

Excerpt from the Options and Outcomes (Ben, link to document 2 here) Findings from *Negotiating the Culture of Work and Technology* (Ben, link to document 23 here) To read the scenario these findings are based on, click here (Ben, link to document 24 here)

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.¹

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.

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.

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.²

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.

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.

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.

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.³

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.

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.

¹ West, Cornel. (1993) Prophetic thought in postmodern times. Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press.

² Freire, Paulo. (1989) Pedagogy of the oppressed. Myra Bergman Ramos (trans), New York: Continuum.

³ The forgotten half: pathways to success for America's youth and young families. (1988). Washington, DC: Youth and America's Future: The William T. Grant Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship.