

Case Study 20:

Why Can't We Be Friends?

Background

Cynthia Lai has been working at RMA Construction, a major construction firm, for the last five years. She studied finance in school and always got great grades. She travelled a little before beginning work, but she always had a very structured approach to work and impressed all her bosses while working part time as a waitress during university. Cynthia began as a junior analyst but was quickly promoted to senior analyst due to her excellent work ethic and positive attitude. She is happy at work, and she can see herself spending her entire career at RMA Construction.

One of Cynthia's colleagues is Derek Gallows. Derek began at roughly the same time as Cynthia, but never seemed to grasp the intricacies of the job. He's been a junior analyst for five years and has barely improved at his job in that time. Cynthia and Derek have a good relationship, and often text on weekends when not at work together. There are four other analysts on the team, and Cynthia gets along with all of them, but she is especially fond of Derek as he can always make her laugh.

The six analysts often have lunch together in the office cafeteria or at the nearby food court. They are all in their mid-to-late twenties and have a good rapport with one another. The work atmosphere is rather strict, given the hectic nature of the work, so employee morale is good but not great. In fact, all the analysts are friends on Facebook and have even created a WhatsApp chat to complain about excessive work and unfair bosses. The work e-mail addresses are monitored by the company, so social media has become a refuge for the analysts to grumble about their working conditions.

Current Situation

Derek has never excelled at his job and recently he was put on a performance plan by his boss. This means that Derek has to meet certain objectives every week and demonstrate more autonomy and initiative if he wants to keep his job. At the end of the six months, if he hasn't improved significantly, Derek has been informed that he will be terminated.

This naturally has not gone over well with Derek, who laments the unfairness of the situation daily in the group chat and occasionally at lunch. Being a social media junkie, Derek has also posted negative comments on Facebook and even sent out cryptic tweets on Twitter. While comments such as "Haters gonna hate" and "They ain't going to get me" could relate back to almost anything, Cynthia knew the negative posts were backlash from the performance plan. "If you keep whining about work on social media, they'll find a way to fire you," Cynthia told her friend. Derek joked that he would join more random social media sites "just to spread the word about RMA."

The Problem

The manager of the analysts, Sylvie Sparks, has decided to retire, effective at the end of the month. In anticipation of her retirement, Sylvie has selected Cynthia Lai to succeed her as the new manager. All of management is on board, as Cynthia has always been an excellent employee. And although Cynthia has never managed people before, she is excited to be given the opportunity to progress in her career, to say nothing of the extra vacation days and increased pay.

However, the people that Cynthia will be managing consist of her former teammates, including Derek Gallows. Cynthia has spent many years with these people complaining about the unfair treatment they endured together, much of it on social media for all to see. Worse, Derek has been lamenting about the incompetence of management, and Cynthia will now be responsible for his work performance plan, given that she is now part of management.

Cynthia is friends with Derek and would hate to have to fire him. But as his manager, she also cannot simply ignore the things he has been posting online, especially in public groups. She also does not want to be perceived as playing favourites among her old team, as that could lead to office gossip, anger, and lowered team morale. The team might also see Derek's removal from the performance plan as a cue that the new regime is less strict and start taking more liberties at work, leading to a decrease in production. "This is all downside!" Cynthia thought to herself when contemplating removing Derek from the performance plan.

Ultimately, Cynthia must decide not only whether she should keep Derek at the company, but also what to do about the social networks being used to express worker apathy. "They seemed so helpful when I started out," Cynthia reflected to herself, but now she realized that the twenty-first century work landscape is a potential minefield.

Activities and Discussion

1. What should Cynthia do about the group chats and Facebook groups that she's currently a part of?
2. What should Cynthia do about Derek's performance plan?
3. What are some of the pitfalls of using social media at work?
4. Can a manager be friends with their employees?