

CASE STUDY 6: The Case of Joe the Jerk (Or, the Very Capable Jerk)

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Instructions: As you read and think about the motivation theories and work-related attitudes that we will cover, consider the following case, and the following questions:

1. What different perspectives on the case would the different theories take? What would they emphasize and point to as most important? What kinds of solutions or alternatives would they suggest?
2. Can you see gaps or weaknesses in the different theories that come out in trying to apply them to the case? Are some of the concepts and theories more useful for this case than others?
3. What would you advise Joan to do about Joe? Can you ground any of your advice in the theories or ideas about motivation that we cover in the readings and class discussion?

You have been asked to consult with a module manager in a public service center of the Social Security Administration. A module is a group of about forty workers who work together in processing claims for social security coverage (that is, requests for the beginning of payments, or other services such as changes and information). A module has all the specialists needed to process a claim from beginning to end—claims authorizers, benefits authorizers, file clerks, and typists or word processors. Each module has a module manager (hereafter, MM) and two assistant module managers (AMMs), who lead and manage the team of workers in the module.

The MM, Joan, has a serious concern about one of the AMMs, Joe. Joe is very intelligent, talented, and younger than most AMMs. As far as his knowledge of the work and technical details is concerned, he is extremely promising and has excellent prospects to move up to become MM and then move on up beyond that. Joe, however,

is arrogant in his dealings with the workers in the module. He talks down to people and treats them curtly and rudely. He behaves as if he deserves more special treatment and attention than the module members because he is an AMM. On the other hand, Joe also takes some stands and actions that are not necessarily bad or unjustified.

Following are some incidents that have occurred:

One of the file clerks arrives late fairly often. Joe has begun to confront her very aggressively, in front of the other members of the module, criticizing her for arriving late. He has initiated disciplinary action against her. Some other members of the module have pointed out to Joe and Joan that the file clerk is a young single mother with a lot of personal problems. Her brother was recently shot to death in a street fight, apparently drug related. Her child is sick a lot and she has problems getting good child care. Joe, however, insists on going forward with the disciplinary action, saying he cannot let a person arrive late regularly without being unfair to those who do arrive on time. Besides, he says, it is essentially illegal for him not to take action. Joan has to decide whether to intervene in the disciplinary action or let it go through.

Joan is concerned about Joe's effect on motivation and work satisfaction in the module. He speaks very condescendingly to module members who make mistakes, acting as if he is a lot smarter than they are—which is often true, in a sense. Joan arranged for a weekend retreat, during which the group went through some team development exercises with a consultant. Throughout the retreat and the exercises, Joe had a sneer on his face, and made sarcastic comments about the time the group was wasting on “touchy-feely nonsense.”

The members of the module have group meetings to discuss problems and changes. Joe has gotten up and walked out of a couple of these meetings, acting impatient with the discussion. He often frowns and rolls his eyes as members of the group are speaking. After the most recent of these incidents, the other AMM, who is excellent as a person and a manager, has told Joan that she is considering asking to transfer to another module or position because Joe is so unpleasant to work with, and because she feels that Joe is damaging morale in the module so badly that it is disrupting the work of the module.

Joan needs to make decisions about Joe:

Joan has to prepare a performance evaluation for Joe, of course. This will strongly affect his chances to move to higher positions. Also, the director of the center is forming a task force to plan and carry out an important change in work processes for the entire center. He has heard that Joe really knows his stuff, and has asked Joan what she thinks of having Joe appointed as either head of this task force or assistant head. (Joe minds his manners and behaves well in meetings when superiors from outside the module are present).

Joan is very impressed with Joe's intelligence and ability. Joe does have a likeable side that often shows. She also knows that Joe's wife has a long-term serious illness and is facing a series of operations at present, and that one of his children was seriously disabled in an accident two years ago. Joe often talks about being bored in his present position and wanting to move up or to somewhere where he can have more variety and responsibility. Joan wants to support and help Joe, and loathes the idea of having to confront him now with a bad evaluation and with the news that she has not supported his appointment to the task force. She has had a number of talks with Joe about his undesirable behavior and attitudes. She has tried to be very positive, praising his capabilities, telling him she really wants him to succeed, and pointing out that he has opportunities to move up. She urges him to show the good side she sees in him, but says that he needs to change. She has never really come down on him with a bad evaluation. In these discussions, Joe sits quietly with a slight smirk on his face, leaves the discussion without saying anything, and pouts for a day or so. The discussions have shown no effect on his behaviors. She is trying to decide what to do next. One possibility in addition to a bad evaluation is to begin the process of trying to have Joe demoted from AMM.

Please return to the questions at the beginning of the case and prepare responses to them.

Source: This case was written by Hal G. Rainey, Alumni Foundation Distinguished Professor, Department of Public Administration and Policy, University of Georgia