

**Can the Sun Rise on Sunset? A Case in Human Resources and
Organizational Behavior**

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Abstract

Events at the Sunset Hotel illustrate the numerous human resources issues that can develop when a senior manager who was passed over for promotion distorts messages and undermines his supervisor's constructive change efforts. Rumors flourish, employees become confused, and Sunset Hotel's general manager is frustrated in his inability to accomplish goals. It is uncertain whether the general manager will be able to regain the senior manager's support or to prevent his behavior from affecting employee morale and damaging the hotel's image and reputation.

Keywords: Managerial communication, employee morale, rumor, organizational change, training

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

The Sunset Andover City is one of fifteen hotels in the Sunset chain. Enjoying an ocean front location, it held an unchallenged position as the premier executive hotel and conference center in the northeast until a little over two years ago. At that time, one of its major competitors—the Royal Robes—opened a larger, state-of-the-art convention center hotel just a few blocks away. Through a combination of creative advertising, special promotions, and discounting, Royal Robes soon took over a large share of the Andover City convention business. Lately, Sunset has been keenly aware of a marked decrease in its revenues.

Chris Edwards, Rooms Division Director of the Sunset Andover City, began as a member of the coffee shop wait staff at the age of 16. Chris quit school to help support a large and struggling family. A hard worker with a somewhat conservative and pessimistic outlook, Chris took his job seriously and gradually moved up—shift leader in the upscale Sunburst dining room, Assistant Front Desk Manager, Reservations Manager, and then Rooms Division Director. For the past five years, however, Chris has been frozen in the position, waiting for the delayed retirement of Sunset’s General Manager, Bob Zilliox.

Bob had expected to retire two years ago, but was asked to stay on when the Royal Robes opened. Although impatient at the delay in career advancement, Chris knew that it was only a matter of time before Bob stepped down. After all, the Sunset policy of “promoting from within” was practically written in stone. Everyone knew that Bob himself became general manager by working his way up in the company and had been chosen over some hot shot MBA who had never made a bed or cleaned a toilet. There wasn’t a manager at the property who didn’t know

that Chris, after 18 years with Sunset, was anxiously waiting for Bob's job to open up. Most, in fact, felt he deserved it.

Recent events, however, seemed to be conspiring against the realization of Chris' expectations. Always pessimistic, Chris had become increasingly negative and critical as his promotion was delayed. His reputation had been acquired through hard and consistently reliable work, not through any ability to manage employees or look into the future. Although efficient and knowledgeable on the job, it seemed impossible for Chris not to antagonize at least one coworker each day. The uncompromising standards of quality Chris established had been the impetus for the property's motto, "Your dollar buys more quality at Sunset." Unfortunately, the quality was often achieved at the expense of on-the-job relationships and even, in some cases, customer service.

These consistently high standards made Chris intolerant of any breach of company rules, or any laxity in maintaining accurate records. Once, Chris sent a member of the front desk staff home on the spot for chewing gum. Another time, a new employee was severely reprimanded in front of her peers for failing to keep paperwork in order. Chris was especially critical of some of Sunset's new, younger personnel, and would openly characterize them as "lazy, discourteous, and undependable." Several incidents involving Chris and various front desk staff members will always be among Sunset's cultural myths.

All Sunset employees had heard the story about how Maggie Knowles, a 22-year-old mother of three, requested a regularly-scheduled workday off so that she could take her children to the circus. Chris saw no reason to make exceptions for that kind of "nonsense," and brushed off Maggie's request with, "and you need two days to take them to the park next week, too, I suppose?" On the day Maggie had requested off, no one could believe it when she came in to

work dressed as a clown-three similarly attired children in tow! With balloons and horns, Maggie proceeded to her workstation. The kids sat on the floor in back of the front desk, and it was nearly an hour before Chris realized what was going on and stopped the show, firing Maggie on the spot. Nothing like that has ever happened since, but everyone remembers the day that Maggie Knowles stood up to Chris Edwards!

Until the opening of the Royal Robes, Sunset's reservations had been so high that Chris was confident that his successful management record would assure an immediate promotion to general manager. After all, it was no secret that Chris had been looking at the higher status, higher paying position for several years. He had even made a point of discussing the move with Shelly Peters, corporate Vice President of Human Resources, during several of her recent visits to the property.

It was true that Shelly had been carefully watching the situation for some time. An honors student from a top ranked business program, she was in her third year with Sunset. Having been assistant general manager of an 800-room resort hotel before joining Sunset's corporate team, she was still the only woman at the executive level.

THE DAWNING OF A NEW ERA

Shelly was convinced that "if Sunset is to prosper under growing competition, drastic changes must be made in its philosophy and management practices." She strongly supported Sunset's creative marketing strategy built around a three-pronged approach:

1. state-of-the-art facilities,
2. excellent service, and

3. fair prices.

A strong and influential leader would be needed to help Sunset develop and communicate this image to the public. In addition, employees at all levels must not only understand the plan, but also be motivated to support it.

In light of this new thrust, it would also be essential for Bob's replacement to be someone who could work collaboratively with the marketing and human resources staff as well as other Sunset managers. Shelly felt strongly that the Andover City Sunset needed someone who would generate new ideas and develop training programs to prepare all employees to provide "the best service in the world."

As soon as Bob Zilliox announced his retirement, Shelly immediately began searching for the best possible replacement. After carefully reviewing Chris' qualifications, she concluded that while Chris knew the Andover City Sunset property inside and out, he lacked the communication and relationship skills, creativity, and risk-taking capability that the position of general manager now demanded. She vividly recalled one of her most recent visits to the Andover City Sunset when she realized just how resistant Chris was to the new information systems that had been purchased for all Sunset properties.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

As Shelly was touring the property, she discovered that Chris had been storing the new computer reservation software in a back closet in the housekeeping department. There was no sign that the boxes had even been opened. When she inquired about his plans to introduce the new reservation software, she was told that he didn't have any use for such "turbo" nonsense.

“The front desk staff has enough trouble with the current system,” he scoffed. “Why complicate matters? My motto is, if it’s not broken, don’t fix it.”

Shelly, known for her enthusiasm and creativity, made an effort to show Chris how important it was for Sunset to take a leadership role in the introduction of new technology. “Come on, Chris,” Shelly had argued. “Give it a try! You’ll find it makes everyone’s job easier. Learning new programs is great fun! You’ll love the new system once you get the hang of it.” Chris was uncompromising in his position, and immediately changed the subject to remind Shelly that she had promised to discuss several new policies aimed at keeping better track of employee absences. Later, Shelly discovered that Chris had told his colleagues that it was “just like a woman to keep changing her mind about how things should be done.”

Recalling this encounter and other past incidents, Shelly felt very awkward at her interview with Chris. “Chris,” Shelly began, trying her best to be firm without seeming insensitive, “Sunset needs your skills and your experience. You’re a respected and valued employee. We just don’t feel that general manager is the best position for you. Do you see my point? Just think of all the headaches you’ll avoid!” She tried desperately to lighten the situation with some humor.

“Valued employee? Right!” Chris shot back as he stood up and walked away from Shelly without another word.

A GENERAL MANAGER IS HIRED

The next week, Shelly offered the general manager position to Damien Cheneau, Assistant General Manager of the Ridgeport-based Omega Suites chain. Damien, age 55, had come up through the ranks at Omega Suites, starting as a front desk clerk and then moving on to

shift leader, personnel assistant, and finally human resources manager at one of Omega's larger properties. At age 49, after a particularly difficult divorce, Damien left the Ridgeport Omega and returned to college, earning an MBA degree with an emphasis in human resources. Upon completion of the degree, Omega hired Damien back as assistant general manager at one of its larger resort properties.

Damien, who thrived on meeting challenges and putting a personal mark on projects, realized there was little room for creativity or advancement at Omega, a conservative and bureaucratic company. Sunset's current predicament, however, would provide an opportunity for him to demonstrate his leadership. Damien knew it would be a difficult situation, but he was looking forward to putting Sunset back at the top of the Andover City convention market.

When Chris first learned that an outsider had been hired as general manager, anger and frustration turned into a deep and consuming resentment toward Damien Cheneau. Damien, who had been told of Chris' expectations, knew that it would not be easy to develop the healthy working relationship needed to implement new and innovative programs at Sunset. After settling into the plush general manager office on the first day, Damien decided to begin by going out and meeting each department manager on his or her own turf.

THE FIRST ENCOUNTER

Since Damien anticipated that his initial encounter with Chris might be difficult, he put it first on his schedule. When Damien arrived at Chris' office, the conversation was a bit stiff:

Damien: Hello Chris, I'm Damien Cheneau. Can we talk for a few minutes?

Chris: Sure, why not. You're the boss.

Damien: I appreciate your directness in coming right to the point.

Chris: What do you mean by that?

Damien: Simply that it's good to get that word "boss" right out on the table so we can look at what it means for our working relationship. Frankly, I don't really like the word—I'd like us to regard each other as team members pulling toward the same goals.

Chris: I've been a good team player for 18 years at Sunset, and I don't intend to stop now just because . . .

Damien: "Because some outsider, somebody with a degree, came and took away my promotion"—are those the missing words?

Chris: I don't like having words put into my mouth. I'll continue doing my job; you can count on that.

Damien: Chris, I know of your reputation as a hard worker and as a stickler on quality. I have no doubt that you will do your job extremely well. But, as you know better than I, Sunset is facing some new challenges. I need every manager's knowledge, experience, and commitment to develop strategies that will restore Sunset to its leading position in the Andover City area.

Chris: What do you mean, "restore"? We are the quality leader in the northeast and always have been. No property on the entire northeastern coast comes close to matching our standards—an achievement due in no small measure to my personal efforts.

Damien: And that's precisely why I came to see you—to remove any barriers between us so that I can count on your full support for our efforts to build on that foundation

and to continuously improve our image and our service. We've got serious competition with Royal Robes next door, and that requires a new focus and new strategies.

Chris: My commitment to Sunset has never been an issue. Ask Bob about me; he will tell you that I have always been cooperative. I've always shared my ideas and information. Everything has been just fine—then you come along and stir things up.

Damien: Chris, I don't expect you to be anything but cooperative. It's just that, if I were in your shoes, I would resent the outsider who took away the position I had come to regard as rightfully mine.

Chris: No one owns a position here. No one owes me anything. I'll do my job; you can count on it. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get back to work.

Damien left Chris' office realizing that it would take a lot of time, patience, and effort to help Chris work through his resentment and anger. While he was prepared to do whatever was necessary to establish a solid working relationship, he only wished it wasn't at a time when so many critical organizational issues also were pressing.

PLANNING FOR CHANGE

Damien knew that, in addition to personnel issues, he had to begin addressing some of Sunset's larger problems immediately. He realized, too, that before any decisions could be made or strategies developed, more detailed and complete information would need to be gathered and analyzed. After spending long hours examining sales, finance, and personnel records, Damien arrived at several conclusions:

1. Most managers had been with Sunset for over six years—there was little turnover.
2. There were very few minority workers employed at Sunset—women, older employees, people of color, and the disabled were not well represented at any level.
3. Customer complaints about indifferent and even discourteous staff had been increasing steadily during the past eighteen months.

After thoroughly reviewing the list of high priority problem areas, Damien formulated a series of specific action steps, which he hoped would arrest and then reverse the steady decline in reservations during the past year and a half. Over the next six months, Damien also planned to work closely with Chris to implement new training and guest services policies that would help Sunset rise above the competition.

IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

As planned, Damien made a clear and consistent effort to include Chris in implementing his plans for improving performance at the front desk. At each stage, Damien met individually with Chris to explain his goals and to solicit input and support. Openly, Chris agreed that Damien's ideas were good ones and promised to help implement them. But that's not what happened. Below are a few of the many examples of how Chris communicated Damien's requests.

Example One

What Damien Said to Chris

Front desk personnel can use any slack time to familiarize themselves with our new computers. As soon as everyone feels comfortable, we'll schedule some formal training sessions

and begin to switch over. There will be bonuses for those who demonstrate exceptional effort toward reaching our goal of becoming one of the most efficient operations in Andover City.

What Chris Said to the Front Desk Staff

The new general manager wants less loafing on the job. From now on, front desk personnel will not have any time to catch their breath. I know you're already working hard, but now our general manager wants you all to teach yourselves how to use those complicated new computer systems. We don't know what will happen if we object, so you had better just do it and keep your mouths shut.

Example Two

What Damien Said to Chris

Front desk personnel should be a little more assertive when suggesting that guests take advantage of some of Sunset's extra services, such as our masseur or childcare. If sales go up, we'll see that staff members are rewarded.

What Chris Said to the Front Desk Staff

Guess what! Our general manager has come up with a novel idea—after a guest checks in, try to convince him or her to spend even more money on some unwanted “extra.” Of course, we've been up selling for as long as I can remember, but our new general manager thinks this is a new idea. The message is that you need to be more aggressive, even if it annoys our customers.

Example Three

What Damien Said to Chris

We are going to run a series of training sessions for your staff in several important areas of communication. We'll begin with effective listening techniques and dealing with difficult customers. The workshops will make staff feel more confident and positive about their ability to handle all types of communication situations. We'll hold the training Monday and Wednesday mornings and start 30 minutes before the scheduled workday begins. Breakfast at 7:30 a.m. is on us.

What Chris Said to the Front Desk Staff

Sorry, everyone, but Damien says that from now on, we have to be at work 30 minutes early on Monday and Wednesday mornings. Our GM thinks you need to improve your communication with customers—apparently Damien doesn't think that you listen very well and doesn't like the way you handle difficult customers. I know you've been doing just fine for years, but what Damien says now is what goes. We had better cooperate even though I'm sure for many of you it will be a real waste of time.

TRAINING BECOMES A PRIORITY

Consistent with his emphasis on employee development, Damien created a new human resources position. A nation-wide search was conducted for someone who could take the lead in coordinating a number of special training projects for Sunset. These efforts resulted in the hiring of an Hispanic woman, Maria Cortez, who demonstrated not only a keen awareness of organizational dynamics but also an impressive knowledge of personnel and training. She seemed a perfect fit.

After years of experience in organizations troubled by racial as well as other social pressures, Maria was quick to realize that there was a great deal of tension between Damien and Chris. She decided to speak up right away to clarify the rumors that seemed to be flying everywhere about the general manager who bumped a long-time, loyal Sunset employee.

Maria went first to Chris. When she confronted him and presented the rumors for his response, Chris shook his head. "What do you expect me to say? Do you want me to throw out the red carpet? Besides, Damien's only worked for a cut-rate chain where the emphasis is on gimmicks to attract guests rather than high quality service. His method is to keep room rates low by squeezing hard-working employees. What can someone with that kind of background and mentality tell me about our business?" Chris then continued the heavy criticism of Damien, citing an obvious lack of respect for high standards and an ignorance of how a quality-conscious property like Sunset should operate.

Maria found Chris' descriptions upsetting and ordinarily would have believed his stories except that a trusted friend, who knew Damien well from his earlier work at Omega, had painted a very different picture. Her friend, in fact, had on several occasions praised Damien as a "progressive, innovative person who respects employees and knows how to motivate them." Maria realized that she would have to talk further with Damien to resolve these two contradictory images for herself.

Maria confronted Damien with what Chris had been saying to the front desk and reservations staff, and described the rumors that were flowing throughout the organization. Damien at first expressed disbelief, asking, "Are you and Chris Edwards in any kind of conflict?" Maria replied that, so far, her relationship with Chris seemed to be just fine. Damien had heard rumors from some managers about how minorities were being given preferential

treatment, but was not aware of any specific conflict between Maria and Chris. “Maybe,” Damien thought, “Chris has said something negative about Maria, and now she wants to get even.” But when Maria volunteered the names of three other department heads who could verify Chris’ behavior, Damien realized that it was time for another talk with Chris. Damien decided to wait until their next regularly-scheduled session, since a special meeting might appear threatening to Chris.

Their next planned meeting was a particularly crucial one because an important training session was about to be launched. The program featured “training in action.” A series of newspaper and television ads would illustrate Sunset’s commitment to hiring and training disabled workers. Some front desk personnel would be photographed and videotaped as they assisted guests. Damien believed this approach, emphasizing the value Sunset placed both on customer service and equal opportunity employment practices, would increase the sense of dignity and pride employees felt in being involved in such an important project.

After ensuring that Chris fully understood the training approach and goals, Damien asked him to explain the program to department heads and to request that all front desk employees “take a little extra care in their dress and grooming” the following week.

After a brief silence, Damien looked directly at Chris and said: “Chris, this is a crucial phase in our new strategy, and if you have any reservations or suggestions, I would appreciate having them now.” Chris replied, “You’re the boss. I will do what you have asked me to do—that’s my job.” The dialogue continued:

Damien: After two months of working together, I had hoped you would feel free to call me “Damien.” But that’s not the problem that concerns me. It’s just that I need all

of your expertise and support, and I'm not sure you're with me. Am I right or wrong? I honestly need to know.

Chris: Who said I'm against you?

Damien: I'll be candid with you; I have talked with several department heads and they all agree that the understandings we reached in my office seemed to be presented in a different light when you talked to your staff. Can you help me understand what's going on?

Chris: I'll tell you what's going on! With all the backstabbing and insecurities around here, I have made a lot of enemies by not giving preferential treatment to anyone and by not joining in on employee complaint sessions. I just do my job, plain and simple. At least I try to, with all the additional problems you've created by sending me real dumb-bells to work with. The guy that came in last week was deaf! A deaf man at the front desk! What is going on around here? Are you losing your mind? Oh yeah, and then I had to fire a Native American hostess a couple of days ago, so I can imagine what your friend Maria has said about that.

Damien: I know how false accusations can hurt, and I promise you that I will get to the bottom of this. If anyone has slandered you, they will be disciplined. Chris, it's important that you realize that Sunset is on the cutting edge of the industry. We're innovative and progressive in our employment practices, our computer applications, and hopefully in our attitudes as well. You can be proud that you're a part of our team.

Chris: I hope you fire all the gossips. We don't need any more idle talk that only interferes with my ability to do my job. It's just not the way it used to be.

Nowadays, it doesn't seem to matter what you know about the industry—that you've got common sense and a good head on your shoulders. No, the fact that you've got years of experience doesn't matter. You need a degree. Either you have that piece of paper, or you need to be disadvantaged or mentally challenged. It's all crazy.

Damien: I understand how you feel, Chris. That's why I wanted to bring these allegations out in the open, because that's the way I deal with people. I'm asking you to give all of this a chance. Can I count on your support in my efforts, even if at first they don't make sense to you?

Chris: Of course. Maria's the one who's making all the trouble for you, not me. Leave it to a woman to get emotional and blow things out of proportion. I just do my job.

ONE MORE CHANCE FOR CHRIS

When the front desk staff met, Chris made it abundantly clear that Damien had told him that anyone who spread false information would be fired immediately. Chris then completed some routine business before relaying the rest of Damien's message:

“You'll all have to improve your appearance, dress, and grooming by next week. Maria has complained to Damien that we generally don't look professional enough and they'll be taking pictures of us for some ads. I'm sorry that your work will have to be interrupted; this is our busiest time, but why should they care? Apparently, some people don't want to hear about our problems. It seems Maria's making trouble for us by telling Damien that we're not doing our jobs very well. She would probably like to see us all replaced.”

Immediately following the staff meeting, Damien called in two of the most dependable front desk employees and asked them to repeat what Chris had just said in the meeting. To his dismay, Damien discovered the extent to which Chris was misrepresenting his messages, and realized that Chris continued systematically to undermine efforts to bring about needed changes. Not knowing where to go for advice, Damien decided to call Shelly Peters at corporate headquarters to get her opinion about the matter. Shelly listened intently. Her first response, as Damien predicted, was one of disbelief.

Shelly: I should have known, Damien. I should never have gotten you into this position.

This is unbelievable—Chris is insecure and resentful. You don't deserve to have to put up with his tricks. Do whatever you need to do. I'll stand behind you. Oh, Damien, believe me, I'm so sorry about this. Let me know if there's anything I can do.

Damien: Thank you for your support, Shelly. I just wanted to get your thoughts before I take any decisive action. You know I'll keep you informed. As soon as I've made a decision on this matter, I'll give you a call.