

I Seem to Be Going from Bad to Worse

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Introduction

My name is Javier and I work for Food Processing, Inc., a company comprising a number of plants that collectively employ several thousand production workers manufacturing and packaging a variety of food products. I work the graveyard shift at our local company plant, which employs over 1,000 people, a significant number of whom are Hispanic like me. When the day and swing shifts have finished processing food for the day, my co-workers and I, most of whom have a high school education or less, come in overnight and use high-pressure hoses and other tools to wash down all of the equipment and sanitize it in preparation for the next day's operation. This job is relatively simple, does not require hard labor, and fits with my college schedule--I can attend classes during the day and work at night. This is one reason it is important for me to continue to work at the company while I am in school. Thinking longer term, since it is a large and fairly diversified corporation, I may possibly begin a career with the company following my graduation with a degree in business management.

Recently, I have experienced some problems involving interactions with my boss and co-workers. I am specifically concerned about the outcomes of three recent incidents. In fact, the most recent incident almost cost me my job. As a result, I am very nervous about staying in the good graces of my boss and co-workers and keeping my job at least until I graduate. I wonder how I could have handled each of the three situations better, and I am concerned about whether or not these situations collectively signal a larger problem I should be worried about.

The Company

Food Processing, Inc.'s production facilities are housed in two adjacent structures, Building #1 and Building #2, each of which employs approximately 500-600 workers on its assembly lines during the day shifts and about 40-50 workers on the clean-up crew overnight. I was just 19 years old when I started with the company and have worked on the night shift in Building #2 for over three years now.

The people who work with me on the night shift are an interesting group. I am one of the youngest employees; most of my co-workers are at least 10 to 15 years older than me. Also, I am one of only a few employees who are going to college. When I have told my co-workers that I am going to college, some of them have said that they wished they could go but they can't because of their kids or other life circumstances.

The turnover rate for new people hired for the night shift here is high. I would bet that for every six employees who are hired, five quit within the first month. However, the employees who don't quit seem to stick around for a long time. Some of the people who work with me on the line have been working at the same job for over 15 years.

Many of the workers on the night shift are Hispanic. In fact, workers in Building #1 sometimes call Building #2 "Little Mexico." On my crew, for example, eight of the ten of us are Hispanic. However, this does not mean that we only speak Spanish at work or anything like that. In fact, some of the guys on the line are the fifth generation of their families to live in the United States and have never spoken Spanish. While a lot of the employees are Hispanic, our supervisors are almost all Caucasian.

Now let me describe the three incidents involving my co-workers and bosses that have made me worry.

Incident #1

During a typical shift, my co-workers and I begin with a 10:00 p.m. meeting when we are assigned our duties for the night and sent out into the plant. Our task is to thoroughly clean the entire assembly line with high-pressure hoses. A frustrating aspect of the job is that some parts of the machinery are more difficult to clean than others. For example, bread dough and tomato sauce can become lodged in parts of the assembly line that are hidden and difficult to reach. As a result, we have to take apart the machines to clean in as many of the hard-to-reach areas as we can. Another complication is that electrical parts of the machinery must remain dry, so we have to clean them by hand without the aid of the hoses. In addition, if someone fails to clean adequately at any point along the assembly line, the resulting contamination will proceed down the rest of the line once production resumes, so we have to be conscientious and clean everything thoroughly.

One day, one of my co-workers named Scott, who trained with me when I first started at the company and had become a good friend, was having personal problems at home. Scott was usually reliable and did a good job of cleaning his assigned machines, but on this particular night he did not. Another co-worker named Vinnie and I felt bad for Scott, and we did not want him to get hurt. If his mind was on other things, he could easily injure himself around the heavy machinery. Also, if Scott did not get his job done, it would reflect badly on the rest of us. While Scott took a longer than usual lunch break to clear his head and call his wife, Vinnie and I decided to help him out and finished his work for him.

The next day, Scott was feeling better, but he said he was tired because of his problems at home. So once again, Vinnie and I helped him out. We did not think much about it because we have both been in similar situations and we understood his plight. However, as the week went on, Scott became less and less serious about his job. He started to joke around and fell behind in his work on purpose. Vinnie and I tried to motivate Scott, telling him to “get your rear in gear” so that he would get his work done with the rest of us, but Scott kept goofing off. Finally, one night Vinnie and I finished our jobs and started to leave when our supervisor told us that we needed to stay and help Scott finish his work so that the assembly line could start on time. I was angry because I was planning a barbecue later in the day and I wanted to get some rest, but Vinnie and I grudgingly stuck around and helped Scott finish his job.

At the barbecue that afternoon, Scott showed up and I pulled him aside. I asked him why he was messing around instead of working hard like he used to. He replied that he didn’t want to work hard and he knew that Vinnie and I would help him. “Why should I work so hard,” he said, “if I get paid just the same as you for working less?” I was shocked by what he said. Scott was taking advantage of the rest of us and getting away with it.

I wondered if I should tell my supervisor about Scott’s behavior. I knew that he would continue to slack off and that Vinnie and I would be forced to help finish his work after we had completed our own work. On the other hand, I considered Scott to be a friend. I did not want to tell on him and risk seeing him get fired. I felt like I was stuck in a predicament.

Sure enough, Scott continued to neglect his work, and Vinnie and I did our best to cover for him. But some nights our work took longer and we did not have the time to do Scott’s job in addition to our own. One night, Scott was so lazy and irresponsible that he failed to clean his part of the machinery before the production line was turned on the next morning. When the quality assurance representative from the state health department inspected the assembly line at the beginning of the day, he found that the entire unit did not meet sanitation regulations, and our full crew was called back in to rewash the line. At this point, I became aggravated and went to Scott and told him that he needed to improve or I would talk to Roberto, our supervisor. Scott’s lips curled into a smirk. “Go ahead,” he said. “I’ll just tell Roberto that I’m doing the best that I can. What can he do about it?”

I about snapped. Rather than yell at Scott right there in front of everyone, I stormed straight over to Roberto’s office and asked if I could talk to him privately. Roberto had been my supervisor for several years, and we were friends outside of work. Sometimes on weekends we shot baskets together or went four-wheeling. I asked Roberto if Scott’s assignment could be shifted to some equipment located in an isolated area separate from the rest of the line where there would be no one else to blame if Scott neglected his duties. Roberto agreed to my request and Scott was moved the next day.

Incident #2

Not long after the first incident, I found myself caught up in a second situation that started when the company hired Jorge to work on our line cleaning crew. Jorge was in his mid-50s at the time

and much older than most of the rest of us on the line. For example, Vinnie was 39 years old and I was just 20.

Since Jorge was new, he was assigned to clean the same piece of basic equipment that most of us began with when we first started at the plant. We liked Jorge because he seemed nice and outgoing. He was very outspoken and he used rough language, but he goofed around with us like he was one of the guys and kept things loose and fun.

As much as we liked Jorge, however, his performance did not improve as he went through and completed his training. It got so bad that Roberto, our supervisor, called a meeting with the rest of our crew and asked us if we thought that Jorge should be transferred to another part of the plant. We had to admit among ourselves that Jorge was not a good worker, but we liked joking around with him--it made working the graveyard shift a little more tolerable. So we told Roberto that Jorge was a good worker and that we thought he just needed more time to learn his job.

Roberto looked at us funny, probably wondering if we were being serious since he was well aware that Jorge was working on the easiest piece of equipment on the line. However, he must have understood our reluctance to see Jorge get transferred, because he accepted our recommendation and said that he would give Jorge another chance.

Vinnie and I decided that we needed to help Jorge do his job more efficiently, but we were worried that it would look to him like we were trying to be his boss. We had not even told Jorge about the crew meeting with Roberto. Finally, Vinnie came over to me and said that I should tell Jorge to start at the beginning of the line rather than in the middle in order to get the job done more effectively. "But you're a lot older than me," I told Vinnie. "Why not tell him yourself? He might take it better from you."

Vinnie explained that I got along better with Jorge than he did and I had worked longer at the company, so I had seniority. Reluctantly, I went over to talk to Jorge. However, I didn't want to seem like I was trying to be the boss and tell him what to do. I simply wanted to help him out and give him some pointers. For that reason, I kind of yelled at him like I do when I joke around with him, and told him to "get your slow ass to the beginning of the line and do your job." Like I mentioned before, we mess around a lot. In response, he turned around and told me to take my advice and "put it where the sun don't shine." I laughed about it as he headed toward the beginning of the line. I figured that he had listened to me and understood.

About five minutes later, Vinnie got my attention and told me to look over at Jorge to see what he was doing. Jorge was once again at the middle of the line, while the product was building up at the beginning. Therefore, I once again yelled at him to ask what he was doing. He turned, looked at me, and then flipped me off. I still thought that we were playing around like we always did. So I told him once again to go to the beginning of the line because that's where the product was building up. This time however, Jorge looked at me with a serious face and told me to go to hell. And then, just when I thought he was going to walk off the line and storm out of the building, he turned back around, headed toward the beginning of the line, and did what I had told him to do.

During lunch break, Jorge did not sit with the rest of us as he usually did. I sent Vinnie to find out what was going on. Vinnie came back and reported that Jorge was really upset. Jorge had told Vinnie that I was acting like his boss and he thought I was “just a little punk kid who thinks he can tell me what to do. He doesn’t know how to respect his elders.” Vinnie explained that, according to Jorge, if I had just come out and explained why he should work from the front of the line, Jorge would not have reacted the way that he did. I was upset and I wanted to explain to Jorge why I said what I did. However, since Vinnie had already talked to Jorge, I decided not to go up to him and try to discuss it again myself. I figured the best way to handle the situation would be to wait until the next day to approach Jorge.

The next day, I said “Hi” to Jorge, but he just turned away and ignored me. This went on for days; it was clear that Jorge was really angry with me. I thought Jorge’s behavior was childish, but I didn’t think that going up to him would make matters any better. So Jorge and I continued not speaking for several weeks. In the meantime, however, Jorge’s performance started to improve. The funny thing is that we eventually started to talk and joke again like we had before, but I think we both had our pride and didn’t want to admit that we were wrong. We never discussed the situation, and I still don’t think that I did anything wrong.

Incident #3

As I continued working the graveyard shift, I developed a closer relationship with my supervisor Roberto. Since school was starting again and I was getting into more difficult classes, I asked Roberto if I could work fewer days. He explained that he really needed me to continue working five days a week, but he suggested that I could work from 10:00 p.m. to 3:00 a.m. (the usual lunch break time) instead of the full 10:00 p.m. to 6:30 a.m. shift. If I needed extra time to study for an exam, he offered to let me come in a little later or leave a little earlier, so long as I told him in advance. It seemed like a good arrangement to me, so I accepted it.

My agreement with Roberto worked fine until Roberto had to take a leave of absence for a day. A woman named Ivy, who normally works with us as a member of our line cleaning crew, serves as the substitute supervisor when Roberto is away. A couple of times before when I had left early, Ivy had asked me why I got to go when others had to stay. I always answered her by explaining that I had an agreement with Roberto to leave early each night so I could get some extra rest before class the next day. I thought she seemed to be a bit jealous of my special arrangement because at different times she said things to me like “I wish I could leave early every night,” “I wish I could go to school, but I have kids,” and “It must be nice to always get off three hours early.” On the other hand, she had also told me that I was doing well to be able to work and go to school.

However, on the day that Ivy took over for Roberto, when I went in to remind her about my agreement with Roberto and said I would be leaving at 2:30 a.m., she replied that she did not know that I had permission to leave early.

I finished my work by 2:30 and went to find Ivy to let her know I was leaving, but I could not find her anywhere. I searched the entire building and asked a couple of people if they had seen her, but no one had. I thought that was strange because the supervisor was responsible for checking on the lines right before lunch break. By this time, it was already 3:00, and I had to go. I told Vinnie to tell Ivy that I had looked for her and could not find her. Then I took off to get some sleep before school.

The next evening when I came to work, I said hello to Ivy like I always did. She told me, "You're gone, you're fired! You walked out of the job last night, and I was looking everywhere for you and could not find you. I also asked other people if they had seen you, and nobody had. I thought something had happened to you."

I was upset and thought that Ivy must really have been concerned for my well-being, so I explained that I had searched all over for her before leaving. I explained that, when I could not find her and no one else said they had seen her, I had told Vinnie to let her know because I really had to leave. Ivy seemed surprised that I had a good response. It was almost as if she really believed that I had taken off, out of the blue, without letting anyone know. She forced a weak smile and said that she was just glad that nothing had happened to me. Then she apologized because she had already told Roberto what I had done and she hoped it would not cause trouble for me. Given my working relationship with Roberto, I was fairly confident and I proceeded to go about my work as usual.

At around midnight, Roberto came up to me with an irritated look on his face. "Hey, Javier," he said. "Come to my office. We have to talk." As I followed him to his office, I asked if our conversation was about the night before, which Roberto confirmed. When we reached the office, we were met by the plant supervisor, Richard. I had met Richard before and we were on friendly terms, but a meeting with Richard usually meant that something was seriously wrong. I started to sweat.

Richard asked both Roberto and me to take a seat. Whenever Richard had an issue with an employee, he usually had Roberto join him, so I knew that something was wrong. Richard turned and asked me to explain what had happened the previous night. I told Richard exactly what I had told Ivy--that I had finished early, that I had an ongoing arrangement with Roberto to leave early from work to prepare for school, and that I had searched for Ivy for half an hour and I could not find her.

Richard said that Ivy had come to him and told him that she had looked for me and that I was the one who could not be found. At this point, it was my word against Ivy's. Fortunately for me, Ivy had been caught lying several times in the past, whereas I had built a reputation for telling the truth. Richard knew Ivy's reputation, so rather than reprimand me he told me that it was my responsibility to get approval from my supervisor before leaving regardless of any previous arrangements. If I had been more responsible, Richard said, the situation could have been avoided. Richard then told Roberto that, since it was Roberto's fault this situation had occurred in the first place because he had not told Ivy about our arrangement, Roberto would be responsible for sorting it all out. I figured that Roberto would side with me.

Then Roberto called a meeting to have a talk with Ivy and me together in his office. When the meeting began, Ivy told Roberto that she had been worried because she looked everywhere for me and couldn't find me. I told Roberto that I, in fact, had looked everywhere for Ivy and could not find her. (What Ivy did not know was that several people had already told me earlier that night that Ivy had taken an early break for lunch to smoke a cigarette in her car along with other co-workers, which is why I could not find her.)

Then Ivy tried to change the subject by claiming that I had not left early to get ready for school but to go party with my friends. That was so untrue, it made me really angry. I could hardly contain myself. I asked Ivy if she had any witnesses or any evidence to support her claims. I told Roberto that if she could produce a shred of evidence that I was partying instead of studying or sleeping, that I would resign right then and there.

It looked like Roberto was ready to take my side. "This has nothing to do with what anyone does outside of work," he told Ivy. "This is about what happened at work." Immediately, Ivy started to get emotional and was on the verge of crying. Roberto then suddenly seemed to switch sides and started to tell me that I was lucky that he did not fire me. He said that I was on thin ice because Ivy was the person in charge and I should have listened to her. As Roberto scolded me, I shot a glance at Ivy. She had a smirk on her face.

I felt my face turn red. I turned to Roberto and told him that I did not like being threatened. If I had to work as though I were on thin ice all the time, I told him that I would rather quit. Roberto looked shocked by my response. He probably expected me to take my scolding quietly. Suddenly, Roberto backed down and said that I was not on thin ice, nor was he planning to fire me. I realized that Roberto was bluffing to try to keep Ivy from crying. Rather than get into a big fight with Roberto in front of Ivy, I told him that, in the future, I would make sure that I had explicit permission from whoever was supervising before I went home. I left the meeting feeling very frustrated.

Going Forward

As I think back on these three work incidents, I become more puzzled and frustrated. I like to think that I am easy enough to get along with, and yet I continue to have conflicts with my co-workers and supervisors. Food Processing, Inc. is a large corporation, and I would like to build a career with the company and move into a managerial position sometime after I complete my business degree. However, if these types of problems keep coming up, there is no way they will consider me for a management position.

I don't understand what I am doing wrong. How could I have better handled each of these three incidents when they occurred? Also, are these three incidents indicative of some broader problem or issue that I need to address to prevent these kinds of problems from happening in the future?