

/var/log/manager

Surreal Management Situations

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The IT manager's day is filled with the mundane. Time cards. Shift schedules. Metrics reports. Counseling employees. Writing evaluations. Signing things. Meetings. Meetings. Meetings. And then there are rare moments of novelty, when something strange happens and you say, "Ahh, that wasn't what I expected at all." It's rarely something both strange and good, but even strange and bad can be better than the monotony of much of the manager's function.

Welcome to the Team. You're Fired

There was an employee on another contract task who was losing his position when the task was completed. He had a reputation for doing good work, and I could use someone with his skills in setting up and maintaining audio-visual systems. I tried to make a place for him in my staffing plan, but I wasn't able to move fast enough and he aged out of the company through a standard layoff. This meant that once I finally had the position lined up, I had to rehire him as an external candidate rather than as an internal transfer. Negotiate. Plan. Line up. Click "hire now" in the Human Resources system. And then I turned to the next thing on my list and figured I'd see him on his first day the following week.

The next day I was contacted by the recruiter. Then by the HR support person. Then by the onboarding person. And then by a random person who didn't even have a stake in the hiring action. Each told a similar story, how difficult and angry and rude the candidate was. Within hours, it seemed that everyone at my location knew he was a harsh personality, and I was answering people left and right on why I was bringing such a bad egg onto the team.

I talked to him on the telephone and uncovered a sad story. He needed the job. Wanted the job. But was so insulted that he had to reapply as an outsider that he couldn't control his temper and was just lashing out at everyone he had to deal with in the process, including now me on the call. The more he talked, the more he started swearing at me, like he had done with the others in the hiring process. The fabric of the organization was already buzzing with the story and there was no way I could successfully integrate him with the team with all the bad blood.

I had already clicked "hire now," so technically he was an employee who just hadn't signed in on the agreed first day of employment. Welcome to the team. I'm sorry, but you're fired.

The Hundred-Dollar T-Shirt

I have an employee who is impeccably dressed. Whenever I see him, I remember the time in 1989 when I bought a beaten-down 1974 Ford pickup truck for \$300. I think of that truck because my employee's shoes cost \$300. An exceptional sense of style, with materials, textures, and colors working together seamlessly and in tune with the seasons. And it's not all style over substance: he's my top cybersecurity engineer, and he always gives extra hours and great focus on his task.

There is a manager a rung above me on the organizational chart. This manager is “into” sports. Sports talk frequently takes up more than work talk in any given day. He dresses OK, but sometimes has blue-socks-black-pants problems, and has an unfortunate tendency to wear brown wool slacks with a maroon acrylic polo shirt with a sports logo. It’s a look that doesn’t say “senior manager.”

This manager, dressed in his mismatched sports-logo polo, ran into my cybersecurity engineer in the hallway. My engineer was wearing a sharp ensemble and looked very professional, except that his shirt was lacking a collar. You could call it a “t-shirt” if you wanted to overlook the fact that it probably cost more than \$100 at a designer store.

Of course, I had to go and “answer” for my employee later, but I’ll admit I took a certain sad, ironic pleasure in watching the “dress code violation” counseling that the mismatched sports-fan manager felt the need to deliver to my engineer that day.

The Part Is on Order and Will Be Here Any Day

I’ve been pushing a team for months to realign a complex business intelligence system to gain better throughput. My challenge is that the team isn’t technically “mine,” but rather is a peer’s team who is working on something where I’m in more of a customer advocate role. I really feel like I’m more the conscience of the system that keeps reminding the team that they’re not quite done with the job until they do that last bit of performance tuning.

Finally, they tell me they can’t go any further because they need to order a specialized network card for the blade enclosure. Once they have that, they’ll be able to finish re-provisioning LUNs, and then they’ll be able to migrate the virtual hosts into the new configuration. It will all fall into place, just waiting on the part, boss. Don’t worry, boss, we got it, boss.

A month passes and I go back into fact-finding mode, asking if we’re done yet. I get told the same story. We’re waiting on the part, boss. Don’t worry, boss, we got it, boss. I ask, who, exactly, is supposed to be buying the part? It’s our procurements team. Who in procurements? This guy. We call the procurements guy and discovered something fascinating. A few months before the part was ordered, we had upgraded our workflow tracking system. The user interface changed and the procurements guy never went to the training. So we discovered that not only had our part not been ordered, so too had many other things not been ordered because the procurements guy wasn’t ever seeing the service request tickets. We called him and he set up the purchase order on the spot.

Now my “we got it, boss” guy is standing in front of my desk, feeling really badly about all this. I guess we didn’t have it, boss. OK. I ask him what he thought the next potential bottleneck would

be. He replied that he’d have the team ready to go as soon as the part arrived, no sir, they’re not going to be a bottleneck. He’ll have them on hot standby to jump to work. They’ll overnight the part, we’ll get started no later than day after tomorrow.

While he was talking, I speaker-phone dialed my buddy at the vendor that sells these special network cards. Hey buddy, I say when he answers, how long to ship one of these special cards? Oh, about three weeks, he answers. I ask him if he can pull a favor, give us a demo or a loaner early, which he agrees to sort out for me. We hang up and I do my honest, level best to not lecture about bottlenecks, responsibilities, and follow-through.

And then I spent the rest of the day feeling good about this particular mess, because I got to be operationally useful instead of just managerially present.

The Preparatory Meeting for the Pre-Meeting for the Meeting

One of my responsibilities is the project management team.

One of the final tasks in a project is to conduct an “operational readiness review,” which is the final milestone to have a project accepted by the operations group before we close a project. This is the meeting where we formally hand over diagrams, documentation, systems, and responsibility.

A year ago we had a readiness review that went sour. The project manager wasn’t really prepared. The operations guy had a headache and was testy. Our local NFL team, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, had just lost to a high school team. There was something in the air that day. And the review meeting went south and was one Molotov cocktail away from a brawl. Ever since then, we’ve held a pre-operational readiness review meeting.

The pre-meeting includes everyone invited to the regular meeting except the actual decision-maker from the operations group. The concept is that if we’re going to fight, let’s get the fight out of us before we talk to the decision-maker. The pre-meeting is where questions get asked and answered so that we’ll know what the answers will be when they’re asked again at the real meeting, and no one is surprised. It feels wasteful to me, but all the major stakeholders seem content, and work isn’t slowing down because of it, so OK, two meetings. One is a dress rehearsal.

I’m in the pre-meeting recently, sitting in the back and observing the relationships, the expertise, the flow, and generally doing my quiet manager thing. And a hockey game breaks out. People swinging sticks, punching, gouging, arguing. Not literally, of course, but there was a strong disagreement over how prepared some people were to have the meeting. Not the real meeting, of course, but the pre-meeting. Not prepared for the pre-meeting. Which was there specifically to help people prepare. Prepare for the real meeting.

A serious manager would have put a halt to what came next, but I was too enthralled to say anything as everyone agreed that from now on they would have a preparatory meeting before the pre-meeting so that everyone would know how to prepare for the meeting that would review the state of everyone's preparedness before they went to the actual meeting.

Maybe We're Just Working Too Hard

These surreal moments are not the norm for the team, although I suspect that these types of things happen in any large organization anywhere. I have a highly educated, experienced, dedicated group of top-flight professionals, but sometimes we all take ourselves a little too seriously, get worked up over the wrong thing, or hold others accountable for the something silly simply as a result of our drive, momentum, passion, and fatigue. The trick is to keep the teams running smoothly for the majority of the time, and to have enough of a sense of humor to poke fun at ourselves when we let things get weird. I'm the manager, and that's my job.



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