

Managing Like a Man at SilkQueen?

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Sally Dawson works for SilkQueen, an Australian company that imports and manufactures high quality fabrics for retail sale. The company manufactures at a plant in Sydney as well as in several locations throughout Asia. It began as a family-owned company in 1910 and became a publicly-listed company when it started international operations in 1979. It has always had a female-dominated workforce yet management has been largely male. Sally has just returned to Australia to work as a line manager in the Sydney manufacturing operations after spending ten years working in the company's operations in Asia. While overseas, she completed several posts including stints in Malaysia, Indonesia and China. While in Asia she worked as senior HR manager and had responsibility for all of the HR functions of the subsidiary operations in addition to management of the cross-cultural training programs for expatriates posted to the region. She undertook considerable travel across the six Asian nations in which the company has operations. As well as being highly skilled in cross-cultural management, she is fluent in Mandarin and Bahasa. Despite holding three degrees in HRM, having worked for fifteen years in the HRM field and being internationally experienced, in the three months in which she has served as a line manager in the Sydney operations, she has experienced some considerable indifference, and even hostility, towards her by subordinates.

Though the move back to the Australian operations has meant that Sally has had to change the focus of her work, she has worked very hard to put in place strategies aimed at improving productivity in her section. The most notable of these initiatives was to re-organize the work hours of the work group for which she has responsibility. She has implemented a system of working around the clock instead of the 10 hour days under which the factory had previously operated. This model was implemented without consultation with the employees, and without discussion with shareholders or other interested parties. The factory is not unionized though a group of employees do meet on an ad hoc basis to discuss issues of concern. Whereas the employees were previously required to work 10 hour days, five days a week, the new structure only requires them to work 8 hour shifts up to a total of 40 hours within a five day period for the same pay as when they worked a 50 hour week. However, though the employees have reduced hours for the same pay, they are very dissatisfied with the new structure as it means that they have to work less regular hours with earlier and later starting times. Though the employees were given the option of choosing the shift that they wished to work (6 am – 2 p.m., 2 p.m. – 10 p.m. or 10 p.m. – 6 a.m.) many feel that they really have not had much choice in the matter if they wanted to keep their job. Since implementing this new structure two months ago, production output has increased by almost 20%. At the ad hoc employees meeting last week, employees discussed the notion of taking a no-confidence vote against Sally.

This week, Michael Ribero, the General Manager of SilkQueen, has made his routine three-monthly visit to the plant. While walking around the shop floor inspecting the premises, he hears one worker say to another, “That Ms Dawson really has no idea what it is like to be an average worker with a big mortgage to worry about, kids to collect from school and other commitments – I really am unhappy about having to work this shift where I start in the afternoon and don’t finish until nearly midnight. I can’t afford babysitters and I think I am just going to have to look for work elsewhere”. “I agree,” said the other worker, “When Mr. Wong was our manger, he would never have brought in these terrible work hours. I can’t believe that a woman manager is so inconsiderate to us. I thought a woman manager would be better than a man. I thought they were supposed to be nurturing and all that...and care about their workers”. The first employee nodded in agreement, “Yes, that’s right” she said, “Mr. Wong at least looked like he cared about us. He used to walk around the factory floor and ask us how we were going. He always had a smile or joke for everyone”. “Yes”, said another, “Mr. Wong was great – he always asked us what we thought before he did anything.”

Michael Ribero then said to the employees, “I am sorry to have been overhearing your conversation but I am really concerned about the comments you made. I was under the impression that most of you here were happy with the changing shifts because it meant fewer hours a week for the same pay.” At that point several other employees piped into the conversation with comments on Sally’s leadership. The General Manager listened with grave concern to their comments that suggested that Sally was regarded as a poor manager, who didn’t care about their work conditions, who never came near the factory floor and buried herself behind a high desk with her back to the door in an office two levels above the factory floor. Michael Ribero thanked the employees for their comments and assured them that he would take up their issues.

The next morning, Michael Ribero called Sally asking her to visit him at headquarters. When Sally arrived at headquarters she really did not know why Michael wanted to see her but assumed he wanted to congratulate her on the improvements she had made to production output in such a short time period. When she met with him, Michael raised with Sally the views aired to him the previous day by some of her employees. As Michael said, “Sally, I am rather concerned that the employees see you as being out of touch and only focused on the bottom line. I think it would be preferable for you to adopt a more participative style of leadership or I think we might have to consider moving you elsewhere in the organization”. Sally was, naturally, fairly defensive and said to the General Manager, “Well, I am sorry that they don’t think that I have been leading like they think a woman should. I wasn’t conscious that I am working like a man like they think. I thought they would be happy with the shorter work hours. No one has said anything to me. I am highly qualified and experienced and in Asia no-one had a problem with my so-called non-participative management style. Why isn’t my authority being respected? Haven’t I increased productivity greatly?”.

After a day of not being able to concentrate very effectively on her work, Sally returned home. Sitting in her apartment, she began to fume over the employees’ attitude and senior management not valuing her. Sally thinks about the long hours she works often late into

the night and the meetings with executives at headquarters. Even though she is single and does not have the responsibility of children, she is beginning to resent the hours spent at work and so little time for a social life. In Asia it had been okay - at least she felt valued and had a diverse work life and lots of opportunities to travel. But, back in Sydney, with the pressure from her subordinates and judgment that she is a poor manager, the stress is starting to take its toll. Sally knew she had not been very happy with the job in Sydney and had for some time been aware that she did not have the support of the subordinates that she had enjoyed while in Asia, but following this discussion with the General Manager, Sally is starting to seriously consider leaving the organization altogether to start her own consulting business in cross- cultural management. She would take with her many years work invested in the company and considerable knowledge and experience that would be hard to replace.