Manager’s Hot Seat Teaching Notes

Video #18 Bullying in the Workplace

Introduction

This scenario explores the complexities of bullying in the workplace. Bullying is a serious form of workplace violence, though workplace bullies typically use words and actions on their victims. This case shows one example of bullying, while adding a second dimension of nepotism since the one bullying is the boss’s sister.

Learning Objectives

1. To analyze approaches for handling a bully.
2. To recognize effective ways to deal with bullying.
3. To understand why threats are ineffective when trying to persuade.

Scenario Description

Overview

Susan Sheppard, Creative Design Manager at Word-of-Mouth Marketing Group, is consistently bullied by her colleague, Alexandra Woodward, the boss's sister. Alexandra has been working at the firm a little over a month, after quitting her job as a Rare Artifacts Curator at the Museum of Indigenous Culture. During her short time at Word-of-Mouth, she has shown a propensity for “self-governance” and defiance. Extra work has been heaped on Sheppard, and she has had to face sarcasm and a constant barrage of inappropriate comments from her newly appointed subordinate.

Profile

* **Susan Sheppard**, Creative Design Manager, Word-of-Mouth. Sheppard has been at Word-of-Mouth for four and a half years and was appointed manager of the Creative Design Department seven months ago.
* **Alexandra Woodward**, Creative Design, Word-of-Mouth. Woodward is the boss’s sister and is the newest and least qualified recruit.

Backstory

The Word-of-Mouth Marketing Department is eight people strong, including Sheppard and her new colleague Woodward, the newest and least qualified recruit.

Woodward shares the boss’s family name, and presumably feels she shares the boss’s default authority, too. She came to the company six months after leaving her job as a museum curator. Only one month into her new career, she is already dictating her own workload and that of others; she dumps work onto Sheppard and is bullying and inappropriate.

In the last two weeks, Sheppard’s desk has been littered with unfinished work originally assigned to Woodward, including design layouts, annual report figures, copyright disputes, and print schedules.

Twice, Sheppard was left with design layouts to complete within three hours of their deadline. On one of those occasions, Woodward had done barely more than sketch text boxes, leaving Sheppard with more than a day’s work to accomplish within an hour and twenty minutes.

When asked to obtain the copyright to publish a particular photograph (featuring a celebrity’s home), Woodward skipped over the details (not even filing the request), almost trashing a print-run of 70,000 brochure covers as well as leaving Word-of-Mouth open to possible legal action. Luckily, Sheppard picked up on Woodward’s oversight and gained permission from the relevant parties before any damage was done.

Woodward point-blank refused to write the annual report figures, saying that as an “Artistic Consultant” it was insulting to ask her to file facts and figures. In fact, Woodward doesn’t have a job title, which is something Sheppard cannot address.

The print schedules, which Woodward was supposed to deliver a week before the commencement of the Approval Stage, arrived on Sheppard’s desk with one day to spare, and, as with the design layouts, were so incomplete, they required Sheppard to put aside her own work and concentrate on getting the schedules out in time.

During a recent meeting with a photographer, Woodward undermined Sheppard continually either by contradicting her suggestions or through disrespectful gestures and sighs.

Whenever Sheppard approaches Woodward’s desk, Woodward initially completely ignores her and then does little to engage in conversation, deliberately avoiding eye contact.

Just four days ago, when Sheppard issued instructions to another member of the team, Woodward took it upon herself to approach the team member and, on “Sheppard’s behalf”, retract the instructions.

When Sheppard initially asked Woodward into her office for a discussion, Woodward created such a scene of angry complaints and accusations of bullying, that Sheppard had to back out of her intention to diffuse the situation.

At every opportunity, Woodward has been bad-mouthing Sheppard to other members of the Creative Design Department.

Scene Setup

Sheppard has scheduled a meeting with Woodward to discuss the completion of one of their big projects—the creation of a new brochure for the home furnishings giant, Soft Landings. More importantly, she hopes to confront Woodward about her bullying behavior.

Scene Location

Sheppard’s office.

The Meeting—Summary

Throughout the meeting, Woodward continues her bullying of Sheppard by making verbal threats and complaining she is a bad superior. In addition to the bullying behavior, she also is rude to Sheppard by answering her cellphone and her overall tone of voice. Sheppard tries to level with Woodward to outline what she sees as her position with Word-of-Mouth. However, Woodward refuses to give a direct answer and constantly plays the “my brother is your boss” card. She continues to skirt around taking any responsibility and suggests she is “above” the work that has been assigned to her. The meeting concludes with Sheppard notifying Woodward that she will be notifying human resources and will be talking with the boss.

Afterthoughts—Summary

Sheppard believes the meeting went poorly. She had a framework in place and Woodward derailed the entire plan. Sheppard is worried about the nepotism issue and notes that she wishes she had recorded the meeting. She concludes by noting that if nothing changes in the firm, she will possibly leave and seek legal action.

Discussion Questions

*Leaning Objective #1 To analyze approaches for handling a bully.*

How effective was Sheppard in handling the meeting with Woodward?

Sheppard made the right choice to host a meeting with Woodward before talking to the boss. She conducted herself professionally most of the time and did not sink to Woodward’s level. Bullies usually look for situations to become escalated, such as yelling or threatening, and they thrive on this type of environment. Sheppard was assertive, yet remained as calm as possible throughout the confrontation. She also refrained from showing weakness and tried to outline how Woodward’s behavior was impacting the work environment.

*Leaning Objective #2 To recognize effective ways to deal with bullying.*

Sheppard called a meeting with Woodward to discuss a current project and her bullying. What are others ways Sheppard might handle the bully situation?

Calling the meeting with Woodward to confront her as a bully is a good first step. Other effective ways that Sheppard can deal with the bully situation would be to:

* Keep notes of the bullying behavior.
* Document all of the bully’s actions (or in this case, inactions).
* Ask co-workers to observe and/or document the bullying situations.
* Check company policies related to employee conduct.
* Seek advice from someone in human resources.
* Tell the boss (though this situation is tricky given the relationship).

*Leaning Objective #3 To understand why threats are ineffective when trying to persuade.*

Throughout the meeting, Woodward constantly threatens Sheppard. Why are threats ineffective?

Threats are statements—either implicit or explicit—that suggest someone will be punished for doing (or not doing) something. In general, threats are ineffective for many reasons: 1) they don’t produce permanent change, 2) they won’t necessarily produce the desire action, 3) they make people abandon action, 4) they produce tension, 5) they provoke counter-aggression, and 6) people dislike and avoid anyone who threatens them.