

Publisher's Note:

Additional solutions can be found at the Asiapac Website which can be accessed at www.asiapacbooks.com/forums.asp. Readers are invited to submit their comments and solutions of certain episodes to the author at the same Website. Their solutions will be added to those already on the site.

Comments on the Episodes

Because many of the cases deal with human behaviour, there are no definitive correct solutions. We have compiled some possible solutions to the cases for your reference. Many of the solutions make use of logic and common sense while others base the answers on management principles. We thank our readers for submitting some excellent solutions.

Episode 1**The Missing \$2,000****Readers' Comments:**

When Mrs Koh asked Soliano to bring his mother to the office for a private conversation, she is treating him like a naughty boy at school although he is an adult. She could have spoken to Soliano in the presence of Mr Koh. It is unsafe for a despatch person to withdraw large sums of money from the bank without an escort. Soliano could be robbed.

It is unfair of Mrs Koh to deduct \$500 from Soliano's salary to punish him for the loss. She has to give him the benefit of the doubt. If Soliano did not agree to that, he would be fired. It gives him no choice. The fact that he betted heavily does not mean that he is dishonest. Giving him a written warning to the effect that should there be any loss of that kind in future, he would face instant dismissal is sufficient.

Episode 2**The Abrupt Termination****Readers' Comments:**

The human resource manager chose the easier way of informing Ah Huat through e-mail as he did not want the hassle of breaking the news to Ah Huat, and then having to explain things to him. To the unfeeling manager, e-mailing the news may be the most convenient thing to do. However, it does not make sense to handle this important matter via an impersonal medium. The HR manager should call Ah Huat to his office personally and explain to him the reason for the retrenchment. It makes a difference hearing the news

from a manager. It shows that the company recognised and treasured Ah Huat's efforts over the years.

Besides, one of the responsibilities of the HR manager is to take charge of dismissals. So, it is the duty of the manager to handle the retrenchment responsibly.

This incident will have adverse effects to the company. If the retrenchment could happen to Ah Huat then it could happen to anyone in the company.

The employees will thus have little sense of security, fearing that they may be the next to go.

Episode 3

The Reluctant Coach

Readers' Comments:

Comment 1:

The management may be doing the right thing by transferring Joshua to marketing. As Joshua has been doing his present job for the past eight years, it may be a good opportunity for him to move on to a new role. With his technical knowledge, as the management sees it, Joshua will do well in marketing. Sonny's approach towards the matter was wrong. Nobody likes surprises, in this case Joshua was not informed earlier of his transfer.

For succession planning and career development, the parties involved need to be informed beforehand. Management needs to discuss with Joshua what his career development plans are and what training will be provided to him so that he will be ready to handle his new role in marketing.

The rejection from Joshua was probably because he was not prepared and was not sure of his new role. As he was not exposed to marketing, he will not know what is expected from him. If Sonny, the human resource manager, were to explain to Joshua his new role, responsibilities, challenges, and new salary package, Joshua may be more comfortable and may even like his new role in marketing.

Comment 2:

It is right that the management believed that Joshua with his product knowledge will be equally competent in the marketing post. If the current marketing teams are not performing up to the company's expectation, employing new marketing personnel is not going to solve the problem. However, the decision to remove Joshua from producing user manuals is still a win-lose situation, if the two new-comers employed to take over Joshua's job scope are unable to produce better results. Even if Joshua had taken up the marketing post and managed to be very successful, if the quality of the user manuals has dropped as perceived by customers, inevitably the brand image will fall despite the success of the marketing strategies. This could be the fatal blow to the company's survival.

Joshua could have stayed in his field of expertise, the management could have sent the marketing teams for training under Joshua. At the same time,

he could also be training the two recruits. He will perceive that he is considered a key staff by management. Psychologically he will be more motivated as he could find himself fulfilling his need for self-actualisation. It will also help to give Joshua time to pick up some experience in the marketing field, and he will be able to receive rapport from both the marketing teams and the recruits. This will reduce the problem of communication breakdown and foster a better relationship between the two departments in future.

Comment 3:

Joshua's transfer to marketing was badly executed by the human resource manager. It was not planned and rehearsed. Obviously, Joshua took his role seriously and was not seeking to work in a new field. The manager should have recognised this and taken a different route. If one anticipates a reluctance to change, a lunch-time approach is not the appropriate venue. A longer counselling session should have been planned.

Cost cutting measures are inevitable especially when the decision has been taken by management.

Joshua could have been made the supervisor of the two new employees, at least for a year. He could wear two hats to give him room to ease into the new marketing job and at the same time, supervise the recruits. After many years in a job, employees are insecure about moving to uncharted waters.

Comment 4:

The firm could have discussed their career plan for Joshua with him first and get his buy-in, instead of making the decision unilaterally. Joshua is a competent staff and has been doing a good job. The two recruits may or may not be able to do as good a job as Joshua. But by the company's action, even in the best case scenario, they had merely replaced Joshua with the two staff to do his original job. They still had not solved the problem at marketing. Where a company is serious about staff career development, they should never forget that each staff member is a very important component in the company. A staff career development programme will not succeed if plans are drawn up by the company unilaterally and forced upon the staff concerned.

Comment 5:

Joshua was obviously hurt. The HR manager should have done better by giving more details of the functions at the new department. For example, by stressing how poorly the standards of documentation were in marketing and how Joshua's experience in documentation will help the company raise the standards of sales processing, and customer retention in the new department. The manager should also tone down the cost saving in Joshua's old job. He could have said the two recruits weren't up to standard and did not know the company's culture, and needed Joshua's guidance. It is a matter of handling

Joshua's pride in his job and presenting the new job as a new challenge to him.

Episode 4

The Non-whistle Blower

Readers' Comments:

Comment 1:

Being a boss you should not only talk to your subordinate during the year-end appraisal and then pour out all your negative feedback. Periodic informal and formal meetings should be held to ascertain the subordinate's performance.

If the supervisor finds that a subordinate is not honest in his work, he should talk to the person immediately and tell him to stop instead of waiting for the end of the year and then transfer him from the department. In this case, it is not fair to the "accepting department". The supervisor may not have told the real reason for the transfer.

Billy doesn't deserve to be punished for not squealing on a colleague. As such, Bala is wrong to penalise him for Justin's misdeed and dishonesty. Billy is not obliged to tell Bala about Justin's work. If Billy did that, Bala will perceive that Billy has an axe to grind with Justin.

Comment 2:

Being a no-nonsense manager, Bala should act immediately if he had proof of Justin's misdeeds. He should talk to his boss or the HR department, and not wait till the end of the year. If Bala has proof of Justin's wrongdoings, he should talk to management and the HR manager and take appropriate action.

Comment 3:

Justin is an inconsiderate and a selfish person with no integrity and right values to be an effective employee. The company should not keep such an employee.

Billy is not an effective mentor in not guiding Justin with the right values. Billy did well by uncovering the reason for Justin's need for money. Billy seems more concerned about being popular than being right. By being a "life-saver" and not wanting to see Justin lose his job, Billy is doing more harm than good. Justin will not learn for himself what is integrity and the right values in life.

Bala should not be discussing a third party's misdeeds during the performance appraisal with Billy. By expecting Billy to report his colleague's misdeeds, Bala is encouraging inappropriate corporate culture of gossiping and tale-carrying. If Bala deemed Billy as not a "loyal team-player", he should not have kept such "non-performance" to the end of the year. He should conduct regular performance feedback on his employees' performance.

Bala is an inconsiderate and cowardly manager who transfers his problem to another department. Billy should not accept Bala's "death sentence" as it is. He should appeal to the HR manager or Bala's supervisor against the unfair punishment. This shows that the company does not have an effective HR manager and a good HR system in place. Billy is neither a proactive nor effective employee. He accepts life as it is. No wonder he can't be a credible mentor to Justin.

Bala shouldn't discuss another colleague's misdeeds with the appraisee. By encouraging employees to report on each other's misdeeds, Bala is not an effective manager. A good manager should build trust and teamwork in his department.

As a responsible manager, Bala ought to terminate Justin's service instead of transferring the problem to another department. A company needs to retain employees with integrity, unlike Justin; employees who can mentor effectively, unlike Billy; and effective managers, unlike Bala, in order to progress and prosper.

Comment 4:

Billy should not be punished for somebody's misdeeds unless it has been explicitly spelt out in the staff manual and made known that any failure to inform the company of colleagues' misdeeds is malfeasance.

If the organisation wants to encourage the reporting of misdeeds, it may want to consider rewarding such staff instead of meting out punishment. Even though it is more positive, such a practice will still sow the seeds of discord among staff which will affect productivity and morale.

The loan is in Billy's personal capacity as a friend. It's unfair of Bala to withhold Billy's increment if his overall work performance is good.

Bala as a manager in the government sector, had made three major mistakes in handling this case:

He did not thoroughly investigate the case.

He punished Billy for Justin's misdeed.

His punishment on Billy wasn't justifiable based on the performance appraisal system.

Billy's punishment should be lighter. Bala could either inform his superior to form an independent team to investigate into Billy and Justin's cases. Then proper punishment will be carried out according to the recommendation of the team. Or he could have treated Justin's misdeed as a possible criminal act and reported the case to the police.

Bala should have questioned Billy about Justin's misdeeds earlier when he heard about it and not wait till appraisal time. Bala should gather what Billy knew and take appropriate actions against Justin. The punishment was unduly harsh on Billy and light on Justin.

Comment 5:

By blowing the whistle, would Billy be rewarded in any way apart from maybe being recognised as a team player or loyal worker? As such, there is no advantage for him to squeal.

Bala seems to have acted harshly towards Billy. Many of us may not want to be in the position to blow the whistle on our colleagues simply because it is against our principles. Instead, it should be the duty of the management to be more vigilant. Bala seems to have taken the easy way out by punishing Billy for Justin's wrong doings. Instead of taking immediate action against Justin he chose to wait till the end-of-year appraisal to drop his bombshell. This is highly unprofessional and unethical.

Bala could have counselled Billy and advised him that he should not have been involved with Justin's financial problems. By helping Justin financially Billy had unknowingly become an accomplice to a crime as civil servants are not allowed to borrow from money lenders.

On the other hand, Bala's implication that Billy is not a loyal worker does not hold water as loyal workers should be gauged by their work performance, initiative, interpersonal relationships, and related skills rather than by their whistle blowing tactics.

It seems that Billy had been wrongly accorded total blame for Justin's behaviour. Bala should take responsibility for what had happened. However, by covering for Justin, Billy should also take part of the blame. If Bala knows that Justin's character is suspect, he should have tried to prevent all that from happening by transferring Justin to another department before something like this takes place.

Comment 6:

From a business point of view, Billy deserved to have his increments withheld. An employee should always act in the interest of the employer, and withholding information that is detrimental to the employer is acting against the employer's interest. When Justin asked Billy for the loan, he should have warned Justin that misappropriation of company's fund is a criminal act, and that moon-lighting and buying medical certificates will land him in trouble with the company.

If Justin does not heed his advice, he should then report to his superior, Bala, about Justin's misdeeds. As for Bala, since he knew about Justin's misdeeds without Billy's telling.

If Bala had handled the situation as soon as he came to know about Justin's misdeeds, Billy may have been spared the punishment.

Comment 7:

Bala had acted unfairly towards Billy. As far as work quality and performance is concerned, Billy met the company's expectations and had consistently proved to be a diligent contributor to the organisation. The only setback was his loyalty to his colleague, Justin, when he promised to refrain from squealing on him.

Justin was the bad hat in the organisation and as such deserved to be penalised according to the company policies and code of conduct. He will probably need professional social counselling to improve his personal and worklife and rid himself of the bad social habits. As for Billy, being a reserved and quiet employee who minds his own business does not warrant his increment being forfeited consecutively for three years. Bala should encourage him to be more communicative in the future if he notices such issues so that management can tackle them early. He should explain to Billy the benefits associated with that action to attain support and understanding.

Comment 8:

Bala's approach towards Billy was unjustified. Using the appraisal to reprimand him is unfair, as appraisals are used to appraise work attitude, ethics, and overall behaviour. Bala informed Billy that he knew about Justin's moonlighting, indebtedness, and faking medical certificates; yet no action was taken at that point. Instead, Billy was reprimanded and his increment halted. Justin, instead of being fired for pilfering and moonlighting was transferred. Pilfering any money from a company is tantamount to cheating, stealing, and criminal breach of trust. Bala did not act appropriately. A warning to Billy, who explained his position regarding whistle blowing, would have sufficed. Instead, Billy received an unfair punishment.

Comment 9:

The difference between Billy and Justin is clear. Billy, I assume, was a model employee, whereas Justin was the opposite. Bala, being a no-nonsense manager, should not have tolerated Justin's deeds in the first place. This whole affair could have been avoided if Bala had taken action earlier. The case is interesting and very common where people from different cultures, regions, and language backgrounds work together. It is clear that Justin misappropriated public funds, made false reports, and gambled while being employed in the civil service. This is clearly unacceptable in any workplace. On the other hand, Billy was punctual, probably efficient, and naïve. He was not an accomplice to Justin's crimes. He probably felt justified in not revealing Justin's misdeeds as he is by nature not a whistle blower and had promised Justin that he would not reveal his misdeeds. Billy does not deserve that kind of punishment. In all fairness, besides Billy and Bala, there must have been others working in the department who had some inkling of Justin's misdeeds. Moreover, Billy did not know that not informing on Justin constituted a crime. Bala's position in the department gives him the authority to punish the guilty. If he singled out Billy and not anyone else for not blowing the whistle on Justin, Bala is not fair. The management should immediately initiate the following measures: Formulate a code of ethics and conduct for staff.

Communicate this code to all employees and ensure that all staff understand the code and the implications for violating it.

Document the policies for noncompliance of the code.

Whistle blowing has a negative connotation: it is bad and disloyal to rat on your colleagues, friends, and comrades. We learn this from our very first days in school. That's why the triads and the Cosa Nostra promised death in return for stool pigeons.

Episode 5

The High Flyer

Readers' Comments:

Comment 1:

There is nothing inappropriate for Tessa to expect Hannah to be accountable for the mistakes committed by her staff. After all, Hannah undertakes a managerial role and she has to ensure that her staff carries out their duties with due diligence. However, the situation can result in a more positive outcome if Tessa handled this matter sensitively.

Hannah was promoted twice within two years. Her fast promotion has resulted in her not being ready to take on the managerial role. If Hannah had relevant training on staff management skills as well as proper counselling being extended to her, the situation may turn out positively.

Tessa, being new to the department, may be under pressure to ensure that it runs smoothly. However, by transferring Hannah to another division with no direct reports may make her feel that she is being demoted, even though there is no change in salary. This, not only resulted in an unhappy staff, it may send a wrong signal to the remaining staff that Tessa does not tolerate mistakes, thus the "demotion" of Hannah. As such, by transferring Hannah to another division will not solve the problem of her lack of supervisory skills. Furthermore, Tessa is leaving no room for Hannah to improve. This does not reflect well on Tessa's managerial skills either.

Hannah's enthusiastic attitude shows that she has the potential to be trained. Her shortfall in staff management skills can be overcome with training and counselling. If the organisation believes in staff development, Hannah should be given progressive counselling before the decision is being made to strip her of the managerial role. This decision may come across as too harsh before any corrective action is taken.

Comment 2:

A high flyer under one boss cannot remain so impressive under a new boss because each boss has a different management style and different expectations. Tessa prefers to work directly with all levels under her charge while Hannah's former boss dealt with Hannah only.

Hannah could learn to manage Tessa's expectations and improve on her managerial skills in order to work effectively with the latter.

Hannah should have tried to adjust herself to suit the different working style of a different boss. But most importantly, she should have worked closely with her staff and reward them accordingly. Only then will you get a motivated team and together the group will achieve more.

Good communication is required on everyone's part to understand each other better and work with better synergy. Tessa's decision wasn't harsh. It's a very normal reaction. This is so common in the daily workplace.

Comment 3:

Hannah proved that she was a good worker and she received recognition and was promoted. As a manager, she used her staff's creative ideas as her own to impress the top management. Clearly, she had managed to get into the good books and had complete trust from her male boss.

Because of such trust, her boss didn't see the need to check on her staff, whenever things went wrong as he had "taken for granted" that Hannah was a fair and just manager.

Moreover, Hannah's boss didn't have the habit of keeping in touch with the staff at all levels. On top of that, Hannah's management capabilities might go unchallenged as her staff may not dare to report the actual events, as they fear that Hannah's credibility outweighs their complaints.

Hannah's success can be linked to her use of charm and the sheer luck that she was at the right place, at the right time, with the right boss, therefore she could get away with mistakes all the time.

When Hannah was under Tessa, who was a female who believes in staff communication at all levels, this was the turning point. Hannah's charm and goodwill built previously with the male boss couldn't work with the new superior.

Tessa, being a "no-nonsense" boss, believed that as a manager, Hannah should be held responsible for mistakes though it could be her subordinates who made the mistakes. After knowing that Hannah's staffs weren't motivated and had low morale, she was unsure of Hannah's capabilities. Tessa's decision to transfer Hannah to another division may solve the current problems faced by Hannah's department. To achieve a win-win solution, Tessa should give her another chance by sending her for management training.

Tessa should consider that Hannah previous wrong doings were due to the incompetence of her previous male boss for not training her in the first place. Hannah deserved a second chance rather than being condemned.

Comment 4:

It is wrong to assume that high flyer under one boss couldn't be impressive under a new boss. In the case of Hannah, she was a high flyer because she was a good worker but lacks management capability to be an excellent leader.

This is a very interesting case but can be a fairly common occurrence. It can happen in organisations where

Opportunistic career development in relation to structured systematic career developmental plan for staff; and
Human resource culture: Fault finding in relation to development and process improvement culture.

Comment 5:

Hannah is a very valuable staff. It is important to keep staff that are customer centric and have good disposition in handling customers. The promotion and recognition of Hannah is appropriate. However, it is always very critical to support the "transition" from staff to line manager. Training, development, mentoring, and coaching a new manager is important. Hannah's attitude and working relationship must evolve from a staff to a manager. As a staff, you perform the work but as a manager, your work is done through others. Thus skills like motivating subordinates and team building are critical besides the typical managerial functions. Hannah's new boss is also a very interesting character. At that level, you are dealing with departmental heads. Coaching, mentoring, targets setting, and leadership are very important. Tessa has handled the case in a harsh and confrontational manner.

As a boss, if the department manager is responsible, so is the boss or the more senior manager. It is important to emphasise quality and it is important to highlight the seriousness of mistakes; however it is equally important that the action does not demotivate the individual or the department. A good leader must be able to give direction, share and highlight problems and provide the stimulus the team needs to continue despite adversity. Tessa has failed in this regard; she has merely done what Hannah has done, put the blame on someone else. If Hannah is really that bad, she should not have been promoted nor should be transferred out at the same salary. She should be sacked.

There should be more tact in handling "mistakes and errors". Mistakes and errors are not done on purpose but usually result from miscommunication and barriers especially between departments. Thus, it is really the "fault" of the boss, Tessa should ensure clear communications and no barriers to process flow between departments. The article seems to send a message that the HR culture is one of "fault finding". There must be a top-down strategic approach to look at "lapses, mistakes, mis-encounters, customer feed-back" as opportunities for process improvement rather than as a "fault finding and laying blame at individuals". Even if during the review, it is apparent that an individual is the centre of the issue, there are many causes still: it could be a training issue, it could be a pre-conditioning, it could be a lack of understanding or differences of expectation and many others where it is not necessary the "person at fault". By solving these issues, it is possible that the individual might not have made the mistake. In this example, there are at least two areas for analysis. One why the two departments gave the wrong figures, two why a wrong formula was used? There are endless possibilities; ultimately the individuals involved are actually not "guilty".

Comment 6:

Hannah, in her role as the supervisor, was not leading the team effectively. Her action in "stealing" ideas from her staff, selling them to the top management as hers and taking all the credit had stifled creative ideas that could improve her team performance. She also exhibited the behaviour of shifting responsibility to her staff for mistakes made. She showed herself as a self-centered person and wasn't a good leader despite her friendliness. Tessa's decision to transfer Hannah was not harsh assuming that all other interventions, like coaching and training had been undertaken with no success in changing Hannah's behaviour or attitude. In fact, Tessa could be doing Hannah a favour by casting her in a role where she could excel and contribute.

This was a case of the difference in management style of the two bosses and a miscast of roles. Hannah's accomplishments and outstanding performance as a customer service officer had won her previous boss's trust and confidence. She was completely empowered to manage the team her own way. She created a structure that isolated her team's direct access to her immediate boss and allowed her to create an image of a capable manager. As such her boss adopted a hands-off management style and was not aware that she under performed in her role as a supervisor. Whereas her new boss, Tessa, a people-oriented manager, who practised open communication with all levels, was able to discern the unhappiness of Hannah's team, and her hands-on approach enabled her to recognise that Hannah was miscast in a role that she could not excel in.

Tessa's decision is not too harsh on Hannah, for the following reasons: In the incidence of the loss of \$5,000, Hannah told Tessa that Mei Leng was very careless, implying that it was Mei Ling's fault. Tessa subsequently found out from Mei Leng that two departments had provided the wrong figures and that the wrong formula in the spreadsheet was actually provided by Hannah. Hannah has behaved inappropriately by lying and trying to cover up a mistake in which she has a part in. This behaviour is a serious form of misconduct, given that it comes from a manager.

Hannah's staff had little motivation in their work and morale was low. This means the productivity of the department would be affected as well. As mentioned, Tessa "believed in keeping touch with the staff at all levels". Based on this, it can be deduced that Tessa must have talked to Hannah's staff to understand why they had little motivation to work and why their morale was low. The truth must have surfaced. Thus, Tessa's decision is not harsh. She is merely removing the supervisory responsibilities of Hannah. Tessa appears to think Hannah is still a useful contributor to the company. Hence the transfer to another division with no one reporting to her.

Comment 7:

There are two types of "high flyers". If the high flyer is an individual with "substance", that is, has the necessary functional and leadership competencies, sense of responsibility and integrity among others, the

person's behaviour will be more consistent. This person will stand by his/her principles and will not change his/her behaviour easily to suit the occasion of others. This high flyer will quit the job instead of yielding to the supervisor if it is against his/her principles.

However, if the high flyer is one individual without substance, that is, possesses shallow knowledge, lacks depth, likes to "sit on the fence", follows the "changing direction of the winds", curries favour, this person will lose credibility when unable to deliver expected results.

To sum up, in the corporate world, a lot depends on what kind of boss you have. And unfortunately, the boss has this vested power to decide on the fate of others, whether this privilege is abused is another subject altogether.

As a department head, Hannah has a "command responsibility" over her staff, that is, she is also responsible for the mistakes made by her staff. Tessa is right in holding her managers responsible for mistakes committed by Hannah's staff, while she herself will be responsible to her higher-ups for this mistake as well.

Cases like these remind me of the real world especially in large MNCs where typically someone who is good at what he is doing will naturally be promoted to a management position, as most senior management of organisations have this simplistic view that the person would be able to impart good experience, guidance and leadership to the team members so the team will be successful as well.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case. It takes more than just being good at your current job to be a manager, to manage and lead people, lead a team, and to achieve team success. Individual success comes easy to those who are competent in their current jobs. As a manager, you have different focus and priorities, added responsibilities, wider job scope, larger territory, and you will have to depend on your team to deliver to achieve the team's objectives. The higher you climb, the less will be your ability to do everything yourself. In addition to manage down the line, you also have to manage your bosses. A boss like Tessa does not come along very often. The CEO of a company will issue instructions and objectives to direct reports and holds them responsible for the results. These direct reports will issue instructions and objectives to those under them, and hold them responsible for results. This process will continue down the line. In this regard, the boss will normally leave how things are run to these direct reports and as long as the required results are achieved, they tend to turn a blind eye to such weaknesses as the end always justifies the means.

There is no point changing a winning game, especially in MNCs where most assignments last only a couple of years, so it is important to produce immediate results in your current position in order to secure a more important assignment in the near future. In view of this, taking credit for suggestions or jobs done well by your staff is very common as well. Bosses, especially those much higher up do not normally take the time to interact and understand those staff further down the line, and in Hannah's case, when her

boss is of such character, she even instructed her staff not to interact directly to her managers.

It is only when objectives are not met that the boss will start looking at what went wrong in a particular team. Good bosses will get to the root of the problems in the team, however, chances are the team will get a new manager assigned to "clean up the act" in that team and the same vicious circle starts all over again.

In summary, this case illustrated two management issues:

The importance of training and development or milestone training for staff, manager, middle managers, and leaders, and

The importance of having a more productive HR culture that looks at mistakes as opportunities for process improvement.

Episode 6

The Arrogant Manager

Readers' Comments:

Comment 1: Change Can Spring Surprises

Change is a global phenomenon and for companies to survive, they must change. Commonly, such changes may involve major restructuring, and reductions in employment.

An organisation can change by altering its structure and personnel. From the case, we saw that there was a sudden change in management. Changing the people involves changing the skills, relationships, expectations, and perceptions of the staff. Such changes may lead to more effective job performance. The case reflected a change that was totally unplanned. The planning could have taken place at the headquarters.

Whether Raymont's action was personal or not is open to interpretation and is very subjective. On the surface, it might seem like a 'tit-for-tat' act.

However, if we see it as a planned strategic change of people, then Raymont had acted in the interests of the organisation at large.

One basic assumption is that the effectiveness of organisations depends on the behaviour of people working in them. From the case, we observe that Alicia had not shown the professional conduct expected of her as a top-level secretary. Firstly, she was a rumourmonger. Secondly, her extent of offering co-operation was based upon her liking for the person rather than upon meeting of urgent dictates of organisational objectives. Thirdly, she had fostered a culture of a 'precedent to patronise her' before things get done. She got away with such behaviour by leveraging on coercive power by virtue of her position.

If we refer to Lewin's three-phase Theory of Change, Raymont's action merely introduced the 'unfreezing' phase, which was the process of recognising that the current state of affairs needed improvement. The realisation that change was needed was the result of his growing awareness

that current conditions, especially Alicia's high-handed behaviour, was unacceptable. Given his new position, he was empowered to make a change for the better.

Three planned change strategies commonly used are forced coercion, rational persuasion, and shared power. The related sequence of events illustrated the details of the change strategies. Raymont had used a combination of forced coercion and rational persuasion. He first tried to 'command' change through the formal authority of legitimacy, forcing and acting unilaterally. This was shown in the usage of such terms like "I want you out" and "This company has no place for ..." towards Alicia. However, when Alicia threatened legal means to redress her dismissal, Raymont relented and resorted to the rational persuasion strategy. He attempted to bring about change through persuasion based on empirical facts, special knowledge, and rational argument. Here, he tried to use informational efforts referring to credible knowledge (terms like trespassing) and demonstrated facts to win the argument.

Raymont had shown he was skillful at handling human resource matters. He granted Alicia a personal exit interview, together with the human resource manager, to clarify the decision made. In no-nonsense terms, he firmly put an end to Alicia's future spread of her personal 'culture' in the revamped organisation under his charge. Raymont had handled this matter in a non-arrogant and professional way. He could have, as commonly practised locally, just sent an impersonal e-mail. Alternatively, he could have, without any qualms, just delegated the task to Mr Teo.

Raymont could offer Alicia to work under Kim Mei or in another department. One may even suggest counselling and re-training for Alicia. However, to alter one's behavioural patterns calls for planned psychological strategies in the context of organisational development and would be a major intervention. But as Raymont was determined to get rid of 'rotten apples', this 'humane' solution may work to the detriment of the organisation's future effectiveness. In this vein, Raymont would do well to train Kim Mei in better interactive and social skills, to elicit cooperation, rather than just demanding action.

Alicia may consider suing for 'wrongful' dismissal. But these days, it would be difficult to interpret or prove what is wrong. One could also argue that the good past appraisals might not be worthy as these could be based upon favouritism. From her performance and behaviour, we can conclude it will not merit a pass on a 360-degree appraisal test.

In the contemporary business scenario, many organisations must struggle to stay competitive and have initiated changes called 'rightsizing'. This simply means that 'to retrench' or be 'made redundant' is common practice.

Raymont's defence could be that after a certain amount of organisational structural changes, the number of employees needed to be adjusted to work effectively in the new setup. Hence, such unplanned changes were forced upon the company without notice. This was a result of the headquarters' decision based upon reactions to global, economic competitive pressures.

The business environment these days is constantly changing and chaotic. In the turbulence experienced by today's organisations, managing change has to be a continuous process and managers must be adept in managing uncertainty.

This case was also valuable in that it highlighted a phenomenon frequently experienced but not brought into the open. It is common knowledge that many executive secretaries openly abuse their positions that 'patronising' them has become a culture. This raises the issue of professional ethical behaviour versus the tendency to succumb to the corruption of power. Most weaker management simply allows such secretaries to follow Naïve Relativism with consequent impediment to the organisation's ultimate effectiveness.

Comment 2: Personal Attack

Unfortunately, this is situation that exists everywhere. Such "firing" is always personal. A good manager would try to find a place for Alicia, especially if her performance has been good and consistent.

It will be difficult for Alicia to sue for wrongful dismissal. The company was just exercising its contractual obligation by giving her one month's pay in lieu of notice.

However, in this case, Mr Teo, the HR manager, has informed Alicia that her post has become "redundant". He means that Alicia is entitled to retrenchment benefit, including the one month in lieu of notice pay out.

Comment 3: CEO's Prerogative?

In some organisations where HR provides the supporting role rather than that of a business partner, it is usually the top man who decides on the HR policies and practices. In this case, Raymont has decided that Alicia should leave.

In reality, Raymont was being personal when he fired her as a form of punishment. This was apparent in the remarks that he snapped at Alicia. However, on record, he has duly complied with the employment terms if it provides for the organisation to terminate the service of the staff without any reason by giving one month's salary in lieu of notice.

Raymont, being a regional sales manager before, was guided by different goals and expectations. Due to his portfolio then, his bottom line revolved around generating revenue for the firm. This is evident in the good annual sales figures. Having assumed the role of general manager, he should expand his scope to include running the organisation as a whole and this covers managing human issues.

Whatever conflict Alicia had with Raymont before, as the GM, he should look at the situation objectively and perhaps consider the option of transferring Alicia to another department to enable her to utilise her skills. Alicia has been receiving good appraisals for her performance for the past four years. Unless a job fit can be identified, as a last resort, termination of service due to redundancy applies. If Raymont has considered these, not only

is he able to gain the respect of Alicia, it also reflects that he advocates a people-oriented culture and positive work environment where staff do not bear grudges. The approach he chose in dealing with Alicia will have an impact on how others in the organisation look upon him as a leader. But Raymont wanted Alicia out. Filing a legal suit against Raymont and the company for wrongful dismissal will not be in Alicia's favour. Firstly, the firm did not contravene the employment terms and has compensated her. Secondly, Mr Teo, the HR manager has informed Alicia that her role as an executive secretary has become redundant. This is common where movements involving senior management take place within the organisation. The employability of their respective secretaries may in one way or other be affected by these movements. Thirdly, Alicia's good performance appraisals during the past four years have little bearing in cases of redundancy. Before Alicia embarks on the legal suit, she has to consider what she wants to achieve. Rather than to expend her resources and incur undue stress in going through the legal suit, and facing an uncertain outcome, the best option is for her to move on to another career. The lesson is to maintain cordial working relationships with the new colleagues.

Comment 4: Poor Corporate Image

From a management perspective, Twinkle Corp has a corporate culture of being profit orientated and a weak culture of teamwork and human relationship management

Raymont's decision to replace Alicia with Kim Mei can be justified because of Alicia's delay of approvals and requests submitted to the general manager. Alicia buys the story of the rumours that Raymont and Kim Mei were having an affair. Kim Mei was Raymont's secretary when he was the regional sales manager. This showed that Alicia was unprofessional in her work attitude. Therefore, it is justified for Raymont not to have Alicia as his new personal secretary as the trust level between them was apparently deteriorating. Raymont understands that Alicia is not protected by the Employment Act. He fired her instead of transferring her to another department. This shows that Raymont wants to demonstrate his power as a warning to his new subordinates who might defy his orders or get into his bad books.

Mr Teo, being a human resource manager, has failed to uphold the integrity of his job responsibility which is to be a fair and just "judge" in this case. As he possesses the authority to protect corporate employers and their interests, he should have stopped the wrongful act of Raymont. Instead of doing so, he decided to hide behind the couch to protect his own job.

Such a reckless decision undertaken by Raymont and Mr Teo will affect the corporate image and employees' morale in the long run. No rational employees will stay loyal or trust the human resource management of a company which does not consider employees' job security.

By taking a legal action, Alicia might get back her job but this would not be a win-win situation as she might most likely be faced with more difficulties

as Raymont may attempt make her stay in the company more miserable. Eventually, Alicia will still leave the company.

This win-win solution for Alicia will be to report her grievances directly to the president of the Asia Pacific region as the vice president will most likely side with Raymont. As a result, the best thing for Alicia to do is to find a new job that has better corporate culture.

Comment 5: Seek Consensus

Raymont's decision was outright brutal and personal. No staff would stomach this without a fight. I'm appalled that the HR manager condoned Raymont's actions. What kind of company image will this project to the staff and public?

The damage is irreversible. Unfortunately, precedence was set with the termination of the previous general manager, hence, such irresponsible acts are condoned by the management.

The management could have better handled this matter by:

- Refuting Raymont's request to replace Alicia with Kim Mei. Raymont should appreciate this opportunity to establish a professional and cordial working relationship with Alicia. Managers of today's fast changing environment are required to be flexible and sensitive to market changes, and need to work with different people.
- Seeking Alicia's opinion on an internal transfer to the department of her choice. She might welcome a change environment and new challenges. This might help retain a good staff.
- Ensuring that an internal transfer be effected only when a consensus is reached by parties concerned. These steps might help create a positive and conducive working environment for all staff.

Alicia should not sue the company till all avenues are exhausted to resolve this matter on a more amicable note. A win-win situation can be reached through better communication.

Comment 6: Management Influence over HR Policies

It is clear from Raymont's action that it is personal. He made no bones of his intention to get Alicia out of his sight at the earliest opportunity. His statements to Alicia that he wants her out of the office "by 5 pm today" and that the company "has no place" for someone like her demonstrates the pent up wrath in him. Clearly this is not going to reflect well on him as the new GM and for the company. He is known to be impatient which had led to Kim Mei offending her colleagues in interoffice dealings in the five years she worked for him. This latest incident will send chills in the air for the other employees. Staff will be wondering who will be Raymont's next target. To make matters worse, Mr Teo, the HR manager, will be implicated and perceived as ineffective, playing and singing to the tune of management.

From a HR standpoint, there is not much Teo could do differently. He may have given the best advice available but then he is also dealing with an assertive character with a grudge and who is his new immediate supervisor. It is unlikely the VP for Asia Pacific will intervene in isolated personnel issues at each branch. In the corporate world, there is always an inherent tendency at the management level to focus on the bigger issues and pay scant attention to the trivial matters.

For Alicia, she can only turn to external sources to seek help for redress. She should seek the help of the Ministry of Manpower immediately and advice from her lawyer.

Very often, we come across articles pointing the finger at the HR department for bad practices. For the uninitiated, the truth is, decisions impacting on employees are usually dictated or influenced by business or functional heads and not necessarily made by or supported by HR.

This case is one example. The reader should be mindful that poor HR practices in a company are often a reflection of the company's leadership. In a bigger organisation, this includes each functional leader who will want to have a say in how they manage their own resources. The helmsperson is never the HR director nor manager.

Comment 7: Instilling Fear in the Company

The general manager's attitude and actions towards Alicia is definitely unfair and uncalled for. His decision is too personal. Let's examine what led to his action.

Kim Mei may have bad-mouthed Alicia constantly in front of the GM leading him to think extra negatively about Alicia, especially the alleged affair that Alicia had rumoured about Kim Mei and the GM. The GM may be taking revenge on Alicia. It could be that Alicia's position is really redundant.

The GM should not have sacked Alicia with such short notice. This is really for extreme disciplinary cases. He did not give Alicia a chance to seek redress.

He could have a talk with Alicia to determine if she has problems with her work. He should also talk to Kim Mei to hear her side of her story. He could consult other co-workers to find out about Alicia's work performance and attitude. If there is really a problem with Alicia, then he could take the necessary remedial action to rectify Alicia's problem. For instance, arrange a counselling session for Alicia, or send her for training to beef up her skills.

The last resort will be to serve her with a warning letter if she is still adamant about her work attitude and finally dismissal if all else fails.

Raymont could transfer Alicia to another department if there is a vacancy rather than getting a new employee to fill that position. Training a new employee will cost the company more than to retain and retrain an existing employee.

The HR manager could advise the GM about the professional methods to tackle Alicia's case. He could advise him about the vacancies in other

departments. He could have a one-on-one interview with Alicia without the presence of GM. This will allow Alicia to talk freely and without fear about her work. Then he could have a session with the GM. He could report on the unfair treatment to the upper authority if the GM abuses his authority. GM is portraying a bad image to all employees in the company with his action and favouritism for Kim Mei. He is only instilling fear to all employees and that will create an intimidating working environment, and this will result in an unmotivated workforce. He will not be seen as a professional leader but a dictator that is going to ruin the company ultimately.

Episode 26

The Pregnant Employee

Readers' Comments:

Comment 1: Employer Might have Cause for Dismissal

Under the Ministry of Manpower, MOM, maternity guidelines, Ember would be entitled to maternity benefits as she would have worked for her employer for at least 180 days before her child's birth. However, these benefits might not have been clearly communicated to her by her employer. For example, does the 'time-off' taken for regular check-ups by Ember constitute as maternity leave? If so, since these are taken flexibly over a period, under the maternity guidelines, Ember's employer might have cause for dismissing her.

Also, besides maternity leave, what are the other maternity benefits that Ember is eligible for? Are these benefits part of the pro-family benefits in the company? Esther needs to clarify what the company's maternity benefits are, to assess whether there is a breach of contract and violation of her employment rights before she decides to take any legal action.

Ambrose should have retained Ember till she is due for confinement. MOM should make it mandatory for employers to communicate to their female employees what exactly their maternity benefits are, so that they will not be placed in a limbo when faced with a similar situation such as Ember's.

Comment 2: No Breach of Contract

There is no breach of contract as Ember has worked less than 180 days before the child's birth. The foetus only about four months old so she is not entitled to maternity benefits. A typical appointment letter does not state specific maternity guidelines.

Ambrose can help by negotiating for more compensation for Ember, an extra month of salary for example, or by recommending some part-time assignments for her.

MOM should shorten the entitlement period for maternity benefits to 90 days before the child's birth. In line with Baby bonus scheme, it should encourage working through flexi-hours or work from home schemes.

Comment 3: Pay out of Goodwill

The Children Development Co-Savings Act stipulates that the employer may not dismiss an employee who has taken maternity leave. In addition, maternity benefits should be accorded if dismissal is within three months from confinement. Ember Seet was only six to seven months pregnant at the time of dismissal and the reason for dismissal was due to downsizing on a last-in-first-out basis. Therefore, on all counts, there is no violation of the law and the dismissal was justifiable.

However, presumably Ember has been a good and reliable worker, and thus had been receiving full support from her supervisor, Ambrose de Souza. As such, being a good employer, the company should have paid her, as part of retrenchment benefit, the two months of pay in lieu of the maternity benefits even though she is not entitled to it under the law. The payment will also serve as recognition for her hard work and as financial assistance while she waits for her delivery of her child before she is able to find another job.

Comment 4: No Violation of Employment Rights

Ember assumed that her service was terminated due to her pregnancy. Despite Ambrose's reasoning, Ember felt that her retrenchment was unjustified.

It seemed that Ember's employment rights have not been violated as there is no breach of contract. The following extracts from the Employment Act justify our views:

Termination of Service

Ember's employer has the rights to terminate her services due to reorganisation of the company structure which is based on the policy of 'last-in-first out'.

Retrenchment Benefits

Retrenched employee can request for the benefits if she has been employed for at least three years. However, Ember was compensated a month's salary with addition of \$500 out of the employer's goodwill despite being employed for less than a year.

Children Development Co-Savings Act

Despite being covered under the Act, Ember is not eligible for the maternity benefits because she was dismissed before her confinement. Thus, her employer does not need to compensate her.

It is not easy for a pregnant job seeker to gain employment. The MOM maternity guidelines could be improved by:

- Prohibition of dismissal or retrenchment of pregnant employees at any stage
- If need be, there must be valid reasons for termination. The employer has to pay maternity benefits that she is eligible for and pay for medical check up expenses incurred till delivery of the child, and
- Heavier fine should employer flout the law: Increase the fine from \$1,000 to \$5,000.

There are many ways that Ambrose could help Ember. Firstly, the company could continue to employ Ember on contract with emoluments. The company could also implement a shorter work-week for Ember. Ambrose could also refer Ember to his contacts in a similar field with a strong testimonial.

Episode 8

Father Knows Best

Readers' Comments:

Comment 1: Keeping a Distance from Confrontation

Hallibaten Inc has done the right thing in terminating Abigail's service. Abigail responded to Betty's counseling in a confrontational matter and it was aggravated when Abigail brought her father to "resolve" the conflict. This action undermines Abigail's maturity.

In this case, Betty started the counseling on the wrong note, which resulted in Abigail and her father fighting for their rights.

This can be resolved amicably if Betty had not relied on the unconstructive feedback on Abigail's performance from a third party. Betty suggested Abigail contact the recruit to retract the statement and threatened non-confirmation if this was not done. Betty was fairly impressed with Abigail's work and initiative until then. Despite the unpleasant feedback on Abigail's encounter with her former company, Betty should have observed her performance anew. To avoid recruiting a wrong person, Betty could have conducted a reference check.

Betty should counsel Abigail tactfully about ethical conduct. One way is to highlight on her good performance so far, share with her the unpleasant feedback but assure her that she will be assessed positively if she follows the ethical standards of the organisation.

Comment 2: Terminate as a Last Resort

The company has the right to terminate Abigail's service. She brought her father to settle her problems with the company. However, the matter could have ended more pleasantly had Betty not confronted Abigail. Betty should also not have advised that her probation could be terminated if she does not live up to the standards of the company. This is understood and would seem like a threat when it is pointed out during a confrontation.

Betty should have closely observed Abigail's behaviour for some time and along the way try to impart the standards of professionalism to Abigail. She should try to be impartial to what her friend has told her and give Abigail a chance to prove herself first. If Abigail does not live up to the job expectations, then the company could easily terminate her service. Abigail could be counseled to change her behaviour, failing which the company could then take action to terminate her service.

Comment 3: Don't Act on Impulse

Betty as a supervisor should not have "counselled" Abigail immediately after her high-tea talk with Sock Mun, but should adopt a wait and see attitude to confirm if Abigail is really what Sock Mun made her out to be, or that Sock Mun was just "working" things up a little. Who knows? Perhaps Sock Mun herself had an axe to grind? Perhaps her boyfriend had been attracted to Abigail and she was jealous of Abigail.

Why should Betty suggest to Abigail that she call the recruit to retract her statement? What difference would it have made to Abigail's potential contribution to Hallibaten Inc?

This case is typically reflective of what goes on in our daily working lives, and although we know what needs to be done (wait and give the person a second chance), we usually cannot control our emotions and the devil gets the better of us.

Betty should be counseled for acting on unverified information. As for Mr Toh, which girl's father would not have done what he did?

Comment 4: Innocent until Proven Guilty

"Innocent until proven guilty" – that is the view Betty needs to adopt with Abigail. It is easy to be clouded by information provided by an old friend. Betty feels that Sock Mun has prepared her for Abigail's tactics and why not? Sock Mun is acting out of concern and with Betty's interests at heart. However, in Abigail's case, Betty should probe carefully and tactfully into the matter at hand instead of zooming in and relating to her the incidents. Abigail may have been guilty of her past acts but by asking her upfront of her misdeeds may have put her on the defensive, thus explaining her defiance and the subsequent presence of her father.

Perhaps Betty could hold back the information received from Sock Mun and just ask more personal questions about Abigail's previous employment experiences. If Abigail's statements conflict with that of Sock Mun, then Betty should give her a chance to perform in her new post and keep a very close, but discreet watch on her. To safeguard her company from unethical acts, Betty could approach Abigail after her first misconduct and tell her she would have to leave if there are further misdeeds. If Abigail does not repent, only then should Betty relate what she had heard about her past. Betty would need to thoroughly explain to Abigail that she had placed aside the information from an old friend and given her the benefit of her doubt to reform and perform.

Comment 5: Personal Matter

Betty should not mention what she heard from her former classmate Sock Mun to Abigail unless Betty is a close friend of Abigail. Since Betty is not Abigail's close friend, she cannot tell her what Betty knows from her friend Sock Mun as it is a very very personal matter and gossips can be false. Betty started the commotion by letting Abigail know about the gossip but Betty did not handle the situation well. Abigail's father's comment about his

karate black belt is just a statement which can also mean that he is a righteous person and not the other way round.

If Betty is really concerned about the situation, she should not interfere in personal matters which are very sensitive and not easy to trace.

Comment 6: Better Option

Presuming what Sock Mun said was true that Abigail was capable of bad-mouthing Innovatif then she could do the same for Betty's company. Letting Abigail know the information that Betty got and later firing her would definitely sour the relationship and make the matter worse. Betty did not obtain any concrete evidence to support her claim.

A better option would be to keep mum about the information obtained, keep a close eye on Abigail's performance during the probation before deciding on the next step to take.

If Abigail's performance is unsatisfactory, her service could be terminated with no questions asked. Her father would not have been called in to “rectify the injustice” and the scene would not turn ugly. On the other hand, if Abigail performed well, contrary to what Sock Mun said, then the company has hired a good employee. It may turn out to be a win-win situation for both sides.

Comment 7: Rational Decision

The termination of Abigail's service was a rational and level-headed decision as she had failed to comply with the management philosophy of being ethical in all its dealings, both internally and externally.

Whether Abigail was innocent or guilty for the incidents at her previous company Innovatif, she could have made a formal complaint about Betty Yuen's accusation to the higher authority and requested for an investigation. Moreover, she had also failed to explain herself or behaved professionally when Betty confronted her about the rumour.

Instead she chose to bring her father, Toh Gan Seng, to the company to resolve her problems. Toh's threat to inflict injury on Hallibeaaten's staff will not be tolerated in any company.

Since the HR officer insisted that her termination had nothing to do with the above event, the company should have allowed her to finish the probation and reassess her performance, instead of terminating her without a valid reason.

Episode 9

The Sales Manager in Search of Change

Readers' Comments:

Comment 1: Lack of Cultural Fit

Lawrence Lor has made a grave mistake. While he seems lost and demotivated in his current role, firing off blind resumes is no way in which

to plan and manage one's career and as Lor has found, can have terrible consequences.

One of the aspects of this case is that of cultural fit. Both parties, Lor and his Korean employer are disconnected here. For the Korean company to truly survive in the international arena, it must be mindful and respectful of its Korean heritage and culture but also to realise that it is operating in the international marketplace where forcing another country's culture on the local market is not a sound business practice.

Lor, on the other hand, demonstrated a lack of emotional intelligence and maturity to manage his own career. While the actions of the Korean employer may be deemed illegal and Lor may be entitled to appeal his coerced dismissal, the case has all the makings of a long and protracted legal fight.

I would counsel Lor to embrace the events as an opportunity: to fulfil his MBA ambitions and to truly understand what he wants from a career. Then move on to an organisation where his obvious talents can be managed and appreciated.

Comment 2: Forget Past Achievements, Look Forward

Innovatio Inc was unfair in their treatment towards Lawrence Lor. He was a strong contributor to bring the company to where it is. In my view, it was a clash of personalities between Lawrence and his Korean boss. Both parties resented each other and were seen to be in a competitive relationship rather than a collaborative one.

I suspect Lawrence felt he was more capable than his superior. The same sentiments were probably shared by his superior when Lawrence bypassed him on several occasions by corresponding directly to the President.

These actions were viewed very negatively in the Korean culture where respect and loyalty towards the superiors is highly regarded.

Lawrence should have weighed the dynamics of his employment within his current organisation more carefully and what his chances of success in joining a "new" organisation would be.

In addition, if he really felt the need to look for greener pastures, he needs to be more selective in his job application as compared to using the traditional method of writing in. Some methods could be networking and referrals.

I wonder if Lawrence tried working hand-in-hand with his Korean boss for the sake of achieving a "win-win" relationship and teamwork; if he hadn't then he could have.

He must realise that his past achievements are history, what is important is the present and the future. He must look at each and every new day as a challenge. Dwelling on his past achievements will only make him a pessimistic individual and build up negative emotions towards his current job and his employer.

Whatever has happened, he can only look forward and make the best of it.

Comment 3: Don't Tread on the Company Culture

It is unfortunate that the blind advertisement Lawrence responded was posted by Innovation Inc. To Kim, what Lawrence had done was against the Korean culture. However, was this stipulated in the organisation's human resource policies? I feel that Lawrence has a strong case against the organisation for wrongful dismissal. He had not acted against any professional code of conduct. He was merely seeking to develop his profession after reaching a career plateau in Innovatio. Furthermore, his performance was above par and his sales on target. Even its president recognised Lawrence as a good regional manager. These are sufficient to proof a prima facie case.

Putting aside what is right in the court of law, in reality, it is in one's best interests to follow the culture of the organisation. As the saying goes: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do". Lawrence had been with Innovatio, a Korean company, for 15 years. He ought to be aware of its corporate culture and the do's and don'ts. This is even so when his new boss of six months is a Korean himself. Lawrence should be wise enough not to bypass his boss as this is against the Korean social system.

Comment 4: Retain the Services of a good Manager

The company should not have asked Lawrence to resign. If Kim is a good manager, firstly, he should have offered the new position to his staff. Secondly, knowing that Lawrence has applied for a job, he should find out the reason and try to retain him. After all, Lawrence has contributed greatly to the company.

The president is not wrong in supporting his manager, but this time it is not justifiable because Lawrence was asked to resign because of his "disloyalty" to the company in looking for another job. The president should have intervened and recognised the efforts put in by Lawrence over the years. The company should change its close-knit culture, recognise people for their contributions, and develop people based on their potential, not on personal relationship.

The company could terminate Lawrence's services if he does not resign. Since the culture of the company does not recognise independent thinking and action, there is no point for Lawrence to continue working in the company. The firm has previously ignored his recommendations for development.

Comment 5: Blind Corporate Culture

When we find ourselves products of our culture and immersed in a corporate culture that may or may not be inherently biased, we are often unaware of the consequences of such a system. Sometimes corporate culture is blind. We have to recognise that we live in a pluralistic world. Almost every area we touch will involve diversity.

Asking Lawrence to resign is definitely not a wise decision. The company not only loses a good regional manager who knows the market demands, it also risks losing the strong customer base that he has built over the years. It

should recognise his past contributions and consider his application for the new position.

Lawrence should not opt for termination even though he could take legal action for wrongful termination. He risks ruining his reputation and might be perceived as a bad hat, which he is not. Tendering his resignation is a better option.

Comment 6: Drastic Action

I feel that the company had taken too drastic an action, based purely on relationship to terminate Lawrence's service. It was unethical by any corporate standard.

Kim should pre-alert all staff that he wish to be informed of all correspondence with the president, hence avoiding such unpleasant incidents.

The president should have stood by Lawrence and not condone Kim's error of judgement. Such precedence would demoralise staff and tarnish the company's reputation of having a fair and just system.

There was a strong clash of cultures between Lawrence, who expected a more democratic company and the Korean culture, a p'a system. Employees these days are more highly educated, affluent as compared to those in bygone years, hence, a company has to recognise and re-invent its management style to suit the current situation, so as to retain good employees and achieve better results for the company.

Lawrence could have opted for termination as a last resort to protect himself, should he require legal action to be taken against the company. But the company should hold a meeting between the HR manager and Lawrence to resolve this issue with the objective to retain Lawrence's service. With his 15 years of excellent performance and contribution, his service should not be terminated based on wrong reasons.

Comment 7: Integration of Culture of Parent and Subsidiary Company

The sad part about this case is that Innovatio Inc's management failed to integrate the different work practices and human behaviors between the Korean company and the Singapore subsidiary.

Moreover, Yong Chung might have intentionally or unintentionally made used of the Korean social system as a tool for company politics to get rid of Lawrence Lor. This is not an ethical practice.

It is understandable that Yong Chung might have misjudged Lawrence as being disrespectful and arrogant, but this cannot be an excuse why both of them did not try to communicate about these issues before. If they had talked things out, this incident could have been avoided.

The HR director at headquarters had agreed with Yong Chung about dismissing Lawrence. The President felt that he would let the regional manager on site to decide. If this was the case, it should be the human resource manager in Singapore who should decide on Lawrence's future.

Innovatio might face more difficulties in terms of managing human resources and acquiring professionals from different countries in future. This, in turn, would affect the staff morale.

Episode 10
The Overpaid Salaries
Readers' Comments:

Comment 1: All Should be Punished

Assuming that the punishment imposed on James, Ishmael, and Tony were in accordance with the disciplinary policies of the Surawin Education Ministry, then the decisions were fairly made, except that the Minister should also be held responsible since he was overall in charge. The Education Ministry is a part of the public service and as a whole should be accountable for any negligence, especially when public funds were involved in this particular case. Hence, the Minister owed an apology to the public. This also applied to James Loh, the Director of Education.

At the operational level, both Tony and Ishmael should bear equal responsibilities for the error as Tony was directly involved in preparing the appointment letters for the new teachers and Ishmael, being Tony's immediate boss and HR Director, had failed to ensure that the salaries indicated in the letters were correct. In addition, Tony, having been in this job for 22 years, should be vigilant enough to carry out this task competently. Having to complete this in the tight schedule does not absolve him of all blame. Similarly, Ishmael, in a hurry to send out the letters, failed to exercise his responsibility in checking them.

Comment 2: Who Should Take the Blame for the Errors

The person who should bear most responsibility is Ishmael as he was the one giving the instruction to type and he was the signatory of the documents. He should have checked before signing. Though Tony made the mistake, this human error could still have occurred whether he was under pressure or not. The instruction to type was from Ishmael and only Ishmael could have spotted the mistake as Tony has typed all the letters with the same mistake. Tony could have genuinely thought that it was the correct amount. It is unfair to blame James Loh and the Minister as they would not have the means or time to go through every single document which originates from the Ministry. They selected their subordinates and should therefore be partly responsible as every head is responsible for the output of their department. Therefore, if Ishmael's salary was deducted, and Tony was transferred, so should James and the Minister be penalised to warn all civil servants that this was a very serious error and should never have occurred in the first place.

Comment 3: Mistakes Do Happen

In the working world, mistakes do happen. However, if the mistakes are very serious, someone must be responsible for them. As an administrative officer, Tony Leem should be more effective in his work although there is no doubt about his efficiency. He should proofread the work before he sends it to his boss. Transferring Tony to an atoll in the Surawin archipelago is a fair decision as this will set an example for other staff if they ever make such big mistakes. Everyone should be responsible for what they sign. You may delegate work but you cannot delegate responsibilities. Hence, Ishmael should check carefully before he signed. The written reprimand and the pay reduction are fair punishments.

As for James Loh, although he suffered public humiliation, he managed to retain his job as director, he would have to make sure that such mistakes will not happen again as it is very difficult to find a job elsewhere if he has a bad reputation. For the Minister, he should not be blamed except for engaging the wrong people.

Comment 4: Errors Benefit Nobody

Nobody wants an error to occur, there is no gain for anyone. Even the monetary gain of the teachers is temporary. The overpayment should be returned to the government when the mistake is detected.

The error came about because things were done hastily. I think the decisions are fair. Each gets his share of punishment, and hopefully learns a lesson as well. What is important is that the source of the problem, lack of proper checks, is looked into and action taken to avoid similar problems from happening again.

The fact that Ishmael tries to push all the blame to his subordinate, Tony, puts me off.

Comment 5: Blame the Culture

In my opinion, the root cause of the problem is in the culture of the society and the Ministry rather than with the individuals involved, as the negative behaviour existed in all of them. This reflects that they are a product of the system.

The ministry, probably the government as well, appears to be very bureaucratic as reflected in the silent acceptance of the new teachers as dictated to them.

Evidence of poor leadership at all levels is clear as those in leadership positions, from department to the ministerial levels, look only to their subordinates for blame instead of examining the problem.

There also seems to be a lack of accountability and ownership of job as everyone involved blames everything else except themselves.

There is some nepotism as the education director was able to retain his post because his brother was the Chief of Army.

Finally, there is a total lack of systematic planning. How could one start preparing for the appointment letters only three days before the appointment of the new teachers when training them alone has taken 12 months?

In this case, blaming any individual would be “barking up the wrong tree”. The right solution is to change the culture of the society in general and that of the Education Ministry in particular.

Episode 11

Slaving for the Dowager Empress

Readers' Comments:

Comment 1: Grab Offer to Use as Stepping Stone

If I were Hillary, I would accept the increment in salary and the use of a company car. When the promises of increment and company car has come true, I would then start to look for a job and use the recent increment and added responsibilities as a leverage to prove my capability to any potential employer.

One factor which Hillary cited for staying on despite such a stressful job is there is still so much to learn. But judging from Sylvyn's dependence on Hillary to teach her niece, Hillary has obviously already attained a respectable level of management skills, enough to warrant her a management position elsewhere.

If asked why she wants to leave the present company, Hillary can always cite Sylvyn's authoritative management style, and the fact that Sylvyn's niece would soon be joining the company, as why she thinks that Nam Kok will remain a family business, and her own career path in Nam Kok will be limited.

Hillary does not have to be wary of her boss's threat as there are enough multinational companies around where Sylvyn's "powerful contacts" would have limited reach.

Comment 2: Take Control of Your Life

What are the good points of the job? One would be financial rewards like more pay and promotion to higher positions. Other points would be the ability to grow, to mentor, a sense of achievement, and a love for the job. But also look at the bad points: the first being a lack of trust by Hillary's boss, the lack of respect from Sylvyn, a suspected lack of integrity with no personal assistant serving long terms, and a sense of uncertainty, vulnerability, and betrayal through Sylvyn's actions. These will affect the confidence of any individual and will bring about negative results in the person.

By analysing the information given in the case, one concludes that there is a lack of long-term prospects in the organisation and one should be prepared to leave. In the short term, one should ask for in writing the bonuses promised and proactively search for better opportunities elsewhere. If there is no improvement after three months then it's time to leave. Be in control of your life again.

Comment 3: Look for Recognition of Your Contributions

It is obvious that Hillary's career in Nam Kok Manufacturing has stagnated, despite being a key personnel and having to slog day and night for Sylvyn. My advice to Hillary is that if she is keen in building a career, she should consider leaving Nam Kok for an organisation where her potential could be developed and contributions recognised.

It might not be wise for Hillary to accept Sylvyn's new offer, as it would likely be followed with other unreasonable demands in future. Furthermore, it would be tough for Hillary to supervise the marketing manager when all the marketing decisions are made by Sylvyn. Given Sylvyn's management style, Hillary might not be given the full autonomy in running the marketing unit.

If Hillary decides not to take up Sylvyn's offer, it is wise for Hillary to continue to learn new things at Nam Kok and build good rapport with the organisation's clients during the weekly parties. In this way, not only is she able to develop a useful network in the business community, good opportunities may also come along.

Comment 4: Single and Mobile

Hillary should not accept the offer however generous it may be. There is no such thing as free lunch. Considering Sylvyn's management style, she must have something up her sleeves by providing such a generous package.

Already Hillary does not get much appreciation from Sylvyn despite working day and night and spending almost all her time at her job.

Even though the additional marketing responsibility looks attractive and may provide opportunity for Hillary to gain more knowledge and experience, she has to consider that all decision will still be controlled by Sylvyn. Hillary will not get a chance to do much in the area of marketing. She will just be a “coordinator” to pass on the instruction from Sylvyn to the marketing manager.

As Hillary is single and therefore more mobile, she should explore opportunities in other organisations. With her capability and efficiency, she could develop in a position where she is given the freedom to make managerial decisions.

Comment 5: Be Happy in your Job

Although the case is fictional, there are many of such real life characters in this world. In the case, it is very clear that Sylvyn is playing with Hillary. Once she gets her chess pieces in place, Hillary will be history. If Hillary is fortunate, she will receive some compensation once Sylvyn decides to get rid of her.

Just like Empress Dowager, Sylvyn is the vengeful type. She will not allow her subordinates to be better than her or talk to her. Her command is like an imperial decree, anyone who disobeys or disagrees will be executed.

Sylvyn's proposal is like dangling a carrot before Hillary. She is obviously buying time for her niece to be ready.

When Sylvyn said that the marketing manager will report to Hillary but all marketing decisions must come from Sylvyn, it's obvious that she is using Hillary as a puppet. It is like saying: "Do what you want as long as it is my decision."

My advice to Hillary is try something new. Forget about the short-term gain. Many people are tempted by immediate benefits and do not see longer-term rewards. Do not believe in the saying that a bird in hand is worth two in the bush. This is a kiasu, (afraid to lose) attitude. What you find in the bush could be a pot of gold. If you don't try, you will never know what is in that bush.

Therefore, Hillary must take the first step to accept changes. To change the world around you, you must first change yourself. Take risk and if it fails, it doesn't matter. Try again.

If Hillary is the cunning and playful type, she can choose to play the same game with Sylvyn. Obey her commands, work hard, and polish her boots. In the meantime, quietly look for good openings. Such tactics can be very stressful and Hillary must be able to predict Sylvyn's moves.

While working for money is necessary, working happily and with satisfaction is most important.

Comment 6: Hillary has Little Future in the Present Job

Hillary should not carry on working for such a boss. It is true that a personal assistant's job requires the person to organise parties, and run errands. PAs are also expected to be on 24-hour standby. There are bosses who do not know how to treat their staff well. They demand staff to start on time, and no taxi claims after midnight. Hence, Hillary should diagnose if the job is right for her.

What is intolerable is that the boss does not trust her, and also threatens her. Her pay may be attractive, but she knows that there is no future.

Whether she should take up the new offer depends on whether she still trusts her boss and she still wants to give her another chance. She must ensure that she can continue to work with Sylvyn and that the job is not stressful.

Accepting the offer would give her time to test if her boss is sincere.

Alternatively, if she has enough savings to support herself and her family commitments, then I suggest she call it quits. It is good to get other exposures elsewhere.

Comment 7: Kangaroos in the Outback

I advise Hillary to think about what she wants in her career. Will a salary increase with a marketing manager reporting to her, and a company car be satisfying?

Before Hillary decides to accept or reject Sylvyn's offer, she should consider:

- 1) Sylvyn is a dictator and there will be little chance for Hillary to expand in career.

- 2) Sylvyn will still make her work all the overtime with no extra pay, and no freedom to make contacts with the rich clients.
- 3) Sylvyn may sack her once her niece is ready.
- 4) With the new appointment, it means that her job responsibilities have also increased and the salary increase doesn't seem to be sufficient reward.

Since Sylvyn threatened Hillary that she will end up feeding the kangaroos in the Australian outback, I assume the case happened in Australia. Hillary could check with the country manpower department, if an employer has the right to influence other companies' employers about who they hire. If the laws do protect the employees, then Hillary can safely resign.

Comment 8: Hillary Needs a Change

There will not be long-term gain for Hillary if she were to remain in the job permanently. Hence, she should only stay for another three to six months while keeping a lookout for new employment.

It's time for Hillary to move on as she has evidently "outlived" her predecessors and Sylvyn will eventually find a way of terminating her service once the niece she is grooming is ready to take over Hillary's job. Though Hillary puts in much effort and time into her work, it is not appreciated and she does not have the trust of Sylvyn. The latter only offered her the increase in salary and benefits when she threatened to resign. Hillary should seek a new job that will give her job satisfaction and pride and most importantly, a more conducive working environment.

However, I do not advise her to leave immediately in view of the bad economic times, as it may take her some time to get a new job despite her capability.

Comment 9: Track Record Helps

Hillary should find a job before resigning. Although the economy is not good, with her high caliber experience, any good company will hire her. Sylvyn is temperamental, does not trust her employees and does not value employee loyalty.

Hillary noticed that none of her predecessors worked more than 18 months with Sylvyn. Obviously, Hillary doesn't need to think of working in this company for long, she will never be appreciated.

No doubt, Sylvyn threatens that no one in Asean will employ her due to her powerful influence in the business community; Hillary can always find a job that is outside Sylvyn's influence. I believe her business counterparts have seen how efficient Hillary is, in business ethics the ex-boss has no rights to impose such terms to her future boss even with her powerful influence. No one would like to miss an opportunity to employ good workers due to other people's influence.

With good working attitude, ethics, and humility, Hillary will be able to get better offer elsewhere.

Comment 10: Letter of Advice for Hillary

Dear Hillary

I'm sorry about your plight. It's a nightmare working for "Cixi". However, don't act on impulse, or you'll regret later.

In these bad economic times, good jobs are hard to come by. Why not accept Cixi's offer first. Though the promotion's only in title, it'll reflect well on your CV in your job hunt.

It's better to secure a job first, before resigning, otherwise you'll lose your bargaining power. Start your job hunt. To prevent Sylvyn's suspicion, arrange the job interviews when you run errands. Put the company car to good use.

There's no prospect for you in Nam Kok. Sylvyn has told you her niece will be taking over, but she's not ready yet. You're still useful to her so long as her niece hasn't learnt the ropes. Appear helpful to her niece, but don't impart all your expertise to her. Stall for time while you search for a new post.

With your experience, competency, and positive work attitude, you'll be able to find a better job and hopefully a good boss. Good luck in your job hunt.

Episode 12

Enjoy Life to the Fullest

Readers' Comments:

Past Contributions Should be Taken into Consideration

The CEO has not done the right thing in dismissing Nathan. Nathan has worked for Datawatt Inc. for more than 10 years, working his way up to his present position. I am sure that he is an honest and effective staff.

Nathan should not have held on to US\$6,000 for four weeks. Perhaps his boss should have given him another chance considering his service and also his past contributions.

I believe that this is his first offence and he should be given another chance.

Giving him one month's notice in lieu of salary is very mean of the CEO, after what Nathan had done, smuggling the payments out of Myanmar. The CEO did not for one second thought of what would have happened if Nathan were caught.

His good friend and colleague, Edwin, without hesitation paid Nathan's overdue car payment of \$1,650 to the debt collector. Nathan must be a good and honest person, otherwise Edwin would not have helped him.

Termination is Different from Dismissal

The CEO has made his decision in accordance with the company's policy.

Datawatt Inc does not condone staff holding on to the company's cash. In this case, Nathan has committed a gross misconduct that warrants a dismissal as decided by Joachim.

Instead of showing remorse, Nathan aggravated the situation by putting forward an invalid excuse that he forgot to hand over the cash to Finance till

four weeks later, after his return from Myanmar. To make matters worse, Nathan's debt collector had complained to Joachim about the unpaid car installments.

Like the civil service, Joachim takes a serious view of staff being in debt. He had no choice but to dismiss Nathan despite his contributions to the company's sales.

The firm is already being lenient and compassionate by giving Nathan one month's salary in lieu of notice. In the usual HR practice, for dismissal cases as a result of gross misconduct, staff will only be paid up to the last day of service with no additional month's salary in lieu of notice. In this case, Joachim is treating this as a case of termination rather than as dismissal.

Honesty is of Great Importance

Joachim did the right thing. Although Nathan is a good contributor in terms of sales, he worked hard as he needed cash to maintain his lavish lifestyle. Spending beyond one's means is a vice. Nathan had clearly gone overboard by withholding the US\$6,000 paid by the customer.

Consider the number of cases of white-collar crimes that surfaced in recent years. Some lawyers went to the extent of embezzling their client's money. These stories may have affected Joachim's decision. He knows that his credibility will be at stake if he is not firm as the boss.

Having been informed of an employee's bad debt, no employer would want to retain his service, especially when he is authorised to handle large amount of cash on behalf of the company. Having put that on balance, if I were Joachim, I would not lose any sleep about the decision to dismiss Nathan.

No One is Indispensable

It is a loss of a capable regional sales manager to Datawatt Inc. However, from a management prospective, no employees are indispensable. Today, companies can always train and upgrade employees' capabilities and skills; companies policies and culture can only act as guidelines for employees to follow, but individual character flaws can not be changed overnight, thus I would agree with the decision of the CEO in dismissing Nathan.

Datawatt should monitor and set clear standards on their entertainment expenses for their sales department in future. Nathan might have broken company policies by holding on to client payment, but why didn't the finance department in charge chase after the money when he returned? The finance director needs to look into this matter as well, so that no employees could have the excuse for forgetting.

Nathan is only a valuable tool rather than a valuable employee, that's why when the CEO found evidence for his misdeeds, he sacked him. Nathan shouldn't have agreed to help the company to smuggle cash out of Myanmar, because it is unprofessional. Nathan could only impress the company by doing legal dealings, but he should know that no company would want this kind of employee for long.

Honesty is Best

The CEO is a man who takes honesty as the top priority and when he perceives someone to be dishonest, there will be no second chance. I strongly agree that honesty is a great virtue; however, I think people must be given a second chance. The most important thing is for Nathan to realise the seriousness of the matter and show a sincere intention to change for the better.

Nathan should be given a second chance NOT for his loyalty, but for his capability. There is no true loyalty in employer-employee relationship. The employee continues to work for a company not because he is loyal, but because that company is still the best place for him at any point of time, after considering multiple factors like salary, flexi-time, and job satisfaction. So, Nathan should be given a second chance because:

- 1) he is a capable salesperson, dismissing him will be a great loss to the company
- 2) there is a possibility that he could realise his mistakes and change for the better.

Let's Move on

The CEO has valid reasons for firing Nathan to prevent potential damage to the company's reputation.

However, depending on circumstances, people should also be given a chance to repent. In this instance, Nathan has been with the company for more than 10 years and he has done well in sales. There is also no direct evidence to suggest that he intended to cheat the company of the money he collected from his client or use the money to pay his personal debts.

Hence, the CEO could have given Nathan a stern warning. As a further safeguard, he could review the limit of Nathan's entertainment expenses and other perks. To take it a step further, he could take the opportunity to tighten the company's policy, put in safe-guards, and then move on from there.

That way, the CEO is seen as a firm but not a person without compassion.

He is perceived as a boss who sees the staff as a valuable asset.

For Nathan, it would be a wake-up call to seriously review his personal life and to get things in order.

Episode 13

The Harassed Marketing Manager

Readers' Comments:

Family Comes First

I would encourage Kuok Ming to resign from this company, as all odds are against his favour should he continue to work there.

To lose his blissful marriage and family life for this unworthy cause, is totally unnecessary.

His priority is clearly to be a responsible husband and father, therefore, to resign so as to save his marriage is the most logical and reasonable thing to do, for any man under the same circumstances.

The chances of winning a lawsuit for sexual harassment is slim, considering the collection of evidence, and witnesses would be a daunting and fruitless task.

Given his age and capability, he would be able to recover his initial loss in earnings with a new company, as the economy recovers.

Bring Matter to the Directors' Attention

Though Kuok Meng may have many financial commitments, he should think about his future and family. Either way, he would have to leave the job one day, so it is better that he prepares to leave the job now and bring up the issue to the board.

Short of gathering evidence to sue his boss which would be very unpleasant and costly, he should put a stop to her harassment immediately. If he continues, he would end up being more suppressed and eventually it would destroy his marriage. In the end, he would have to go when Siow Pheng has a new "target".

Though the board supports Siow Pheng, certainly they will not condone her behaviour because it is a matter of time when someone brings up the issue and the company's reputation would be at stake. However, in view of her capabilities, they may still retain her.

But there is no way to continue working in the company. Kuok Meng should get another job where he is recognised and rewarded for his experience and capabilities instead of his current job where he has to cater to his superior's whims and fancies to get special privileges.

If he continues to work in the company, eventually both his career and marriage would be finished.

Consult Spouse and Close Friends

Kuok Ming should discuss the matter openly with his wife. As Kuok Ming's boss is a female, it is more complicated to handle the matter by himself. As they have gone for late meetings, dinners and several overseas trips, there are chances for Siow Pheng to make negative stories about Kuok Ming which can eventually break up his family life.

After consulting with his wife and close friends, he'll have a better idea of what to do. Then it'll be his decision whether to continue working there or not.

Siow Pheng Needs Male Friends

Kuok Ming can stay or leave. Leaving is the easy part but that's not the kind of man he is. Sueing the company is out of the question.

To stay, first he has to explain his disposition and his plans to his wife and ask for her full support. He will have to tolerate Siow Pheng's harassments to buy time and to study his options.

He must then have a serious heart-to-heart talk with Siow Pheng to tell her that their togetherness is affecting his family life. That their closeness is inviting office gossip and will affect their careers. That he may be forced to leave if she insisted on continuing her ways. He needs to make Siow Pheng see that she is his boss and nothing more.

He will have to develop strategies. One is to bring along an office colleague whenever Siow Pheng wants to dine with him. Another is to introduce eligible male friends to her, which may be what she needs most, as all her time had been devoted to her work and she may have little time to socialise. He should leave only after all that has been done and when the harassment has not stopped. Then Kuok Ming can resign without regretting that he had not given it a shot.

Sito's Fortunate Dilemma

Sexual harassment is an unfortunate happening resulting from a seemingly “fortunate” happening. Seemingly “fortunate” events happened to Sito. He:

- was a former acquaintance of Siow Pheng
- was recruited based on that recognition and purported good sales record.
- was given special attention and privileges
- attracted personal remarks of the boss in her role as his “coach”
- had dinners with Siow Pheng
- travelled with her and spent much time with her, and
- received high pay, not realising that it was a golden handcuff.

Nothing good comes free and Sito should have realised it early in the game when one-to-one happenings were recurring. He should have made his personal priority known to Siow Pheng at the second late night dinner, using references to his wife and daughter on every occasion to his advantage as a “shield” from the boss.

Sito should minimise interface with the boss and mix more with the rest of his peers. Has he sought counsel from the human resource manager? Sexual harassment issues are best handled objectively or subjectively only in the presence of a witness. Meanwhile, he should maintain his performance level with proven visible results and find another opportunity outside the company. It may be too late for him to get out of his dilemma in the company, but it should not affect his future eternally. A present setback will not ruin his whole future. With staged development of another opportunity, his clean break may cost him a pay cut but his family is worth more than anything money can buy.

Get real, Sito! Bear the short-term consequence for your foolhardiness and think of the long-term happiness with your family. Those who do not dare break out of their negative circumstances at temporary cost will suffer the loss of their integrity and loved ones in the long-term.

Talk to Siow Pheng Subtly

If Kuok Ming decided to follow his lawyer friend's advice, he should choose an appropriate timing and environment to convey the sensitive message to Siow Pheng. Perhaps in an office setting, give her a subtle message, most importantly, when Siow Pheng is sober. This may help to reduce any embarrassment that may occur.

However, if I were Kuok Ming's close friend, my advice will be: "Why forego your happy family for S\$150,000 and end up losing your love ones?" Since he has proven his mettle in the former post, surely he can get another job that will tap on his marketing skills, except that, perhaps the remuneration may not be as attractive as that offered by Ozalid Drugs. Then again, why compromise one's dignity and engage in this unhealthy relationship?

Suing the firm for sexual harassment may not be in Kuok Ming's favour due to the hefty costs involved. Furthermore, such cases are relatively new in the local context. Unless Kuok Ming has sufficient evidence, supportive witnesses, and is ready to put himself through undue stress for a 'sure win' case, it is advisable not to take this approach.

Call It a Day

Kuok Ming should resign. With his calibre, getting another job is not difficult. He should not stay because of the pay and tolerate the sexual harassment. As a man, where is his dignity?

Siow Pheng has misused her authority to take revenge on married men. She even threatened Kuok Ming that she since is very close to the board members; she can get rid of him easily.

As it is time consuming and costly to take legal action pertaining to sexual harassment, he should not waste the time and effort. Rather, he should be actively looking for another job. Silas's advice is right; there is no point to waste the time and money to file a legal suit.

It is not worth losing a loving wife and family for such affairs. It will be very tiring to balance both situations. He will end up losing his job and family when he cannot take the pressure.

Three Solutions to the Problem

Could it be that Siow Pheng is so busy with her workload that she is unable to socialise? At the same time, she needed someone badly to confide in and since she knew Kuok Ming from their JC days, she regarded him as a very close friend, and a trusted confidant. Is Kuok Ming over-reacting? By confronting her with a hint of their "unusual relationship", her pride may have been badly hurt and thus, she came out with the series of "threats".

I suggest three options.

Option 1:

- Have a heart-to-heart talk with Siow Pheng when she is in a more sober mood.
- If she were an understanding boss, she would apologise for her behaviour and agree to his transfer.

- Simultaneously, discuss the situation with his wife, gain her trust, and get her opinion about the matter.
- Organise outings for Siow Pheng with Kuok Ming's family and perhaps, introduce some friends to her to widen her social circle.

Option 2:

- If Option 1 does not work, then he will need to seek advice from the Board.
- Even though she claims to have a close working relationship with the directors, from a business standpoint, if his performance is beneficial to the organisation, they should not let personal conflicts of this nature, affect the overall performance of the organisation.

Option 3:

- If the above options do not work, then he should consider tendering his resignation but not before securing a job elsewhere.
- He may have to consider re-training or going into a different industry, and be prepared for a pay cut, if the job market is not in his favour.
- I will not suggest hiring a lawyer to settle this matter, as it will be a waste of time and money. It will also make life miserable for the immediate family and all parties concerned, should the matter be made public.

Episode 14

The Boss from Hell

Readers' Comments:

Ambrose is Not a Model Boss

The list of conditions Ah Yong will present to his boss Ambrose will be:

- Do not be aggressive
- Do not be self-centred
- Be more professional and open-minded
- Be understanding, do not embarrass subordinates in front of other staff when pointing out their mistakes, and
- Show leniency to the staff.

Ambrose will not be a model boss overnight. He has been aggressive and demanding right from the start. With his level of competency, his father-in-law and wife trust him to run the business as long as the company makes profits.

Ah Yong's black file on Ambrose does not mean that he can prove Ambrose's mistakes. Some of the information given by another party may not be strong enough to charge him in court.

Ah Yong's method to challenge the boss is unethical. His intention is to resolve the misunderstanding with his boss; he should not be using Ambrose's weakness or mistakes to threaten him.

Ambrose Can't Change Overnight

It looks like Ah Yong is letting his emotions get the better of him in trying to manage his boss. Before this blackmailing leads to dire consequences and since Ah Yong has already taken the wrong step, he should just focus on the complaint lodged by the staff member. This is within his purview as the secretary of the union branch committee.

His conditions to Ambrose would be to ask Ambrose to legitimise the voucher signed by the staff and not to involve the staff in any unlawful transactions.

It is not realistic to expect Ambrose to turn over a new leaf and become a model boss after this incident. On the other hand, since Ambrose has full autonomy in running the company and given his obnoxious behaviour, he may implicate Ah Yong in his wrong doings in future.

By holding his boss to ransom, Ah Yong is not only being unethical but ineffective in changing Ambrose's managerial style overnight. Even if Ambrose should behave like a model boss in the short term, after thinking of a way to deal with Ah Yong, he may return to his original self.

Stop the Espionage Activity

Ideally, Ah Yong should demand that Ambrose show respect to all his staff and to treat everyone equally. With immediate effect, he must cease his "espionage activity" and learn to trust his staff. In addition, Ambrose has to be more transparent in his dealings with his employees and he must also make good on his words.

Ambrose will not become a model boss overnight. However, the conditions stated by Ah Yong would eventually and hopefully guide him on the right track.

Unfortunately, Ah Yong's method is unethical as it can be categorised as "blackmailing". However, as this concerned Ah Yong and his colleagues' rice bowls, there seem to be no other choice but to resort to that method.

Impossible for Good Artist to Carve a True Flower

If we were Ah Yong, we will make Ambrose to:

- Be respectful to the staff, for example, he should greet others first instead of waiting for them to greet him
- Be fair to the staff
- Be forgiving
- Be responsible, for example, be accountable for his instructions given to the staff
- Be honest and show integrity, for example, do not abuse his authority as chairperson of the grassroots committee
- Trust staff, and

- Set a good example.

Given Ambrose's unforgiving and scheming character, he would abide to the conditions given by Ah Yong for a short period until the evidence is destroyed. We believe that the threat used on Ambrose cannot make him a model boss for long as it is impossible even for a very good artist to carve out a true flower. For Ambrose to become a model boss, it is likely to happen when he realises his shortcomings and wants to change on his own free will.

The approach used by Ah Yong is unethical even though it is with good intent and for the interest of the staff. We feel that one who steals to provide for others does not make one less of a thief.

Blackmailing the Boss is Unethical

The following list of conditions for Ambrose would be useful:

- To greet the staff by name during his morning rounds. This would ensure he gets to know all staff by name
- To be more understanding and allow staff to learn from mistakes. This would ensure that staff would not be humiliated openly by Ambrose. People learn from mistakes, and allowing staff to learn from mistakes would help to boost their morale
- To adopt a fair performance appraisal management system. This would eliminate favouritism in the company and would encourage the staff to strive for the best of their abilities
- To adopt an open-door policy. Staff should be allowed to see Ambrose any time of the day
- To guarantee that the staff is not tricked into signing incomplete documents. This would prevent the misappropriation of funds.

Ambrose is not changing to be a better boss out of his own free will. Being the scheming person that he is, he would find every opportunity to retaliate. However, a genuine change may be achieved when positive results such as increased productivity and higher staff morale are achieved.

The method used by Ah Yong is considered a form of blackmail and is not ethical.