

Additional case study: The civil service department

Background information

The administrative officials in this government department have a fairly high salary and good job security. The typical employee is middle-aged, with a medium-level education. They conduct the same kind of commission work from Monday to Friday and show little interest in increased variation of their work tasks. They don't seem to be interested in being promoted or even getting new work duties.

When medium-level managers meet with team-leaders in the department, they will usually enquire as to how many commissions the group has made in the last three months. The conversations between employees are often about family, sport or culture. When they talk about work is it mostly about concrete things that have happened, or what people have said to each other. For example, a conversation between two employees might go like this:

"Gunilla wanted me to work overtime on Thursday to do Fabian's commissions – she knows that I have my handball each Thursday. I value my free time highly."

"Me too."

Displeasure is never laid out directly, but is disguised behind ironic humour. The department, and its managers, are often described in disparaging terms – but always in a humorous way. When work conditions are discussed more directly, it is often in terms of different reprimands that team leaders either received from their managers, or gave to their team members. Descriptions about the work environment are expressed in terms of the physical working conditions, such as location, proximity to the bus terminal and on-site restaurants.

Work tasks in the civil service department consist of commissions conducted by each official. The initial creation of a commission is the responsibility of a single employee, working in isolation. This process is then followed by numerous group meetings. These work groups have an appointed leader whose duty it is to ensure that the groups work towards the organization's goal. The use of time in these work groups is often a subject of discussion: the meetings are formal, and if somebody questions whether the long discussions are really necessary, they are often told something like: "The most important thing is to participate, to share the information."

The organization is split into divisions, each consisting of three to five work groups with about ten members in each group. A middle-level manager is in charge of each division. The division managers' main tasks consist of surveillance and distribution of information. Each month they create reports about the results, and these are submitted to the higher-level managers. The higher-level managers have no contact with team leaders or other employees. Rather, information often reaches employees after decisions have already been made.

A misplaced leader

The clearest example of defective leadership is 'Arne'. He is 38 years old and has a BA in Law and a Masters in Economics. Last year he divorced for a third time and has recently embarked upon his fourth marriage. He has worked as a manager for five years. During the second to fourth years of his management, employees reported misuse of power – but when complaints about Arne's behaviour reached his bosses, they were very surprised. People who brought up concerns about Arne's leadership style were treated with suspicion and became the subject of negative rumours. For a long time the criticism of Arne stopped completely.

When a consultant was brought in, with the aim of observing and improving the work climate, it emerged that Arne was involved in several of the conflicts in his division. On one occasion, Arne had rushed to the canteen and announced in an upset tone that one colleague, 'Bengt', had been revealed as incompetent. A long dispute followed, which finally ended with Bengt's resignation. Before he left his job he wrote a document about Arne, describing him as constantly rude during personal conversations but charming and ingratiating in public. According to Bengt, Arne had never answered any message sent by e-mail and always expressed himself in very short sentences on the telephone – but he communicated completely differently during private conversations, being excessively talkative.

When the consultant interviewed Bengt, he described himself as a strong leader who always listened to his subordinates, and an honest person who drives people to develop and excel. An evident characteristic of Arne was that he seemed to be completely uninterested in what others thought about him: he seemed to be incapable of learning from mistakes and he never admitted to making any errors. On the other hand, it was clear that the higher-level managers liked Arne. Despite evidence of dishonesty, they still trusted him. The aggressive verbal behaviour reported by Arne's colleagues was constantly excused by higher-level management, who would offset it against Arne's other presumed qualities. The consultant refused to work with the program for improved work climate if Arne remained in his present position. But rather than replace Arne, the decision was made to replace the critical consultant with another, more sympathetic one.

Data collected from the department indicates that employees' self-reported job satisfaction is about the same as in other commensurable organizations, but that organizational commitment is much lower (Eisele, 2009).

Tasks for students

1. How would you describe Arne's personality?
2. How would you describe the workplace?
3. What could be the reasons for the higher-level managers' support of Arne?
4. What could be done to solve the problems at the civil service department?

Sources of additional information

Daneke, G. A. (1985). Regulation and the sociopathic firm. *Academy of Management Review*, 10, 15-20.

Eisele, P (2009). Diagnosing a deviant workplace: Examining antisocial organizational behaviour and its correlates with job satisfaction and organizational commitment. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*.

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Note

This case is a true story. The Civil Service department in question (not surprisingly) wishes to remain anonymous. The names of characters have been changed. The case was written by Dr Per Eisele, associate professor at Blekinge institute of Technology, Department of Management, Sweden, pei@bth.se.