Problem Employee or Problem Boss?

Change, Resistance, Performance and Leadership

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The New Guy

Paolo Rodriquez has just been appointed Director of the Environmental Policy Unit (EPU) in the Policy Branch of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) for the Province of Contentment. This is his first big move into management. He has supervised people before and brings to the EPU a reputation for being high-energy, positive and a team player, at least among his peers.

Paolo also sees this job as a way to break into the policy world. He has spent a lot of time working for other executives as an assistant. He has worked in a Deputy Minister’s office and is known to be politically sensitive.

Paolo is young for this promotion – 32. He has moved quickly. He is relatively unknown to his staff as most of his experience in DNR was in other Branches. He has also worked in other departments.

The EPU is a relatively small unit of 24 employees. Reporting to Paolo are three supervisors, two of them responsible for policy areas and the other for the small administrative support unit. All administrative support is centralized for the Unit. The Unit gets all of its finance and human resources support from the Branch specialists who report to the ADM.

Both of the policy area supervisors, Deidre and Ken, had applied for the Director’s job. Both have longer work experience than Paolo, but with considerably less diversity. They have tended to stay put, specializing in environmental issues.

Man with a Mission

The ADM, Policy – Georgina – has been pretty dissatisfied with the EPU for some time. She has tried to get this sensitive area for the province more attuned with greater public sensitivity to the environment. She has also tried to bring environmental issues, especially community engagement and integrated planning, on the broader natural resources agenda. She has not felt well supported by the existing team. She sees Paolo as someone ‘who gets it’ and who she can guide to become one of her leading managers.

In offering Paolo the job, Georgina made it clear that she expects changes. She felt that the issue was not necessarily one of the people, but of the culture of the Unit. She therefore made it clear that she wanted changes, but that she did not want a ‘bloodbath’ – to use her words. “Wake these people up. Bring in the big picture. Make them more attuned to selling their messages, which I see buried in long, useless briefing material, to the rest of the Branch and the Department.”

In accepting the job, Paolo saw this as a big opportunity to show himself and his potential. He certainly understood the big picture. He knew that he would have a big job convincing the Unit that there had to be changes. He was unsure about what to do first and how. He also knew that he was walking into some pretty murky waters.

But Paolo believed in the power of energy and in personal leadership. He felt that the good staff would be happy for a bit stronger hand.
The Ken and Deidre Show

Upon his arrival, Paolo does a walk around of his little share of the cubicles on the third floor of the DNR building. He then asked to see his three supervisors in his office for a brief chat.

Before he can get going, both Ken and Deidre launch into a fairly bitter attack on how little respect the advice that they produce is given by the ADM, let alone the Department as a whole. “Nobody with in-depth technical ability gets an ear around here, especially on environmental issues. We are always seen as complicating people’s lives. They just want to run parks.”

Paolo sees this as an opening and leaps into it – all the way. “That is exactly why I am here, I guess. I am pretty sure the ADM wants to turn this around too.”

Ken and Deidre looked at each other and then at Paolo for clarification. “I have to take some time to sort this out for myself, but I certainly have direction to improve our performance here. I also have direction to make our voice more respected.”

Reactions to this statement seem to split Ken and Deidre and therein the tale moves on. Deidre said, “Well, it’s about time! When do we start?” Ken said, “Not so fast. What do you mean and where do we fit in?”

Paolo replied: “With me, I hope.”

The Paolo Project

For the next few months, Paolo seemed to be hitting all the right buttons. He started a team building process inside the Unit – a day away, a planning session, and some team-building work. He caught very clearly the message that most of the workers had seen themselves as apart from DNR and not respected.

Without any new resources available to him, he could not hire new staff, so was limited in how much more he could ask people to do.

However, he started to try to move them out of their safety zone and into the broader department. He got staff named to a variety of committees across the department. He started to work on some strategic pieces for the ADM to present to the Senior Management Committee. He worked with other Directors more closely.

Paolo was high energy and expected all of his staff to be as well. Very soon they began to complain that all of these committees and strategic planning was getting in the way of their real work. They continued to produce very thoughtful and detailed documents criticizing departmental policy for its lack of an environmental vision. Briefing notes of 15 to 20 pages continued to be the norm, although Paolo kept asking them to be edited down.

Paolo also clarified the duties of Ken and Deidre. Because of her enthusiasm, Paolo asked Deidre to manage the relationships within the department. She would carry the horizontal work. Ken would focus on policy analysis – his specialty. Paolo made it clear to Ken that effective communications were as important as substantive analysis. Ken commented to his staff, “I suppose he wants to boil these complex ideas into a 10 page PowerPoint presentation!”
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Things Stop Going So Well

The situation in the Unit started to show signs of strain. Some staff started looking for other jobs. Sick leave went up slightly. Fewer staff were available to work long hours in urgent situations.

Then, one day, Deidre stormed into Paolo’s office and said: “I just can’t do this any more. I set this stuff up. I send my folks and we get laughed at. Our material stinks. The messages are there but lost in poor presentation. It’s late too often so we go to these things with nothing to say. We are becoming a joke around here.”

Deidre made it clear that she liked working with Paolo but was fed up with her present role. She was thinking of moving on. There were plenty of positions for a person of her skills. Besides, her recent high profile in the Department had already led to a few offers from other Directors.

Deidre said nothing directly, but she was certainly communicating that she thought Ken was the problem. She felt that she had risen to the challenge that Paolo had put forward, but that Ken had not.

Paolo had not missed this either. He had seen longer timeframes to get work done. Ken had not joined in the broader role, but retreated into the analytical role, consulting even less than before. His work and that of his unit had not changed much. Rather, the long memos continued. The complicated arguments that turned people off and distorted the message continued.

Paolo found himself increasingly editing material. Every re-edit session had become a showdown with Ken. If Ken was not there, his staff would go to him afterwards.

They saw Paolo as an uninformed careerist using them to get his next promotion. He simply did not understand environmental issues. Where did they get that idea?

A few friends around DNR were telling Paolo that his two supervisors were sending such different signals that they wondered who was right. Deidre seemed to be promising better advice and team playing. Ken seemed to continuing the holier than thou version of environmental neglect without offering much in the way of advice. Further, they were having little impact on policy matters.

Ken’s Performance

Paolo had to decide if Ken was up to the job that he had given him. His performance had certainly slipped since Paolo’s arrival. It was being noticed. Questions like “What’s up with Ken?” and “I thought that at least he knew his stuff, even if he kept it to himself.” started being voiced.

Ken himself was not sending many signals of joy at work. He tended to be non-communicative at EPU meetings, seldom suggesting agenda items. He never voiced opposition or support for Paolo’s directions.

Ken was not ambitious, even though he had applied for the Director’s position. He was not well connected within the government, having worked in this one area for over 10 years. He was, however, proud of his expertise in environmental issues. He hoped someday to teach. He saw himself as an intellectual.

Ken never gave a specific cause for concern about his work. Material was
delivered and Ken was on top of the substance of the files. But everything seemed to go into slow motion. Always there was a reason for things not happening, a defense, and an explanation. Seldom did Paolo hear about it being solved.

Increasingly, Ken’s isolation started to show. His staff often was left to work on policy issues on their own. Deidre would sometime informally discuss issues with them when they needed help. Ken would often vigorously re-edit papers and Briefing Notes, often adding considerable length and detail. He also would make handwritten comments on draft that were becoming increasingly hurtful to staff.

Some staff had already talked to the union about some of the comments which they regarded as harassment. Ken was also a union member, being only at the supervisory level. So the union contacted Paolo with the suggestion that he sort this out internally. If he failed to do so he might have a harassment charge on his hands.

Once or twice, the ADM asked, “What’s up with Ken? He had always been an OK guy, a bit thick but OK. Look on the lip on him now. Has he got a problem with you, Paolo?”

In spite of all this, in direct contact, Ken was civil and professional with Paolo. He never confronted him when Paolo put forward a new idea. He simply did not deliver or, more often, the timing and quality were the issue.

Deidre increasingly withdrew from pushing horizontal and departmental involvement. She had been burned once too often. She liked Ken and they had been through a fair bit of time together. She felt sorry for him, could see that he was unhappy but could not figure out what to do about it. She like Paolo too, but was unsure about him. He seemed to want to go in the right direction, but was it for flash or for impact?

**What Does Paolo Do?**

Walking out of a departmental managers meeting one day, Paolo overheard a couple of senior advisor laughing. “Well, if we really want to put a stop to this proposal, let’s bring in EPU. They can still slow things down better than anyone! With Paolo there, you just feel better about it.” He was almost sick. He had failed to change things and was becoming part of the joke.

He knew that he had let things drag on too long. Ken was the problem and he had to confront him. How was he going to do this?

Paolo knew that if he went at Ken directly, he would start into a war of words. Regardless of the side comments and the ADM’s directions, Ken had always received high ratings in his performance appraisals, when he got them. Timeliness was never part of his objectives. Good communication was not either. In fact, Ken had written his objectives for his former supervisors. Paulo had just not had time to get on top of that item.

Paolo was also smart enough to know that long service does count for something. Ken was a problem but not than much of a problem.

Paolo also knew that he had to address the sarcastic remarks that had so upset staff. If he failed to do so, he would be as...
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responsible as Ken for the harassment charge.

Paolo was new at this. In fact, he was a relatively inexperienced manager who had never dealt with a problem employee. He also was reluctant to talk to his boss about this, at least until he had a plan. She was tough and not tolerant of poor managers – for long.

Paolo turned to the Human Resources Advisor for the Branch. He said, “Ken acts like I am some sort of philistine, spoiling his pure policy work. He seems to react through passive resistance.” The HR Advisor, Gloria, asked: “Does he really know what you expect of him?” Paolo felt that his direction had been good. He wasn’t ready to let Ken off the hook on that front. But Gloria pressed on: “You went in there to make some of the changes that Georgina wanted. If Ken can’t measure up, then something has to happen. But, the burden of proof seems to be with you right now. His performance appraisals are good. By the way, one is overdue. His general work record is good. Although, that harassment thing can’t be left to fester. You need to think through a strategy before you do anything.”

Paolo felt as if the ball had been firmly bounced back into his court. He knew she was right. HR people only advise: they cannot do the manager’s job. But what was that job right now?

**Case Study Challenge**

The problem employee is a major challenge to managers. However, where they most often fail in dealing with problem performance is their failure to use the skills that got them into management in the first place: an ability to analyze and quickly judge what the situation is, an ability to understand the views of others, an ability to set directions, an ability to set goals, monitor performance and provide feedback.

1. Applying these ability, analyze the situation at hand. Provide a diagnostic of that situation: what is going on here?
2. Suggest a course of action for Paolo to follow with respect to: himself, his relationship with Ken and his relationship with the rest of his unit.