



## Leadership Barometer 187 Lazy Employee Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD



Early in my career, I had an extreme example of a lazy employee. Through some dialog with my manager, I learned a valuable lesson that stuck with me.

### **My role was clear**

I was brought into a manufacturing department of a large company. My job title was “Assistant Department Manager.” That was a level between the first line supervisors and the Department Manager whose name was Nick.

The purpose of my position was to figure out how to get more engagement in the workforce. I felt well prepared for this assignment, having studied Organization Development in Graduate School. I also had several assignments working with people to maximize output.

### **A lazy employee**

The department was pretty good overall, but there was one individual who stuck out. Jason was an inspector who worked on the shifts rotating from day to night work. The work of an inspector can get pretty boring. You basically wait for the product to be made and then measure it for compliance.

Most of the time, the product was compliant, so it would pass on to the next operation. Jason had a habit of taking catnaps at his station when the work was not in front of him. We tried giving him extra duties, but he was not very responsive.

### **Caught in the act**

One morning, Nick and I were walking around the department. I spotted Jason at his station sound asleep on the job. I told Nick that we were having problems with keeping Jason engaged in the work. He showed little initiative and either goofed off or fell asleep nearly every day.

I told Nick that we were considering firing Jason because of his low morale and general lack of attention to his job.

## **The moment of truth for the lazy employee and me**

Nick stopped walking and squared up right in front of me. He agreed that at the plant Jason was a slug. He brought the morale of the team down and sometimes missed defects.

Nick said, "You're right Bob. Here at the plant Jason is a nothing. But that young man is a member of the Webster Volunteer Fire Department where I am the chief. You should see him when he steps into that building. He is a ball of energy. He volunteers for extra duty, he stays late to clean up, he gets along with all the other guys. In that environment, Jason is a model employee, even though he is a volunteer. You tell me, Bob, who is the problem here? Is it Jason, or is it you?"

### **Brought up short**

I was forced to admit that the real issue was me. I had failed to provide the culture and atmosphere that brought out the potential in Jason. I had a conversation with him. He shared that at the firehouse there was always some important action. At work, he was mostly sitting and waiting. We made some changes.

We attached the inspection function to the manufacturing team. This freed Jason up to do more active work. He really liked the fast pace of the assembly line, so we tried him there. He did extremely well, and six months later we made him a team leader. He was a different person.

From that point on, I have worked to understand that each individual is different. Each person has a key that will unlock the potential that is bottled up inside. My job as a leader is to find the key and provide it to the worker.

### **Stephen M.R. Covey's book**

I really appreciate Stephen M.R. Covey's new book "Trust and Inspire." Stephen shows us the path to go from a "command and control" environment to one of "trust and inspire." Covey demonstrates the wisdom of shifting our leadership thinking so that we bring out the greatness in every individual.

### **Conclusion**

I learned a valuable lesson in that exchange with Nick and saw it supported in Covey's book. Some people are calling it the best leadership book of the year. I personally believe it could be the most useful leadership book of the decade.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations.