

## **Obstacles to Open Communication at MERS**

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In the response to a survey asking employees to identify the most prevalent at MERS of a list of "Common Viruses", the most popular was "Kill the Messenger". In an attempt to understand why MERS employees might be reluctant to bring problems, complaints, suggestions, etc. to the attention of Management, 3 sessions with non-management employees were held in the last week of September 2002. The following were offered as possible obstacles to open communication:

(It should be mentioned at the start MERS staff acknowledged at the sessions that they have a lot to be thankful for: a beautiful building, generous benefits, and a Board and management team concerned about their physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

It should also be mentioned that while most employees who responded after reviewing this report thought it accurately described their experience of MERS, some disagreed strongly.)

1. **Firings/Resignations.** In the 4-plus years between MERS independence and when Anne became executive director, only one employee was "terminated". The others who left either retired or left voluntarily. In the less than 2 years since, 11 people were either fired or quit because they were made to feel uncomfortable. Several terminations were clouded in secrecy - the employee just disappeared, and all we were told was that so-and-so was "no longer employed by MERS", or had "resigned and we wish her well in her future endeavors."

With any termination, staff needs to be given as much information as possible without violating confidentiality. They need to be reassured that the firing was warranted - that the employee was told about his or her substandard performance and given ample opportunity to improve. Terminations can be traumatic emotionally and economically. If staff doesn't understand what happened, they might think it could happen to them.

Staff should be reassured that MERS is committed to the principle of progressive discipline and that no employee may be dismissed without "just cause". Time could be scheduled at one of our monthly staff meetings for a question and answer session on the "Progressive Discipline" and "Dismissal" sections of the Personnel Manual.

The manner in which terminations are carried out needs to be more humane. Rather than rushing the employee out the door, they should be given time to tie up loose ends and say goodbye to fellow employees. They should be permitted a dignified departure.

A MERS goal should be NO MORE FIRINGS. More effort should be made to work

things out, such as assigning the employee to another position, or having another employee work with them.

2. **Abuse.** No one likes getting snapped at, condescended to, belittled or treated with disrespect in any way. That experience causes the employee to avoid any unnecessary contact with the supervisor.

Employees are not children or inmates or dogs. Managers should treat employees with the same respect they give their superiors. They should praise them when they perform well, support them when they struggle, sympathize when they stumble, and treat them with kindness even when they must inform them that they may not be able to continue working at MERS.

Harping about mistakes is abusive. Mistakes will be made. Mistakes can be fixed. Instead of attacking the employee when mistakes are made, the supervisor should help them figure out how to avoid such mistakes - possibly by providing *written* procedures, or training, or by changing the procedure.

Even-handedness in disciplining employees was also mentioned as a problem. This could be remedied by treating all employees the same: with respect.

3. **Verbal Warnings.** Performance problems should be discussed with employees long before they read about it in their performance review. Any criticism should take place in private.
4. **Employee/Supervisor Confidentiality.** Employees should be able to expect that personal work issues discussed with their supervisor will be kept confidential. Several instances were cited where a supervisor was heard talking to one employee about another. Other instances were mentioned where an employee heard someone talking about something that had originally come from them, and they had told no one other than their supervisor.
5. **Trust.** When a supervisor sees an employee talking to another employee, he/she should not assume that the employees are just socializing. When a supervisor sees an employee come to work 5 minutes late, he/she might consider that the employee worked a half hour late the night before.

Employees resent being constantly watched. The expression “walking on eggshells” was used often in the sessions. Unless the employee is obviously not working the full 8 hours a day or is not turning out a reasonable quantity of work, they should be left alone. They should be trusted to do their jobs, regardless of appearances.

6. **Merit Pay.** Any merit pay system must include objective, measurable criteria. Without them, employees are left to guess about what to do to please their supervisors, and they may avoid saying anything that could be interpreted as “negative”. Because of the economic consequences, they may be afraid to question

policies, procedures, and practices, or openly disagree with the supervisor. Without measurable criteria, merit pay may be perceived simply as a way for supervisors to punish dissent and reward pet employees.

For many jobs, measurable criteria for judging performance are extremely difficult to establish. It would be easier if MERS were a poultry packer, because we could award bonuses based on the number of chickens processed. But refunds and retirements are not uniform; 5 tough cases might take as long as 10 simple ones. Performance cannot be judged solely on volume of output. Quality is even harder to measure.

Unless merit at MERS can be objectively measured, merit pay should be abandoned.

7. **Favoritism in Promotions.** There is a perception among MERS employees that promotions are sometimes based not on ability, but on the employee's relationship with the supervisor and other managers. Employees think twice about speaking up about concerns when they think it might offend someone and hurt their chance for a promotion.

It is also suspected that some job descriptions have been written with specific employees in mind.

8. **Ignoring Complaints.** Complainers and employees with negative attitudes should not be ignored. They are usually on to something. Saying "bring me solutions, not problems" is counterproductive, because problems need to be identified even when no solution is apparent. Some people are good at identifying problems, others are good at solving them. Identifying the problem is the first step.

When an employee complains about a "dumb" rule or procedure or policy at MERS, the manager should make it clear that complaints are welcome and encourage the employee to elaborate. Then the two of them should discuss ways to resolve the issue. Once a plan is agreed upon, the manager should either take the lead or provide active support in getting the issue resolved. No employee should be allowed to think that complaining does no good.

9. **Employee Advisory Committee (EAC).** The EAC seems to have strayed from its mission. It is perceived by some as the puppet of Management. There should be no Management representation on the EAC. It was initially created as an alternative to an employee union. It should serve as means for employees to bring issues to Management and the Board, not as the organizer of social activities.

No matter how comfortable employees are with bringing problems and issues to their supervisor, it is important that a variety of avenues for expression be provided. Some employees will prefer to raise some issues anonymously, and one function of the EAC should be to preserve that anonymity.

Issues such as employee benefits that can be decided only by the Board should be

presented to the Board as a request from the employees, even if Management does not support the request.

10. **Ombudsman.** The concept of an ombudsman might be considered for MERS - a neutral party to whom employees could go when they are having problems with their supervisor or another employee.
11. **Too Many Rules and Restrictions.** Some rules and restrictions are necessary, and when they are, they should be in writing and readily accessible – like on the Intranet. But some rules have been imposed on everyone after the transgressions of one or two employees. It is better to deal with the offender rather than punish everyone.
12. **Employee Improvement.** While employees appreciate Management concern for their physical, emotional and intellectual well-being, they resent being force-fed employee improvement activities. They resent being pressured to go to school when the classes would not significantly improve their performance on their current job. They should be expected to do their job well and get along with other staff, but nothing more. Pushing employees to go to school only makes them feel like they are not good enough. Employee performance should be judged on how well they do their job, not on their educational qualifications for the job.

The same goes for the Covey training, Hardy's assessments, suggested reading, etc. Employees don't want to be told how they should talk and act. They are adults, and there is no reason to think that anyone else knows them better than they themselves. When employees desire outside assistance in improving themselves, they alone should decide where to get it.

There are some things that are none of MERS' business. Unless there is something about the employee that affects their performance at MERS, they should be left alone.

13. **Mountain Out of Mole Hill.** Employees report having taken a problem to a manager and then watching helplessly as the issue gets transformed/distorted into something much worse than it really is. The employee who introduces the issue should be allowed to speak for him/herself.
14. **Welcoming New Employees.** MERS is perceived by new employees as cold and unfriendly. New employees should be welcomed warmly and introduced to all - and not necessarily by taking them around and introducing them personally to each employee. An e-mail could be sent to the entire office introducing the new employee and inviting staff to drop by and introduce themselves. This should be done not only for permanent employees, but temps who are going to be here for more than one day.

An employee orientation program should be created. It might consist simply of a list of things a new employee should know, with references to the Intranet, the MERS website, the CAFR (which - among other information - contains staff pictures), etc. We have MERS employees who had never heard of the EAC.

15. **Manager Timidity.** Employees report that they have brought problems to their supervisor and although the supervisor sympathized, he/she refused to take it to the Executive Director because he/she was afraid to do so or assumed the response would be negative.