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LEARNING MANAGEMENT THE HARD WAY: EXAMINING CASES OF MANAGERIAL MISCONDUCT TO PROMOTE BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Summary. This chapter considers six mini cases, based on litigation, discrimination and retaliation. The cases are presented as a means to train managers to avoid managerial wrongdoing and misconduct. The principle is that by examining worst practices, managers can be trained to avoid these missteps and in the process improve their managerial acumen for ethical conduct.

Keywords: managerial misconduct, corruption, discrimination

NAUKA ZARZĄDZANIA: BADANIE PRZYPADKÓW NIEWŁAŚCIWEGO ZACHOWANIA MENEDŻERÓW W CELU PROMOWANIA NAJLEPSZYCH PRAKTYK W ZAKRESIE ZARZĄDZANIA

Streszczenie. W artykule podejmuje się rozważania sześciu mini przypadków, w oparciu o rozprawy sądowe, związanych z dyskryminacją i odwetem. Przypadki są prezentowane jako materiały szkoleniowe dla menedżerów w celu uniknięcia niewłaściwych zachowań i wykroczeń. Autorki zakładają, że przez zapoznanie się z najgorszymi praktykami, menedżerowie uczą się unikania złych zachowań oraz poprawiają umiejętności zarządcze w kierunku etycznego postępowania.

Słowa kluczowe: niewłaściwe zachowanie menedżerów, korupcja, dyskryminacja

1. Introduction

This chapter presents six mini-case studies, based on litigation, which can be used to teach best practices in management. It has been suggested that giving future managers an opportunity to explore cases that highlight wrongdoing, such as discrimination and retaliation, is an effective way to avoid corporate corruption and misconduct that arise from such discrimination or other unethical and/or illegal management practices (Petrick, Quinn, 1997).

Issues typically found in discrimination or retaliation cases which have been whistle blown for reporting corporate misconduct or violations include age discrimination, retaliation for administrative complaints of misconduct or discrimination, religious discrimination, race/national origin discrimination, gender discrimination, sexual preference discrimination and disability discrimination (Tangri, Burt, Johnson, 1982). The most frequently cited allegations in 2011 in the United States were sex discrimination, disability discrimination and finally age discrimination, in this respective order, according to the Equal Opportunity Commission (EEOC, 2012).

These cases, derived from litigation, illustrate the consequences of managerial misconduct and can be used for training of students and managers to allow them to learn from these case illustrations. This chapter will allow readers to consider some good practices that could be implemented to avoid such negative consequences of management mistakes that landed employers in court and in many cases paying out large awards or settlements (York, Barclay, Zajack, 1997).

These cases illustrate the consequences of not dealing effectively with issues such as discrimination and retaliation. A careful examination of the cases may be used to suggest proactive strategies, mindsets, and organizational routines that will encourage positive managerial practices that promote the dignity and productivity of all employees, and minimize corruption (Brody, Freed, 2011). Volumes such as these can serve to elevate the status of the profession of business and management through the exploration of more ethical, and we would argue, more effective managerial practices.

One compelling argument is that management mistakes and unethical choices, such as those documented in these cases, can lead to lower levels of employee engagement (Schwab, Taylor, 2012). Though, there is some evidence that retaliation is perceived as less damaging to employee engagement if it is seen as stemming from an act of omission rather than an act of commission (Charness, Levine, 2010).

The result of these managerial errors and ethical lapses can be catastrophic for some individuals, and in addition can have a chilling effect on the employee engagement of those who are not directly involved in the discrimination or retaliation (Datz, 2012). There can be

a resultant decrease in organizational citizenship behavior, or helping the organization – what is referred to as pro-social behavior, or helping colleagues (Livingston, 1982). One of the keys aspects of effective managerial action is that when there is perceived discrimination, how the employer treats the worker can greatly affect an outcome (Berman, West, Bowman, Van Wart, 2010). One suggested best way to handle the case professionally is at the HR function level; whereas some of the worst outcomes seem to derive from allowing the employee's supervisor to deal with the problem locally (Brody, Freed, 2011).

The choice of the cases selected in this chapter reflect the psychological expertise and expert witness experience of one co-author and are reported in light of the strategic management expertise of the other co-author. The cases cover a wide range of situations and thus outline the risk factors that can contribute to managerial misconduct (Regester, Larkin, 2008). The court cases are be largely based on U.S. cases, however the cases also have relevance in an international, multicultural context, such as the documented issues of women's struggle to enter the ranks of management in many countries (Lam, 1992).

2. Procedural Justice and Effective Management

Effective management requires managers to resolve disputes and allocate resources to achieve strategic goals (Cropanzano, Bowen, Gilliland, 2007). Procedural justice refers to the perceptions by employees that rewards and punishments are given out on a fair and equitable basis (Ali, 2011). Retaliation is often a consequence of a perceived lack of procedural justice. Ironically, we observe in a number of case studies that managers often compound an initial breach of procedural justice with retaliation towards the "victims" of the original lack of procedural justice, who are then punished, treated poorly or harassed because of speaking up against the initial injustice. The cases show that juries are particularly harsh in their judgments if they see evidence of retaliation. This makes sense as the victim is being essentially re-victimized – compounding the trauma. Or in other cases, a witness or whistle blower becomes themselves victimized. The Supreme court in 2011 upheld that anti-retaliation protection extend to both informal oral complaints as well as formal written complaints, (*Kasten vs. Saint-Gobain Performance Plastics Corp.*, US, No. 09-834,3/22/11) however this protection often goes unheeded as we see in these cases.

Sometimes this lack of procedural justice has to do with violating statutory requirements. For example, there was a well documented case of a commercial real estate executive who lost her job because she spoke up about the company's policy of denying rest and meal breaks to hourly employees. After speaking up to her VP on this, she was terminated. She lost her job due to speaking up about the violation of California wage-and-hour law. This got her

labeled by senior management as a troublemaker and her suit eventually went to trial. However the courts ruled in her favor because she was a clear high performer with documented excellent performance reviews. (*Steffens v. Regus Group*, No. 11-55379, 9th Cir., 2012) (*Payroll Manager's*, 2012).

In other cases, racial discrimination plays an important role. Nason (1972) documents the root causes of discrimination and how it is evident in corporate settings. He documents both overt and covert discrimination. It would be nice to think that over the last 40 plus years, this racial discrimination has been eradicated in corporate settings. The cases we present in this chapter suggest that this aspect of lack of procedural justice has not been removed entirely. It has been asserted that there are, unfortunately, some cases of dysfunctional consequences to diversity that can lead to increased employment discrimination, job retaliation and harassment (Finkelman, 2007). Let us consider some illustrative cases of discrimination and retaliation.

3. Retaliation and race discrimination

The plaintiff was a 55 year old Black social services division director who received a letter of intent to terminate her from her position at a county social services agent. She had been on administrative leave due to an investigation of claims that she attempted to interfere with an official investigation of foster parents because she had a personal relationship with one of the involved parties. The plaintiff contended that she never intentionally delayed the investigation and that there were no conflicts of interest.

The plaintiff sued the county for wrongful termination, retaliation, race discrimination, breach of contract and intentional infliction of emotional distress. The trial, in which one of the authors testified as an expert witness, was limited to the retaliation claim.

The plaintiff also filed a claim with the equal employment opportunity commission relating to the investigation that her employer had conducted in response to her initial complaint. She contended that while her investigation was still pending her employer fired her as an act of retaliation.

Her lawyers claimed that her discharge lacked good cause or sufficient evidence and they noted that an administrative hearing earlier that year determined that there was not sufficient cause to terminate her. Regardless, she was officially terminated the following year.

Her employer claimed that the letter of intent to terminate her was already in draft form and had been circulated to the director, to the HR department and to legal counsel before they even had knowledge of the equal employment opportunity complaint.

In response, the defendants claimed that the plaintiff had interfered with a foster care investigation and agreed to testify for the foster parents at the license revocation hearing against her employer.

The plaintiff claimed severe emotional distress saying that she was mentally scarred for the rest of her life. She said that the defendants had engaged in cruel and intentional conduct which included singling her out at meetings and treating her more harshly than others and blaming her for problems she had not caused. According to the plaintiff, these acts in addition to her actual termination discredited and changed her status in the professional community in which she worked.

The plaintiff asked for \$1.8 million in economic damages for past and future wages and lost employment benefits, and at least double that amount for emotional stress.

The defendants noted that in response to the damaged reputation claim following her termination, the plaintiff actually obtained a doctoral degree and expanded her therapy practice and started a business with her husband and became president of a prestigious association of therapists.

The jury sided with the defendants and awarded the plaintiff no money. The plaintiffs requested a new trial.

Retaliation cases such as this one are particularly dangerous for defendants because juries tend to get angry when there is a feeling that employers took improper action in response to legitimate complaints by their employees.

The best defense in this type of situation is a professionally conducted investigation with appropriate action directed at anyone who engaged in misconduct (certainly for retaliation or the appearance of retaliation) directed at the claimant.

Investigations should be initiated and completed as early as possible and information about their outcome should be shared with the claimant and perhaps with others having a need to know, for its prophylactic effect in the future. Corrective action or punishment is expected under these circumstances and the absence of an appropriate remedy and/or punishment can be very detrimental to a defendant in court.

It is instructive to note for purposes of this chapter that discrimination and harassment can have serious ethical and legal repercussions but it is the retaliation that compounds the exposure – and typically the award of damages.

4. Retaliation and age discrimination

In another case of retaliation, this time coupled with age discrimination, the plaintiff was terminated from a position as a vacation timeshare sales manager after working for almost 14 years.

In this matter the plaintiff had met with attorneys representing the company regarding a coworker's age discrimination lawsuit after he had been terminated. The plaintiff provided information that was favorable to the coworker and detrimental to the company. The following day the company placed the plaintiff on a series of onerous performance contracts and reprimanded him.

The company then instructed his boss to fire him but his boss refused to do so. That obviously did not go over well with the jury. Top management eventually became involved in the case and the plaintiff was assigned work duties that he could not perform and he was threatened with his job.

Not surprisingly the plaintiff then went on a medical leave of absence because of stress and the company exacerbated the situation by announcing at a large employee gathering that employees on medical leave had no future with the company and would be terminated. Consistent with that proclamation the company terminated the plaintiff after he was out on leave for six months.

The plaintiff sued and alleged that he was retaliated against based on the information he provided on behalf of a terminated coworker's age discrimination lawsuit. He also initiated causes of action for age discrimination, disability discrimination, constructive discharge, intentional infliction of emotional distress and violation of the California family rights act.

One of the authors then testified that the defendant's human resource management practices were below the standard of care in the industry and deviated from ordinary employment practices.

The defendant's economist estimated his loss of income as low as \$1400 while plaintiff's economist estimated that he lost \$2.3 million in front and back pay, extrapolated to his anticipated retirement age of 70 years old. The plaintiff also asked for unspecified damages because of emotional distress.

The jury awarded the plaintiff \$1 million because of the retaliation based on the defense's race discrimination discharge and intentional infliction of emotional distress. This reinforces our position that retaliation is the specific type of misconduct that most antagonizes juries.

5. Retaliation

Our next case is a landmark in many ways. It was virtually a pure retaliation case and entailed the intervention of the California Court of Appeals. It became precedent-setting for all subsequent California employment cases. It was also thought to be the most costly single plaintiff employment case in California.

Now that we've hopefully whetted your interest, the plaintiff began working as a contract computer technician at a laboratory that was managed under a contract with the United States government more than two decades ago. She eventually became a full-time employee.

Difficulties began when the plaintiff claimed that a male supervisor began to sexually harass a female employee who the plaintiff supervised and said that she actually witnessed the harassment. The plaintiff repeatedly complained to senior management until her employee left the laboratory on a stress disability leave and filed a lawsuit alleging sexual harassment.

Years later the plaintiff was supposed to testify as a witness for the employee who filed a sexual harassment claim. During her deposition, the plaintiff contended that management had searched the network server and discovered that she had converted certain outside business files that were allegedly in violation of laboratory policy. After about a month following her deposition, she received a "notice of intent to terminate" her. The termination became final shortly thereafter.

Following a six week trial during which the jury deliberated for seven days, they awarded the plaintiff a total of \$1 million. The defendants filed an appeal and the plaintiff filed a cross appeal. The basis for the defendants appeal was that one of plaintiffs' experts (and an author of this chapter) was permitted to testify to the trial judge with respect to retaliation matters that were alleged to be within the province of the jury and that the expert improperly influenced the jury's verdict.

The appellate court reversed the case and remanded it for a new trial. The plaintiff's attorney said that he would win an even larger verdict the next time around. The plaintiff's attorney turned out to be correct! The same author testified again in the retrial but avoided the language that had offended the Appellate Court of California.

The plaintiff maintained that the termination was strictly due to her testimony in the underlying sexual harassment case and that the laboratory violated numerous provisions of their own policy by terminating her without giving any previous warning and without considering other discipline. She claimed that the asserted reasons for her termination (computer misconduct) were pre-textual. She argued that similar misconduct cases which involved even more serious acts had occurred but that the discipline taken against those

employees was far less severe. The plaintiff's human resource management expert supported this contention.

The defendants argued that the plaintiff had performed a substantial amount of work for an outside business entity on her laboratory computer and that it had a strict policy that required termination of any employee who was found to use the computers for outside business. Consequently the laboratory asserted that the plaintiff was terminated for violating well established work rules against improper use of their computers and not in retaliation for her testimony in the sexual harassment case.

The plaintiff argued that she was so distressed about her termination that she attempted suicide by taking an overdose of medication and alcohol. She called her department head in the middle of the night who then called police who went to her house and took her to a hospital where she received treatment for the next couple of weeks. Her psychologist testified that she had had a very difficult family background and her work was the most stable part of her life. He noted that her emotional distress was serious and permanent and that she needed therapy three times a week for three years.

The defense claimed that she was now making more money at her new job and that her emotional distress was related to her serious personal problems and to her family life rather than to her job. The jury did not buy it.

After about five weeks of trial, the jury awarded the plaintiff a total of \$2,127,000 plus legal costs. The total cost of the two trials, taking into account all legal fees on both sides, was estimated to be just under \$10 million.

6. Sexual harassment and wrongful termination

In a more "traditional" sexual harassment case, in which one of the authors also participated as an expert witness, two plaintiffs who were waitresses at a restaurant, alleged that they were routinely subjected to verbal and physical sexual harassment by the kitchen staff and busboys. One of the plaintiffs resigned stating that the harassment had become intolerable. The plaintiffs contended that the investigation following the resignation was inadequate and that no remedial action had been taken. The second plaintiff complained to management again that she had been sexually assaulted by a bus boy who had three known prior complaints against him.

The management notified the busboy of the complaint and that resulted in a series of threats and retaliation against the plaintiff. The plaintiff made a telephone call to the management saying that she was too afraid to return to work. As a result, the management fired her.

The busboy was actually promoted shortly thereafter and went on to harass another employee. This action eventually led to his termination. The plaintiffs sought action against the defendants based on wrongful termination as well as sexual harassment.

The plaintiffs argued that repeated complaints to management were ignored and that no effective remedial action was taken. Instead they contended that the defendants, especially the general manager, actively participated in the sexual harassment activities directed at the plaintiffs and other female employees.

The defendants maintained that neither of the plaintiff's complaints were actually reported and they did not learn about the complaints until after one of the plaintiffs resigned. The defendants also noted that there had been no prior pattern of sexual harassment.

The jury awarded the plaintiffs \$2,331,319 plus \$71,252 in prejudgment interest and \$595,801 in attorney's fees. The defendants appealed and declared bankruptcy.

7. Assault and battery and negligence

The plaintiff worked as an administrative assistant in a university hospital orthopedic surgery department. He complained to his supervisors that an orthopedic surgeon had treated him inappropriately and that nothing was being done about it. He also claimed negligence and intentional infliction of emotional distress.

The plaintiff maintained that the surgeon had assaulted him on three occasions. On the first occasion the surgeon allegedly poked him in the forehead and said "don't fuck up my clinic" resulting in a red mark on plaintiff's forehead that that remained there for hours until he put ice on it. In the second incident the surgeon allegedly pounded him on the back, arms and chest, saying "good job". This pummeling left welts as well. On a third occasion the surgeon allegedly "pounded" him while "grinding" against him sexually calling him a "punk-ass bitch."

The surgeon and the University Hospital vehemently denied all of these allegations. One of plaintiff's supervisors testified that in fact he had only complained once and his direct supervisor, who did not testify, signed a declaration stating exactly the same thing. Per the plaintiff's request the hospital immediately removed him from the department and conducted an independent investigation.

The defendant's human resource management expert (one of the authors) characterized the investigation as "world class." The defense characterized the plaintiff as an exaggerator and as an unstable individual. The surgeon testified that he had a pleasant joking relationship with the plaintiff and would not have pulled rank insisting that the plaintiff address him as Dr. had the plaintiff not begun calling him by his first name and even by nicknames.

The defendants also noted to the jury that the plaintiff did not mention the alleged "pummeling" incident until after the litigation started and that he also failed to report the "sexual grinding" incident until the start of his lawsuit, claiming repressed memory. The defendants also called a psychiatric expert who testified that the plaintiff had an extensive and well documented history of exaggeration and overreaction in situations similar to the matter at hand, which was indicative of his histrionic tendencies – including the likelihood of exaggerating symptoms and malingering.

To make the case even more interesting, the defendants noted that the plaintiff told a nurse practitioner outside of the hospital that he was angry with the surgeon and implied that he might want to hurt him. The nurse practitioner took the plaintiff to the emergency room at a different hospital where he told a physician about his desire to hurt or kill the surgeon. That medical center made a determination that it was necessary to hold the plaintiff against his will for the following 72 hours on a "5150," which is a section of California's Welfare and Institutions Code which is an allowance for when someone threatens to inflict bodily harm on himself or another individual, whereby he can be held involuntarily for that period of time. They also issued a "Tarasoff warning" to the surgeon, which is a notice that it intended to breach the doctor – patient confidentiality for the protection of a third-party.

Consequently the University Hospital placed the plaintiff on a paid investigatory leave and required that he undergo a fitness for duty investigation. He actually passed and was permitted to return to work. Defense witnesses included the nurse practitioner to whom the plaintiff confessed his rage towards the surgeon, and a physician who saw him in the psychiatric unit at which he was being held. The nurse practitioner testified that the plaintiff told her that if he saw the surgeon, "he wouldn't know what he would do." The physician also testified that the plaintiff had expressed homicidal ideations towards the surgeon.

The defendants produced documents demonstrating that the plaintiff had filed two previous workers compensation claims, which he previously denied in sworn testimony, one of which involved a claim of a reported assault by another physician. The defendants also produced documents demonstrating that plaintiff had previously threatened to kill another supervisor.

The jury found the defense not-guilty on all counts.

8. Disability Discrimination and Retaliation

The plaintiff was a 53 year old redevelopment specialist with the County Housing Authority. She worked for the agency for 12 years and directly supervised approximately 20 employees.

The plaintiff developed serious physical and psychological problems, including headaches, tinnitus, pain and numbness on her face, along with severe anxiety, panic attacks, disorientation and dizziness while driving. The plaintiff reported her difficulties to her immediate supervisor and notified management of her medical conditions which included a debilitating spinal tap which resulted in neurological damage and caused her to limp.

The plaintiff began psychotherapy and was eventually diagnosed with conversion disorder, severe anxiety and depression. She continued to work until she requested a review of her work load and job duties that she thought were a major source of her stress. Her request was denied and instead she was informed that she was being transferred to an office that would have required her to drive just under 200 miles round-trip from her home every day, ostensibly for cross training.

The plaintiff then filed an internal complaint for retaliation and disability discrimination, which were denied. She then requested reasonable accommodation in modifying her working conditions, due to her various disabilities. The plaintiff was ordered to not return to work by her physician and the county placed her on family medical leave.

According to the plaintiff's attorney, the county did not formally notify her that she was out of leave time until well after it had expired. The defendant's claim that her filing for a leave of absence was inadequate because of missing (but unspecified) medical documentation that had not initially been requested in the leave of absence form. Instead she was asked to contact an assistant director who did not return her calls or messages and did not respond to an email that documented her medical history and identified her physicians and authorized the county to contact them.

Instead the county allegedly ignored her leave of absence requests and terminated her for job abandonment. The plaintiff then sued for disability discrimination, failure to provide reasonable accommodation, and retaliation under the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Family Medical Leave Act. She charged that the county ignored eight separate requests for reasonable accommodation and a leave of absence. Her counsel claims that it was the only one of 16 leave of absence requests that was actually denied by the county.

The plaintiff's supervisor made damaging admissions at the trial and acknowledged that she had in fact requested accommodation and that the county was obligated to engage in the interactive process, which they apparently did not do.

The defendants maintained that the plaintiff did not supply the required medical documentation and that she had been released by her doctors to return to work. They argued that the plaintiff had already been granted three months of medical leave and that she was physically able to return to work and engage in the requested cross training.

One of the authors testified as to the inadequacy of defendants human resource management practices and the jury awarded plaintiff \$1,033,500¹.

9. Conclusion

We feel strongly that there are important lessons to be learned in each of the case studies that we described. Some of the cases are especially egregious with respect to improper managerial conduct and decision making, while other cases are offensive because of the duplicitous misuse of the judicial process. In retrospect, that is why we have a wonderful jury system of justice that sifts through all the contradictory claims, reviews the evidence – and typically comes to the correct determination.

Readers may wish to consider the following instructive questions:

1. Did you agree with the jury decisions that we reported?
2. Could an alternative outcome have been justified?
3. Was there a way to detect and avoid the misconduct that resulted in the claims reported by the plaintiff?
4. Could best management practices have actually *anticipated* misconduct before it became manifest in the workplace?
5. Could additional management training and sensitization have played a prophylactic role in addressing the underlying behavior that became an issue in each of these cases?
6. Could have effective human resource policies and practices been sufficiently vigilant and proactive to mitigate harm to the employee and reduce liability to the employer?

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¹ Although one of the authors participated as a human resource management expert in each of the aforementioned cases, specific details about the cases were provided by an 8/24/2012 search on “www.verdictsearch.com”.

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