

LARRY HANSEN SPEAKS OUT⁵¹

Larry Hansen entered the employees' locker room prior to the starting time for his second shift at the northern Ohio plant of XYZ Manufacturing Co. He saw about a dozen of his coworkers just finishing the day shift. It seemed like an

CASE FOR COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT

informal meeting was being held, and emotions were volatile. John Adams, the union steward, was trying to respond to complaints from several of the workers. Hansen took a seat nearby where he could listen to the discussion and get changed for his shift.

The gist of the discussion centered on an episode early in the day shift. Louis Brockington, a young journeyman machinist, had been fired by company management because he had been caught smoking a marijuana cigarette during a break from his work. “Brock” was being paid—considered “on the clock”—as well as being inside the factory. Because this was an obvious violation of the company’s “drug-free” and “no smoking” policy for all employees, he had been immediately dismissed. He was even forced to leave the plant with his street clothes and personal items in a bag packed by management. He wasn’t even given the opportunity to be sure all personal items from his locker were included.

Management informed union representatives of their action almost immediately and assured them that everything found in the locker belonging to Brockington was put into the bag he was given except for a small plastic bag, which had been stuffed into the toe of Brock’s street shoes. The bag contained about half an ounce of the same substance Brockington had been found smoking. Management kept this item as “evidence” in case the union decided to formally protest Brock’s rapid dismissal.

Many of the workers argued that management had violated Brockington’s privacy by illegally searching an employee’s locker without his permission and asked what was to prevent them from doing this to anyone working in the plant. Management would never think of searching the private areas of a manager’s office. Also, Brock was a very popular worker who had a number of friends among non-management employees. They also argued with the union steward that Brockington should have been given another chance.

Steward John Adams told the workers that, unfortunately, Brockington had been given a second chance by management. He had been caught doing the same thing three months earlier. Management quietly warned him at that time that a repetition of this misconduct would result in his dismissal. The company’s “drug-free” policy also required that the union representative be informed of such action in writing. Adams had received such a notice about Brockington’s first disciplinary action and also notice of his dismissal when Brockington violated his “second chance.”

After hearing even his union representative say that Brockington had been “treated fairly by management when he got a second chance,” Larry Hansen could no longer keep silent. He walked into the middle of the group of workers and said loudly to John Adams. “It’s too bad that Brock wasn’t a member of management—because then he would have gotten a third, fourth, and even fifth chance if he needed it!”

Quickly, several of the men asked Hansen what he meant by his remark. Hansen answered by asking, “Do you remember when we adopted this drug-free policy and put it in our work contract two years ago? Well, about a year later I found out from the executive day gate watch-

man that one of the VPs used to frequently come back from lunch loaded to the gills. His excuse was he was buying ‘liquid lunches’ for good customers. But you all know that drinking during working hours is also covered under our glorious ‘no drugs’ policy.” The locker room got very quiet as Hansen continued.

“The guard tells me that after doing this for over three months, he doesn’t see this VP for about three or four weeks. And then, one day he shows up but parks in a different space from where he had been assigned. Also, he stops going to lunch by himself. He always has some other big brass with him, and now he comes back stone cold sober within an hour of when he left. The word the guard got was that after management told him to clean up his act, the guy kept right on doing it. And when he was gone for nearly a month, they sent him some place to dry out. When he came back, they gave him a different job.

“Guess the VP got bumped down a little, but he sure didn’t lose his job. And he got a lot more than just two chances! If you guys ask me, the blue-collar men that make this place go don’t get the same ‘fair’ treatment the bigwigs do under our ‘no drugs’ policy. If they screw up, they get special help, and they sure don’t get fired!”

By the time Hansen had finished with his story about the company’s VP, it was nearly time for the second shift to begin. “One thing,” Hansen said to Adams, “the union sure ought to appeal this raw deal that Brock got. If we can’t get the same treatment from management for our own members, what good is having this ‘no drugs’ agreement in our contract? They can go out and have a four-martini lunch and call it being sociable with a customer. What’s wrong with us having the same rights? Let’s put this on our agenda for next week’s union meeting, and try to take care of Brock!” The group broke up with a loud round of “Yeah! Let’s do that!”

Questions

1. What do you see as the major lesson that should be learned from this case? Is alcohol use during working hours with customers more or less detrimental to the company than substance smoking on the job? Should the privacy rights of employees preclude management from searching employee desks and lockers or reviewing employees’ e-mail messages at will?
2. Do you think this case illustrates a dual standard for ethical conduct? Should the same rules exist for workers at all levels within a company’s structure, or do members of management deserve special treatment? Why or why not?
3. When the union brings Brockington’s dismissal appeal to management, how should management react if they sincerely desire an effective “drug-free” program in their company and an ethics policy by which all employees can live?