**Speaking up Too Loudly? The Mailing List Email**

When employees at T Lubricants first read the email, a ripple of shock spread immediately through the large manufacturing company. “He must be crazy!” they exclaimed, wide-eyed and unbelievingly. The email they were referring to was sent by Meng Ling, a first line manager of Plant Z. Boldy titled “A Complaint Letter about Plant Manager”, it was not only sent to every single employee of the entire company, but it was also forwarded to the general manager of the Greater China region. Clearly, Meng was extremely dissatisfied and felt he had to express his frustration.

T Lubricants is a large manufacturing company with three manufacturing plants. Plant Z is the oldest plant and is responsible for more than half of the total production. Many employees were locally employed and had worked there for more than 10 years. The previous plant manager, Wang An, was dismissed due to his overly soft management style and a lagging knowledge of modern technology.

T Lubriants preferred a manager like He Feng, the top manager of Plant G. He Feng was an experienced employee and possessed excellent knowledge of recent technological trends. Furthermore, his strict leadership style was well known for genererating outstanding performance. Plant G was mainly composed of migrant workers who were willing to work hard for job security and monetary bonuses. He Feng used this knowledge to create a competitive environment in which employees worked gruelingly for some additional money. After Wang An’s dismissal, He Feng was assigned to lead Plant Z to achieve similar results. A new project was in development and top management wanted to ensure a high level of performance.

After He Feng took the reins, he immediately established some measures he had effectively used in Plant G. He held regular meetings to assign tasks and provide detailed instructions and aggressively monitored the work performance of his subordinates. The employees at Plant Z were not sure what to think. They had heard stories of He Feng’s leadership style but they were less than impressed with his delivery. During staff meetings, He Feng would severely criticize the mistakes of employees and created an atmosphere in which competition among coworkers was encouraged. He appointed some operators to continually supervise his subordinates and report to him directly if any mistakes were made or any objections were raised. He Feng’s philosophy was that severe measures would allow employees to be more careful and have a higher sense of responsibility. However, He Feng had successfully created an atmosphere of fear in which employees were reluctant to try harder for fear of making mistakes.

Unsurprisingly, after several months, the productivitiy remained unimproved under He’s leadership.

Employees in Plant Z disliked He Feng. They often gathered socially to complain about He and his measured. They agreed that due to the increased competition among employees, good relationships broke down and help was ratherly offered among coworers. They also thought that the employees’ had lower self esteem, especially after they were criticized. Despite their frustration, employees were too scared to address their complaints directly with He Feng. So it was with a mixture of shock, excitement and relief when Meng Ling “took one for the team” and sent out the complaint.

Meng Ling was hired by He Feng himself to be the first line manager. He was hardworking and had good relationships with his coworkers. However, he was frequently criticized by He Feng in public and rarely had the chance to provide a defense or explanation. After many private discussions with other coworkers, Meng Ling decided to record their complaints and write the email on their behalf. Meng Ling thought that if He Feng was unwilling to listen to the employees’ concerns, maybe top management will.

The scandalous email mentioned at least ten complaints, including unfair promotion decisions, invalid operations management systems, and extreme criticism of He Feng’s treatment of subordinates. It was apparent Meng Ling was frustrated with the way things were going on at the company and was urgently looking for ways to bring change to He Feng’s leadership.

Although the intention was there, the email backfired. The email resulted in a nervous and uncertain atmosphere among the employees in Plant Z.

Firstly, the publicity of the email embarrassed He Feng and violated the expectation of respect between subordinate and supervisor. As China has high power distance in which leaders have high authority of their subordinates, the challenge from Meng Ling was considered to be an insult. Secondly, it provided a poor example to other employees about how to deal with their dissatisfaction. It may encourage others to use public ways to call out or criticize the company. Thirdly, the ongoing discussions and whisperings of the situation provided a significant distraction to the employees. They spent much of their time whispering or discussing the event and took away their focus on their work. Lastly, top management became worried about the liabilities in the company. Their consideration of changes further caused worries and uncertainty for the employees. Overall, the email caused many challenges.

The managing director of the Greater China region took action immediately. He set up a meeting with all the top managers to discuss how to moderate the negativity surrounding the email. He also pledged to all the employees that they would communicate with the relevant witnesses and parties to fully investigate the validity of the complaints. He acknowledged that they found He Feng’s leadership style to be severe and that in his direct manner was prone to speaking insulting words unconsciously. They they also believed that subordinates – no matter the reason – had a responsibility to behave decently and that the manner and content in which Meng Ling sent the email was inappropriate. Top management emphasized that they do not condone acting rashly. As a result, Meng Ling was persuaded to resign and a performance improvement plan was set up to evaluate He Feng’s performance for the next three months.

Despite these attempts by top management, the damage was done. The complaint email created a toxic environment in which employees perceived managers to show little respect for their subordinates. Furthermore, employees perceived little change. Whereas He Feng remained in the organization, Meng Ling had departed as a consequence of his speaking out. Employees became more fearful of their rights in the organization and questioned the company’s willingness to help lower ranked employees. They wondered whether T Lubricants cared about them at all.