WHEN A PROBLEM AFFECTS YOUR JOB

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by Sunil Dissanayake

Don’t put your head down and hope for the best, if a major problem in your personal life threatens your career. Here’s a coping strategy.

From time to time you experience minor problems at work. It could be anything from a new director or division head handling your sector who is difficult to get on with, or having too little or too much work, or a feeling of being stagnant. That is when, it is reassuring to be able to count on supportive hearing from your spouse/fiance/fiancee/family. or from a role model at work, to help sort things out and make decisions about how best to handle the situation, and overcome it.

But what if it is the other way around? A major problem in your personal life is likely

to develop to a point where it affects your performance at work? However well organized you are, it can happen, and the result can be a deterioration in your performance, loss of your supervisor’s and of your own confidence resulting in stress. It can be an enormous problem if it happens at a time when you need to be secure in your job to ensure a steady income more than ever. Your own family, your in-laws and your parents could be depending on your income.

Whatever the problem, if it is likely to affect you for more than a few weeks, you must gather the strength and common sense to develop a strategy for coping in the longer term, and if possible this should probably involve your immediate supervisor and his/her supervisor as well, along the line.

Although it may seem easier in the short term, to give no explanation for poor performance, a succession of absences due to minor. ailments, delays in arriving at work or strained relations with colleagues, is unfair to both yourself, the company and the people you work with.

Take the case of Hana, married and the mother of two school-going children. Newly promoted as division head in a major multinational financial group, she had rarely taken a wrong step during her entire career. At 26, she has had a rapid career path, from being a management trainee just 4 1/2 years earlier.

But within a couple of months of her promotion, she made a number of glaring errors in her credit evaluations whereby the organisation lost a couple of million dirhams, was badly prepared for meetings and was looking less than her usual immaculate self. She became irritable and prone to constant arguments with colleagues, was frequently late and never available a minute past the normal office hours.

What no one knew was that Hana’s husband, a successful photo journalist, suspected to be gay had left her to live by himself.

Totally devastated, having to handle the childrens’ confusion and sorrow about their father’s disappearance from home, exhausted her.

In a case like Hana pressure builds up on all fronts, and it is vital to bring at least some areas under control before things get out of hand.

The first thing to do is to get the finances sorted out. Secondly, if you have had a good performance record with your current employer, you should be able to ask for special concessions for a period of time. But it is also reasonable to give your supervisor, who has to plan ahead, as much information as possible.

DON’T IGNORE YOUR PROBLEM. Don’t wait for senior management to draw attention to the deterioration in your performance standards. Make an appointment to see your supervisor, before he/ she calls you for a discussion on your poor performance. Indicate that you wish to discuss a personal matter in confidence.

At the discussion explain as much or as little as you have to without exaggerating or minimising the problem.

Be factual about how the problem is affecting you now. Whether it is likely to get worse, and approximately how long it is likely to last.

Outline what you are doing about the problem now.

If necessary, propose a proper plan with a time frame. For example, a period of time to arrive at work late and end early, a time of leave without pay if paid leave is exhausted or a temporary transfer to a department with less pressure than your

own department, would be helpful.

Be honest about how much you can handle during the crisis period. Your supervisor would prefer to know now, than to discover later that you had not been able to cope and that everything has come crashing down.

People frequently underestimate the effects of a major personal problem, on their performance. It is also quite common for us to deny it is happening and just struggle on blindly with no real action plan.

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If you are the supervisor. If on the other hand you are the supervisor of the affected employee, and you sense something is not right with a member of your staff, it can be a sensitive area because as a manager you are treading on the fine line between interference in personal affairs of the staff member and your concern for the company. Below are a couple of steps you may want to follow:

• Don’t rely on rumour or bad mouthing or superficial ‘evidence of failing performance (We Sri Lankans seem to be world champs in this area). Monitor the performance of the staff member carefully for two or three weeks, make notes of the dates and times when absenteeism took place, or when he/she was late at arriving for work, or did not meet a deadline or was unprepared at a meeting etc.

• Set a date and time and let the staff member know you want to talk.

• Have a couple of options in mind, depending on what information or explanation you receive from the staff member. If you are handling a top 20 % of your company, you are obviously more likely to be flexible and accommodating than with a bottom 10 %.

• Go directly to the point and state the reason for your concern. Be specific about lapses and give an opportunity to the staff member to comment on each lapse.

• Try to elicit suggestions from the employee on ways to cope and improve. Explain the need for you to know how long it is required for him/her to be back on track.

• It is important that you should honour any promise that you make about treating

the information you have been given, in confidence.

It is inevitable that the help, empathy and support we extend to staff members is heavily influenced by the nature of the problem they are experiencing.