

Your Unhappy Duty

Case Studies In Health Care Supervision,

Charles A. McConnell

You are the manager of purchasing and general stores for Ajax Memorial Hospital. In the year you have been there you have come to know your four employees quite well. They are generally a happy, cohesive, and cooperative group, usually joking among themselves but getting the work done more that satisfactorily. All of them seem to give a great deal to the hospital, and it is obvious to you that they care about what they are doing. A couple of them usually come in a bit early, going over their plans for the day's work over coffee before starting time, and although quitting time is 4:30 pm, all of them generally stay a few minutes later to finish what they happen to be working on. You have felt all along that you could not ask for a better group of employees.

This afternoon, however, things change. You returned at about 3:00 pm from an outside meeting and were met by four grim faces reflecting varying degrees of gloom and anger. The department secretary, Carol, said, "the CEO is looking for you. In fact, three calls in the last hour--although I said you weren't due back until 3:00."

The telephone rang. Carol answered it and after a few seconds said, "Yes, (s)he just walked in. (S)He'll be right there."

Without an inkling of the problem you hurried to the CEO's office, where you were greeted with a stern look and a firm instruction to close the door before seating yourself.

"I want to know whether you think you're running a hospital department or a social club," the CEO snapped.

"What do you mean?"

"I was walking along the corridor near your office when I heard an awful racket coming from the stockroom. Laughing, practically shrieking, so loud I could hear it two hundred feet up the hall. I went in and found all four of your staff eating lunch in the stockroom. Actually eating lunch in the department. Were you aware that they did so?"

"Certainly. They've always done that. I wondered about it when I was new here, but I did enough digging to convince myself there was no rule against it."

"There are commonsense rules of behavior I insist on. These should be sufficiently plain that they need not be written, and eating in the department is an obvious case. Why do you suppose we provide a cafeteria?"

You said that you agreed as far as certain areas were concerned. For instance, you said that it would not look good for someone to be eating lunch at the admission desk. You believe it does not really matter in the case of the stockroom, as this is a closed area never entered by patients or visitors.

"What's good for one department is good for all departments," the CEO responded. "And that goes for the coffeepot as well. I don't permit coffeepots in the departments. Your people can get their coffee in the cafeteria at specified break times, just like everyone else."

Not quite biting your tongue, you said, "There's a coffeepot in the dictating room of medical records. Of course that's used by doctors as well."

Your remark triggered a few choice comments about your attitude, and you found yourself on the receiving end of a spontaneous and rather critical "performance evaluation" until a few minutes before quitting time. Although you tried your best to defend your employees, citing their good-humored cooperation and flexibility, you nevertheless departed with a clear message to take back to them: We are running a health care organization in businesslike fashion, and that means no boisterous laughter, no eating in the department, and no coffeepot.

You arrived back in your department at exactly 4:30. Your four employees, grim faces and all, were the first in line at the time clock in the corridor. It was the first time you ever knew any of them to leave at 4:30 on the dot.