

Can the Sun Rise on Sunset?

Teaching Note for Can the Sun Rise on Sunset? A Case in Human Resources and Organizational Behavior

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August 30, 2002

CASE OVERVIEW

The Sunset Andover City, one of fifteen hotels in a small chain, has recently lost a large share of its convention business to a new property. Chris Edwards, Sunset's Rooms Division Director, has an 18-year history with Sunset and is expecting to be promoted to general manager upon the long overdue retirement of Bob Zilliox. Although experienced and hard working, Chris tends to be pessimistic and intolerant, often maintaining high standards at the expense of on-the-job relationships and customer service.

Shelly Peters, corporate Vice President of Human Resources, realizes that Sunset needs a general manager who can work collaboratively with Sunset's management team. She concludes that Chris is not the right person for this position, and hires Damien Cheneau as Sunset's new general manager. Having been briefed on Chris' situation, Damien strives to develop a productive relationship with him. Their first conversation, however, is awkward. Although Chris promises to support Damien's change initiatives, that is not what happens. Chris deliberately distorts and misrepresents Damien's messages when he communicates them to his front desk staff.

Damien hires Maria Cortez to lead in the development of several training projects. Immediately, Maria heard troubling criticism of Damien and addressed these rumors by talking with Damien directly. When Damien learns that Chris has been undermining his efforts, he

realizes that another conversation with Chris is essential. This discussion comes at a critical time, as Sunset is launching a “training in action” program and Damien expects a great deal of press on current efforts to hire and train disabled workers. Chris promises that, while he is frustrated by the changes at Sunset, he will support Damien and “do his job.”

Once again, however, Chris misrepresents Damien’s position to the front desk staff. When Damien discovers that Chris has continued to undermine his change initiatives, he calls Shelly Peters in the hope that she can help. Shelly apologizes for not anticipating the extent of Chris’ resentment, and tells Damien that she will support whatever action he feels is most appropriate. Damien considers his options and prepares to develop an action plan.

TEACHING OBJECTIVES

The primary teaching objectives are:

1. To *illustrate principles* of organizational behavior, communication, and human resources management through case examples.
2. To provide a realistic organizational context for *decision-making* regarding the appropriate application of theory (from organizational behavior, communication, and human resources management) to workplace dilemmas.
3. To practice the *skills* related to handling human relations challenges.
4. To *increase awareness* of the complexity of behavior in organizations.
5. To *increase awareness* of the variety of options available in addressing human resources issues and of the probable consequences associated with various decisions.

TOPICS ADDRESSED

The Sunset Case provides opportunities to discuss a range of topics, including:

1. Individual differences
2. Formal communication networks
3. Informal communication networks
4. Attribution theory
5. Motivation theory

6. Attitudes and values
7. Performance management
8. Stress
9. Organizational communication
10. Conflict
11. Organizational politics
12. Organizational culture
13. Leadership
14. Workforce diversity
15. Change management
16. Decision making

QUESTIONS AND NOTES

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. *Describe each of the following individuals in terms of personal traits and management style. How effective was each person in handling the human relations situations that arose and in accomplishing his/her personal goals? Provide concrete examples from the case to support your answer.*

(a) Chris Edwards

We know quite a lot about Chris. Adjectives used to describe him include: “a hard worker with a somewhat conservative, pessimistic outlook,” “negative and critical,” “efficient and knowledgeable on the job,” and “intolerant” with “uncompromising standards of quality.” Stories about Chris are recounted to illustrate his character:

1. He sent a member of the front desk staff home for chewing gum.
2. He reprimanded a new employee in front of her peers for failing to keep paperwork in order.
3. He would not let Maggie Knowles, a front desk employee, have a day off to take her children to the circus.

Chris also resists change. For example, Shelly discovered that he had no intention of implementing the new reservation software that had been ordered.

Chris harbors grudges and is often duplicitous in his communications. For example, he distorts the messages that he receives from Damien and presents quite a different interpretation to his front desk employees than what was intended. Examples include:

1. learning a new computer program,
2. explaining Sunset's extra services to guests,
3. participating in communication training sessions, and
4. taking special care in appearance for the media visit

There are also underlying issues regarding Chris' attitudes toward diversity. It is most explicit in a conversation when Chris complains bitterly about working with a disabled employee. This conversation also suggests that Chris feels insecure because, while he has a great deal of industry experience, he recognizes that education is becoming increasingly valued.

The above characteristics and behaviors made it impossible for Chris to achieve his initial goal, which was to be promoted to general manager. He was not a good fit relative to the leadership competencies Sunset needed, such as creativity, flexibility, and a participative style. Unfortunately, he subsequently focused his energy on the goal of discrediting Damien Cheneau.

(b) Damien Cheneau

At his former job, Damien "thrived on meeting challenges and putting a personal mark on projects." He looked forward to the problem solving and strategic planning involved as Sunset's General Manager.

Damien has a participative management style, as he chooses to meet his department managers by talking with them "on their own turf" to better understand their needs and concerns. He confronts personnel issues in a straightforward and objective manner. The best example is when he calls in Chris in the first encounter and tries to establish a relationship with him.

Damien also demonstrates an objective and fact-based approach to problem solving and strategic planning. We are told that he reaches conclusions about Sunset's problems and

establishes a course of action after thoroughly analyzing the facts. He engages in a systematic and long-term planning process for continuous improvement.

Damien has multiple goals. Regarding his vision for Sunset, it appears that he is moving forward through initiatives, such as hiring Maria Cortez and creating opportunities to gain visibility for Sunset's progressive employment policies.

Regarding human resource issues, Damien's style enables him to build strong relationships with his colleagues and staff. However, he has not been successful in convincing Chris to join Sunset's change process or in developing a healthy relationship with him.

(c) Shelly Peters

Shelly shares Damien's vision for Sunset. She is described as being known for her "enthusiasm and creativity." Shelly appears perceptive and fair-minded. While we aren't told a lot about Shelly, we do see that she readily empathizes with Damien when he tells her about the problems he is having with Chris. Although she is willing to confront important human relations concerns and deal with performance problems, we get the impression that she has to put a great deal of energy into the more difficult task of confronting these contentious personnel issues. We can imagine that her strength would be in generating creative ideas and working as a mentor and coach in developing Sunset employees.

Shelly's goal is to see that Sunset does well in an increasingly competitive marketplace. She wants to know that the right people are in decision-making positions and that they will accomplish key organizational priorities while still maintaining strong interpersonal relationships and a healthy corporate culture.

(d) Maria Cortez

Maria appears interpersonally sensitive, as she was "quick to realize that there was a great deal of tension between Damien and Chris." She also demonstrated a direct and no nonsense style when she immediately confronted rumors related to Chris and Damien. Maria clarified the situation by approaching both Chris and Damien, describing the stories that she had heard, and asking for their response.

Maria is also task-oriented, having been hired to initiate specific training initiatives. We get the feeling that she will be good at her job and will ultimately reach the goals she sets for herself. Maria appears to focus on the important issues and, rather than allowing interpersonal conflicts to distract her, she seeks information that will enable her to resolve them and “get on with it.”

(e) Maggie Knowles

A young mother and front desk employee, Maggie demonstrated spunk by standing up to Chris when he refused to let her have a day off to take her children to the circus. While she may have been immature and/or unwise, she demonstrated the courage of her convictions by not passively accepting Chris’ refusal to allow her to take off a day for a family event.

While Maggie experienced undesirable consequences for her behavior, she did get her point across and accomplish her goal which was, presumably, to not let Chris get away with his unreasonable policies. Everyone remembered the fact that Maggie had stood up to Chris; her “gutsy” response became part of Sunset’s oral history.

- 2. A variety of communication breakdowns have occurred at Sunset due to employee behavior. It is helpful to first determine which of these problems can be solved through training and which require other types of intervention. What are some criteria that would help you identify areas where training would be most productive? Once you have a set of criteria, identify at least four specific communication or human relations problems that emerged at Sunset due to an employee’s behavior: Use the criteria you developed to determine whether each of these problems can be resolved or reduced through training.*

This is an important question because if an employee has a serious performance problem that training will not reduce or eliminate, then all parties (the employee, his or her coworkers, and the organization) suffer. Consequently, your goal is to hire individuals who have the prerequisite attitudes and personal characteristics that will enable them to reach high performance through training.

The following criteria are among the most important for distinguishing between problems that can be resolved through training and those that cannot. If you can answer “yes” to each of the questions below, it is likely that training will have a positive impact on performance.

Criteria to Determine Whether Training Will Address Performance Problem

1. Attitude—does the individual have a desire to change and learn?
2. Potential—does the individual have the mental and/or physical ability to perform to expected standards?
3. Values—are the individual's values consistent with those of the organization, i.e., when presented with choices will this person make appropriate decisions?

Sample Communication Breakdowns at Sunset

(a) Maggie Knowles came in to work dressed as a clown and Chris fired her on the spot.

Behavior

Maggie deliberately defied her supervisor's decision regarding her request for a day off, and responded to the situation with extreme behavior.

Criteria

1. Attitude—While Maggie's attitude toward Chris is negative and confrontational, there is nothing to indicate that her attitude toward work is an issue.
2. Potential—Maggie seems to have the mental and physical potential to perform well.
3. Values—Maggie does not share Chris' values regarding reasonable employee requirements.

(b) Shelly is Vice President of Human Resources yet, when she confronts Chris about the reservation software, she is unsuccessful in convincing him to use it.

Behavior

Shelly sees the problem, and takes a soft, "Learning new programs is great fun!" approach to persuading Chris.

Criteria

1. Attitude—Shelly wants to do a good job and cares about her work.
2. Potential—Shelly seems to have the mental and physical potential to be an effective Vice President of Human Resources.

3. Values–Shelly shares in the vision for Sunset; she is open minded and ready for change.

(c) Chris meets with Shelly and learns that he will not be promoted to the general manager position.

Behavior

Chris does not discuss the situation objectively to learn more about Shelly’s reasoning. He simply stands up and walks away.

Criteria

1. Attitude–Chris has a negative and antagonistic attitude toward Shelly.
2. Potential–Chris has the physical and mental potential to do his job well.
3. Values–Chris does not share the new values that have been established for Sunset.

(d) Damien has his first meeting with Chris to solicit his continuing support as new initiatives are introduced.

Behavior

Chris responds to Damien with hostility and sarcasm.

Criteria

1. Attitude–Chris has a negative attitude and a great deal of resentment toward Damien.
2. Potential–Chris has the mental and physical potential to do a good job.
3. Values–Chris and Damien have very different values and do not share a vision for Sunset.

(e) When Damien solicits Chris’ support for the Training in Action program, he is again unsuccessful in gaining cooperation.

Behavior

Chris responds by placing blame for past problems on Maria, saying, “Leave it to a woman to get emotional and blow things out of proportion.”

Criteria

1. Attitude—Chris has a strong personal bias and an unhealthy attitude toward issues of diversity.
2. Potential—Chris has the mental and physical potential to do a good job.
3. Values—Chris does not appear to value honesty and a straightforward approach to problem solving. He deliberately is duplicitous on numerous occasions.

(f) Shelly apologizes to Damien and indicates that she should have realized the trouble Chris would cause.

Behavior

Shelly's tone is apologetic and unassertive. She is not behaving in a manner that would engender Damien's confidence.

Criteria

1. Attitude—Shelly is positive and genuinely concerned.
2. Potential—Shelly has the mental and physical potential to do a good job.
3. Values—Shelly shares the values that have been set for a successful future at Sunset.

Note: Participants might also discuss how attitudes, specific physical or mental potential, and values (as well as other criteria identified) are best assessed for selection purposes. The legal aspects of these issues are also relevant. Interview questions, standardized assessment instruments, or specific experiences might all be used to make wise selection decisions.

3. *What role does the grapevine (informal communication networks) play at Sunset? Do you see the grapevine as a positive or as a negative organizational influence? How effectively is the formal communication network operating? What could Damien have done to prevent inaccurate information from moving so freely throughout the Andover City Sunset? How is the accuracy of information affected by serial communication?*

The grapevine can serve either to reinforce an organization's culture and strengthen messages from "the top," or it can be used, as we have seen in the situation at Sunset, to spread inaccurate and harmful information. The grapevine is an important communication vehicle at Sunset, and Chris uses it to reinforce the messages that he wants employees to hear. Examples are provided that illustrate the occasions in which Chris uses the informal network to discredit Damien and to suggest that his requests are not in employees' best interests.

As was made vivid through several examples, a weak individual link in the information chain (in this case, the formal network) can have a profound effect on the organization. Damien is depending on his managers to communicate important plans and goals to employees. We see that Chris, who has a key linking role between Damien and front desk employees, uses his position to distort Damien's messages. Damien's best response is to understand the power of informal communication networks and to make sure that he monitors them and feeds accurate information into the system.

Whether through formal or informal communication systems, serial communication plays an important role at Sunset as it does in any organization. The challenges involved in maintaining the accuracy of such information can be illustrated further through the game of telephone, where a single message is communicated in a linear manner from one student to the next. A comparison between the initial message and the final version frequently reveals significant differences. Fruitful discussions can take place regarding what distortions occurred, where they occurred, and what caused them.

4. *Consider the issues that emerged and how each affects job performance: (a) workforce diversity (mentally or physically challenged, gender, age, ethnicity), (b) technology, and (c) equity.*

(a) Workforce Diversity

Workforce diversity brings with it challenging management dilemmas. Often, employees are working with individuals who have different backgrounds or values and, in many instances, this situation creates resentment and distrust. In addition, employees often enjoy their jobs because of the social interaction and friendships that develop. When workers are mentally challenged or otherwise "different," those accustomed to interacting only with individuals who

are similar to themselves may feel uncomfortable and unhappy. Such employees lack motivation, and turnover is likely to increase.

Notice Chris' attitude toward hiring physically challenged workers for the front desk and his lack of sensitivity to issues of diversity. His bias and negative attitude make it nearly impossible to develop healthy working relationships or to increase productivity.

(b) Technology

There are several key issues with regard to technology and the hospitality workplace. One of the most obvious is the extent to which technology effectively can replace face-to-face interaction. The impact of technology on human relations in organizations is just beginning to be understood. A second issue, which emerged at Sunset, is the frequent unwillingness of older employees to learn new systems and procedures. Chris' motto, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," sums up an attitude that has prevented many organizations from moving smoothly into the future.

(c) Equity

Perceptions regarding fairness often account for the most pressing human relations and performance problems in organizations. Employees who might otherwise feel good about their situation suddenly become dissatisfied when they believe that they are not being treated equitably. Chris did not feel he was treated fairly; he felt he deserved the position of general manager and, as a result, he became disruptive and dysfunctional.

5. What were some of the cultural myths at Sunset? How did they develop?

Cultural myths are stories that represent an organization's values or convey "how things are done" in that environment. For instance, employees at Sunset expected to be given priority when positions became available, as Sunset had a reputation for promoting from within. Most employees knew, for instance, that Bob Zilliox had been made general manager over a better educated (and perhaps better qualified) candidate who had an MBA but did not have a history with the company.

When Maggie stood up to Chris by dressing up and bringing her children in to work, this behavior made a vivid impression on all employees. While it highlighted Chris' rigid and

unreasonable behavior and the consequences of not following his policies, it also served as an inspiration and an example of how Sunset employees do not sit still and allow themselves to be treated unfairly.

6. *If you were Damien, what would you do about the situation with Chris? Write/discuss a plan for how you believe Damien should resolve this personnel dilemma. How would you ensure that, whatever action you took, it would not have a negative impact on other Sunset managers and employees? Be prepared to defend your recommendation.*

Damien must first clarify his options and then evaluate each according to a set of criteria.

Possible Criteria

1. Does the action maintain the positive, participative approach that Damien wants to foster?
2. Does the action place the best person for the job in the position?
3. Is the action consistent with Sunset's values? Does it demonstrate the need for change and growth?
4. Does the action move Sunset closer to its vision?

Option #1: Keep trying to work with Chris and capture his strengths. Give him very explicit guidelines regarding the behavior you expect, and let him know the consequences if he does not behave accordingly. Set up a meeting schedule and make other arrangements to provide the support he requires.

Does this option meet the four criteria presented above?

1. Yes, in the short term.
2. Probably not.
3. No.
4. Probably not.

Option #2: Keep Chris with Sunset but move him to another position where he can do less damage.

Does this option meet the four criteria presented above?

1. Yes, in the short term.
2. Probably not.
3. No.
4. Probably not.

Option #3: Review the documentation on past performance to ensure that there is a solid and compelling case, and fire Chris immediately.

Does this option meet the four criteria presented above?

1. Yes, if viewed as a long-term goal.
2. Yes, it opens the opportunity for greater effectiveness.
3. Yes, it demonstrates the need for change.
4. Yes, as Chris was obstructing efforts to move toward Sunset's vision.

Option #4: What other options might Damien choose? In this case, firing Chris immediately appears to be the best solution. While it may have an immediate negative effect on employee morale, Sunset cannot move forward while Chris is undermining efforts to change and improve performance.

The approach Damien takes to managing information about his decision will determine how his action affects morale. Assuming that the decision is to fire Chris, Damien could expect that the informal network would be full of misinformation. One approach would be to communicate the fact that Chris is leaving Sunset directly to other managers so that they would be in a position to anticipate and respond to the inevitable anxiety and stories that will emerge. Since this is a personnel issue, it would be inappropriate, and in most cases illegal, for Damien to share any details. His best strategy is to move forward and focus on reinforcing a vision that will involve and excite Sunset employees.

Note: If students have studied approaches to problem solving, this is an opportunity to have them apply one of the models they have learned.

Questions for Thought and Action

1. Decision-Making for Change

You are a consultant who has just been hired to take a look at Sunset's operations and make recommendations to Damien Cheneau regarding how he can best create a strong organizational culture of high performance and quality service. Your goal is to give Sunset a strong competitive advantage over other convention hotels in the northeast.

1. Write a clear mission statement for Sunset.
2. What other policies or systems need to be created and/or documented? Select one and create a document for Sunset's Personnel Manual.
3. What meetings need to be conducted? Who should attend? Create the agenda for one of these sessions.

What memos need to be written, and to whom? Write them.

2. Articulating the Vision

This exercise can be prepared individually or the presentation outline can be planned by a small group with one member delivering the final speech.

- a. Create a presentation that Damien might deliver to his management team.

The goal of this 4-5 minute speech would be to share his vision and to inspire his senior managers. He would make it clear that they play an important role in Sunset's turn-around and its future.

- Create a complete presentation outline.
 - Deliver this presentation to your classmates.
- b. Create a presentation that Damien might deliver to new Sunset employees as part of their orientation.

The goal of this 4-5 minute speech would be to clearly articulate Sunset's mission and vision, and to inspire these new hires to high performance.

He would make it clear that they play an important role in Sunset's future.

- Create a complete presentation outline.
- Deliver this presentation to your classmates.

3. Selection Interviews

- a. The following is the position description for Sunset’s new General Manager that brought in Damien Cheneau:

Seeking a creative and participative leader to serve as General Manager of a 500-room convention center hotel in the northeast. Opportunity to create a bright future for up-scale, primarily business-oriented property in a competitive environment. Must have excellent management, decision-making, and strategic planning skills. Experience working as a change agent helpful. Thorough understanding of the convention market and hotel operations required.

Create groups of 5, and assign a student to each of the following roles:

Observer: Closely observe the interviews and take notes on what you see. After the hiring decision is made, provide feedback to your group members regarding how well they demonstrated that they would be a good fit with the position description.

Interviewer (Shelly/Shawn): Interview each of the three applicants. Keep in mind your earlier discussion regarding selection criteria as well as Sunset’s specific needs and goals. You will be asked to make a hiring decision among the three applicants, but may also choose not to hire any of these candidates.

Applicants (three candidates): Given what you know about Sunset, interview for the position of General Manager. Convince Shelly/Shawn that you have the “right stuff” to move Sunset into the future.

- b. Repeat this activity, this time focusing on the search for a new Special Projects Director. The position description that brought in Maria Cortez appears below:

Position as Special Projects Director available at progressive, future- oriented convention hotel in the northeast. The Special Projects Director is a member of the Human Resources Management team and has responsibility for creating and implementing a number of special projects, including diversity training. Excellent human relations skills and an understanding of organizational dynamics required. Must be able to work both independently and as part of a larger team.

4. *Sunset Role Plays*

Several conversations taken from the case are listed below. First, role-play the encounter the way you imagine it unfolded as described in the case. You do not have to repeat the dialogue as provided, just capture the general tone and direction of the conversation or interview. Then, role-play the situation a second time to increase effectiveness.

As a Focus Person, your challenge in the second role-play is to apply the principles and skills of effective human relations and human resources management. Use the case and characters as a basis for your interaction. Try to be consistent with what you know about each individual's style, motives, and goals, but feel free to make up supporting incidents and dialogue as you progress. Make sure your Partner demonstrates several unproductive behaviors so that you will be challenged to respond appropriately in a difficult situation.

Focus Person	Partner	Situation
#1 Shelly Peters	Chris Edwards	Shelly interviews Chris as a candidate for the General Manager's position at Sunset.
#2 Shelly Peters	Damien Cheneau	Shelly interviews Damien as a candidate for the General Manager's position at Sunset.
#3 Damien Cheneau	Chris Edwards	Damien has been hired as the General Manager at Sunset, and holds his first get-acquainted meeting with Chris.
#4 Damien Cheneau	Chris Edwards	One of the discussions between Damien and Chris for the purpose of soliciting Chris' help in implementing plans for improving front

#5 Damien Cheneau	Maria Cortez	desk performance and new guest services policies. Damien interviews Maria for the position of Special Projects Director at Sunset.
#6 Maria Cortez	Chris Edwards	Discussion of the rumors Maria has heard regarding the conflict between Chris and Damien.
#7 Maria Cortez	Damien Cheneau	Discussion of the rumors Maria has heard regarding the conflict between Chris and Damien, as well as the information Chris has been giving his front desk staff about Damien.
#8 Damien Cheneau	Chris Edwards	Damien confronts Chris with reports from department heads regarding the rumors Chris continues to spread, and also solicits support for the new Training in Action program.
#9 Chris Edwards	Front Desk Staff	Chris explains the Training in Action program to his front desk staff.
#10 Damien Cheneau	Shelly Peters	Damien calls Shelly to discuss Chris, solicit her advice, and share his frustrations with Chris' disruptive behavior.

ADMINISTRATIVE COMMENTS

1. The Sunset case provides students with a set of human resources issues typical of those they may encounter on the job. The incidents, while concrete, are readily generalizable. Students might be encouraged to share personal experiences that illustrate the principles highlighted in the case.
2. In many instances, there are no “right” and “wrong” answers to the case questions. The purpose of the questions is to stimulate thinking and problem solving.
3. One of the most important learning outcomes is for students to listen to and consider the variety of possibilities as presented by their peers. Therefore, it is particularly important to establish an environment where students feel free to express their views and where they listen attentively to their classmates.
4. “Questions for Thought and Discussion” of the Sunset case can be approached in a number of different ways depending on the specific learning objectives:
 - a. Students can be asked individually to prepare specific questions, in writing, for class discussion.
 - b. Students can be assigned to teams and provided with a set of questions. Teams can prepare their responses to questions in writing outside of class.
 - c. Students can be assigned to teams and provided with a set of questions. Teams can engage in in-class discussion and report verbally to the larger group.
5. “Questions for Thought and Discussion” help students achieve objectives related to gaining knowledge about human resources and organizational behavior. “Questions for Thought and Action” help students with the skills of implementation and provide a forum for feedback.
6. Students may be given participation credit for the activities in “Questions for Thought and Discussion” or they may be evaluated on a broad scale of excellent, average, poor. Participation credit may be particularly appropriate in larger classes where students are performing some of the activities simultaneously in their small groups, or where the product is the result of a group effort.
7. The more active and involved students are asked to be in case discussions and activities, the more likely they will be to prepare well in advance. Obviously, this preparation leads to a more thoughtful and informed discussion, which adds value to the experience for their classmates—and for the instructor!