

A Bully Gone Wild

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Things unraveled quickly. Cheryl ducked to avoid being hit and possibly stabbed by the scissors that the assailant had thrown at her. Cheryl got up out of her chair and moved around a table to avoid being further assaulted by one of her employees, a large woman who was moving towards her. To Cheryl's relief, her employee took out her cell phone and made a phone call stating that she just been fired, that Cheryl was a bitch, and they had to get rid of her. In the meantime, Cheryl left the office and out onto the sales floor. A moment or two later, the worker stormed out of the store's inner office and moved out to where Cheryl, the workers, and the customers were -- yelling and cursing the entire time. Everyone in the store watched in amazement as they scuttled about to maintain distance between themselves and the emotionally charged woman. She knocked down and threw merchandise about, tore down and ripped apart store displays as she moved through the store. Thoughts raced through Cheryl's mind. "This is crazy! How long is this going to continue? How far will she go?" Cheryl also wondered how things had gotten to this point and what she could have done differently when dealing with this worker. Nevertheless, she had the immediate situation to deal with and had to decide what to do.

Background

The events that led up to the situation described above began when Cheryl Vaughn saw an advertisement in the newspaper for a job opening for a store manager at a fabric store. Cheryl was excited because the position did not require a college degree. Although she had attended college she had only accumulated 30 credits and had a long way to go to earn her bachelor's degree. The job advertisement also stated that "supervisory experience was preferred." The fact that it was not required made all the difference for Cheryl. In addition, the advertisement indicated that seamstress knowledge and experience were required. Cheryl knew she had that one covered. She had begun to sew when she was a child, had taught sewing at a community center when she was only 14, taught sewing at her high school when she was 16, performed alterations for a dry cleaning business, and while attending college, provided alteration services out of her home to a number of business persons and other individuals. In addition, she had previously worked in three other fabric stores. She had also gained sales and customer service experience in other non-fabric related businesses but she had never held a supervisory or management position. Cheryl hoped that her cumulative experiences would prove enough to qualify her for and get her hired into the store manager position. After talking with her husband and receiving his encouragement, she applied for the job.

A couple of weeks later, Karen Schmidt, the regional manager for the fabric chain, contacted Cheryl. Karen informed Cheryl that she had looked over her application materials and wanted to interview her. She scheduled the interview for Friday of that week which was just a few days off. Cheryl was ecstatic. She really wanted the job.

The fabric store was part of a chain that had over 60 stores throughout the Western U.S. There were on average approximately 25 employees in each store. The organization also had warehouse employees and truck drivers who made deliveries to the stores. In addition, there were dozens of employees who worked at corporate headquarters.

Karen and one of her store managers flew into Cheryl's city to conduct the interviews. The position Cheryl applied for had been vacant for over three months. In the interim, Karen Schmidt had used the store's assistant managers as a group to run the store, hoping that one would rise to the occasion and demonstrate her management capabilities. Unfortunately, that did not happen and Karen had decided to limit the position to external candidates. Because the trial run with the assistant managers had proved to be such a disappointment, Karen had informed the assistant managers that none of them would be considered for the position.

The interview was conducted at the fabric store that had the store manager opening. Cheryl arrived at approximately 9:50 AM for her 10:00 interview. She felt uncomfortable walking through the store toward the office and then sitting in a chair outside the office until she was invited in for her interview. She felt that all of the store employees were staring at her and she got bad "vibes" from them. She experienced the same sort of feelings when she left the interview.

Despite the discomfort, Cheryl believed she had done very well in her interview and she was very excited when she received a call from Karen late that afternoon offering her the job with an annual salary of \$55,000. That figure well exceeded what she had earned working three different part-time jobs and she would receive retirement and health benefits. She lived in a small rural town with a population of approximately 35,000 where the cost of living was relatively low compared to the national average. From her perspective, especially given that she did not have a college degree, the total compensation package was more than fair.

She was to meet Karen and her associate that night to talk more about the job and some of the particulars associated with the store that Cheryl would manage. Karen let Cheryl know the reasons why she had decided to fill the job externally. The store had not performed well under the four assistants, and Karen felt it was time to look elsewhere. Cheryl was informed that all of the assistant managers were female and in their 40s and 50s. This caught Cheryl's attention because she was only 29, quite a bit younger than the existing staff, and quite petit at that, standing only 5' 2" tall and weighing only 105 pounds. Although Cheryl did not know the employees, she had been an occasional customer at the store and had observed that the assistant managers and many of the employees were older and much larger in size than she was. She wondered if she might have any difficulty managing these older, bigger, and more experienced women.

Karen instructed Cheryl to arrive at the store at opening time on Monday morning, introduce herself as the new store manager, request the policies and procedures manual, take it home with her to study it for the day, and when she could find time thereafter. Cheryl had hoped that she would have been trained but was informed by Karen that that was not possible because the previous manager had quit and had moved out of the state. In addition, the closest other store was 100 miles away and Karen explained to Cheryl that the time and expenses required for her to be trained in another store were too great. Besides, Karen added, "these girls have gone long enough without a manager". She told Cheryl that she would just have to learn as she went along and that she could ask the assistant managers and workers questions to help her learn the ropes. Cheryl was very anxious about starting her new job, especially without any training and after Karen told her that the assistant managers were upset that one of them was not appointed store manager. That concerned Cheryl and she wondered if she might be resented and encounter resistance. All things considered, she equated her situation to learning how to swim by being thrown into the water.

The First Day for the New Manager

On Monday morning, Cheryl showed up at the store. As instructed, she gathered her new employees and introduced herself. The employees were aware that a new manager had been hired and would begin working that day, but they were told little else. Softly, but confidently, Cheryl introduced herself. "Hi, my name is Cheryl Vaughn and I have been hired by Karen Schmidt as the new store manager." She shared a little background information about herself, how excited she was to have this job, and that she hoped they would all have an enjoyable and productive time working together. Cheryl informed the workers that she had been instructed to get the policies and procedure manual, to look it over at home, and then return to the store the next day to begin working. In response, one of the assistant managers, Terri, articulated in a mocking manner, almost as if she was spitting the words out, "Well manaaageeeer, let's see if you can manage us!" Cheryl was surprised that an employee would talk that way but she thought it best not to reply to Terri's challenge, at least for the time being. Despite the obvious awkwardness of the situation, Cheryl smiled at the group and made some small talk while she waited for the policies and procedures manual to be brought to her. Fortunately, Terri had nothing else to say and merely listened to the chatter though she had a nasty look on her face, which spoke volumes. When the manual arrived, Cheryl said her goodbyes and left the store, but purposefully, not doing so in a hurry. "I'll be damned if I am going to let her think she ran me out of here today," Cheryl thought to herself.

While driving home, and throughout the day, Cheryl thought about Terri's behavior. All she could come up with was that Terri must have behaved that way because she was frustrated that she had not gotten the job. She wondered if this type of behavior from Terri would continue, if it might prove contagious, and if so, what could she do to squelch it from the outset, or at least as close to the outset as she could.

Cheryl felt that managing this store was an incredible opportunity. She knew it would take a lot of time, energy and commitment and realized that she had a lot to learn but she had always been a hard worker and knew she could do it. "If anyone could make this work, I can" she thought. "I

have the technical skills and a lot of customer service experience.” However, she knew that she had not managed before which concerned her especially after her initial encounter with Terri.

Cheryl studied the policies and procedures manual and found much of it to be interesting and potentially useful. Included were policies regarding overtime and holiday pay, rest and lunch breaks, jury leave, and non-discrimination. In addition, there were multiple statements indicating that employment was at-will which Cheryl concluded meant that a manager could terminate any of his/her employees, at any time with or without good cause. The manual also included the organization’s disciplinary policies which included progressive discipline. Progressive discipline is a process in which employers give employees a series of escalating warnings for inadequate performance or unacceptable conduct (Mathis et al., 2014). As she looked over these materials she could see they were similar to the disciplinary policies she had encountered at a couple of her former employers. (Excerpts from the policies and procedures manual pertaining to employee conduct and discipline are provided in Appendix A of this case.)

She was surprised that the manual placed such a large emphasis on employment-at-will (EAW) and that EAW superseded any requirement by the fabric chain to follow its progressive disciplinary policy. More specifically, the manual stated that: “With the exception of the ‘at will’ employment policy stated in this manual, company practices, policies, and programs may be amended at any time, and may vary from a particular practice, policy, or program. This handbook does not create contractual terms of employment or an express or implied contract of employment. Rather, the contents of this manual are intended to serve as general guidelines concerning some present practices, programs, and policies.”

The policies and procedures manual had been developed by the Human Resource Department that was located at corporate headquarters. The manual indicated that if store managers or employees had any questions pertaining to the manual that they should contact corporate Human Resources. Cheryl figured she would take advantage of their knowledge at every opportunity because she was starting from scratch.

A Rocky Few Months for the New Manager

Cheryl returned to the store the next day. While Cheryl had previously worked in a three other fabric stores, they each operated differently. They each had their own set policies and procedures, cash register and inventory ordering systems, different methods for displaying materials, conducting sales, and advertising. As a result, Cheryl had to ask her employees questions about some of the most basic store procedures. When she did, her workers seemed to look at her and their coworkers in disbelief. It was as if they were thinking, “So you are the manager and you don’t know these things?” This added a lot of stress and discomfort for Cheryl, and it did little for her self-confidence and credibility. The first days passed slowly and Cheryl felt very much alone.

During her first couple of months as the manager, Cheryl phoned and emailed HR about a number of things she had questions about. However, it did not take her long to realize that HR was short staffed and they seemed to be quite overwhelmed with what they had to do. Compounding that, Cheryl felt some of the answers she received were perfunctory and they

failed to return some of her emails and phone calls. She did not feel she was getting what she needed from HR and stopped using it as a source of information.

Cheryl realized that Terri had been the informal leader during the months that the fabric store had operated without a manager. The other employees seemed to like Terri and they went to her when they had questions. She was good at what she did and had worked at the store a long time. She appeared to have the loyalty of the other assistant managers and employees.

Cheryl knew that she was the outsider and she tried very hard to be nice to her employees, including Terri. Cheryl made an extra effort to try to win Terri over by complementing Terri for how much she knew about the technical aspects of the fabric business and on her effective customer service. Despite Cheryl's attempts to be complementary and friendly, Terri was terse with and uncivil toward Cheryl. In addition, Cheryl felt that Terri purposely used her larger size to physically intimidate her. For example, Terri would often put her body in a position that made it difficult for Cheryl to get by her in the narrow aisles and small cashier area.

Despite the challenges, Cheryl tried hard to juggle learning the details of the store and getting to know the employees, while having to tiptoe around Terri. As the weeks passed, Cheryl asked fewer and fewer questions and became more comfortable as she learned the nuances of the store, got to know the workers a little better, and most of them were more friendly with Cheryl. However, things were still far from perfect. Terri continued to make it difficult for Cheryl to get around her, used her body to move Cheryl, and regularly gave short and abrupt responses to Cheryl's questions. Cheryl was also convinced that Terri made snide comments about her to the other workers.

After a few months of managing the store, Liz, a new employee who Cheryl had hired two weeks earlier, walked into Cheryl's office. It was clear to Cheryl that Liz was very uncomfortable and nervous. "Cheryl, I wanted to share with you what went on yesterday while you were out of the store. Terri was bad mouthing you again and questioning your ability to manage the store. She told us that you have no idea what you are doing and that you never should have been hired. She was pressuring the other assistant managers and the workers to make things difficult for you. She figured if we did that then you would eventually quit or you would be fired. Also it wasn't that she was just trying to stir things up, but some of our customers could hear what she was saying." Cheryl could feel her face heat up and she was very upset about Terri's shenanigans. Cheryl thanked Liz and then sat alone in her office for a while as she thought about the situation. "Well things haven't improved as much as I had thought and Terri is only trying to make the situation worse."

Cheryl knew that she could not allow Terri to sabotage her reputation or job and she adamant that she was not going to stand for it. "I was the one who was hired as the store manager, not Terri. Terri had her chance and blew it before I was hired. Who does she think she is trying to ruin things for me?" Cheryl realized what she had to do and that action would involve some risks, and she had a lot on the line, possibly her job. She had not counseled Terri about any of her concerns nor documented any of the problems that she had had with Terri. In addition, she realized that she was taking Liz at her word about what Terri was up to. Nevertheless, Liz seemed like a good person and Cheryl believed that she had told her the truth.

Cheryl knew what she wanted to do but she wondered, “What if Karen does not agree with my actions? What if she doesn’t support me and reverses my decision? Well, I can’t worry about that now and will just have to see what happens. If Karen doesn’t back me up then I don’t want to work here.”

It was not long after Cheryl’s conversation with the Liz regarding Terri’s unacceptable behavior, that Cheryl called Carla, one of her assistant managers, into the office. “Carla, I have asked you to be here so that you can observe and serve as a witness of what is going to follow.” That statement certainly got Carla’s attention and caused her eyes to open widely. Next, Cheryl called Terri into the office. She asked her to take a seat and started right in. “Terri, I am aware of your constant criticism of me and how I manage the store. I find your behaviors to be unwarranted and disruptive, and I can’t allow you to treat me, your manager, the way you have any longer. Effectively immediately, you are no longer an employee of this store.” Before Cheryl could say anything more, Terri got up out of her chair with a look on her face and accompanying body language that led Cheryl to believe that she was ready to tear Cheryl apart. Her face had turned dark red which was in stark contrast to Carla’s facial color which had turned white! Terri became unraveled and was emotionally charged. She called Cheryl every nasty name in the book while she pulled things out of her pockets and threw them at Cheryl. One of the items she tossed was a pair of very heavy metal scissors (Gingher brand). Fortunately Cheryl was able to duck in time and the scissors flew over her head, narrowly missing her. In the meantime, Carla had flattened herself up against one of the walls with a look of terror on her face. After throwing her arsenal of items, Terri started coming around the table toward Cheryl. Cheryl and Carla quickly moved around the table to avoid Terri, not having a clue how far her aggressive behavior might go. Terri used her cell phone and called an off-duty employee. Almost shouting she said she was fired, that Cheryl was a bitch and that they had to get rid of her. While Terri was still on the phone, Cheryl and Carla slipped out of the office to avoid any physical altercations.

Within a minute or so, Terri stormed out of the office. She moved through the store tossing merchandise about, knocking down and pulling down displays, throwing them on the floor, swearing all the while. The store was open for business at the time and customers were present.

“This is crazy! How long is this going to continue? How far will she go?” Throughout the ordeal, Cheryl wondered what if anything she had done to cause this, if she should have handled the situation differently, and what if anything she should do now. She was not trained for anything like this nor had she encountered anything like it before. Cheryl realized she was the store manager and that people were looking to her to deal with the situation. Should I call the police? Should I get the help of others and try to restrain her? “Should I evacuate the store? I have got to do something!”

Appendix A

Excerpts from the Fabric Firm's Policies and Procedures Manual

Rules of Conduct

Whenever people work together, their safety, efficiency and well-being requires adherence to certain rules of conduct. Management's policy is to keep rules to a minimum.

These rules are not intended to create any contractual terms of employment, express or implied, nor do they constitute an express or implied contract of employment. They do not affect management's right to terminate employment "at will", with or without notice or cause. Thus, the following are the usual but not exclusive guidelines for conduct, discipline and/or discharge and may at any time be amended, modified or rescinded as management deems necessary.

Among the job performance characteristics required of each employee are the following:

- Work competently and independently with a minimum of supervision.
- Regular attendance and punctuality at work.
- Compliance with all workplace safety and health procedures.

[Some other items listed in the handbook have been omitted.]

An employee who fails to maintain at all times proper standards of conduct, or who commit acts such as those appearing in the following list, shall be subject to immediate disciplinary action, up to and including termination:

- Unsatisfactory job performance.
- Improperly seeking or obtaining unauthorized access to work areas, computer systems, or confidential or restricted data, documents or other materials.
- Improperly using the company's e-mail system and/or access to the Internet for any purpose that is not reasonably related to an employee's job functions and duties, or in any manner that would violate any other Rule of Conduct contained in this handbook, or in any manner that would violate the company's "Internet Policy".
- Lack of respect for others (bullying) is repeated inappropriate behavior that is directed at another person at the place of work and/or in the course of employment.
- Conduct that threatens, intimidates or coerces another employee, customer, vendor or business associate.

[Some other items listed in the handbook have been omitted.]

Because rule violations have an adverse effect on the continuity, efficiency and safety of operations, a violation may result in immediate disciplinary action including oral warnings, written warning notices, suspension and termination. A warning notice generally will contain specific incidents, dates and corrective action.

Sources that Students Can Consult

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