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SWFT

negotiation consultation  
report

PROGRAM ON NEGOTIATION AT HARVARD LAW SCHOOL  
AN INTER-UNIVERSITY CONSORTIUM TO IMPROVE THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

## THE TEAM MEETING

### Confidential Instructions for the Team Advisor (salaried)

You are a member of a newly created work team in your factory. There are five members of the team, one of whom is absent today and one of whom is attending a two-day safety training session. As a result, there are three team members at today's team meeting -- the newly elected team leader, a high seniority manufacturing tech and a low seniority manufacturing tech. In addition, the meeting includes the supervisor (yourself), now referred to as the team advisor, and the union steward.

REVIEW COPY

Recently, you have helped the team to take on more responsibility for daily decisions, such as job assignments, vacation scheduling, overtime balancing, and ordering supplies. There has been more teamwork lately, but there has also been more conflict as team members have begun to be more honest about what is bothering them.

DO NOT REPRODUCE

The weekly team meetings are one hour long and you are twenty minutes into this meeting. The team leader opened the meeting with a review of the agenda, followed by reports on safety, quality, schedule and cost performance. The team learned that safety and quality performance had been good, but that there were some problems with schedule. Apparently, your work area has been identified as a "bottleneck" in the production operation -- things get backed up at some of your machines, which means that other operations further down the line don't get all the parts they need. On cost, you have saved money by reducing scrap costs, but there is too much downtime due to unscheduled machine repairs.

There is just forty minutes left in the meeting. For each of the remaining agenda items (which are listed below) the time is listed, along with the name of the person who put the item on the agenda:

1. Running machines without safety guards (5-7 minutes -- Team Leader)
2. Skills progression/job rotation (5-7 minutes -- Low seniority Manufacturing Technician)
3. Preventative maintenance/work standards (10 minutes -- High seniority Manufacturing Technician)
4. Absenteeism issues (5-7 minutes -- Salaried Team Advisor)
5. Shift-to-shift competition (5-7 minutes -- Union Committee-Person)
6. Summary of decisions and assignments and next meeting agenda (5 minutes)

Each person will take the lead in presenting the item that they put on the agenda. The low

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seniority manufacturing technician is the team recorder and you assume that this person will keep a good record of any decisions reached and any assignments undertaken. You have a few moments now to reflect on each of the agenda items in turn.

**Running machines without safety guards.** You are glad to see the safety issue on the agenda. You have watched some of the new, lower seniority employees run their machines without safety guards or with "modified" guards. You know it is a way to save a half step, but you also know that the guards are there for a purpose. Learning after an accident is too late. You hope the team can handle this, but you will step in as their advisor and insist on safe practices if you have to. One constraint that the team faces is that it will still be held accountable for achieving the production numbers based on established work standards.

**Skills progression/job rotation.** You are not sure what the story here is. In the other teams you have been hearing from the advisors about higher seniority employees who are resisting job rotation. If there are dynamics like that in your team you are determined to nip them in the bud. Again, you will let the team come to a consensus decision and only step in if you have to.

**Preventative maintenance/work standards.** This sounds like an important issue. You are not sure what the exact connection is between the two concepts, however. You know what preventative maintenance is -- regularly scheduled repairs and replacement of parts, combined with keeping machinery clean and in good condition. You also know what work standards are -- the standard time needed to produce a part under normal conditions (if there ever was such a thing). Some earlier informal conversations suggested that new preventative maintenance standards might lead to changes in work standards, but you are not sure about the scope and magnitude of the change. Also, you recently attended training in the "Manage the Change" process, where workers are given advance notice of changes in work operations -- even if the changes are within management's rights under the contract. In this case, new preventative maintenance practices that change the work standards would call for advance notice under the "Manage the Change" process. You expect to learn quite a bit about this when it comes up on the agenda.

**Absenteeism issues.** This is your issue and it is a complicated issue. It would be easy to fall back on old supervisory habits, but you are not sure that is the best option. The immediate problem concerns a team member -- Sam -- who is absent today. Sam does work hard when she is here, but she has been absent four times in the past three months. Counting today, that's five instances in three months, which makes this a possible disciplinary situation. Usually, there is little or not notice about her coming in. This creates a real burden on you and the team leader since you must both ensure coverage on the job. Thus, you feel strongly on the issue. You fear that things might get worse. Before discipline is involved, you hope that the team can regulate itself on this issue. You only asked for 5-7 minutes on the agenda since you don't want this to turn into a lengthy discussion -- you just want people to know that it's getting close to a disciplinary situation and you hope they can help solve the problem.

**Shift-to-shift competition.** The final item was added by the union steward, who has never before put any items on your team's agenda. You are not sure what the committeeperson means





by "shift-to-shift competition," but you suspect that the item is directed at you and the team leader. Certainly both of you have been pushing for higher volumes. The other shift often leaves this team with very little in-process inventory. Sometimes you even do the same to them. It's not right, but that's the way things have always been in this plant.

Your team has had some training in communications and confrontation skills, as well as in effective meeting processes. You will do your best, as always, to use these skills during the meeting. Also, you will make sure that the resolution to any issue involves a clear plan -- with assignments specified, due dates set, and names noted. Also, you want to be sure that the team is clear in outlining what successful completion of the assignment would look like. Of course, all of this has to take place within the incredibly tight time constraints on your agenda. As you get ready to dive in on the last forty minutes of the meeting, use the little preparation time you have to address the following three questions:

- \* When the team gets to your agenda item, how will you present it?
- \* What do you need to do to be ready to address any of the other agenda items?
- \* What would be acceptable or desirable outcomes on each of the agenda items -- from your perspective, from the perspective of the other team members, and from the perspectives of the company and the union?

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