Manager’s Hot Seat Teaching Notes

Video #19 Work-Life Balance

Introduction

Many organizations recognize the need for work-life balance. This scenario explores this very issue, as well as prompts discussion about corporate culture. In addition, the case shows one approach for delivering negative news to disgruntled employees.

Learning Objectives

1. To recognize the need and importance for employees to balance work and family/life.
2. To analyze the influences of corporate culture.
3. To identify effective approaches for delivering negative news.

Scenario Description

Overview

Samantha Peters, Technical Director at Quantum Gaming, a video-game company, is conducting a scheduling meeting where she must ask employees to put in a serious amount of extra hours to meet a valued customer’s request. In addition to various challenges of her leadership, a discussion of the Quantum Gaming's overall responsibilities to its workers, corporate culture, and work-life balance issues sidetrack the meeting. The employees pressure Samantha to make a decision right then and there; however, she cannot confirm their requests before talking to upper management.

Profile

* Samantha Peters—Technical Director, Quantum Gaming—has been a Technical Director at Quantum Gaming for 12 years, managing a creative force of 40 people.
* Graham Hulbert—Programmer, Quantum Gaming—has been in the company’s design department for 21 years and is a little resentful of Peters for holding the position of Technical Director, although he hasn’t shown any ambition for the position himself.
* Miranda Cortez—Animator, Quantum Gaming—started working in the team two years ago after returning from unpaid maternity leave. Before that she had been working for the marketing department’s design team, but found her position too stressful and creatively limited.
* Tom Anderson—Modeler/Designer, Quantum Gaming—has been at the company since he graduated from university last fall. He’s still a little shell-shocked about being in the working world.

Backstory

Company culture at Quantum Gaming is falling apart. The employees feel overextended on a regular basis. In the past seven months, there have been no fewer than three projects which have pushed the team beyond capacity:

* The Back-to-School educational-games project ran over schedule due to “miscommunication” with the client; Quantum Gaming had failed to meet spec requirements. The fall-out from this situation included pushed back deadlines; consequentially, employees lost four full weekends to play catch-up.
* One of Arcadian’s (Quantum Gaming’s biggest clients) projects expanded in scope and three team members, Linda Kramer, Joe Berry, and Doug Courtier, ended up working two weeks of overtime—late nights and weekends—against a backdrop of inadequate recognition for their efforts.
* In an attempt to build more business, the Quantum Gaming took on a multi-player online games project, even though their skills in this field were limited. One member of the team, Mat Parsons, was burdened with the entire responsibility of producing a workable product. In the end, the project was abandoned and the client compensated by 150% of money paid.

Recently, four employees have quit. Among them, Linda Kramer and Doug Courtier cited stress, exhaustion, and “pathetic recompense” as the key reasons. Mat Parsons checked into rehab for a substance abuse problem after breaking down at the end of the multi-player online games project. Chronic insomnia and a state of hypertension had forced him over the edge.

Scene Setup

Peters arranges a 10am meeting with one of her teams to discuss working extra hours for two weeks to meet the valued client’s request.

The client, Arcadian, has put in a last-minute request to make changes to its new game’s central character before the release date next month. The changes include an overhaul of the design look and a reworking of the character’s special features.

In the meeting, the talking points will be:

* The number of extra hours needed to meet the team’s deadline two weeks from now—Peters will request they work evenings/early mornings and over the weekend.
* The inflexibility of the deadline. This client is extremely important as their business last year represented more than half of Quantum Gaming’s gross income. They call the shots.
* The need for each team member to contribute, as significant aspects of program and design will be affected.
* How the team will be compensated for taking on the extra workload—days in lieu, paid holiday, etc.
* Rescheduling of other projects to fit around the new deadline.

Peters has a tendency to postpone decisions, so the team presses for an immediate response; Peters is also under enormous pressure from the client and upper management.

Scene Location

Conference room at Quantum Gaming.

The Meeting—Summary

Samantha begins the meeting by telling her team that they are going to have work extra hard the next two weeks to finish some last minute changes that Arcadian is demanding. The team is immediately outraged and tells her there isn’t enough time. She informs them that they can put other projects on hold to finish this one project. Each of the team members confesses their grievances with Samantha’s management style. In particular, Tom mentions some of the recent injustices that have occurred, which forced two other employees to leave and one to have a breakdown from being overworked. Tom wants to be paid double overtime over the next two weeks; Miranda wants flexible Fridays, and Graham wants a paid vacation and for Quantum Gaming to stop taking on new projects until old ones are finished.

All of the employees want Samantha to agree to their requests in the meeting; however, she cannot do so until she talks to her boss, Phil. She informs them that she will try her hardest to get their requests approved and will notify them as soon as possible if they are.

Afterthoughts—Summary

Samantha recognizes that she has a disgruntled staff and that they have just cause for their concerns. She believes the meeting was somewhat of a success given the circumstances. She recognizes that she should have eased the team into the upcoming project rather than dumping it on them. In other words, she should have consulted with them about the possibility rather than demanding the needed overtime. Samantha found it difficult to promise the staff certain things without knowing if management above her will approve them. She does not want to bear more negative news if the requests are denied.

Discussion Questions

*Leaning Objective #1 To recognize the need and importance for workers to balance work and family/life.*

Why is it important for Quantum Gaming workers to ask for a balance between work demands and their life? Why is it a smart move on the part of Quantum Gaming to help workers strike this balance?

Student discussion will vary based on students’ own lives and experiences. Those who have been in the workforce for some time may have different responses than students who are just entering or have only been in school. In general, however, workers should have a balance between work and family/life. The worst case scenario for not finding the balance will be someone like Mat Parson who went over the deep end.

In order to reduce turnover and increase employee satisfaction, Quantum Gaming should strive to help employees strike a balance. The cost of constantly hiring new employees and training them far outweighs the small cost of offering current employees flexible work time, telecommuting options, or extended career breaks.

*Leaning Objective #2 To analyze the influences of corporate culture.*

What is the corporate culture of Quantum Gaming based on the meeting? Is this a place where you would like to work? Why or why not?

Corporate culture is a set of values, attitudes, and philosophies, and it varies from one organization to the next.

For Quantum Gaming, the organization clearly values their bottom line more than the mental well-being of their employees. If it didn’t, Quantum would have resolved personnel issues after losing two employees to a competitor and contributing to one employee’s breakdown. The culture of valuing money also comes through in the way projects have been scheduled. Quantum Gaming has taken on more and more projects before current ones are finished in an effort to bring in more business and increase revenues. Finally, Quantum values the bottom line by pandering wholeheartedly to Arcadian’s last minute request to change their game’s central character.

The answer to the second question will vary by students’ personalities. While most probably wouldn’t enjoy the working conditions at Quantum Gaming, some will thrive it in.

*Leaning Objective #3 To identify effective approaches for delivering negative news?*

How effective was Samantha’s approach in delivering the negative news?

One effective approach for delivering negative news is to describe the situation, present a possible alternative or compromise (if available), and then ask for input or action from the audience. Samantha might consider the context of delivering the negative news by asking questions such as whether she has a good relationship with the team or whether the organization treats them well overall.

Samantha’s approach wasn’t initially successful. She immediately jumps in with the bad news—that the team will have to put everything aside and work extra-long hours for the next two weeks. In the follow-up interview, even she recognizes that she might have approached the delivery of the bad news in a different way by first asking hypothetically about the extra work and how the team might cope if they were asked to change the project. Samantha also uses negative words (i.e., “unfortunately”) that signal to the team a negative is coming before she even announces it.