

“Blue Sky”

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Blue Sky

Emilio Coronado felt the cool and crisp morning air on his face as he got into his car to drive to work. He was thinking that today was going to be a clear spring day, colored with a pastel blue sky. Emilio was feeling good. He had just been promoted to a middle management position within a large county social service agency. Emilio had worked hard for his promotion to program manager. Throughout his career with the agency, he had volunteered to serve on various work committees, accepted and labored on special projects, and even secured an MSW degree at the local university. Emilio has just been assigned to a division of the agency called In-Home Supportive Services, a division that provided personal and health care to frail and elderly residents in their homes who might otherwise be institutionalized. Emilio was unfamiliar with this division having worked primarily in other areas of the agency serving children and families for most of his career. Many co-workers had told him that the division was the step-child of the agency and a place where unproductive social workers were dumped because they could not cut it in other areas of the organization. Emilio was not deterred and, in fact, looked forward to the challenge. Today was his first day on the job. On his drive into work he saw nothing but clear blue sky, which gave him a sense of joy, optimism, and confidence that he would do well in his new position.

The first month on the job went well for Emilio. During this period, Emilio mainly indulged himself in observing operations and acquainting himself with his areas of responsibility. His management span of control included 5 program units, each unit comprised of one social work supervisor and 7 social workers. In all, the division possessed 55 staff, including a clerical unit that supported the division. Emilio made it a point to introduce himself to staff and talked to them about himself and how excited he was to be assigned to the division. One of the social workers he was especially fond of was Kelly. Emilio knew Kelly from graduate school where they met while working on their MSWs'. Kelly was intelligent, candid and always upbeat. Kelly was happy when Emilio was promoted, and thought Emilio would make a great program manager. As for the other staff, everyone seemed genuinely interested and

excited about Emilio's presence. Emilio returned to his office and turned on his radio to listen to some soft music while he worked. He looked out his office window and saw nothing but blue sky. He was feeling good.

Trouble

As the next few weeks went on and staff became more accustomed to his presence, Emilio began to notice fewer smiles on the faces of staff. Many staff began to pass him in the hallways without greeting him, acting almost as if he were not there. As he wandered around different program areas, he began to observe how staff conversed and moved about the workplace. Emilio noticed how staff conversations were brief, as if to say the minimum, and that their body movements were almost mechanical and robotic. He thought these observations odd, as if staff lacked life, and in a fleeting moment of thought, Emilio half jokingly coined them "social work zombies".

One day Emilio happened upon loud verbal exchange between a social worker and the supervisor of the clerical support unit. Emilio was unnoticed and upon hearing the exchange, Emilio quickly deduced that the supervisor was upset by the social worker's request to expedite a check for a care provider. The supervisor was voicing frustration at the social workers for her poor work habits which necessitated too many special requests like the one being debated. The social worker's constant request for expedited services meant that her staff had to stop their work routine to deal with the social worker's immediate request. Even more so, other social workers in the division were constantly requesting expedited services interrupting normal clerical operations and causing undue hardship on her staff. The social worker countered by stating that rules and procedures established by the supervisor were too rigid and inflexible and often didn't meet the work needs of social workers and their clients. "*Besides*" remarked the social worker "*why don't you ever ask what we think before you go around making up all these rules!*" When the two combatants noticed Emilio, the verbal barrage stopped. Emilio was immediately troubled. What would motivate two professions to behave that way? Even more troubling to Emilio was the realization that this exchange had occurred within ear-shot of clients sitting in the waiting room! Emilio knew he would have to deal with what he just witnessed, but decided to postpone any action until later. He never did.

The Dead

As weeks passed, Emilio perceived that supervisors were visiting his office more often asking him for specific direction on supervisory and program matters. At first he welcomed this interaction with supervisors as it gave him a chance to interact and get to know them. Most of them were fairly new at supervision ranging from 2 to 3 years of experience and coming from within the ranks of the division. The exception was Bill, who worked for the agency for 27 years and who was near the end of his career. Emilio was somewhat drawn to Bill because it seemed Bill possessed wisdom and practical experience that Emilio might find useful. As Emilio's interactions with supervisors progressed, he felt the issues being brought to his attention were mundane and routine. He thought any competent supervisor should be able to make decisions on these basic issues. Emilio was growing weary and frustrated of always having to make the call or having to give specific direction because of supervisory inertia. In his weekly meeting with supervisors, Emilio did most of the talking and supervisors mainly took notes and nodded in agreement to whatever Emilio said. Emilio tried repeatedly to engage and motivate supervisors into thought provoking discussions by activity soliciting their opinions and ideas. He mainly received blank stares and timid responses of affirmation. *"I'm talking to the dead"* thought Emilio.

Emilio had been on the job 3 months and had become familiar with program and budget reports, as well as using information systems that supported his division. One day, Emilio became concerned over a monthly report which indicated a high number of overdue client assessments that needed to be completed annually. The report indicated the number of overdue assessments for the prior month. Emilio decided to review monthly reports going back 6 months and discovered a high and consistent pattern of overdue assessments each month. Although clients were not discontinued from services, the agency's failure to assess annually potentially meant that some clients were not receiving adequate levels of services, while others were receiving higher levels of services than needed. Emilio decided to investigate further. He randomly selected electronic case files representing different social workers and checked their client assessments going back 3 years. He discovered that many client assessments rarely changed from year to year, even though changes in health status and personal needs were often noted in the case record. At Emilio's next meeting with supervisors, he presented his findings. Supervisors responded to his findings by stating they constantly pressure their staffs to keep their

overdue assessments to a minimum, but the reality was that social workers had too many cases. Bill said that workers had figured out long ago that there was no real incentive to completing annual assessments timely. As long as clients weren't discontinued, they rarely complained about not being assessed annually. When Emilio pointed that the division's inability to complete its work timely had implications for granting proper service levels, service planning, and budgeting, supervisors stated they would "*get on*" their staffs right away.

The Walk Around

Emilio made it a habit from time to time to walk around work areas occupied by social workers, usually with a morning cup of coffee. This gave him a chance to informally chat with staff and hear what was on their minds. At first, Emilio enjoyed these causal conversations with staff, but his morning walks were becoming increasingly unpleasant and difficult. Staff increasingly were complaining about the pressure to complete more work, the difficulty of working with the clerical unit, procedures and processes that were burdensome and whimsical, and the high caseloads they had to manage. When Emilio inquired about what supervisors were doing to address their concerns, the almost universal response was "*very little*". One social worker said "*it's all about CYA. They never listen to what we say.*" Another said "*what's the point, you know what's going to happen - nothing.*" As time went on, Emilio noticed that fewer staff at their work stations when he passed through. When he inquired about the location of missing workers, staff who were present stated that their peers were in the field. Conspicuously absent was Kelly, whom Emilio had not seen and talked to in quite sometime. When Emilio returned to his office he requested from personnel an ad-hoc report on time-off usage for the division. When he received the report, it indicated higher use of sick and personal leave within the division in comparison to other divisions in the agency.

Ms. Chin

Emilio was increasingly receiving complaints from clients about the poor quality of services provided by the division. He learned after talking to a few clients that his number was being given out by supervisors. The supervisors were informing clients that Mr. Coronado was the person they needed to speak to because only he had the authority to approve their requests or resolve their issues. A conversation with the elderly Ms. Chin exemplified many of the

conversations that Emilio was beginning to have with clients. Ms. Chin stated to Emilio that she needed a temporary increase in services because she was going to have minor out-patient surgery and *“might need a little more help around the house”*. Paul [social worker] told her he was behind in his work and since her request was not considered a major emergency by agency standards, he could not go out right away and re-assess her service needs. Paul said he could get out there in 3 weeks, 2 weeks after her outpatient surgery. Ms. Chin wanted to know why Paul couldn’t increase her services administratively since Paul was just out at her home 2 months ago and Paul has been her social worker for years. *“I just needed some more services just to get by for a while until I get better.”* Paul said he couldn’t administratively do it and would check with his supervisor. Paul told Ms. Chin it might help if she called herself and spoke to Alice Green [supervisor] about increasing her services. Ms. Chin called Ms. Green who refused to administratively increase services despite Ms. Chin willingness to send in a doctor’s verification confirming the minor outpatient surgery. Ms. Green said that it was *“agency policy that a home assessment being done to grant in any increase in services.”* Ms. Green then referred Ms. Chin to Emilio stating that *“only administration had the authority to override agency policy.”* When Emilio tried to refer Ms. Chin back to the supervisor to resolve her problem by promising Ms. Chin he would speak to Ms. Green first, she became frantic. She begged Emilio not refer her back *“because Ms. Green wouldn’t do a damn thing and I’ll just get Paul in more trouble. Why can’t Paul decide these things? Why does everything have to be approved by Ms. Green? What to you pay these people for anyway, to sit around and be told what to do?”*

Bill and Kelly

Emilio was becoming increasingly discouraged about what he now perceived to be a poor working environment, where staff seemed dysfunctional and poorly motivated to take charge and do the right thing. Now after 6 months on the job, Emilio was convinced that quantity and quality of services provided by the division were poor. But worst yet, nobody seemed to care or know what to do. Emilio decided that he would talk to Bill, the most senior supervisor in the division to try and get some insight as to why the division operated so poorly. Emilio took a risk and shared with Bill his observations, conclusions and frustrations about the division. Surprisingly to Emilio, Bill agreed with him stating that he had been there a long time and things have always been this way. Bill went on to say that staff just come to work, do their job and go

home. Nothing really changes. In his mind, this division has always been an after thought to everything else that goes on in the agency. *“Hell”* said Bill, *“I can’t even remember the last time the agency director was seen walking through here.”* Bill sensed Emilio’s motivation for wanting to talk to him. He knew Emilio wanted information as a precursor for initiating changes in the division. Bill said *“I know your thinking of maybe putting some fire in this place, but remember that has already been tried before. I remember when Alice [Ms. Green] was first promoted. She tried all kinds of new things she learned in training to get staff excited about what we do and how we do our jobs. She did things without checking with Linda, your predecessor. Linda didn’t like Alice doing things without checking with her fist. One day Alice got creamed and came out of Linda’s office crying. She never was the same. Administration backed Linda, even when they heard about Linda hammering Alice.”* Emilio thanked Bill for his comments and told Bill he hadn’t decided on anything yet. He would have to think more about it.

Emilio felt even worst. This place seemed to have a long history and culture of poor performance and underachievement. Not only was the division a step-child of the agency, but a battered one. Emilio decided he had to speak to Kelly to gain a better sense of what staff thought about working for the division. Emilio hadn’t spoken to Kelly in sometime and wondered if she was purposely avoiding him. Kelly agreed to meet with him, but he sensed reluctance. She would have early morning coffee with him, but only if they met away from the office. Much like his meeting with Bill, Emilio decided to take a risk with Kelly and shared with her what he had shared with Bill. Kelly was not surprised. She told Emilio that she found it hard to come to work because the job was routine and boring. Nothing exciting ever happened at work. She told Emilio that she was actively looking for other work because the place was bringing her down. There was little camaraderie and the work was not stimulating enough. She said *“Besides the place is besieged with problems that everyone seems to ignore and do nothing about. The only solutions are the same old ones and supervisors just expect everyone to work harder, instead of smarter.”*

She reminded Emilio how they both work hard to get their master’s degree so that they could be professional social workers. She said to Emilio *“Remember when we graduated we thought we were full of new and cutting edge ideas? Well, it doesn’t seem that anybody is listening.”* She told Emilio that lately she came to the conclusion that she felt more like a factory

girl, more concerned about producing widgets just to keep her supervisor off her back. She told Emilio that she was overjoyed when he was appointed program manger, thinking things might change. But since Emilio was appointed, very little had changed. She bluntly told Emilio he needed to do something as she knew of a number of peers who were seeking to leave and work elsewhere. She was telling him these things because of their long friendship. Emilio was grateful for Kelly's frankness. As they rose to leave, Kelly gave Emilio a departing hug and said, *"Why don't you talk to Dr. Sumner. You always said you enjoyed discussing administrative and management ideas with him. Maybe he can help you figure out what you need to do."*

The Senior Citizens' Protection Act

When Emilio returned to his office there was a message on his voice mail. It was from the agency director office asking him to report to her office that afternoon at 2:00 o'clock. The director's, Jane Montgomery, was pleased to see Emilio as she had not spoken to him privately since his promotion. Emilio genuinely liked Jane because she had always been supportive of his career. In fact, Emilio believed that Jane was in large part responsible for his promotion since she encouraged him to apply for the position. She also had arranged for other senior managers to discuss the position with him prior to his interview before the civil service board. Emilio felt he owed her a great deal and he did not want to let her down. Jane informed Emilio that she had just returned from the state capital and had attended a meeting of the director's statewide association where they discussed recently passed legislation. One legislative bill called the Senior Citizens Protection Act was headed to the Governor's office for signature. Because of intense lobbying from senior citizen advocacy groups, the governor had agreed to sign the bill into law. She told Emilio that the new law would directly affect his shop and would mandated an expansion of in-home supportive services provided by his division. Although most people agreed that expanding in home support services to seniors was a good thing, local county governments had opposed the bill. Their opposition was based on the statue's requirement that county financial participation for these services be increased from 5% of total program cost to 30%. This increase in county financial participation would put a severe strain on county revenues which the county was ill-prepared to assume. Jane told Emilio that these events would put services provided by the division under increased public scrutiny as the County Board of Supervisors and other community interest would want to know more about the nature of the

program and how increased county dollars would be spent. Given it would now cost the county an additional 2 million dollars just to support current level of services, much less an expansion of services projected at an additional 2 million, Jane said she was in no immediate position to authorize more staff or resources to the division. She straightforwardly told Emilio that his division would have to be creative and learn how to do more with less. Further request for staffing and resources would be very carefully scrutinized. Emilio told Jane he understood and would report back to her in 45 days with a plan to address these monumental changes. Jane responded by saying she looked forward to his report.

Dark Clouds

As Emilio returned to his office, his experiences over the last six months began to haunt him. He pondered the ability of staff to handle these upcoming changes which surely meant even more work being placed on them. Even now, little progress had been made in addressing overdue annual assessments. Turf battles between social workers and the clerical unit seemed more common place. Division supervisors were lethargic and heavy handed with their staffs. Staff were increasingly distant and unresponsive. Three staff members had resigned in the last 30 days and absenteeism was on the rise. Emilio reflected on his meeting with Bill and Kelly hoping to find meaning on how to proceed. Bill advised caution, while Kelly advised immediate action. Emilio was determined to act, but clarity was not forthcoming. Perhaps Kelly was right. Maybe he should talk to Dr. Sumner. Emilio reached his office and sat at his desk. He called Dr. Sumner, but his voice mail said he was out until next week. He turned on his radio hoping the music would help him relax. Instead, the voice coming from the radio was reporting weather stating “comfortable temperatures and sunny blue skies in the days ahead.” Emilio looked out his window and saw gloomy dark clouds on the horizon.