

# CASE STUDY #1

(Support staff performance problem)

You are the new Chairperson of a unit that had the same Chairperson for 15 years. You were a faculty member of that unit for most of those 15 years.

Carol was the administrative assistant for the previous Chairperson for all of the 15 years. She has good technical skills; her problem appears to be behavioral and is occurring more intensely during a time of major staff and workflow changes in the unit. By all appearances, Carol enjoys creating dissension between other faculty and/or staff members; she is rude to callers or visitors; she is short with students and constantly scolds them for things they have done; and she drops your name about strict rules for using the copier, ordering minor supplies, etc.

You have observed and been a “victim” of this behavior for 15 years and you want to establish a new culture and climate of treating everyone with dignity and respect.

*How will you begin to change this situation?*

## ISSUES TO CONSIDER

*Provide immediate feedback regarding her behavior including:*

- Analyze the source of Carol’s performance problem.
- Give Carol clear and specific feedback about her behavior.
- Clarify the impact her behavior has on the workplace (is she aware of her behavior?).
- Set clear expectations for Carol that describes what appropriate behavior will look like.
- Create a timeline for improvement.
- Develop a plan for follow-up.

Refer to competency definitions (in handouts) from the Performance Development Program (PDP) for examples of behavioral expectations.

*Discuss your vision for the department with Carol (be clear about it for yourself), including:*

- Talk about the changes and her acceptance of change.
- Recognize that not all people accept change at the same pace.
- Acknowledge that change isn’t easy.
- “WIIFM” (what’s in it for me). Help her to see the personal benefits of making this change.

# CASE STUDY #2

(Supervisor role clarity)

In your new role as department chairperson you've been perplexed with clerical staff who come to you frequently when they're dissatisfied with decisions made by their supervisor or when they want to complain about something she has done or not done that they disagree with. Because you want to be responsive, accessible and approachable you always take the time to listen to these staff concerns; sometimes you change decisions if you feel the supervisor hasn't been fair or thorough in her decision-making.

Just recently the supervisor came to you complaining that you are undermining her authority and that staff now have no respect for her in her role. She is considering leaving, which you would hate to see happen.

*What can you do to address this situation?*

## ISSUES TO CONSIDER

*The relationship between a department's academic administrator and the support staff supervisor can be a difficult one, possibly due to lack of role clarity, unclear expectations on both sides, and different priorities.*

*The supervisor in an academic unit is generally responsible for leading and managing the support staff (usually clerical employees), who support the work of departmental faculty. While there is considerable unit-to-unit variation, this generally means that, minimally, the supervisor approves staff use of leave time and conducts staff performance appraisals. Depending on the department, faculty may give work directly to the staff member who supports them or the supervisor may be responsible for receiving work from faculty and delegating it to the appropriate staff member.*

*Here are some steps you, the department chair, could take to resolve this situation:*

- Have a discussion with the supervisor about how you and she see her role in the department. What authority and responsibilities will she have? Come to agreement on this. Be candid about the fact that there are problems.
- As part of the discussion talk about how you see your role relative to the supervisor. Over what kinds of staff-related decisions do you want to be consulted or have authority? Realize that if you give the supervisor responsibility for overseeing staff work, but she has little or no authority in decisions, she is in a difficult position in terms of staff respecting her role.
- Communicate with staff in person about the supervisor's role, responsibilities and authority. Be clear about the areas where you will be involved. OVER

- Once roles and responsibilities are clarified, stick to the agreement. If staff come to you on subjects within the purview of the supervisor, send them back to the supervisor for resolution. Don't second-guess or override the supervisor's authority.
- If you have concerns about the supervisor's decisions or actions, go directly to her and talk privately, rather than overriding her decisions publicly.
- Have regular meetings with the supervisor about departmental issues, faculty satisfaction with support staff, etc. Keep communication lines open.

# CASE STUDY #3

(Faculty treatment of support staff)

Charles has been a tenured faculty member and researcher at MSU for 15 years. His research has received worldwide recognition. Charles works for his research 7 days a week 24 hours a day (or at least that is the way it appears). He is not a good communicator; he is very demanding of the support staff and berates them both in private and public if they make errors. There is constant turnover in support staff positions. Staff have reported the treatment they received from Charles and the overall climate as the main reason for leaving. This creates lost productivity, and unnecessary time and cost involved in constantly posting, advertising, and filling positions.

*As the new Chair, what should you do to resolve the problems?*

## ISSUES TO CONSIDER

*Consider:*

- Acknowledge that you appreciate his expertise and tenure in the department. However, as the new chair you have a vision for the department, which includes valuing all employees and creating an effective team environment.
  - Discuss your vision and the changes you have in mind.
  - Ask for his support and assistance in making these changes.
  - Acknowledge that change isn't easy and that all people do not accept change at the same pace.
  - Offer your support and assistance to him during this transition.
  - Ask him to come to you to help resolve staff issues.
- Provide direct feedback—is he aware of his behavior and the negative impact it has on others and on his research (turnover is costly).
- Set clear expectations for positive behavior toward staff and the benefits he will receive if he changes his behavior (staff will respect him and want to work in his lab and be more productive, thereby decreasing turnover).
- Stress the importance of treating staff with respect.
- Does he need to have the “burden” of supervising?
- Offer the option of providing a line supervisor to handle the day-to-day operations of the lab.

# CASE STUDY #4

(Reclassification/Merit Pay)

Your assistant, classified as a Secretary II, continues to provide you with outstanding service. She voluntarily works extra hours and has recently taken on additional job responsibilities with regard to maintaining the department budget. She also was instrumental in gathering information and worked long hours to help prepare the Annual Plan.

You have become aware that she has commented to other employees that her hourly pay rate is beyond the progression maximum for her classification grade level. You fear that she may bid on other higher level positions in the university.

*What are some options you might consider to insure that she remains in your department?*

## ISSUES TO CONSIDER

*Consider:*

- Possible reclassification of her position (duties may be beyond scope of Secretary II classification)
- Should she receive overtime payment?
- Lump sum merit increase
- Merit increase to base
- Other informal reward/recognition strategies
- Publicly thank the employee and provide other expressions of appreciation.
- Write a formal letter of commendation for her personnel file.

# CASE STUDY #5

(Probationary Employee—Performance Problem)

You hired Rita, an Administrative Assistant, four months ago. She was also a new hire to MSU.

You have been dissatisfied with her performance from the date of hire. Her skills are not sufficient and it appears she is unwilling to learn new skills. The faculty in your unit cannot obtain the support they need for their projects.

As Rita's supervisor for four months, you have a good handle on the situation and want to begin addressing this performance problem.

*What should you do?*

## ISSUES TO CONSIDER

*Consider:*

- She is a probationary employee—do you keep her? (“\$1 million hire”—average salary over 25 years of employment)—cut your losses if necessary.

*Important steps:*

- Conduct an interim evaluation – automatically sent to you at 6 months from employment dated
- Analyze the source of her performance problem and provide the necessary training.
- Follow up at regular intervals with specific performance feedback and reinforcement of your expectations.

*When do you terminate a probationary employee?*

- You have established clear expectations, followed up on a regular basis with performance feedback, provided support through the process, and it has not resulted in the performance needed.

*If she is terminated:*

- Hire a temporary employee until permanent replacement is found.
- Determine if this is the correct classification to meet department needs OVER

- Analyze your needs and expectations of this position.
  - Possibly reclassify position (if current classification is not appropriate).
- Use Behavioral Interview Questions for new vacancy—hire the right person—both technical skill and behavioral skills.