

Case Study : Kenny and the Hell's Angels

Kenny was a team leader with the Parks and Gardens section of a large city administration. The city's recently retired CEO was an autocratic and dictatorial person, whose most recent management initiatives (a focus on short term efficiencies and spending cuts, to boost his own managerial reputation and therefore his post-retirement prospects as a business consultant) had resulted in low staff morale at all levels, and consequent productivity downturns throughout the organisation.

Two months ago, the city had appointed Peter Winston as its new CEO. As Winston completed an initial review of city administration activities, he noticed that one work team had escaped the negative effects of the previous CEO's style - the parks and gardens crew supervised by Kenny retained very high morale, and worked efficiently and effectively. Winston promptly arranged a meeting with Kenny:

Winston : I've asked to see you today, Kenny, because I'm curious how you can maintain productivity and morale in your group when the rest of the organisation has major problems in that area.

Kenny : I think it's a matter of communication style really. When the old boss called a supervisor meeting, there would be a lot of shouting and yelling, we'd be told that productivity was poor, our work was below standard, we were taking too long on coffee breaks, and so on. Sure, I go back to the guys and give them a version of that message. But I don't lay down the law about what I want; it's better to open up the issues for discussion and ask the guys what they think the team should do. That way, we usually come to the same conclusions without the yelling and screaming.

Winston : That's what I thought might be happening. That's why I've decided to appoint you as supervisor of another crew who have been having big problems. I know you can sort them out for us.

Kenny was in his early thirties, and had worked for the city administration since leaving school at age 15. He believed that he still enjoyed a good place to work, mainly because he thought that his current crew worked exceptionally well as a team, and had more ability and enthusiasm than any group he had ever worked with. However, he now found that he was being transferred from the highest producing crew to the lowest, a group of people who referred to themselves as the "Hells Angels Crew", and who were well known internally for their constant fighting with management as well as with each other. The previous crew supervisor had resigned because he could not cope with the stresses that these people caused him.

On his first day with the Hells Angels, Kenny took the group to a private part of the workplace cafeteria for a two hour meeting. This was clearly a two way discussion, in which Kenny first of all listened, without interrupting, to a series of gripes and complaints about what was happening in the unit, and the effect these concerns had on the crew's output. In turn, he carefully explained the way he liked to operate and outlined the work issues that were important to him. He stressed the importance of treating people fairly and equally, and noted the level of expectation he had of crew members in return. From this point, a major source of conflict became apparent.

The crew stated that they could not, and would not, perform effectively while their efforts were constantly criticised by top management and as long as their supervisor would not defend them against these criticisms. The crew felt Kenny would have to prove himself to be very different from their previous supervisor before they would perform to Kenny's high expectations. However, Kenny felt that the crew had to prove themselves as capable before they could expect a different management response.

Kenny acknowledged that there was a legitimate difference of opinion between the crew and himself, and suggested that at the outset they should simply agree to disagree – with the proviso that it was in the best interests of everyone that he and the crew members should work together to find a compromise solution. After a further hour of discussion, the following process was agreed.

1. Crew members would initially work to a formal set of operating instructions, prepared in great detail by Kenny. These instructions identified what tasks were to be done, which crew members would perform each task, the methods to be used and the time allowed. This period would last for four weeks, at which time the crew and Kenny would meet again to discuss progress.
2. At the next meeting, crew and Kenny would discuss employer requirements for its production crews, and establish specific crew goals which were acceptable to both crew and Kenny. Crew members would be expected to fully participate in this process. Kenny would then revise his operating instructions to take the group's suggestions into account, and trial the new ways for another four weeks.
3. Kenny would review crew productivity during these first eight weeks and beyond, with more authority and responsibility being given to crew members as efficiency and effectiveness improved. The ultimate goal was to have the crew determine their own operating processes, and to function independently.

Questions

1. How effectively did Kenny use the ten commandments of effective communication in his management of this situation?
2. How effectively did Kenny balance production and people - attention to the task and attention to the people carrying out the task?
3. To what extent will Kenny's approach prove to be successful?