**EVOLUTION OF A MANAGER: CAREER ON THE LINE**

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Mike Gibson’s head throbbed as he re-read the October report. Although Gibson’s specialty oil and vinegar bottling team had high productivity, his personal ratings on an upward feedback appraisal were the lowest of any manager. His second chance as a team manager seemed doomed. Reassigned to lead the bottling and packaging line in a food production facility, members of his team were reprimanded after falsifying quality reports. After the disciplinary incident, the team retaliated and gave Gibson an extremely low rating on an upward feedback appraisal. Although a graduate of a corporate management program and currently an MBA student, he seemed unable to apply the lessons of the classroom to his own work. The handwriting was on the wall—Gibson’s career was on the line.

**Gibson’s Career at Athenian and Start-up of the New Packaging Line**

The Athenian Italian Products food manufacturing plant was headquartered in northwestern Pennsylvania. Management turnover at Athenian was quite low given its well-known reputation as a people-focused organization. Voluntary turnover had declined significantly since the recession began. Promotion was from within for the most part; turnover among manufacturing workers was similar to other manufacturing plants.

Now in his early 30s, Gibson had worked for eight years at Athenian in various minor managerial roles. Gibson’s managerial career began with a management trainee program where he spent several 10-month stints in different functional areas. Although Gibson received what he thought were strong performance evaluations, he had never landed a significant line position after the program. He apparently was not on the fast track. He tried to perform well and tried to develop relationships with more senior and influential managers. Due to his innate shyness and passivity, he found networking very stressful and extremely difficult. His peers sometimes told him he was “way off base” in his efforts. With an undergraduate degree in biology from a Canadian university, Gibson became a production team manager on the Gourmet packaging team. Seeking to improve his managerial acumen, in the same year he enrolled in an AACSB-accredited, part-time MBA program near his home.

About the time Gibson enrolled in graduate school, Athenian made the largest acquisition in its history. A newly acquired packaging line added to the workload of the existing two-line, three-shift, 22-person operation. Mid-level manager Russell Cavendish noticed that Gibson had recently enrolled at his alma mater, and offered him the production team management slot for the new packaging line. Cavendish told Gibson that he appeared to have the right management skills to be successful there. The previous manager had been a marginal performer who retired prior to the acquisition. Although he had no experience with large engineering projects or with start-ups, Gibson agreed to take the challenge. Now he led two existing packaging lines as well as starting the new packaging line. Among Gibson’s new subordinates were two male crew leaders in their early 40s, each with more than 20 years of experience; an eight-person crew of seven males and one female, each with an average of 15 years of experience; and a female engineer, Shirley Wainwright, in her early 40s. While Wainwright had 15 years of company experience, she had minimal involvement with projects of the scope of this new line.

The project plan called for a 1-year installation with the goal of reaching a capacity of 400 bottles per minute and an efficiency metric of 60%. Wainwright would manage the installation, mechanical troubleshooting, and improvements. Gibson was to ensure the proper training of the new packaging team. After one year, the line achieved the 400 bottles per minute goal, yet the efficiency rating was only 50%. Gibson believed that the root cause of his team’s efficiency problems rested with the faulty execution of the new line by Wainwright, the project engineer. Upper management felt otherwise—that he lacked control over the situation. Gibson was transferred to another existing team and was replaced by a more experienced Athenian manager.

**Bar Code Scanner Problems at the Bottling Line**

Athenian believed in offering second chances to those who experienced career setbacks. Hence, two years later, Gibson became production team manager for the bottling line of olive oil, red wine vinegar, and balsamic vinegar, with responsibility for meeting business objectives as well as quality targets. Documenting quality checks without actually performing the check had been a serious issue in the department a year earlier. This was a major quality incident at Athenian that was well known and frequently discussed. When that incident occurred, the violations resulted in disciplinary probation for seven quality control technicians not on the bottling team itself. When Gibson arrived as production manager, he made it clear to the bottling crew that they should never sign off on something unless the task was actually completed.

Disaster struck when Gibson discovered that three of his day shift technicians had signed the first article inspection quality audit without verifying that the case barcode scanner head was operational, a violation of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for the audit. As luck would have it, the bar code scanner head was not adjusted properly and was not reading the cases.

Gibson immediately reported the falsification of the quality audit to his boss and the HR manager, as required by the SOP. HR placed the three technicians involved on probation. Although Gibson voiced concern about what he perceived to be the unnecessarily severe disciplinary action, he was told that the precedent had been set earlier and that acting in a consistent fashion in handling violations was critical. Two of the disciplined men were in their 60s and one was in his mid-20s. The oldest had been cited for numerous performance issues, but had never been formally disciplined, while the younger two historically had good performance ratings. The other 15 technicians on his team objected strenuously to the punishment. They felt Gibson’s response to the incident was harsh and felt that Gibson should have kept the issue within the team. They recounted that their previous manager was more lenient in dealing with similar situations. “We really liked Marrocco—he was like one of the gang and cared for us first before tattling to *the man*.” Gibson countered that the previous manager had a reputation for not holding his people appropriately accountable for their actions, and that the former boss had been relieved of his duties because of it. The bottling team members who were not disciplined in this incident told Gibson that they were now “afraid of his leadership style,” and believed they could not make a mistake without being punished. Gibson was hurt and felt that his team should realize from daily interactions that he had their best interests at heart while still doing his best for Athenian. Gibson was perplexed by the reaction of his bottling team to the probation action. He felt in some ways betrayed, but he worked hard to help the team understand and follow the SOP. He now decided to explore in depth why he received such a poor score on the Voice of the Associate (VOA) report, Athenian’s upward feedback measure for production managers.

**A Closer Look - Bottle Team Design and VOA Upward Feedback**

When Gibson took over the bottling team he left in place his predecessor’s team design for assignments, for collective team responsibilities, for customer care, and for major production outputs. At Athenian, team performance was measured at the corporate level, but rewards for those on the production floor were based on individual performance alone unless the manager created a team-based option in the appraisal system. However, the bottling team members worked autonomously and rarely interacted with other teams at Athenian on process improvement initiatives. The only significant change he made was to give the team authority to alter their work strategies as long as they informed Gibson prior to implementation, but the team hadn’t made more than a handful of improvements. Gibson continued to cross-train team members, but rarely called team meetings unless a major problem arose. Busy with meeting deadlines at work and school, Gibson hadn’t found the time to explicitly discuss comprehensive achievement expectations with the team. He made sure everyone knew the weekly team performance goals and efficiency targets, but had not set specific goals for individuals.

Gibson believed that things were going reasonably well on the bottling team, so his first reaction to the VOA feedback was that something had to be wrong with the data. He did not understand how the manager of a high-performing team could have received such a low VOA score. He was determined to find an error with the subjective data. His boss, John Stefano, told him that there was no mistake with the data and that he should determine exactly what the team issues were with his performance. Stefano also mentioned that he noticed Gibson’s tendencies to work *out in left field* and stressed that this style was not conducive for upward mobility at Athenian. Athenian preferred their managers to be more like middle linebackers in football who called plays and had the big picture scheme of things. Gibson wasn’t quite sure what that meant.

Gibson approached the team to determine their perspective on the VOA scores. The team initially feigned ignorance. Gibson stressed that the low scores had to originate from the team, since they were the only ones from whom the data was collected; therefore, some workers must have had problems with his management style. After several attempts, he felt that he made some headway in understanding. The team coalesced around the issues of fear of making mistakes, lack of recognition, and distrust as key reasons why Gibson’s VOA was scored low.

Seven months later, on a bright and crisp sunny day in October as the leaves were just beginning to change, Gibson pondered his future at Athenian. He knew Stefano’s words rang true. Even after eight years with the company, he had not developed levels of power and influence needed. His immediate concern was improving his team’s performance while simultaneously raising his team’s perceptions of him (VOA score). To do that, he had to become more sensitive to the broader environment in a systemic fashion, right down to understanding the metaphors used.

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