizationally.

**6. What stresses did Monica’s decision to enroll in the program place on ExpSol?**

Stress is defined as “tension from extraordinary demands, constraints or opportunities” (Schermerhorn et al., 2013, p. 35). Although stress is usually discussed in the context of individuals, organizations can experience stress as well. The immediate stress to ExpSol was in covering for Monica on days she took off, with resultant impacts on finances, work-product quality and impact on client relationship. The more important stress was the long-term one on ExpSol – knowing that almost surely she would leave in a year or so.

Several conflicts arose in ExpSol related to the situation and they exacerbated the stress. In general, a conflict occurs when there are disagreements. In the situation described there were multiple types of conflict. Schermerhorn et al. (2012, p. 220-221) described various kinds of conflict that could occur in the workplace: substantive (ends/ goals related) versus emotional (personal); interpersonal, intrapersonal, intergroup and inter-organizational.

1. Monica had an internal conflict of whether to sign up for the demanding program, which would almost definitely disrupt the time she could devote to her job, or to simply continue with her job as usual: intrapersonal.
2. The conflict between Monica and David which was driven mostly by differing organizational personalities and views on what was important in Monica’s job and relationship with her boss: interpersonal, mostly emotional, but substantive to some degree.
3. The conflict between Monica and ExpSol arose due to her devoting time to her program. Monica’s professional goal of becoming an expert in the field of data analytics was at odds with ExpSol’s goal of continuing with their current expertise and not stepping in into data analytics: inter person-organizational, substantive.
4. The conflict between ExpSol and Ken’s (client) firm was triggered by the abrupt firing of Monica, wherein the client firm received no notice and consequently was unprepared to deal with the changed situation: inter-organizational, substantive.

ExpSol’s business model essentially was that of a staffing company. The difference from regular staffing firms was that employees were highly skilled and were typically placed in a client firm for long periods of time. This model had been highly successful across various industries and functional areas – including financial services and management/technology consulting. Examples of such firms included – Accenture, Tata Consulting Services (TCS), and more recently, IBM. It had been used by McKinsey for general consulting.

ExpSol was relatively small and had only three major layers – front-line employees, referred to as consultants, who were programmers like Monica; middle managers, like David, who coordinated and managed consultants ; and the top executive level who brought in new clients, and negotiated client projects. ExpSol’s revenue model was that clients paid for each “talent” or employee placed in the client firm, and perhaps additional amounts for any other software infrastructure ExpSol provided.

ExpSol was very lean with no buffer of employees. If Monica took time off, there was no one to cover for her. The client firm (Ken’s) had agreed pay for only two employees. When Monica was not present, the other employee had to take over. However, the work was too much for one person to handle. Consequently, ExpSol had to bring in Jeff, as a third employee, to work alongside Monica and to fill in when she was not present. The client firm refused to pay for a third employee and Jeff’s salary had to come from ExpSol’s pocket. Thus, Monica’s absence had a direct impact on the bottom line.

Apart from financial implications, there were also work implications. The client work was involved and complex. Whoever filled in for Monica on days she was not there had to be cognizant of the entire work, this person could not just step in on those days and pick up. This meant that the third person had to work alongside Monica for an extended period. There was also risk in replacing Monica entirely, since there was a learning curve that would determine when the new person would become effective, it would not be immediate.

At the same time, ExpSol could not tell Monica to never take a day off. Indeed, she did have a certain number of personal or sick days that were available in a year. The days she had taken off had fallen well within in the limit of her personal, paid days off plus unpaid days ExpSol had granted her. However, her taking any kind of days off did mean that ExpSol had to make adjustments out of the ordinary for work to continue seamlessly.

**7. What mistakes, if any, did ExpSol make in managing the process of firing Monica?**

In a broader sense, the question examines what firms need to do to retain high performing employees. Two points should be noted at the outset – first, that under the concept of “employment-at-will”, ExpSol and Monica were both free to opt out and choose to part company, at any time either of them felt appropriate. Second, it was all but certain that Monica would leave once she completed the program, unless ExpSol provided a strong incentive to stay.

Monica had been with the firm for seven years – a competent and loyal employee. The client firm, a valuable customer for ExpSol, valued her very highly. The question arises as to whether ExpSol did all it could and should have to manage Monica, and later the process of separating from Monica, in an optimal manner. In this case “optimal” can be interpreted to mean – at lowest cost in the immediate while maintaining organizational and individual relationships for the future.

ExpSol’s actions can be examined at three levels: strategic, operational and tactical.

1. Strategic – long range. It is difficult for organizations to hold on to high performing employees, particularly those positioned at the cusp of a rapidly growing field. Monica had shown no particular interest in advancing to a managerial position. However, she *was* motivated by professional achievement. ExpSol did not see a future role for Analytics in the firm – that was an executive decision and perhaps was not likely to change anytime soon. Given all this, ExpSol could have retained Monica only by offering her something comparable. For instance, Monica could have been made a lead in managing client interactions and thinking about client issues at a higher and more conceptual level than at the programmer/developer one which was basically one of performing as per direction. That is, Monica’s role could have been “enriched” (Schermerhorn et al. 2012, p. 133) with added complexities and responsibilities. ExpSol could have allowed Monica to participate in industry conferences in order for her intellectual needs to be satisfied. They could also have encouraged her to take classes, perhaps online, related to her work and awarded her skill-based pay (Schermerhorn et al., 2013, p.126). This was the norm in the software industry – there “skills premium”, monetary incentive for acquiring new skills, was on the rise (Salary Surveys 2013).
2. Operational – medium range. We can make a reasonable assumption that Monica was not interested in advancing to a management level. Such a job would have meant spending most of her time coordinating and managing employees performing jobs much like her current one. Taking away the option of advancing managerially, the scope for professional development was mainly in David’s purview and would come from his interactions with her. David had made his objections to her pursuing the program quite clear. David’s role as Monica’s boss had been reduced to a purely administrative one where the client dictated *what* she did and he was only nominally made aware of the details. David had several ineffective ways to keep a hold of Monica, for instance, by requiring her to get his sign off on any changes required by the client. This backfired since the client was almost always under time pressure and did not want to wait for such bureaucratic delays. Often Monica understood the client’s perspective and went ahead with the work without clearing it with David first, only telling him later. David viewed such an attitude poorly and had become increasingly hostile to Monica. Her signing up for the program was the last straw.

ExpSol was either unaware of the deteriorating relationship between David and Monica, or had chosen to ignore it. In either case, it was a mistake. ExpSol might have been unaware of it, since the only information anyone above David had about Monica was from his evaluation reports. Relying only on supervisor evaluations is often problematic. Lussier and Hendon (2013, p. 301) ask “Aren’t supervisors supposed to know every job for which they are responsible” and answer “in today’s work environment… nobody can know every job”. ExpSol could have made other avenues available – for example, subordinate reviews or 360-degree review (Lussier and Hendon, 2013, pp. 302-304). If these were already in place and ExpSol was aware of the situation, the organization had done a poor job of dealing with it. Personality conflicts between a boss and employee are not uncommon. Sometimes, the only way to resolve it is intervention by someone higher up. David should have been guided so that he did not let person issues cloud his judgment. He might have benefitted by getting information on typical personality characteristics of programmers, many of who view themselves as skilled experts, do not often conform to organizational norms and often respond to bureaucratic rules with impatience and disdain (Beecham et al., 2008). As mentioned in the case, David and Monica had started out on a good footing. However their relationship had deteriorated over time. This was a cautionary tale for both ExpSol and David. If David was not counseled and guided in managing such employees, the same situation would recur with whoever replaced Monica. Ultimately, how ExpSol dealt with David after this situation would depend on how much he himself was valued, or felt valued, by the organization.

1. Tactical – short term. The key decision here was the timing of when Monica was fired. She had been fired by David on the first of the month, the start of the busy period for the client, without any prior warning to the client. The client had reacted immediately and with understandable force. It would seem that David was in a hurry to fire Monica and did not think through the implications of timing. Even if David had been blinded by emotions, the executive level of ExpSol should have planned the timing better, in view of maintaining client relationships, especially with an important client. The timing of the firing was a mistake – ExpSol should have waited out the busy period, had Monica train the relief employee on how to handle things during this time, notified the client and let the client know they were picking up the cost of training and then fired Monica!

**8. What could, or should, ExpSol do with regard to the client firm relationship?**

The process of terminating Monica’s employment did take a toll on the relationship between ExpSol and the client firm. The two organizations had had a long-term relationship. The client firm, and especially Ken’s group, had placed a lot of trust, and responsibility, on ExpSol to provide the (programming) talent to deliver their own products. That trust would definitely have been eroded to a certain extent. ExpSol should work on acceptable replacements to Monica (and the other employee who quit) at the earliest. They would need to clarify future expectations with both the client firm and Ken’s group. They could offer some flexibility in their charges of the client to compensate for what had occurred and to build goodwill.

**Epilogue**

Despite understanding the urgency driving Ken’s request, Monica was firm in her refusal to contact ExpSol and request permission to help complete his group’s work for the month. Looking for some way to bring her in, Ken asked what ExpSol could offer as an incentive to work for a week in order to complete the work. Monica was caught off-guard; she was feeling psychological pressure of having to give some answer. She blurted out “severance pay of six months and all benefits for that time period”. Ken relayed that to ExpSol’s chief executive who balked and called Monica to instead offer her two months’ pay. She refused to negotiate for anything less than six months. ExpSol capitulated. Monica worked with Ken’s group for about a week to finish the work for that month and received pay and benefits for the next six months.

Monica had a good professional and personal relationship with Jeff and guided him as much as she could in handling the work with Ken’s group. After Monica’s departure, Jeff was moved to her position at ExpSol and David became his boss. Soon Jeff started having complaints about David and his micromanaging style.

As Monica progressed in her program she began exploring job options. Soon she received an offer from a large corporate firm to do analytics work, with compensation that had an increase of more than 10% over her ExpSol salary.

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