

*Intercultural Problem Solving for Performance
in WorkPlaces and WorkLives*

The Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank

Creates an intercultural dialogue among problem solvers—from Pittsburgh’s urban community, from business, regional development, social services, and education, and

Seeks workable solutions to problems of workplace performance, workforce development, and worklife success for new urban workers.

The Think Tank’s structured, solution-oriented process:

- Opens an intercultural dialogue in which administrators, human resource developers, line managers, educators, researchers, community workers, trainers, and employees meet as collaborators,
- Structures talk into a problem-solving search for diverse perspectives, rival hypotheses, and collaborative solutions,
- Draws out untapped levels of community expertise to build more comprehensive intercultural understandings of problems and to construct community-tested options for action, and
- Builds a scaffold for Local Action Think Tanks in individual workplaces.



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Table of Contents

The National Dialogue	
What the Reports Are Saying about the Climate for Performance.....	2
The Findings of the Think Tank <i>In Brief</i>	
What Pittsburgh Is Saying about the Issues that Matter.....	4
Decision Points in Negotiating the Culture of Work.....	5
The “In Training” Problem Scenario.....	6
Orientation Day – Training and Hiring	
The Story-Behind-the-Story.....	8
Decision Point 1. Hiring.....	10
Decision Point 2. Training.....	13
Week One – Communication and Work Support	
The Story-Behind-the-Story.....	17
Decision Point 3. Communication.....	20
Decision Point 4. Work Support.....	22
Week Two – Monday at 5:00 p.m. – Community Support	
The Story-Behind-the-Story.....	25
Decision Point 5. Community Support.....	27
Tuesday 7:10 a.m. – Performance	
The Story-Behind-the-Story.....	29
Decision Point 6. Performance	31
On Her Break – Crisis	
The Story-Behind-the-Story.....	33
Decision Point 7. Crisis	34
Appendix: Brief #1	

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The Think Tank Findings were edited by Dr. Linda Flower and Susan Swan.

THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE

WHAT THE REPORTS ARE SAYING ABOUT THE CLIMATE FOR PERFORMANCE

The Context for Low-Wage Work

Any effort to create a climate for performance must respond to deep-running forces that shape the current context for work in low-wage jobs.

- A generation of concentrated unemployment has sapped the “culture of work” in urban neighborhoods.¹
- Children of this experience enter a public education operating below the bar of national standards, while a digital divide further separates poor families from the technology required by the future.
- As young adults enter the workforce, they find themselves in the “fluid bottom” of the economy where replaceable workers “churn” through a series of low wage, low benefit, and limited growth jobs.² For TANF recipients, a minimum wage job means the loss of health and child care.³
- Even as employment increases, sharply visible racial disparities in wages and jobs remain.⁴ The unemployed find jobs but not self-sufficiency.
- Forty per cent of new jobs in the booming health care industry are at the lowest tier.⁵
- Urban neighborhoods with an educated, experienced, and stable workforce remain enclaves of working poor.⁶
- Workforce development attempts to shift from its short-term focus on placement to the process of asset development.⁷
- However, the national earnings gap, with its disproportionate effect on the urban poor, continues to widen.⁸

These are systemic factors in our social economy which undermine the effects of job preparation and undercut the motivation for high performance in bottom-tier jobs. A far-sighted workforce development policy must address these root causes. Effective action in the present must confront their consequences.

How Does This Context Affect Performance?

Popular wisdom reduces problems in performance to a deficit in the employees and links performance to a lack of "basic skills." The "new vocationalism" in Department of Labor programs, for example, focuses on a list of limited, discrete literacy skills.⁹

Employers Pose Some Rival Hypotheses

The studies of workplaces and employers themselves offer some rival hypotheses about what matters.

Employers say what they want most are

- work ethic attitudes (dependability, respectfulness, productivity, cooperation, pride in work, eagerness to learn and advance) and communication and problem-solving skills.¹⁰

When employers are concerned about "skills" shortages, 80% are referring to work ethic and social skills.¹¹

The research agrees:

- What matters is a "working knowledge" about the job and the workplace.¹²
- Studies of the changing workplace call for integrated, contextualized instruction in both basic and thinking skills.¹³
- Studies also suggest that productivity is not related to basic skills.
- Productivity is tied instead to the ability
 - to *interpret* expectations of the workplace (read situations, understand feedback)
 - to *negotiate* the everyday conflicts that arise on the job (with schedules, co-workers, management) and
 - to create *teamwork* within a collaborative "community of practice."¹⁴

This national dialogue has little to say, however, about how employees themselves would interpret the problems or the possible solutions.

THE FINDINGS OF THE THINK TANK IN BRIEF

WHAT PITTSBURGH IS SAYING ABOUT THE ISSUES THAT MATTER

The Think Tank on Negotiating the Culture of Work and Technology has convened eight dialogues, beginning in April 1999. It elicited rival hypotheses and options for action from over 450 participants, speaking from the diverse perspectives of management, employees, and their communities of support.

The Findings presented here highlight strong alternatives as well as cultural and professional differences. However, the concerns that repeatedly emerged across these dialogues also reveal a consensus on six issues local problem-solvers need to be talking about:

About Communication

New workers, their co-workers, and their supervisors are having difficulty talking about problems, especially unspoken/unshared expectations. But the solution to the communication problem is not just "communication" -- workers, co-workers and supervisors must have specific language strategies that are geared towards problem-solving across hierarchies.

About Problem-Solving Skills

New employees need problem-solving skills that will help them plan for, avoid, or solve difficulties that could affect their job performance. Job-specific training alone doesn't help people negotiate an unfamiliar culture of work or to integrate home and work.

About Networks of Support

Family and community networks of support are essential to managing both WorkPlaces and WorkLives, but are rarely connected to actual work sites. The problem is building a connection between these resources and what workplaces and employees feel they need.

About Compassion and Respect

New workers are highly attuned to issues of respect; workplace decisions are motivated by the effort to avoid being identified as the "problem." Instead of seeing the new worker as *the problem*, managers communicate respect when they treat inexperienced employees as *people* with solvable problems.

About Training

Quality and breadth of training and after-training support is a predictor of success. The biggest perceived needs revolved around problem-solving, communication skills, life skills and more extended on-the-job training.

About the Basis for Self Sufficiency

Belief in one's own ability to make a change in one's life is a necessary but missing form of support. New employees' beliefs in themselves as problem-solvers encourage the acquisition of strategies for overcoming WorkPlace and WorkLife problems.

DECISION POINTS IN NEGOTIATING THE CULTURE OF WORK AND TECHNOLOGY

The Think Tank’s Findings are organized around seven key decision points that make up the problem case (“In Training”) which participants analyzed. At these decision points administrators, employees, and the people in their networks faced hard choices—and sometimes made problematic decisions.

The Findings document the diverse stories-behind-the-story and some options that surround these decision points.

1. Hiring

The company’s hiring initiative introduces a new cohort of inexperienced employees (who are unprepared to read the culture of this workplace) into an institution not sure it knows how to support their success.

2. Training

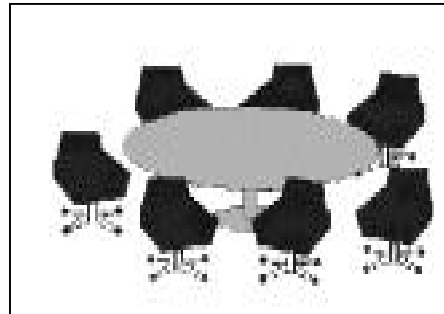
The “standard” training leaves the new employee with information overload and inadequate preparation for independent performance.

3. Communication

A management/employee relationship becomes strained over difficulties in reading one another’s expectations, messages, and needs; mutual confidence begins to ebb.

4. Work Support

The situation demands on-the-job-learning, but without systematic support by Human Resources, management, or co-workers, the employee is left to negotiate a hazardous terrain.



5. Community Support

The employee is distracted when the demands of child care, overtime and transportation exceed the resources of her limited (and also struggling) network of support.

6. Performance

The new employee’s performance difficulties are affecting co-workers and the externally evaluated performance of the office.

7. Crisis

A red flag problem is about to happen.

The Think Tank Findings identify two areas for action—

In WorkPlaces — helping management and staff teams increase their capacity for intercultural problem solving

In WorkLives — helping entry-level workers increase their capacity for work-based decision making

THE “IN TRAINING” PROBLEM SCENARIO

The Decision Makers

- Human Resource Managers and Trainers
- The Admissions Office Manager (Mr. Snyder)
- An Inexperienced Employee (Melissa)
- Her Co-workers

Orientation day: (Hiring, Training)

Melissa, a young woman who has just completed a welfare-to-work program, is feeling pretty confident that her future is teeming with possibilities after landing the long awaited “good job” at University Medical Corp. After a brief but intense orientation process, she’s finishing up her computerized systems overview training today. She’s feeling somewhat dazed with technological information overload, but is moving forward unfazed. Tomorrow it’s off to the Admissions Office—the standard beginning placement position. Although entry-level wages are low, this is the point of entry to the coveted jobs in the executive staff pool which offer benefits, training, and mobility.

The Think Tank Process

- Think Tank dialogues invite participants to seek out significant “rival readings” of a problem scenario constructed around widely shared, persistent problems.
- Participants use their differences (in race, culture, position, experience) to reveal the “story-behind-the-story” as different players in the scenario might see it.
- They then approach this more comprehensive representation of workplace problems as intercultural problem solvers—exploring “options” for action and testing their “outcomes.”

Week One : (Communication and Work Support)

Upon Melissa’s arrival to admissions, Mr. Snyder, her supervisor, was pleasantly surprised—taking careful note of her well-tailored suit and attractive appearance. His customary initial meeting stressed how his unit was evaluated based on efficiency and attention to details; Melissa appeared undaunted by his expectations. Days later Melissa gets a somewhat different, if perplexing, insider version over coffee break. Snyder, who had bitterly complained to Human Resources for sending him “all these welfare-to-work recruits,” was overheard to actually thank H.R. for finally sending him someone who “looked alright.”

The hospital’s information technology is demanding: the new Admissions software is prone to freeze and/or deny access to the next user if an entry does not fit its template. The communications system within the hospital seems to assume that you already know “who to ask.” Melissa has recovered from a small series of such breakdowns by asking whoever

is nearby to bail her out, and so far this has covered up what she fears might be seen as a failure. Snyder had said to route questions through him, but he clearly seems too rushed and busy to bother with all these “how to” details.

Week Two—Monday at 5:00 p.m. (Community Support)

In a cloud of dust and smoke Jake and Christina Roberts finally arrived at the Emergency Room. With the aid of a hospital staffer, between contractions Christina was carefully seated in

the wheelchair and brought inside, immediately checked by the attending resident doctor and moved quickly off to the hospital's delivery suite.

Melissa has been asked to work a double, covering the 3:00-11:00 PM shift on the tail of her own daylight shift. The nearest day care she can afford ends at 6:00 PM, so she calls home whenever she gets a break. The neighbor looking after her child has to go to work herself at 8:00.

Knowing she is responsible for filling out the Roberts' admittance, Melissa sends an internal email up to the delivery suite. She asks someone to tell Jake Roberts to come down for a formal admissions interview and turns her attention to more immediate tasks.

Tuesday 7:10 a.m. (Performance)

Melissa arrives to work ten minutes late for the first time, feeling a bit worn. Mr. Snyder abruptly asks to speak with her, noting that some errors in her coding have affected the productivity and efficiency of other staffers. Snyder goes on to say his unit's workload is backing up and an internal audit is due shortly. She needs to improve her performance soon: real soon.

Melissa realizes Snyder is under a lot of pressure. But, feeling angry and increasingly unsure of herself, she is now even more confused about what to do. Are the other staff complaining about her? Is it her fault if the new software is crash prone? And how is she supposed to learn the ropes?

On her break: (Crisis)

Things go from bad to worse. In the cafeteria Melissa hears about a young woman who nearly died in childbirth overnight and suddenly remembers the email (asking "somebody" in delivery to send Jake down) that had never been answered. Hurrying to her terminal, she accesses the admissions data and confirms her fears. Christina Roberts had never been formally checked in, and with her transfer to intensive care, her file would be red-flagged for immediate review. Well, she had sent a message to the delivery suite, after all. And could she even hope to outleg the system, find Jake herself, and save face before a fuming Snyder?

Would You Like To Join This Dialogue?

*See how you stack up as
an intercultural problem solver.*

Read a Scene from the "In Training" scenario. Then—

- **STOP AND PREDICT:** What is the problem here? How might the different participants interpret this situation?
- Then read the Stories-Behind-the-Story generated by the Think Tank. How many did you anticipate? Whose story did you not predict?

Now look at the Decision Point this event creates—it's in the little box on the yellow page. But don't jump ahead. Before you read the Options and Outcomes—

- **STOP AND PREDICT:** What options do you consider? See any downsides?

We hope you can use these Findings as food for thought, a tool for training, and a springboard for local action think tanks that turn options into actions.

Orientation Day – Hiring and Training

Melissa, a young woman who has just completed a welfare-to-work program, is feeling pretty confident that her future is teeming with possibilities after landing the long-awaited “good job” at University Medical Corp. After a brief but intense orientation process, she’s finishing up her computerized systems overview training today. She’s feeling somewhat dazed with technological information overload, but is moving forward unfazed. Tomorrow it’s off to the Admissions Office—the standard beginning placement position. Although entry-level wages are low, this is the point of entry to the coveted jobs in the executive staff pool which offer benefits, training, and mobility.

What is Melissa thinking?

About the Welfare-to-work Program:

- I’m worried about the prejudice I could experience with my new job – will my boss and co-workers know that I’m from the welfare-to-work program? If they do, will they treat me differently? I’m anxious, self-conscious, and ashamed about how people will see me.
- I am scared about going to work at a “real job.” Everyone tells me that mistakes can be learning experiences if I have the right attitude. I don’t expect to do everything right at first, and I just figure I can “learn on the fly” as problems come up.
- I feel beholden to the program that worked with me – they gave me training and transportation, and I really don’t want to let them down.

About her new entry-level job:

- I am excited about my new job because I see it as the first step to a good job with better pay and benefits. This job is the answer to my prayers!
- Well, I have a new job, but it sure doesn’t look like the “big opportunity” I was hoping for. My welfare safety net and health benefits are now gone – how will I care for my children, pay the rent, or buy medicine? Even though there is possibility for advancement, how long will that take? I don’t know if I have the time to move up to a real living wage with benefits. At least when I had welfare, I could get food from the food bank and with food stamps, and could earn some under-the-table income – not to mention that I had a wide network of support.

About the training:

- I don’t “know everything” about the working world – I’m just coming off welfare! I am worried about how to dress, affording nice clothes, speaking “good English,” and having stable childcare. But at the same time I want to look confident to my co-workers – I don’t want to feel out of place or ignorant.

What is going on here? What is the problem, if any?

A minister says:

- There is a lot more to being successful at work than just knowing technology – what about the rest of the culture of work? Does she know how to solve problems, ask questions, and get along with co-workers? I’m not sure Melissa knows what she is getting into.

A community worker says:

Story-Behind-the-Story

- Melissa's expectations are too high, and she is bound to fall. She thinks she has it made, but she doesn't really understand what "real" work is like!

A union leader says:

- Melissa may be coming out of several generations of working-class family – but this new working world is no longer manual or physical labor. She is moving into not only a new paradigm for her own personal life, but she doesn't have a role model within her sphere of living – she may not have the family support to help her through tough times in this new kind of workplace.

Decision Point #1: Hiring

The company's hiring initiative introduces a new cohort of inexperienced employees (who are unprepared to read the culture of this workplace) into an institution not sure it knows how to support their success.

Option #1: Snyder goes to placement and tells them problems he has with "program people."

A human resources manager says: Mr. Snyder coming to human resources shows us that he is really working to make this program a success. We will be more likely to work with him and he will be seen as someone who really has it on the ball.

A minister says: Mr. Snyder can go to human resources, but he may not have the language to talk about the problems of race, class, and gender differences – if he sees these as issues at all. Just providing a place for dealing with "problems" might lead to discussion of only surface problems without having an impact on the deeper problems of racism, classism, or sexism.

The minister's Story Behind the Story: as a minister, I choose to focus on problems of race, class, gender, and sexuality in ways which my congregation is not always comfortable with. We have had to invent new strategies for talking about these issues – but many churches don't deal with these issues at all. However, by using strategies to talk about these often hidden problems, we have had discussions at our church that have led to great healing and interesting problem solutions.

Academic Contribution
Some policy analysts would call Snyder's presupposed attitude about Melissa "statistical discrimination." Freeman and Holzer define statistical discrimination as found in "employers who have correct adverse perceptions of a group on average [e.g., welfare recipients aren't as successful in the workplace] use membership in that group as a signal of productivity for all group members" (26). This type of discrimination has far-ranging effects; for example, employers might negatively judge their current employees by expecting less of them. These lessened expectations can well lead to poor performance by new employees who feel destined for failure.¹⁵

An employee says: If Mr. Snyder goes to human resources, he won't be seen as a problem-solver: he'll be seen as a problem. He'll get a reputation for complaining, or even worse, a reputation for being racist or sexist. Even though he thinks he is trying to help Melissa, he'll only end up hurting himself.

Option #2: The hospital sees its new Melissas as an important resource within the workforce to help them identify/solve problems in training and support.

An educator says: Melissa can only be a problem-solver if she has the skills to communicate her problems. Since most training programs only deal with technical or procedural training, Melissa will probably not be trained in how to articulate her problems to others, or even to herself.

The educator's Story Behind the Story: I have had students who knew they had a problem with their papers, but didn't have any idea what that problem was. They weren't able to discuss it with me, and I found myself asking them leading questions which they invariably agreed with. Recent research in education suggests that students should be

trained in recognizing their own problems – though how to teach students to do that is a difficult issue as well.

A human-resources manager says: Melissa could become a real partner in her own success and in the success of other welfare-to-work participants. The hospital could revise its training program based on her feedback, avoiding the problems she faced in the future.

Option #3: The hospital holds a multi-leveled Community Problem-Solving Dialogue around an issue that is important to welfare-to-work participants and their employers.

Academic Contribution
Linda Flower writes that the "Community Problem-Solving Dialogues are a strategy for holding productive collaborative planning discussions with an intercultural group." These dialogues help people talk across difference in ways that lead to viable action through inclusive, sensitive problem

A community worker says: People will be able to share perspectives when normally they would remain quiet due to office politics or fear of retaliation. Usually, workers won't say anything because they are afraid their boss will find out and do something to get back at them. But in this case, the boss is supposed to find out, and in a public forum where he would not be able to be political.

A union leader says: Bosses like Mr. Snyder will have to listen and respond to Melissa because they are in a place where people can't be dismissed just because they are only entry level employees. Melissa is supposed to speak here – and will hopefully be given equal time.

Option #4: The hospital needs to work with CBOs to tell them what they need; then the CBOs can place people more appropriately and the hospital won't waste as much time on turnover and training.

A minister says: But what is the corporation's responsibility in training once the employee is placed? It is not just about skills, but also about problem-solving and the ability to handle one's personal life. The corporation has to have something in place to deal with these types of problems.

An HR manager says: CBOs are supposed to fill that function for corporations -- that is why we go to them in the first place. We are not in the business of training or preparing welfare recipients for work -- we are in the business of business and profit. Letting the CBO know what the business is looking for is a great way to match employer and employee, avoiding the many problems of a mismatch.

A teacher says: Someone should show businesses that it *is* profitable to train their own employees. It certainly isn't thrifty to keep hiring and re-training new employees because of high turnover. In the long run, having a corporation-run training or mentoring program will net more money than it costs.

A government employee says: I agree it is not the corporations' job to train new workers -- their job is to make profit. Tax money is for public programs like training welfare recipients.

The government worker's Story Behind the Story: At my agency, we give away millions of dollars to thousands of businesses for the express reason of training workers. This money comes from the federal and state tax programs.

A humanities professor says: What if the solution is not assigning one agency or sector the entire burden of training welfare recipients for work, but instead having a dialogue which draws

Options and Outcomes

on the expertise of all people involved. These dialogues would include workers, management, and agencies, and would be focused on solving a specific, grounded problem.

Option #5: The hospital should not hire people like Melissa, who is obviously underprepared for work.

A CBO president says: I'm not hiring Melissa -- or anyone like her. Melissa is a barrel of nothing but problems. I'm sure she even has more than the scenario can show us. She is not ready to work, and the problems are too big to overcome. It's not worth my time or my organization's money.

The CBO president's Story Behind the Story: If I want to hire someone to mow my lawn, I could hire my own kid. But if he does a terrible job, what do I do? I could hire someone who does it professionally, so I'm guaranteed a good job and I won't be wasting my hard-earned money.

Academic
Contribution
Lawrence Meade argues that inner-city workers are able, but unwilling, to work for low pay – that urban workers have a *disdain* for menial jobs which suburban entry level workers do not exhibit. In what he calls a “supply” problem, Meade writes that there are plenty of jobs on the demand side – it is the supply of willing low-skill workers that is a problem.¹⁷

A foundation employee says: But then these positions will remain unfilled. There are just not enough workers to fill all of the available positions in Pittsburgh today. So not hiring people just isn't an option. Instead, everyone needs to work together to make sure our communities can supply work-ready employees.

A government worker says: This is the attitude that gets companies to go overseas for employees. There is a perception out there that foreign workers are better workers. A factory could be surrounded by the unemployed, yet go to India to hire new workers. What we need to do is to work on preparing our own workers from our communities, rather than looking for good workers in far away places.

Option #6: The hospital pays a bonus to supervisors who keep welfare-to-work employees for one year or longer.

A human resource worker says: Money is the only thing that really works -- the only good motivator for people in business. If Snyder was facing a bonus for keeping Melissa and making her productive, he would invest more time in her. He would have a real reason for her to work out -- and the end result would be that Melissa would get better training and keep her job.

A government agency employee says: A bonus might keep Melissa working, but it won't lead to real help or training for her. She could be just kept on for the money, and maybe be fired after Snyder gets his bonus.

The government employee's Story Behind the Story: This sort of thing happens all of the time with the current federal tax credit for hiring people on welfare or other types of public aid. They are hired for the tax credit and nothing else -- and are often let go after the tax credit is received. It's all about money and not about helping people in need.

A community organization president says: It's not just the supervisors who should get money! What about the co-workers and Melissa? Snyder is only part of the equation in Melissa's success -- everyone has to be motivated for the welfare-to-work transition to be successful. Just Snyder receiving a bonus could lead to resentment among the workers as well.

Options and Outcomes

The community organization president's Story Behind the Story: I was talking to someone who worked at Sony once, and he told me about a program Sony had in its Japanese factory. At the end of the fiscal year, the factory split a certain percentage of the profit equally among all of its employees -- from the CEO to the janitors. And that bonus was around \$75,000! That would motivate *anyone* to be a hard worker!

Decision Point #2: Hiring

The "standard" training leaves the new employees with information overload and inadequately prepared for independent performance.

Option #1: Melissa is trained in more than technology. The preparation includes a toolbox of strategies that enable her to solve problems, negotiate with her co-workers and supervisor, and manage the extra life demands created by poverty.

A community leader says: If Melissa is able to solve her own problems, she'll be able to deal with them as they come up or even avoid them! She'll also be able to understand more options and outcomes for her actions instead of just acting and reacting.

Academic Contribution
Educational theorists and researchers today are calling for a return to "apprenticeship" style education (Collins et al). Such a style of education would enculturate new employees into a specific workplace, including its norms, strategies, rituals, and technologies, and would also give them contextualized problem-solving strategies specific to their career

The community leader's Story Behind the Story: I know so many young women who deal with problems as they come up instead of trying to avoid them or solve them for good. Many others don't even try to solve problems anymore – they just keep losing jobs or apartments instead of figuring out why it is happening and trying to stop it. Problem-solving skills would help these young women so much!

A human resources manager says: Even though Melissa is trained in problem solving strategies, she may be too afraid to use them. Bosses don't always want employees who are powerful in their own right – they want their employees to follow orders and to look to them for advice. Melissa solving her own problems may seem to her like a risky behavior.

An employee says: Melissa doesn't really care about win-win situations. She sees this job only as a means to an ends – a pathway to greener pastures. She is not going to put a lot of time and effort into making sure that she and Mr. Snyder feel happy and comfortable with their performances. She just wants to survive until she gets to a "real" position.

Option #2: The welfare-to-work program performs a skill inventory at the end of the program.

A human resources manager says: A skill inventory would let the trainers know the gaps in Melissa's knowledge. They could then retrain her in the areas where she is weak, avoiding problems with Mr. Snyder during those first few days of work.

A welfare recipient says: A skill inventory only measures what the trainers think is important. What about those things outside technology or procedures? Melissa could be lacking in family support,

Academic Contribution
Workplace researchers Kirschenman and Neckerman write that employers can discriminate in many well-hidden ways by requiring text-based literacy tests before being considered for employment. Skill inventories can therefore be seen as ways to weed out employees who would take too much "work" to "fix." The authors argue that because these employees are mostly from the inner-city, skill inventories can be seen as a type of sophisticated discrimination.¹⁹

Options and Outcomes

transportation, child care, problem-solving skills, or even housing. How will a skill inventory assess that?

The welfare recipient's Story Behind the Story:

I consider myself well trained for the job market, but there are some problems in my personal life that will effect my work. Sometimes my children are sick or even suspended from school. Sometimes I don't have anything appropriate to wear to work, or sometimes I feel like my co-workers are acting prejudiced to me but I'm afraid to confront them about it. These problems for me cause the most trouble in my own working life.

Option #3: The supervisors and co-workers should also receive training -- training to prepare them to deal with the special problems or welfare-to-work employees.

A hospital administrator says: It is the management and board members that really need to be trained in rivaling and problem-solving. This training would enable them to see problems from the point of view of their employees, rather than just doing what the board wants them to do, or just firing the worker, or just ignoring the problem.

The hospital administrator's Story Behind the Story: I have attended board meetings where the board members just accepted whatever the supervisors were telling them, without question or debate. There was no dialogue. I always felt that nothing useful came out of any of these meetings, and the managers left feeling that their opinion was always right in the first place.

A union president says: It is not just the managers who need training, though. Melissa also needs much more training, especially in assertiveness, problem-solving, and communication. She is really unprepared to stand up to Mr. Snyder or to deal with even small problems.

The union president's Story Behind the Story: At my job, we can't keep African-American employees, because we aren't having a dual dialogue going on. And it's not just the employee's fault. We've got management situations here too. Everybody in the boat gotta get along, not just the employees.

A government agency worker says: Management definitely needs to be trained as well. If we have different people (welfare workers) coming in to work, we have to look at them differently: they have different issues. They may come in at 9:05 and not 9. They may have transportation problems, child care problems, or clothing problems. You can have these people say "you gotta get off the rolls here;" but you can't just do that -- there are lots of issues that management has to look at.

An educator says: It is important that management and co-workers are trained in how to teach as well -- not just about how the welfare workers have certain problems. There is lots of research out there about the best way to teach job skills, and Melissa's trainers, supervisors, and co-workers obviously don't know much about this kind of teaching.

Option #4: Training should not stop on the first day of employment -- the hospital could have a training center set up specifically for new employees, with a set time each day that the employee must go and continue her training.

A welfare recipient says: Now this is an idea that would really work. Nobody can learn everything they need to know in just one week, or sometimes only one day! Melissa could go to

Options and Outcomes

the training center and ask the questions she had, without feeling like she is stupid in front of her boss.

The welfare recipient's Story Behind the Story: I have been at new jobs and felt totally lost. The training was sometimes totally worthless, and I just ended up feeling like the fool for not knowing anything, and my new workers were just frustrated with me. I definitely would have used a training center.

A corporate executive says: But who is going to pay for this training center? No one is going to spend money on anything like this -- and let me tell you, a training center would be very expensive. And who knows if it would really work? Business is about making money, not about getting people job-ready. Job-readiness is the responsibility of schools, the community, and individuals.

An educator says: When are people going to realize that investing in human capital can make money for businesses? Training centers can vastly reduce turnover and firings due to incompetence. And nobody can train employees better than the company itself -- no school can get that specific.

Academic Contribution
Educational philosopher John Dewey argues that all educational experiences are not the same -- and that the quality of experience is what counts. Education which is divorced from hands-on experience is much less likely to result in knowledge that can be revised, used in troubleshooting, or travel into different contexts.²⁰

The educator's Story Behind the Story: I teach high school, and what we teach is general skills and information. We could never fully prepare anyone to enter a job -- every business has different rules, different computer programs, and a different overall culture. This type of thing is certainly not the job of schools to teach.

Option #5: Training could be interspersed with work -- half of the day could be training, and half on the job. Then each day could address the problems that the new employees ran into the day before.

A human resources manager says: I like this idea, but Melissa would be pretty useless on those first few days or weeks because she wouldn't have had enough training. And in a hospital, she can't afford to make big mistakes, even if those mistakes have an educational value.

The human resources manager's Story Behind the Story: I work at a bank, and we could never let tellers start the job before they are really trained. They are handling money -- which is tantamount to handling other people's lives. And many of our other jobs deal with the same thing -- even a small data entry mistake could be devastating for one of our customers.

A non-profit executive says: It's true that not all job sites can have this type of training, but in many businesses or organizations, this type of training could really work. In this type of program, the employee's own experiences would be the subject matter of the training, which would lead to a much better hands-on understanding of her job responsibilities.

Option #6: Instead of having a training program, Melissa could be trained "on the job" by her supervisor and co-workers.

An attorney says: This type of training is the best in my opinion. People learn the best through their own experience, and Melissa would really understand what she needed to do if she learned it on the job. If she ran into a problem, it would be a real problem, not something contrived by the

Options and Outcomes

training program -- and that means she would be prepared to deal with that problem the next time it came up.

A welfare recipient says: The success of this training totally depends on Melissa's co-workers. They might be bad teachers, or not want to spend extra time, or be prejudiced against her because she's from the welfare rolls. They might not even want her to succeed at all.

The welfare recipient's Story Behind the Story: I had a job once where I was just thrown out there, and nobody really wanted to help. Every time I asked, they would look frustrated or angry, even though they were told to help me out. Basically, I was just left alone. I had a problem with some customers once, who asked me how a certain dish was prepared, and no one would answer my question. It took so long for me to answer the question that the customers left and I ended up in trouble.

A CBO president says: It is not the job of employees and co-workers to train Melissa -- before she even gets the job, she should have a certain amount of job preparedness. How far are the employers supposed to go? Do they just teach technology, or do they have to tell Melissa how to dress, how to get child care, and how to deal with Snyder? Some of those things are inappropriate, in my opinion, for co-workers to have to teach.

Story-Behind-the-Story

Week One – Communication and Training Support

Upon Melissa's arrival to admissions, Mr. Snyder, her supervisor, was pleasantly surprised—taking careful note of her well-tailored suit and attractive appearance. His customary initial meeting stressed how his unit was evaluated based on efficiency and attention to details; Melissa appeared undaunted by his expectations. Days later Melissa gets a somewhat different, if perplexing, insider version over coffee break. Snyder, who had bitterly complained to Human Resources for sending him “all these welfare-to-work recruits,” was overheard to actually thank H.R. for finally sending him someone who “looked alright.”

The hospital's information technology is demanding: the new Admissions software is prone to freeze and/or deny access to the next user if an entry does not fit its template. The communications system within the hospital seems to assume that you already know “who to ask.” Melissa has recovered from a small series of such breakdowns by asking whoever is nearby to bail her out, and so far this has covered up what she fears might be seen as a failure. Snyder had said to route questions through him, but he clearly seems too rushed and busy to bother with all these “how to” details.

What is Melissa thinking?

About how she is dressed:

- I am uncomfortable with the way Mr. Snyder is looking at me –what if he is interested in me or wants to ask me out? Is this sexual harassment? I need this job, and no one in training talked about what to do in a situation like this.
- I'm relieved that Mr. Snyder thinks I look good! I was so worried about my clothing, because I know that people are judged by their appearances.
- Why should Mr. Snyder feel that way about me? Everyone comes in dressed well; I shouldn't get praise for what is normally done. I see myself as an individual, and I think that Mr. Snyder sees me as a “welfare-to-work person.”

About asking for help:

- The training program really didn't help me with the computers. I'm afraid to ask questions because I don't want to look stupid to my boss and co-workers. They may be looking for me to fail anyway, and I want to always look competent. I feel a little trapped – how will I learn to use the computers without looking like a failure?
- Look, my main goal is to get the job done by grabbing whoever is there – if I need some help, I ask someone to get me through it. I'm under some pressure with this new job, and I'm doing whatever it takes to get the job done correctly.
- The technology breakdowns aren't my fault, and after Mr. Snyder's comment I feel I'm under even more pressure. Mr. Snyder is going to think I'm the one who is not functioning.

What is Mr. Snyder thinking?

- Thank goodness she looks alright, at least better than the other welfare-to-work people I've gotten. But I'm still not optimistic about her performance. Every other welfare worker I've had has failed – why should Melissa be any different?
- I wonder why Melissa didn't come to me, because I can remedy the errors she found in the program; she is wasting a lot of time by “getting around” the bugs. I'm the one who can get the software debugged, and it's silly that Melissa doesn't even consider this option.

Story-Behind-the-Story

- Why hasn't Melissa come to me with any problems? Either she is doing very well or she is getting other people to do her job. Even my old employees come to me daily with computer problems – why hasn't she?

What is Going on Here? What is the Problem, if any?

A policy expert says:

- Mr. Snyder is a poor administrator. But Melissa seems to herself be able to find her way around.

A welfare-to-work supervisor says:

- Melissa is doing a good job utilizing her resources. She has developed a network of support through her co-workers, is doing a great job of coping; and she looks good to her boss.

A community technology activist says:

- The employees actually know more about the equipment than Mr. Snyder does. He may not even understand the problems. Since he could have gone to fix the problems, and hasn't, then he might not even know about it. Even though he says to come to him with problems, he doesn't really have the capacity to understand those problems.

A youth mentor says:

- Melissa could sit down with Snyder at the end of the day to talk about the problems – but Mr. Snyder does not have anything in place to help Melissa out. He is setting her up for failure by not mentoring her himself. He has absolutely no back-up plan in place – like retraining or mentoring — to be sure she doesn't fail because of small, solvable problems.

A human resources recruiter says:

- Melissa is trying to use her experience from part-time jobs at places like Arby's to get her through being new on the job. But those types of experiences don't map onto this type of workplace – she needs to learn a whole new culture of work. Instead of relying on “learning on the fly,” Melissa needs to learn the skills to solve problems before they happen.

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Story-Behind-the-Story

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Options and Outcomes

Decision Point #3: Communication

A management/employee relationship becomes strained over difficulties in reading one another's expectations, messages, and needs; mutual confidence begins to ebb.

Option #1: Melissa goes to Human Resources with the problem.

A Community Worker says: Melissa doesn't even know Mr. Snyder. What is she going to say? What if she is wrong about him – what if he was just having a bad day? She is going to look like a complainer from day one and Mr. Snyder sure isn't going to like her.

A human resources manager says: Human resources can set up a dialogue between Mr. Snyder and Melissa, thus alleviating the problem. They could hold the dialogue at a neutral place, or even over lunch for a more casual atmosphere. This way, the problem would be seen as located in human resources purview rather than as just Melissa's or Snyder's fault.

Academic Contribution
Cornel West argues that nihilism – the inability to believe that your life can change for the better – is one of the most pervasive problems in the inner city. Hopelessness can lead to “learned helplessness” – where workers like Melissa don't even try to solve problems on their own because they believe their actions have no affect on their lives or the lives of others.²¹

An employee says: Human resources doesn't have any power over what Mr. Snyder does or thinks. You can micro manage all you want; if you are a bad boss you are a bad boss – a single complaint of a meeting with HR is not going to change that at all.

The employee's Story Behind the Story: I had a bad boss once, and everyone complained about her. Management talked to her like ten times but nothing ever changed. If anything, those meetings made her even more hostile. In the end, she was fired. Some people are just mean – human resources cannot change someone's personality.

Option #2: We have to train everyone, especially management and co-workers, in how to be humane and respectful to the new workers and to each other.

An educator says: There are strategies around which help people to be sensitive and respectful to other people. For example, the training program supervisor could have really sat down with Melissa and had a conversation about her readiness to start the new job, instead of just letting her go. I think Melissa would have been very willing to undergo more training on the computers.

The educator's Story Behind the Story: There is an argument that the most important factor behind human success is hope. And hope is an emotion, not a skill. To have hope you have to be treated like a human, believe in your own abilities and self-worth, and believe that you really can succeed in life. And that isn't going to happen unless the people around you treat you with respect.

A corporate executive says: No one is going to buy this type of training. If it doesn't make money, it just won't be done. Profit is the driving force behind business, not helping others or being kind. If there is not a direct connection to profit, it is not going to happen. Or, if this training is implemented, the trainees will just laugh it off as something useless.

Option #3: The hospital should pick the managers who will get people like Melissa according to their personalities -- only managers who are compassionate and good teachers will get employees from the welfare-to-work program.

Options and Outcomes

A human resources manager says: This idea could really work well. Managers have different styles and “people” abilities -- Melissa’s chances of success are much greater if she is placed with someone who really wants her to succeed, and is compassionate towards her special needs.

Academic Contribution
Paulo Freire writes that successful learning includes teachers who respect and trust their students. If, he argues, we do not believe our students are capable of success, then they will not succeed. Psychological theory calls this phenomenon the “Pygmalion effect” – students will generally live up (or down) to their teacher’s expectations, regardless of innate student ability. Therefore, Freire argues, truly caring for those we are teaching entails expectations of success.²²

A welfare recipient says: It’s not just managers who will affect Melissa’s success -- her co-workers are also important. But it is true that a good manager can make a world of difference -- Melissa’s chances of keeping her job are much better with a good boss.²²

The welfare recipient’s Story Behind the Story: I worked at a clothing store once with a great team of managers and co-workers. We worked very hard and the store was a great success. But for one

reason and another, all of the managers moved on to different stores and jobs. We got two new managers who were just horrible, and within *one month*, every single one of my co-workers, including me, had quit or were fired. It was very upsetting to me, and was completely due to the new managers, who were mean, bossy, and prejudiced.

A corporate manager says: The only problem I see with that is the managers who are compassionate may start feeling like they are getting lots of extra work without getting paid for it. Perhaps those managers could receive a bonus for successfully training a new employee -- you don’t want to ruin a good manager by overworking him or her.

Option #4: All employees of the hospital could go through cultural sensitivity training.

A community organizer says: Cultural sensitivity training has such a bad reputation today. So often, people just laugh it off, or see it as a free day off from work. Sometimes, I think it makes the situation even worse than it was when it started by reinforcing prejudiced views.

A teacher says: Cultural sensitivity training may seem cheesy or cliched, but it could really work in a situation like Melissa’s. Often, people are completely unaware of the difficult circumstances of a woman who is transitioning from welfare-to-work. They may have never been on welfare, or never even known anyone on welfare. They may be without children, or may have a very supportive community helping them with their needs -- Melissa may not have any of that.

The teacher’s Story Behind the Story: I have a good friend who is a teacher for the Police Academy, and what she teaches is cultural diversity. And while it is true that at first the police officers think her courses are bogus, she quickly illustrates that the type of information she is giving them can save lives, de-escalate bad situations, and make their job much easier in the long run. And the results from her classes are very good -- she often has students come up to her later thanking her for the information they got from her class.

Option #5: This job may just not be the right job for Melissa; she should see the job as a learning experience and move on to greener pastures.

Options and Outcomes

A CBO manager says: Maybe the best thing for Melissa to do would be to move on and cut her losses -- Snyder is obviously a bad boss, the training was inadequate, her co-workers are disinterested, and the pay and benefits are terrible. She should chalk all of this up to a learning experience and go to a new job.

The CBO manager's Story Behind the Story: I was a welfare mother for many years, and when I started back to work I had a lot of crappy jobs. But after each one, I asked myself what I learned and then went on to a better job. And now I have a great job and I can support my family.

An attorney says: It is important that Melissa takes something away from this experience if she leaves -- lots of people leave jobs and make the same mistakes as before -- whether that is choosing another bad job or not being able to solve the same problems in their lives. Melissa has to be reflective about why this job didn't work out, and be sure to work against those issues in her next job.

Decision Point #4: Work Support

The situation demands on-the-job-learning, but without systematic support by HR, management, or co-workers, the employee is left to negotiate a hazardous terrain.

Option #1: The company puts a short-term support or buddy system in place for new employees to turn to for advice.

A human resources manager says: One of the reasons that a buddy system is so important is that it avoids the problems of typical office politics. Without a buddy system, Melissa could be afraid to ask her boss or other co-workers; but with a specific coworker assigned to her, she won't have to worry about who to ask and how her asking will make her look.

A welfare-to-work programmer says: Buddy systems are just as rife with office politics as anything else -- usually, people don't want to have to be a "buddy" to someone new when they have their own work to do. And they might resent Melissa for getting the job just because she is on welfare -- why should a "buddy" have to take up the slack of Melissa's inexperience?

The welfare programmer's Story Behind the Story: I have worked in offices that supposedly had buddy systems, but "buddies" never actually did anything. We felt it was just a political move to make the bosses feel like they had done something good -- they never even checked to see if the buddy program was working. Which it wasn't.

A union leader says: My experience is that buddy systems just don't work. You might get someone who is inexperienced, doesn't know how to teach or train new employees, or is shy. Usually what happens - whether or not you have a buddy system -- is that various co-workers will slowly teach you the rules and "how to's" of a workplace on a day-to-day basis. For example, some employees might be good at the computers, and others might be good at dealing with the boss. Who Melissa needs to talk to or "buddy" with depends on the particular problem she is dealing with today.

The union leader's Story Behind the Story. I work at a post office, and we have different machines for different jobs. Usually the employees know a lot more about how to operate these machines than do the supervisors. And how new employees learn about the machines is that different experts teach their "own" machines. It is much more like team training than a buddy system.

Options and Outcomes

Option #2: Melissa decides to ask her co-workers for advice on an “as needed” basis and avoid bothering the busy manager.

An employee says: Co-workers don’t always know how to handle problems, and they may give bad advice just to look good in front of the “new girl.” Sometimes advice is bad advice, and how is Melissa going to know that?

The employee’s Story Behind the Story One time I was working as a receptionist at a school and I had a problem with the computer. I asked at least four different people for help, and got different answers from each of them. And none of their solutions worked! Turns out, one of them was well-known for stabbing people in the back, another was incompetent with technology, and another was preoccupied and just gave the wrong information.

A human resources manager says: The co-workers will start to resent all of the interruptions from Melissa. They have their own jobs to do, and wasn’t the training program supposed to get her ready to work? Why do they have to take up the slack for Melissa? Some of the co-workers may even start to complain to Mr. Snyder or to each other about Melissa’s incompetence.

An educator says: Co-workers coming in and fixing Melissa’s problems is not an effective way for Melissa to learn how to truly fix problems. These co-workers aren’t trained as educators and may just be going in and “fixing” without actually telling Melissa how to fix the problems herself, or how to avoid them in the first place.

Option #3: The company could have a mentor who works full time on an individual basis with new welfare-to-work employees. The mentor could help with technical questions, but also with personal issues like child care, transportation, and communication.

Academic Contribution
Federal policy analysts argue that there is a disconnection between family, school, community, business, and agencies; this disconnection can lead to failure for inexperienced workers in the system. For example, a young mother who is taking a job training course could ultimately fail to find work if her issues of child care are not addressed.²³

A human resources manager says: That’s what all human resources departments are for -- to help out employees. But I think it is inappropriate for the hr department to intervene in the personal lives of employees -- instead, we can refer the employees to family, church, or a CBO.

A welfare recipient says: If Melissa had someone who was working on her behalf, a lot of problems would be avoided. Maybe Melissa doesn’t know her rights, or even the bus schedule. This way, she wouldn’t have to look silly by asking her boss; instead she’ll look strong

because she’ll be solving her own problems.

The welfare recipient’s Story Behind the Story: I had a job once where the supervisor would not let me go on a bathroom break except for lunch. Well, I never found out until after I left -- but it is illegal to stop me from using the bathroom! And that was the major reason I quit that job.

Option #4: Mr. Snyder schedules a meeting time to speak with Melissa about her day.

Options and Outcomes

A teacher says: Setting time aside for Melissa will allow her to voice her concerns as well as allow Snyder to let her know his concerns as well. Thus, problems that happened can be fixed before they are out of control. Also, this saves the co-workers from having to constantly monitor her.

A government worker says: Mr. Snyder may not have the language to tell Melissa about problems, and Melissa even more likely does not have the language. If Snyder just says to her “you did x, y, and z wrong,” without teaching her how to fix them, Melissa is as bad off as ever.

A welfare recipient says: Melissa may be too scared to ask questions, thinking that she will look stupid if she admits to not knowing something. So Snyder could think everything is fine, when it isn't. And then, when he finds out that he is not doing well, he could be even more mad at her than if they had never met at all.

Option #5: Melissa is trained in verbal assertiveness so that she can negotiate with her supervisor and co-workers.

A CBO president says: Melissa has to know how to communicate if she is going to succeed in this workplace, where everyone is helpful. She has to know how to get what she needs -- but at this point she is too shy and unskilled. Assertiveness training could really help her to help herself.

A CBO supervisor says: Mr. Snyder may not be too thrilled with having an employee who is “assertive” on his hands. It might even play into his prejudices about black women in Melissa's case.

The CBO supervisor's Story Behind the Story: I had a boss once who hated it when anyone said or asked anything of him. You could just be asking a favor and he would freak out. And he especially hated it if a woman asked him questions. His ideal was to be left alone in his office all day -- he believed that the employees should be able to run themselves from day one.

Story-Behind-the-Story

Week Two Monday at 5:00 p.m. – Community Support

In a cloud of dust and smoke Jake and Christina Roberts finally arrived at the Emergency Room. With the aid of a hospital staffer, between contractions Christina was carefully seated in the wheelchair and brought inside, immediately checked by the attending resident doctor and moved quickly off to the hospital's delivery suite.

Melissa has been asked to work a double, covering the 3:00-11:00 PM shift on the tail of her own daylight shift. The nearest day care she can afford ends at 6:00 PM, so she calls home whenever she gets a break. The neighbor looking after her child has to go to work herself at 8:00.

Knowing she is responsible for filling out the Roberts' admittance, Melissa sends an internal email up to the delivery suite. She asks someone to tell Jake Roberts to come down for a formal admissions interview and turns her attention to more immediate tasks.

What is Melissa thinking?

About her child:

- I can't stop thinking about my child – what will I do if no one can watch him after 8:00? I can't stay here if my child is left alone – but I don't feel I can leave either!
- I'm reluctant to talk to my boss about my childcare needs, because he will keep thinking I'm just another "welfare mom."

About her job duties:

- I am preoccupied and overwhelmed right now. I'm still trying to learn the computer program, I can't stop thinking about my kid, and I am trying to get several jobs done at the same time. I'm doing whatever I can, and I can only hope it is good enough.

About pulling a double shift:

- It is ridiculous that they asked me to pull a double shift when I am so new, and without any advance notice! How am I supposed to make arrangements for childcare? Are they even allowed to ask me to stay on such short notice? I am angry and frustrated right now – I am not sure the low pay and no benefits of this job are worth the trouble.
- I would have tried to negotiate with Mr. Snyder when he asked me to work a double, but I didn't know how to approach him without losing face or looking bad. What can I do in a situation like this without one or the other of us losing?

What is Mr. Snyder thinking?

About Melissa's childcare needs:

- I hate hiring people with kids, especially these welfare-to-work people — where's the father of these kids?
- She knew she could have been asked to work a double – why didn't she plan ahead?
- Why don't we have childcare for employees? So many problems would be solved if we had onsite, around the clock childcare.

About her working a double:

- I can't read people's minds. If she couldn't work a double, she should have told me. I would have found somebody else — of course I don't expect people to work if they don't have child care!

Story-Behind-the-Story

- She is really able to balance a lot of stuff at once – I didn't think she would be able to get through the double shift "whole"!

What is going on here? What is the problem, if there is one?

A welfare-to-work counselor says:

- Expectations don't take into consideration the family life. Welfare-to-work needs to cover those bases, helping her arrive at plans for family care.

A human resources recruiter says:

- The option of onsite, round-the-clock childcare sounds good, but there are many considerations that prevent this type of daycare to work out. For Melissa's workplace, onsite daycare might not be an option.

A CBO board member says:

- Why didn't she look at the manual she was provided with? I'm sure it has all of the procedures described step by step. If she used the manual as a reference, she wouldn't have felt so overwhelmed.

A community housing policy analyst says:

- The welfare-to-work staff didn't know about the networks out there – so many people working and living in inner-city communities don't know about all of the resources that already exist.

Options and Outcomes

Decision Point #5: Community Support

The employee is distracted when the demands of child care, overtime and transportation exceed the resources of her limited (and also struggling) network of support.

Option #1: Melissa makes arrangements ahead of time for unexpected overtime.

A welfare recipient says: Child care for low-income people is often informal, and you can't count on it at all times, every day. What if her caregiver gets sick, or if she has other obligations?

An employee says: Why is Melissa being asked to work a double in the first place? Workplaces shouldn't expect parents to work overtimes like this when they have important obligations at home. And if she is being asked to work a double, she should be given some warning.

Option #2: Since Melissa can't afford formal child care with extended hours, the hospital creates a back-up support for sick children or overtime situations.

A human resources manager says: A major cause of anxiety and lost work days is removed. Parents will be able to do their work without being constantly distracted about where their child is or the quality of their care.

A welfare recipient says: On-site child care is a solution, but what about when your child is sick. Or what about summer vacations? Or suspended children?

The welfare recipient's Story Behind the Story: I have older children who have different needs than infants and small children. What happens to them when they are on spring break or summer vacation? And my child was just suspended for two weeks, and I don't know what I am going to do with her. I can't bring her to work, and day care is for young children.

A corporate executive says: It is not our responsibility to parent children. Our responsibility is to get a job done and to pay you for that job. Your parenting is your deal – I shouldn't have to pay for it or to make excuses for your absences or child care needs.

Option #3: Melissa finds out about subsidized child care for women on welfare returning to work.

A community leader says: People on welfare are entitled to free child care for their first year back to work. This entitlement affords new workers time to get back on their feet without needing to worry about the cost or quality of child care.

A welfare recipient says: I was told subsidized child care is for people who make \$21,000 or less. If I make \$30,000, I can't afford to pay for child care, housing, clothing, and food. Subsidized child care only works if you have a very low paying job.

The welfare recipient's Story Behind the Story: I am looking for a job right now, and I am afraid to take anything that pays less than \$36,000. My caseworker has not helped me at all with child care choices I have. In fact, I just found out today that all welfare-to-work recipients are entitled to free child care for a year – regardless of income.

A human resources manager says: Companies could provide, as benefits, advocates for welfare-to-work employees who know all of the ins and outs, rules, entitlements, and helping programs out there for them. Caseworkers don't often – or usually – know about the programs that are out

Options and Outcomes

there for welfare recipients. Human resources managers know even less. If we hired someone who specifically is an expert in all of the services available to people returning to work from welfare, many of these personal or life problems would be solved.

Story-Behind-the-Story

Tuesday 7:10 a.m. – Performance

Melissa arrives to work ten minutes late for the first time, feeling a bit worn. Mr. Snyder abruptly asks to speak with her, noting that some errors in her coding have affected the productivity and efficiency of other staffers. Snyder goes on to say his unit's workload is backing up and an internal audit is due shortly. She needs to improve her performance soon: real soon.

Melissa realizes Snyder is under a lot of pressure. But, feeling angry and increasingly unsure of herself, she is now even more confused about what to do. Are the other staff complaining about her? Is it her fault if the new software is crash prone? And how is she supposed to learn the ropes?

What is Melissa thinking?

About her job duties:

- I am overwhelmed by all of the stuff that is going on. I don't know the computers yet, much less the other procedures I'm responsible for. I feel like I'm so far behind I'll never catch up. At this point, I just want to quit!
- I could be blamed for something that isn't my fault – I'm asked to work extra, the computer training wasn't good enough, and my boss isn't approachable. I know I'm in trouble, but I just don't think it's truly because of something I did.

What is Mr. Snyder thinking?

About her childcare:

- I am not really concerned about her life outside the job – that is her business, not mine. My concern is that she is not doing her job. She is just another one of those cases. She needs to solve her problems herself. Can't she understand that in health care, mistakes can have horrible consequences?

About her mistakes on the job:

- Why didn't she come to me like I asked her to? I'm mad now that she didn't come to me the first week, because now the problem is showing up a week later.

What is going on here? What is the problem, if there is one?

A health care administrator says:

- Employers need to be trained and made aware that there are certain things they will have to deal with in this population of women on welfare-to-work. She is coming into a system with a whole set of parameters she's not used to. Arriving on time, issues of transportation, vagaries of bus arrival, drop-offs. Employers need to be aware of these situations.

A community program coordinator says:

- Mr. Snyder needed an orientation to the realities of single women moving out of welfare. He has no idea of how hard that move is.

A secondary school official says:

- Mr. Snyder made assumptions about why she did stuff, but he could have asked why she was having problems. She is being labeled guilty without a fair trial.

Options and Outcomes

Decision Point #6: Performance

The new employee's performance difficulties are affecting co-workers and the externally evaluated performance of the office.

Option #1: Melissa and Mr. Snyder tell each other about their typical day.

A community worker says: If Melissa and Snyder tell each other about the realities of their lives, both in and out of work, then certain untold understandings will be spoken. For example, Snyder might realize that Melissa has child care problems and would therefore be more sensitive about them. And Melissa might realize that Snyder can get in trouble for her mistakes.

A welfare recipient says: Melissa isn't going to tell Snyder all her "dirty little secrets" -- he already doesn't like her! And most of the stuff she would tell him would only affirm his negative viewpoint of her instead of making him more "sensitive."

The welfare recipient's Story Behind the Story: I tried to get a job as a receptionist one time, and in the interview I let it slip that I had three kids. You could see on the interviewer's face that I had lost the job. I never got called back; when I called they said the "position had been filled." I never tell any possible job that I have kids anymore.

A human resources manager says: These are issues that should be dealt with before Melissa ever meets Snyder. The training program should let Melissa know the importance of her job, including issues of timeliness and child care. Otherwise, why have a training program in the first place?

Option #2: Mr. Snyder could set aside a day for additional training in Melissa's problem areas.

A teacher says: This kind of on-the-spot, as-needed training will be very helpful for Melissa, and it reflects how people learn in the real world. If we are given the chance, we all learn from our mistakes!

The teacher's Story Behind the Story: I'll never forget, in my first job at a day care center I made a terrible mistake. One of the little kids fell and busted a tooth out. I thought it was already a loose tooth, but it wasn't: an irate parent confronted me the next day and asked why I hadn't called the kid's mother immediately or at least put ice on it. He demanded that I be fired. Well, the owner of the center didn't fire me; instead she told me why what I had done was a mistake. Believe me, I never did anything like that again!

A manager says: Who is going to do this training? Mr. Snyder is already too busy, Melissa's co-workers are behind because of her mistakes, and the training program is over. In theory, I like the idea of more training, but is it really practical?

A service employee says: I like this idea of training. So many times when I started a new job I made mistakes and felt like a fool. So what I usually do is cover them up instead of trying to find out how to do it right. If I knew that it was OK to make mistakes, I would have no problem admitting to them and learning from them. It would make the workplace much less stressful.

Option #3: The co-workers could help train Melissa up to the standards of their department.

Options and Outcomes

A union leader says: Helping each other out is part of every job. After all, her performance is affecting theirs negatively. On the other hand, if she did her job well, then they would benefit. And Melissa's co-workers are really the best ones to teach her the ins and outs of her job, and to tell her the consequences of her mistakes.

A community organizer says: That sounds great in theory, but who has time to take care of a new employee? A job is about doing the job, not a day-care center for new employees. I think it would be great if the co-workers helped out, but I doubt they would. What if their job didn't get done: then they would be the ones in trouble!

The community organizer's Story Behind the Story: Just a year ago I had this new employee who didn't know anything at all. But she was real nice, so the other employees tried to help her out with her job. In the end, the new employee ended up spending her time on the phone or gabbing with her co-workers -- her job was being done by the other employees!

A minister says: Once again, I don't think most employees are trained in how to train. They might know how to do their own job have no idea how to teach someone else to do it. What's more, there are intercultural considerations in this training: will someone from a different culture know how to talk to Melissa?

Option #4: Melissa could be transferred to a less important department in the hospital.

A lawyer says: Obviously, this job is too hard for Melissa. But there are lots of other jobs in hospitals which are less difficult. She could be a receptionist, for example. Then, once she got the hang of that job, she could perhaps be promoted to a higher position.

A human resources manager says: I like this idea -- in my job we transfer people all of the time. But there would have to be the perfect position open for her, or else the problem will start all over again, and Melissa could end up floundering from position to position without being successful in any of them.

A CBO president says: No way would I transfer Melissa to another department! How would that make me look? I have to clean up my own messes. If Snyder sent his mess off to someone else it would be terrible for him politically. It would make him look incompetent with new employees, on the one hand, and disrespectful to other departments on the other hand. He should either try to fix the problem himself or solve it by letting Melissa go and cutting his losses.

On Her Break – Crisis

Things go from bad to worse. In the cafeteria Melissa hears about a young woman who nearly died in childbirth overnight and suddenly remembers the email (asking “somebody” in delivery to send Jake down) that had never been answered. Hurrying to her terminal, she accesses the admissions data and confirms her fears. Christina Roberts had never been formally checked in, and with her transfer to intensive care, her file would be red-flagged for immediate review. Well, she had sent a message to the delivery suite, after all. And could she even hope to outleg the system, find Jake herself, and save face before a fuming Snyder?

What is Melissa thinking?

About her mistake:

- Did I follow protocol or was I doing something on my own? I’m not sure, and I’m starting to panic.
- I am hoping against hope that just sending the email was enough — emotionally I was so preoccupied with my child, and mentally and emotionally fatigued. At this point, I don’t even care if I keep this job or not.
- I am so scared – will Mr. Snyder forgive me for my mistake or is this it for me? Am I going to get fired?

What is Mr. Snyder thinking?

About Melissa’s mistake:

- I am bound by protocol, rules, and possible lawsuits – an admission not being put in could cause health insurance problems.
- Why weren’t these problems and procedures covered in orientation? Melissa may be capable, but I can’t wait for her to learn the things she should have learned in training.
- I knew she wasn’t going to work out anyway; it was just a matter of time. Another one bites the dust!

What is going on here? What is the problem, if there is one?

A human resources manager says:

- There was a lack of proper training and orientation, and repetition of what should happen in a certain situation. She wasn’t trained on problem solving but only technology.

A union leader says:

- Two things are important here: technology and procedure, and the procedural wasn’t covered.

Decision Point #7: Crisis

A red flag problem is about to happen.

Option #1: Melissa should quit the job.

A service employee says: This job isn't going to get any better. Melissa has burned her bridges, and I don't think she can make anyone think she can be a good employee again. She's already fighting the prejudice of Snyder and her co-workers by being a welfare person; and now she's confirmed their worst fears. She should just leave and get a job that is more within her means.

The service employee's Story Behind the Story: I worked a job once where I really messed up in the first few weeks. I happened to have a terrible cold right when I was starting, and I couldn't concentrate on anything. I forgot to do stuff, did stuff wrong, and really embarrassed my boss. I felt better after awhile, and started doing my job really well. But no one in that office ever trusted me again. After awhile, I just had to leave because working with people who don't like you is just too stressful.

A minister says: Melissa quitting will just be avoidance of her real problem. If she doesn't reflect on why she's having these problems, and then try to fix them, won't she just have the exact same problems in her new job? And what about her kid -- how will she support him while she looks for a new job? Quitting might feel great in the short run, but in the long run it won't do Melissa any good.

Academic Contribution
Policy analysts like Zemsky and the authors of "The Forgotten Half" describe a process of "churning" or "floundering" through low-level jobs. Urban employees will quit or be fired from a series of entry-level positions, taking up to a decade to find a stable positions which offers a living wage and benefits.²⁴

A policy analyst says: Quitting and getting new jobs is just going to land Melissa in entry-level, low paying, no benefit jobs every time. She'll never work her way up to a self-sustaining career. The key to success is staying in one job for at least four or five years. If Melissa runs from every problem, how is she going to reach that goal?

A welfare recipient says: Why is Melissa thinking about quitting her job? It is not her fault that she's having these problems! It is the problem of everyone at the workplace -- trainers, co-workers, boss. If she leaves, she is the only one punished for a problem caused by everyone. It's not fair that she leaves and it sure won't teach the company how to train people like her in the future.

Option #2: Melissa is sent through the training program again.

A human resources manager says: Melissa definitely needs more training -- it is obvious she wasn't prepared to start this new job. If she went through the training program again, she would know what to look for in terms of technology and problem-solving.

A community worker says: But the training is the problem in the first place -- you can't fix something with a tool that is already broken! Going through the same training program will just bore Melissa and leave her frustrated since she won't learn anything useful.

An employer says: And what is Snyder supposed to do when Melissa is gone for another week in training? Will the co-workers have to fill the void? That will result in them resenting Melissa. They will also think she is stupid since she had to go through training twice -- once was enough for them, so why should she get special treatment?

Options and Outcomes

Option #3: Melissa goes to Mr. Snyder, confesses her mistakes, apologizes, and asks for his help.

A lawyer says: If I were Mr. Snyder, I would really respect Melissa for admitting her mistakes and asking for help. I might also be a little frustrated, but I would also be impressed.

The lawyer's Story Behind the Story: As a parent of several children, one of the things I have always stressed is that they always come to me if they made a mistake. If one of the kids breaks something, even if it is something I love, it is easier for them to admit it to me than it is to hide it. A few times they have tried to lie about a mistake they have made, and it always ends up with tears and anger on both sides. Admitting a mistake instead leads to problem-solving for how to fix the problem and trust on both sides.

A foundation employee says: I like this option, but only if Mr. Snyder is the kind of guy who is able to deal with problems and mistakes calmly, without anger. If he is the explosive type -- and I have a feeling he is -- Melissa's admission will only lead to yelling and perhaps her being fired. Before Melissa tries to do something like this, she needs to find out what kind of reaction she will be getting.

The foundation employee's Story Behind the Story: I have worked with many employers, and some of them will throw a temper tantrum over a dirty coffee cup. Others treat you like a part of the family. For each different type of employer, a different method is needed for dealing with problems. For the one temper-tantrum boss I worked with, I made sure to cover up my mistakes -- it just wasn't worth the effort to tell him the truth.

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