

Who Will Bell The Cat???

A Case study on Organisational conflict

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Case Study

On a Saturday, one customer tendered a cheque of Rs. 200 at the SB counter of a bank branch and obtained a token. He was to get cash at the teller counter. The normal practice followed by the branch is that when a cheque is presented at the SB counter, the cheque is presented at SB counter, the cheque is posted in the ledger and after the concerned officer initials the ledger, it is handed over to the teller payment counter. The customer waited for some time but found the teller missing from his seat, hence he tapped at the glass pane of the counter with his token. The teller took his own time to come to his seat. It led to heated exchanges between the two. Eventually, the customer was refused payment.

The customer approached the Manager and complained about the non-payment. The Manager called the teller and requested him to make the payment since it was obligatory to make payment. However, the entire staff joined the teller and demanded an immediate apology by the customer for his rude behaviour and closure of his account. They wanted police action against the customer since he had threatened them.

The customer, who happened to be an advocate, lodged a written complaint and threatened legal action against the teller. Immediately afterwards, the entire staff came to the Manager demanding protection against such threats.

The written complaint of the customer was handed over to the teller for his comments while all the staff members lodged a joint protest stating that they were aggrieved at the indifferent attitude of the Accountant and the Manager. The entire office was in confusion and loud accusations were expressed by all staff and the customer's problem was completely forgotten.

The teller while replying to the customer's complaint stated that the customer came around 11.55, just before the closing time of the counter and demanded immediate payment and without listening started using abusive and threatening language. The teller pressed the emergency bell but the Accountant did not come to settle the issue. This humiliated the former. Accordingly, he wanted enquiry into the matter and protection against customer's threats.

The Accountant submitted his written comments explaining that the teller was attending a phone call for more than 15 minutes without bothering about the customer. The customer had come well within the banking hours and he might have got upset. It was the staff who shouted and abused the customer. There was no ringing of the emergency bell as stated by the teller since if it were so, the watchman would have immediately closed the shutters. The fault was primarily that of the staff. Moreover, such incidents are of frequent occurrence.

After a couple of days, an Inspector of Police came and enquired about the teller. During the course of talk, he informed that a complaint has been lodged against the teller and he would like to interrogate him. When asked about the nature of the complaint, it was declined stating that the case was against an individual and details of FIR could be given to him only. The bank could be a witness but not a party to the dispute.

After a out 10 days, a notice was served through the Manager to the teller. The notice required the teller to be present next day at 5.30 p.m at the Police Station since a case was filled under Section 294 IPC. On receipt of the notice, the teller wanted that either the Accountant or the Manager should accompany him to the Police Station.

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On the next day, as per the notice served, the teller went to the Police Station, and at around 6.00 p.m. the Branch Secretary of the Union informed the Manager that he feared arrest of the teller and he wanted Bank's help. The bank's lawyer was contacted who assured that if arrested, he could get the teller released on bail. At that stage the superintendent of Police was also contacted to ensure that the teller was not harassed. But nothing was heard after that. At 8.00 p.m., the Manager went to the Police Station and was informed that the teller was bailed on personal bond at around 6.15 p.m.

On the following day, when the branch opened at 9.30 a.m. as usual and some of the officers were preparing to start the day's work, all members of the union who felt that it was the fault of the Manager and the Accountant in particular and all Management staff in general, which led to the arrest, reacted by shouting slogans. All officers went to the Manager's cabin where the situation was very tense. All officers were informed that they are under 'gherao'. A section of the Award Staff members were so emotional that they started threatening and using abusive language.

Officers were not allowed to touch the telephone and no officer was allowed to go outside the Manager's cabin. For a long time, even water was denied to the officers. The officers were not allowed to explain the position to customers who felt upset that the branch was not functioning. For the whole day, slogans were shouted and officers were made to starve. The other section of the union were watching the drama neither helping the management nor the agitating members of the staff.

The local state level co-ordination committee leaders who wanted to find a solution could not pacify the members and the work came to a stand-still for the entire day.

On the day the teller was arrested, the Branch Manager contacted the Regional office to seek the opinion regarding the staff's request for bank's assistance in case of arrest. The branch was advised that although it may be a police notice addressed to an individual, it could help the member. Accordingly, the Manager went to the police station around 8.00 p.m. by which time the teller had been released on personal bond.

Award Staff members did not permit the branch officials to contact Regional Office/Central office on the day they gheraoed them. However, from the nearby branch, RO came to know about the forceful retention by a section of the staff and this position was explained to the Central Office on the same day. By late in the evening when officers were permitted to leave the office, they were completely shaken and informed the Regional Office telephonically that they feared physical assault and hence would not open the branch on the next day.

The Regional Office informed the Head Office about the branch management's stand and they were advised that discussions were going on at the highest level and it is advisable for officers not to precipitate in the matter as it may go against them. Officers were assured that action would definitely be taken against the erring members.

As per the decision, all officers abstained themselves from work on the next day. Accordingly, the branch could not be opened. Nearby branches became aware of the situation and all officers closed their respective branches and joined them in sympathy. The Head office got all information and the branch was immediately advised to seek help from the Chief Secretary or Inspector General of Police but the Branch Manager made it very clear that the officers were totally demoralized and only officers from other branches could man the branch at this stage. The officers of this branch were mortally afraid that their lives were at stake. All Award Staff members came to the branch only to find the branch locked out and customers also had to go back since the branch was closed.

The Branch Manager was assured that the Union officials from Head Office would be sent to arrive at a compromise with the aggrieved customer and the erring members would be dealt with suitably.

As branch did not open, the officers were recalcitrant and fearing that the situation may continue. Two senior Managers from the Regional Office were deputed to see if the situation could be normalized. In spite of requests from the Regional Office Managers, officers related various acts of misbehaviour and hence wanted firm action against

the members and assurance that they would be protected from such harassment in future. As a consequence even on the next day, officers did not attend the office and the branch could not be opened.

On the third day (being a Saturday), the branch was opened by Regional Office Managers as officers and the Branch Managers were insistent on some assurance from the management before opening the branch. All the Award Staff members reported for duty but business could not be transacted.

On seeing the branch open on Saturday, many customers demanded cash payment but as officers were not present, cash could not be disbursed. Customers were sore since branch did not function for the past 3 days continuously. They were assured by the Union leader who had arrived from Head Office and also Managers of the Regional Office that normal functioning would start from Monday.

In the meanwhile, the Regional Manager realised that the situation did not improve and the officers were adamant and did not open the branch, for the past 3 days. He, therefore, rushed to the branch along with Association leaders. There were continuous discussions till midnight on Saturday with the association leaders, Union leader and Manager and Officers of the branch. The branch management agreed to open the branch on being assured that action would be taken against the erring members. All returned back to their respective places while the Manager of the Regional Office stayed back until Monday to supervise the restoration of normalcy. There was no untoward incident and branch functioned normally. However, the relations between the supervisory staff and Award staff remained strained.

Although memos were to be served on the members who misbehaved but these were not served since there was some misunderstanding. The Branch Management wanted memos to be served only on those who actively participated and used abusive language while they found that the Regional Office wanted to serve memos on all the members who were involved. Thus the branch was opened without memos being served.

The issue of serving of memos was discussed at the Regional Office level where Association leaders were present and then days passed without any action and ultimately it was decided that the Branch Manager's views would have to be considered. At that stage the Branch Manager felt that the situation was fast coming back to normalcy and hence he would not like to have another show down. Thus the matter of serving memos was dropped.

Meanwhile, the Head Office felt that the unpleasant situation at the branch had to be set right. They requested senior officials of the Regional office to stay for 2 months at the branch and to try to improve the Industrial Relations situation. However, as the matter of action to be taken against erring members was still unresolved, the same was implemented by the branch on the instructions of the Regional office officials, although reluctantly, in the presence of the senior officials. Thus the ritual of serving memos was carried out after 3 months from the date of the incident.

2. Discussion Questions

Do you feel that Union's action was justified? Why?

Do you feel that Officer's reactions were justified? Why?

Could the situation be averted by the branch management? How?

What role did the Regional Office play?

What should be the I.R. Policy of the C.O.? What were the reasons why C.O. could not act?

Whether the I.R. situation in the branch was due to system's fault or due to lack of sensitivity? At what level?

Can you identify the root of the problem?

If you were to set right the situation, how would you go about it?

3. Teaching notes

The episode of direct confrontation between the Union and branch management was an eye opener and the most opportune moment for the management to look a bit deeper at the causes of the problem. On

the other hand, after a lapse of many months from the incident, there still seemed to be deep rift amongst the various levels of management and also a lack of trust with the Association and the Unions. It is necessary to analyze and appraise different perceptions and to evolve an effective strategy.

The Recognised Union feels that the management is over reacting to the normal happenings in the branch and according to them the position was more or less the same for the last decade. But they agree that indiscipline and overtime should be checked after proper dialogue at the different levels.

The minority, unrecognised Union feels that the entire drama was a farce and an eye-wash and that the management was not really serious in improving the situation.

Officers Association feels unhappy that officers in this branch are made to suffer due to harassment caused by the Award Staff but they feel helpless without the support of officers, who seem to be confused and divided.

Branch Management (Officers & Managers) feel totally frustrated and unhappy for being misunderstood. According to them, their protest was a spontaneous reaction and an expression of genuine fear. They are aggrieved that with the passage of time, the focus had shifted from the problems of the branch to themselves obliterating various issues.

Regional Office Management feels that the problem has to be tackled by the Deputy Regional Manager's office since its closer to the scene of action. But the entire issue is in a state of suspense and no one is sure who should initiate further steps.

Central office Management feels that the problem of this branch is unique and peculiar to the State. Hence DRM's Office should be able to tackle these problems at its level. Moreover, the problems can be best dealt by people who were on the spot instead of being monitored from a far off place.

This complex situation brings us to the question as to who should initiate steps at this stage? Each of the above group feels that no-one is involved hence there cannot be any solution.

Suggested Remedy. Each of the above group can play its role sincerely and then directly or indirectly help in branch effectiveness.

Recognised Union Leaders should be taken into confidence by the Management about the seriousness of the situation and the steps that the Management intends to take so that it understood the spirit in which he problem is being resolved.

Unrecognised Union Leaders should be told that any kind of indiscipline from any group would be dealt with firmly.

Branch Management should list out all the problems, minor as well as major, for which they can seek assistance of the Regional Office and also involve the local Union. The problems can be classified into three categories.

- ? Those which can be tackled at the branch level itself.
- ? Those which can be tackled at the Regional Office level.
- ? Those which have to be dealt at the Central Office level.

After this exercise, they can list out their strengths and weaknesses so as to enable them to know the steps to be taken and those problems which are beyond their scope can be referred to the appropriate higher levels.

Regional Office Management should, despite failures or short comings at various levels, should primarily assist and build confidence in the branch management to enable it to function more effectively.

Central Office Management should emphasize the need to tackle problems promptly and speedily at the lowest level possible, and at the same time should realise that the Manager's role is becoming very complex and difficult. It should examine the following two aspects.

- ? Is the existing industrial relations system adequately geared to anticipate and reduce the areas of conflict, misunderstanding and communication? (Human relations management).

? Are branch Managers adequately trained to shoulder the responsibilities and challenges in the Industrial Relations area? (Human resource development).

4. Board Plan

The Board in the case discussion room needs to be divided into four parts. In these four parts, the following aspects are to be listed out:

PART 1- The salient features of the case in brief

PART 2- Issues and the most important ones to be solved

PART 3- The possible solutions for the issues (can be many)

PART 4- This contains the final solutions which are normally taken out of heated brainstorming discussions in the session. Here the teacher needs to watch the discussion part of the students and is supposed to make the participants give the answers/solutions.

5. Few tips for case analysis

Apart from the case discussion, the teacher concerned can also make the participants participate in a role play which involves the trade union leader and employer and employees so that the participants get first hand information about the issue. Similarly, the teacher can also make the students engage in a debate on the IR issues faced.

Basically, this involves the creativity of the teacher as well as the students.