

CASE 26

Wanted—Good Secretary

Background Information

For over three years, Bernard Malinowski had been the manager of the Customer Service Department at Buford department store. After nearly six years working in various customer service assignments, he still enjoyed the work of responding to the inquiries, requests, and complaints of Buford's various retail customers. He felt it was a way to help the customers and Buford at the same time.

He supervised five service representatives who dealt directly with the customers. At times, the service representatives would also support different marketing programs and initiatives. There was one secretary for the department who provided the administrative and clerical support needed to keep the department running efficiently. Bernard realized all too well how important it was to have a top-performer in that position.

That was why he was so concerned—and surprised—by the recent performance of his new secretary, Betty Lyons. Bernard's expectations had been high when he hired Betty two months ago. He thought she would be the one who might stick around and solve the "revolving door" problem he had experienced with every former occupant of that job. But now, he started to think about replacing Betty.

When she started in Customer Service, Betty seemed to be the ideal worker: She was energetic, cared about doing a good job, worked hard, and got along well with her co-workers. But here she was, making the same old mistakes all her predecessors had made. He ticked off in his own mind the by-now familiar list of problems:

- Letters to customers always looked sloppy and poorly composed. The recent addition of a word processor to the unit had not resulted in any improvements.
- The turnaround time for producing the letters was too long, often seeming to take two or three days from the date of submission.
- Filing and recordkeeping duties piled up and never seemed to be completed on any sort of timely or up-to-date basis.

To make matters worse, recently she had started complaining of being "overworked." Indeed, Bernard overheard her say to one of the service representatives just yesterday: "Have they ever told you what they expect you to do or what the priorities are around here? I'm so busy and pulled in so many directions, I can't do everything. And I don't know what I'm supposed to do first."

Bernard knew she was not performing up to standard, and that he would have to act soon. He thought to himself: "It's funny, but the good ones always seem to have the most problems. When they do their work well, we give them more to do and then, bang, their work falls to pieces. The mediocre ones always stay mediocre—just getting the job barely done." Bernard felt the people should derive satisfaction from completing a job done well—and if not, well, he did give them a pay raise once a year. "That should be reward enough," he thought.

And that was all the reward he gave them.

CASE QUESTIONS

1. Is there a performance problem?
2. Describe the issues.
3. How should Bernard respond?

CASE DISCUSSION: **Wanted—Good Secretary**

Summary

Bernard Malinowski supervised the five service representatives and one secretary in the Customer Service Department at Buford department store. The secretarial position provided important support to all the service representatives. There had been a pronounced turnover of personnel in this position. When Bernard hired Betty Lyons two months ago, he thought things might be different, and was at first, he was actually pleased with her work.

However, he was now concerned about her performance: letters looked sloppy, correspondence took too long to get out, and filing and recordkeeping were behind schedule. Moreover, Betty was complaining about being overworked and not having any direction. Bernard thought that he might need to terminate her if things didn't improve.

Bernard believed that the good employees always seemed to be the most disappointing. They did well, were given more work, and then, their performance failed. He believed that annual merit raises were sufficient rewards for good work, and that was the only kind of reinforcement he gave them.

Answers to Case Questions

1. Is there a performance problem?

Yes. There is a problem with Betty's work output and quality. There is also a problem with the staffing of the secretarial position: High levels of turnover in a position indicate problems in the management of that position.

2. Describe the issues.

There is a quality (and productivity) problem with certain aspects of Betty's job. Presumably, these problems arose after an initially successful period of job performance. There is evidence, then, that she can technically perform the job under certain conditions.

However, it appears those conditions have changed: she has been given an excessive workload without any corresponding sense of priorities or appreciation for the work she has done. It also appears that she has received inadequate training.

Although not described in the case, it is reasonable to suppose that the frequent turnover of personnel in this position may be due to the same underlying causes. And those causes come back to Bernard's inadequate efforts to manage the position and the person in that position.

3. How should Bernard respond?

Bernard has two matters to which to attend. First, he needs to work on the immediate problems of Betty's performance. Second, he needs to

manage the position more effectively in order to remove the underlying reasons for poor performance.

On the first point, Bernard should meet with Betty to identify the exact production problems she is facing. It is likely that he will need to do the following with her:

- Provide additional training
- Identify priorities
- Reinforce good performance
- Give her some temporary support to clear out any backlog of work.

Second, he needs to manage the position. This means looking at the work done in the position and determining whether there are more productive and efficient ways to do it. He should seriously look into ways to reduce the workload or, if that option is not possible, to find ways to do the job more easily. Part of this effort can be done cooperatively and participatively with Betty, and perhaps with the full staff, as part of an "employee involvement" productivity improvement. Modeled along the lines of a quality circle, he could schedule a series of meetings with the staff to look for ways to reduce the nature of the problems.