1.1 Powerful or Influential?

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Courses this story could be used in: Organizational Behavior, Organizational Change, Entrepreneurship, Principles of Management

Topics: communication, empathy, leadership, culture

The Story

Mr. Dawson was the most powerful man at QRS, a company specialized in the development of quality research systems. He had been the president of the company for over ten years. However, he was rarely visible, only a few of the top managers at QRS had ever seen him. The program developers, sales-people in the stores, and even the office managers had never met him—even those who had worked at the company for the same ten years. It was even rumored that Mr. Dawson did not really exist. But no one dared talking about it, because there were also whispers that some employees, who had joked about Mr. Dawson’s vague state of being, had been fired for undisclosed reasons.

At the end of every year there was a gift-package with season’s greetings for every employee in the conference room. This package was given on top of the bonuses. However, all celebrations and ceremonies were executed by the department managers.

Mr. Dawson was powerful, indeed. “He is a billionaire” was what some of the people in the company said. And, although never seen, he seemed to have his ears everywhere in the organization, which inhibited employees from even speculating about this “invisible” man.

Samuel was one of the senior managers at QRS. He had worked at the company for ten years, and never missed a day at work. At least, not without a very good reason. Like that one time when his mother passed away unexpectedly. Or the day that his wife gave birth to their child.
Everyone in the company liked Samuel, because he was open, caring, and empathetic. He was often walking around the office and in the retail stores, where he had a kind word ready for everybody he met: not only his employees, but the ones that were not directly linked to his department as well. Samuel was in fact more of a mentor figure. People throughout the organization would call him to ask his advice on issues that oftentimes were personal.

Samuel’s department was the one at QRS where everyone wanted to work. There was an open atmosphere in the office, and his staff seemed to have developed a wonderful subculture. There was trust and camaraderie, and the Monday-morning meetings always had a pleasant ambience. Sometimes even outside in the open air! Every week someone took care of the doughnuts or the fruit for the sessions. There was a lot of laughter, and the entire spirit was one of creativity encouragement. Ideas were never discarded without team contemplation, and his employees knew that if they brought something up, Samuel would do his best to get their point across.

Samuel was influential. His advice was important to many people throughout QRS—professionally and personally.

Not long ago, Samuel decided to start his own company in research systems and other computer software services. He planned to start small, and gave his notice in line with the company rules. No one liked to see this wonderful man go. More strikingly, many of the very best employees at QRS started applying for jobs at Samuel’s new company.

Within three years Samuel’s company had grown to a successful middle-sized organization, where suppliers, customers, and employees were all happy and content. The company could have been much larger, for there was enough interest from all sides, not in the least customers. But Samuel wanted to keep the family spirit intact, and he realized that this would become harder if the company grew out of proportion. He believed that the organization’s performance should not necessarily rest on moneymaking, but on excellent performance from a happy workforce. The company’s core purpose was, appropriately, “To accommodate America’s knowledge workforce by providing the highest quality in products and service through team-work, creativity, and trust.”

And QRS? That company ultimately went out of business. After Samuel left, several other managers decided to either start their own businesses as well, or find a job in a work environment where it was much more fun. They all remembered the quote by Lao Tzu that Samuel had engraved in a little plaque on his desk: “If you enjoy what you do, you never work a day in your life.”

To all workers, QRS had served its purpose as a stepping-stone in their career, but the lack of personal approach and the coercive atmosphere ultimately drove the best workers away.

The powerful Mr. Dawson remained wealthy for the rest of his vague days, although his power could be questioned in the long run, and the influential