

Too Big for His Britches

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Confusion

Chad sat alone in his car slightly stunned. “What the heck?” he said out loud. He wondered if he could figure out what had just happened and why. He sat and stared at the two pieces of paper in his hand. He had worked hard, performed well, and offered suggestions for improvements, and termination was his reward! How did that make any sense at all?

As one of a handful of part-time workers—four-to-eight high school or college guys (depending on the season) Chad was accustomed to being treated as an inferior by some of the full-timers at the soft drink bottling plant. The department heads treated the part-timers well. They realized the value of the cheap labor in tasks, such as moving pallets full of stock through the plant, cleaning trucks, or doing the heaving lifting to install soft drink vending machines or signage. However, many of the dozen or so factory workers and the half-dozen route drivers were rather condescending. The part-timers thought the treatment just went with the territory. They also realized the abusers were taking their lead from the owner’s son, Dan Jr., who was openly derisive. Dan Jr.’s attitude seemed odd given since he was being groomed to take over the family-owned company from his father. Dan Jr. was nothing like his father, Dan Sr.

Chad took his termination hard. He even went to his business law professor at the local college to see if there was anything he could do to get his job back. The professor patiently explained that he lived and worked in an *at will* state, meaning the worker had no recourse. Chad then turned his attention back to his class work and to finding a new job. The job search would be difficult in this town of twenty thousand people, especially after having been fired by one of the leading businesses. Chad tried to forget the soft drink bottling company and all of its problems. But still, he just could not forget his trip back to the bottling plant to pick up his final paycheck.

Flashback to Last Week’s Conversation

“Haven’t seen you for a few days, Chad. You been sick or just busy with college classes?” Dan Sr. seemed genuinely concerned. Most of his employees called him “The Old Grouch” behind his back after he’d made his afternoon rounds to see if the part-timers were keeping busy, but he always treated Chad well. This time, though, Chad was a little surprised by his concern.

“No, sir,” Chad eased into the statement, “I thought you fired me.”

“What?!” The seventy-year-old voice bounced off all the far walls of the soft drink bottling plant. “Fired you? Me? What are you talking about?”

“Well, sir,” Chad proceeded cautiously, “I came in to work ten days ago and I didn’t have a time card in the card rack, so I went into the office to ask why. Dan Jr. told me I didn’t have a job any longer and that I should come back today to pick up my paycheck.”

“Did he say why?” Obviously, this was the first that Dan Sr. had heard of this situation.

“Well, he said that I had gotten ‘too big for my britches.’” Chad would never forget those words.

“What did he mean by that?” Dan Sr. slumped onto a nearby bench as he began putting the pieces together. Ten days had passed since his last big fight with his wayward son who had recently returned to inherit and manage the business. They had fought about personnel issues and this last fight had been triggered by Dan Sr. telling Dan Jr. to give certain people merit raises. One of those people was Chad.

“I don’t know. He just walked away,” Chad explained. Then he noticed the older man, who at times had been like a grandfather to him, was turning pale. “Are you okay, sir?”

Dan Sr. was obviously distracted by his thoughts. “Huh? Oh yeah, I’m fine.” As he rose slowly to his feet, he mumbled, “I need to get to the bottom of this.” Then more loudly stated, “Come back next Wednesday, Chad. I’ll have something for you. Come between 1 and 2 in the afternoon if you can, ‘cause that’s Junior’s lunch hour.”

When Chad arrived a week later, he was offered a leather side chair in Dan Sr.’s office, the “inner sanctum.” The word around the company was that no part-timer had ever been in the inner sanctum where the shelves were lined with an amazing fifty-year collection of soft drink bottles of all shapes, sizes, and brands; most of which were unfamiliar to Chad.

After a brief conversation, Dan Sr. smiled warmly and simply said, “I hate to lose you.” Then his eyes misted and he rose to leave the room. As he did, he put his hand on Chad’s back and handed Chad an envelope from the top drawer of his desk as he led Chad to the door.

When Chad opened the envelope in his car, two pieces of paper fell out. One was a check for two-weeks pay; a severance paycheck signed by Dan Sr. The other paper was a very brief letter of recommendation that simply said “Chad is a hard worker and will be an asset to have in the right job.” It was signed by Dan Jr.

Reflection

Chad sat in his car for a long time. He reflected on other events he had observed over the past couple of years of his employment at the bottling plant. The bottling plant was owned by a family corporation. Dan Sr. was the CEO and majority stockholder. Chad had heard rumors that Dan Sr.’s ex-wife also owned a substantial part of the company’s stock. The rest of the business

had been divided among the couple's three sons, two of whom were successful businessmen in other parts of the country.

Now in his mid-thirties, Dan Jr. had graduated from a state university and had gone to work for his oldest brother. Chad distinctly remembered the day a year and a half ago that Dan Sr. brought Dan Jr. into the plant and announced to all that his "prodigal son has returned." At the same time, Dan Sr. announced that his son would fill the new director of operations position while he learned the business to prepare Dan Jr. to take over when Dan Sr. retired. Chad recalled the older man's broad smile and his son's devious-looking grin. It was the last time Chad remembered Dan Sr. smiling.

Chad reflected on the many rumors that he had heard at the business over the years. It seemed that Dan Jr. had worked as a part-timer at the business during his high school years and during the summer during both high school and college; however, his part-time job was in the office. People who had been with the company for some time said that Dan Sr.'s marriage had dissolved when Dan Jr. left home to attend college, and that Junior had become a pawn in his parents' divorce. They said that sooner or later Junior's mother would find a way to use Junior to take the business away from his father. Dan Sr. never talked about that possibility, but he seemed increasingly stressed the longer that Dan Jr. worked at the plant.

The full-timers in the plant did not like Junior much at all. The head of bottling, who had been with the company since Dan Sr. had started the business, treated Junior like a child. The head of delivery routes, who had his own route until he hurt his back somehow covering for Junior, did not care for Junior either. Additionally, the head of maintenance, who mostly fixed vending machines, was openly hostile to Dan Jr. So, evidence of past problems were abundant.

Chad's recollections fast forwarded to three months after Junior's arrival when Sarah, a pleasant highly-competent grandmotherly bookkeeper, was replaced with a young bombshell, Sherry. Chad's only interactions with Sherry were the several times when he asked why his weekly paycheck was made out for fewer hours than he had worked. Sherry's answer was always the same: She would make it up to Chad on the next paycheck, and a few times she actually came through on that promise.

Chad had raised the question in his college ethics class as to whether Sherry's behavior was ethical. He did his best to not let anyone know he was referring to Sherry. He used phrases like "What if a bookkeeper always shorted employees on their hours?" The instructor said that such actions would be caught by an outside auditor. When Chad pressed the question, the instructor said the bookkeeper is either incompetent or pocketing the money. That answer only frustrated Chad since that was the conclusion the rumor mongers at the bottling plant had already made.

Several other part-timers had the same problem with Sherry. When one of them complained to Dan Jr., the latter turned bright red and yelled at the worker saying, "She's doing the best that she can!" That worker was loudly and publicly dismissed by Dan Jr. within a couple weeks for "goofing off." The story was that the two of them—Dan Jr. and the terminated employee—had gone to the warehouse to retrieve a pick-up load of new aluminum can stock. The warehouse was about a half-mile from the bottling plant and that was where the misbehavior occurred. Of

course, no witnesses were there to substantiate the worker's defense of himself. His parting remark, shouted over his shoulder at Dan Jr., was, "I wonder if your wife would like to hear about Sherry. I bet she wouldn't appreciate what I saw in the office after closing time last week."

After that, no one dared to question Dan Jr.'s actions, although the part-timers talked about a growing number of what they considered to be bone-headed moves among themselves. Chad chuckled as he thought about a fairly-recent instance. Dan Jr. wanted more control over the drivers so he could set higher sales quotas, which he assumed would lead to more sales and more profit for him. He wanted to have a drivers' meeting each afternoon to indoctrinate them into his new plans for the company, and Dan Jr. always got what he wanted.

To implement his plan, Dan Jr. told the part-timers that they needed to load the six route drivers' trucks each evening. The drivers had always loaded their own trucks, since they knew their routes and their customers' needs. Dan Sr. had trusted the drivers to do the best they could, which they did because they were paid on a commission basis. Dan Jr. wanted to implement a new pay structure where the drivers would get a minimum hourly wage if they didn't reach the quota he had set. Of course, Dan Jr. knew that the drivers would be in an uproar over that intention and would probably take their case to Dan Sr.; therefore, Dan Jr. intended to show the drivers that he was a good a manager by not requiring them to load their trucks for the next day. Surely the drivers would take his side and become his allies.

The part-timers, a few of whom were business majors at the local college, quickly saw two flaws in Dan Jr.'s plan. First, the drivers did not return to the plant at the same time each day, and none of the drivers arrived at the loading dock at the same time as any of the other drivers. So when Dan Jr. announced a drivers' meeting would be held at 4 p.m., some drivers were early and some were late. Those who were early had to wait, meaning they spent extra hours at the plant when they could have been loading their own trucks for the next day and could have gone home from work. Those who were late were told to get to the next meeting on time, meaning they would spend less time selling; and therefore, they would not be able meet the higher quotas set by Dan Jr. Rather than create allies, he had succeeded in alienating and demotivating the drivers.

The other major problem was that the part-timers had no idea regarding the selection of soft drinks they should load on each truck. Each driver's route varied each day. For example, the local city driver would stop at four large and two small grocery stores on two days each week. On another day, he would visit upwards of twenty gas stations and convenience stores. On a fourth day, his route would include most of the restaurants in town. On the fifth day, he would catch all the bars and pubs. The extra time each day would be filled with an assortment of other firms, such as liquor stores, manufacturing plants, and schools, and for varying reasons the driver had to set an appointment to meet the buyer at each organization. The bottom line was that only the driver knew how to load the truck so that the right number of cases of the right soft drinks were in the right spot on the truck to unload at each location. Consequently, the driver had to provide the part-timers with a list of the variety of cases of soft drinks to load as well as a map regarding where to place the inventory on the truck. Obviously, a driver would spend more time creating the list and the load map than he would have spent loading his own truck.

Being a problem-solver by nature and having paid attention in his business logistics class, Chad asked a couple of the drivers whether the two problems could be solved if the daily routes were standardized more than what they had been. Then Dan Jr. would have a better idea regarding when the drivers might arrive at the plant, and the part-timers would know what to load on each truck for the next day. One of the drivers thought Chad had a good idea. Another of the drivers just said “Mind your own business, college kid.” Chad was pretty sure that the driver was just kidding, but his comment stung just the same.

Clarity

Alone in his car, Chad shook his head out of the recollection mode as the dots connected. As he started the car and eased away from the curb, he mumbled to himself, “So, my idea finally got back to Dan Jr. At least now I know how I am too big for my britches.” But Chad also knew that problems lay ahead for Dan Sr. and for the business. He really liked Dan Sr. and was concerned about the future of this business, but being a “college kid” and a part-timer there was really nothing he could do. Besides, Dan Sr. had decided that Dan, Jr. was going to take over operations of the business. Chad couldn’t help but wonder if the business would survive the change in leadership.