

THE **7** SYMPTOMS OF A MANAGER IN TROUBLE

Or How to Spot/Stop a Pink Slip Before It Hits Your Desk

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At the 1990 ICMA Annual Conference in Fort Worth, Texas, industrial psychologist Bill Mathis packed in a wary and curious crowd of administrators. Many looked around furtively before entering the packed auditorium. For some, the subject matter seemed as taboo as an NC-17-rated movie. Luckily, it was dark and crowded. Although the topic wasn't as steamy or illicit as that of a late afternoon television show, it drew an equally curious "studio audience," embarrassed that their attendance might appear to be an admission or association with the Affliction or the Day. That affliction, Becoming a Target for a Pink Slip from your elected officials, drew record numbers, whatever their reason for silting in.

In an effort to offer an embarrassment-proof way to learn about the "Seven Symptoms of a Manager in Trouble," *Public Management* offers the following summary of those symptoms, to be read in privacy at your leisure. To find out if you may be likely to get the boot, Dr. Mathis recommends that managers take a look at the following seven symptoms.

1 Unwillingness to Fire or Move a Department Head

In hallways and bathrooms in municipal buildings throughout the country, the amazed tone of voice is the same as public administrators witness incompetent colleagues. "Why doesn't she get rid of him? He'll ruin her career if she doesn't force him to shape up or ship out!"

From the point of view of elected officials, failure to deal with a problem department head is seen as a warning light flashing over that manager's head. That is, when a manager hangs onto a department head who should be fired, the council or governing body will often assume that the manager has abdicated responsibility to correct the problem. The council reasons that the manager has not given the department head the kind of honest feedback necessary to inspire either an improved performance or a resignation. This assumption is understandable when one considers that councilmembers expect *results* when

they complain about a specific problem or person. They figure that if a department head continues to be a problem after they have complained to the manager, then the continued poor performance is the manager's fault. The council reasons that the manager must be waiting for a crisis to occur before taking the appropriate action.

This can be true particularly with new councilmembers, who often come in with high aspirations for improving the local government. In many cases, new councilmembers become appalled once they get to know the organization well enough to observe some management flaws up close. As a result, they often become quite angry that a department has been allowed to get away with lousy management for so long. This type of poor management allows the novice councilmember the political opportunity to "come to the rescue." However, this opportunity comes at a big price for the manager. In fact, such cases cause the council to question the manager's credibility in light of the lack of results in response to repeated complaints about a particular department head. Novice and veteran councilmembers alike will begin to view the manager as unresponsive to their wishes. In the worst cases, this could result in councilmembers turning the firing of a department head into a campaign issue. At this point, the manager should be concerned about his or her own security.

Of course, from the manager's viewpoint, the firing of a department head is often an extremely difficult task. Considerations about seniority, continuity, and loss of potential retirement benefits when the department head has only a short time to go before retiring are just a few of the more common considerations. The long-term department heads inherited from previous administrations are often seen as the keepers of that administration's legacy. Therefore, their firing is frequently interpreted as a slap in the face of the manager's predecessor, sometimes resulting in a backlash or organizational ill will. In the more complicated cases, the manager may have to wrestle with community popularity of some or the more visible department heads, such as

police and fire chiefs. The power and influence of these figures sometimes outweigh those of the manager, making it an extremely difficult battle to take on.

In any case, it is important for the manager to look at the situation from the council's point of view. With that in mind, even if it is not possible to fire the problem department head, it *is* possible to take *some* action that would prove that the council's concerns have been taken seriously. Some examples of such actions would be setting up strict performance standards for regular evaluation. The first evaluation could be done twice, rather than once a year, if necessary. In addition, it is important for the manager to hold all department heads to the same standard of excellence that the manager has set for himself or herself. The tendency of some managers to set lower standards for subordinates than for themselves can backfire through substandard performance and the accompanying political heat.

2 Change in Personal Effectiveness

As in Symptom #1, it is important to look at things through the eyes of the council with Symptom #2. That *is*, think about whether you might be sending some unwitting negative messages to councilmembers in your personal interactions with them. *At all times*, remember that you work and *live* in a fishbowl. The normal ups and downs of life that take their toll on more private citizens are subject to scrutiny of elected bosses, a staff and an entire work force, the news media, and citizens. So while you go through a midlife crisis, a divorce, or a medical problem, remember that the camera, whether mechanical or human, never stops rolling.

If you show wear and tear, *someone* in these audiences will notice. Furthermore, some will even begin to speculate as to what might be ailing you. Some may even go so far as to suggest that you're too distressed to carry out your responsibilities competently. In turn, managers might begin to use uncomplimentary "nicknames" to refer to certain

councilmembers. A loss of enthusiasm and personal effectiveness often results from the personalizing of community problems, another sign the various "audiences" notice.

3 Unwillingness to Read or Adapt to Political Environment

Once some managers begin to pick up momentum in carrying out their agenda, they run the risk of forgetting to check the political weather vane periodically. When managers fail to notice and adapt to political changes, however, they risk getting blown away. One example that can be seen across the country is the move toward a stronger mayor and stronger governing bodies. Often, council members will be elected on what they perceive to be a mandate for some kind of change. In such cases, they will want the manager to transform their campaign promises into reality as soon as possible. Managers who do not adapt to such shifts in focus publicly put themselves at risk. Those who notice this perceived failure to deliver will begin to say that the manager is "in trouble." When a majority of council begins to notice, it naturally begins to consider getting rid of the manager and finding someone who *will* deliver. Some positive steps toward averting such an outcome are to reconfigure your team, even if it means curing yourself of Symptom #1. It's also important to start out with a good orientation with new councilmembers and to set up regular review sessions between manager and council.

4 Becoming a Target for What's Wrong in the Community

When the community begins to see you as the embodiment of one or more of its key problems, *beware*. For example, if your image makes citizens think automatically of the War on Drugs or the War Against Growth, then you have probably become too entangled in the issue, sometimes to the point of being viewed as a puppet for some political faction. So the manager ends up looking like a target for the community's ills. Another clue is

when council members begin to question the manager's financial integrity. For example, they may accuse the manager of spreading funding for a project around in several different budgets, even though this may be legal. Another clue might be allegations of mismanagement, lack of leadership, or failure to support council. When confronted with the latter charge, managers should ask the accusing councilmember(s) what they mean by "support." If the answer is that this member is being treated with less respect or attention than fellow members, such as receiving memos late or not at all, the manager may look as if he or she is playing favorites. It is therefore important not to appear partial or to be viewed as "too political."

5 Power Conflict

When the manager, instead of the council, sets the community's agenda, chances are the manager is afflicted with Symptom #5. This often results in the manager's placing council in a politically uncomfortable position, such as when he or she calls for new taxes, floats a bond measure, or appears to cave in to special interest groups. One of the natural conflicts between elected and appointed officials at all levels is the professional administrators' focus on the long-term needs versus the short-term focus of the elected officials. In the power conflict stage, the manager appears not to hear when the council asks "Can we just get by this year?" When the manager lets this tug-of-war between short- and long-term responsibilities degenerate into a personalized fight, it's time to step back and refocus with a politically realistic perspective.

6 Distancing

Another symptom seen at the personal level is *distancing*, which is marked by the manager's perceived detachment from problems and people. At this stage, the manager is gradually seen as no longer caring about either the organization, the community, or the council. This is the kind of distancing that makes councils nervous. Some signs of this kind of nervousness are the council's raising of doubt,

suspicion, and scrutiny in areas in which they don't normally show an interest. One possible sign of this symptom is when council begins to show doubt about a manager's abilities or motives by asking for a lot of studies or inquiries. As with Symptom #2, it's critical to remember that you are in a fishbowl *at all times*. Because of this intense scrutiny, managers under any kind of personal stress must be careful not to let the effects of this strain show on their public faces.

7 History of Environmental Dishonesty

The last symptom often crops up in cities experiencing a vacuum in power and/or community values. In such environments, councils tend to see their managers as paid professional scapegoats. A ripe breeding ground for this kind of outcome is a council that practices what Dr. Mathis calls "covert communications." This rule means that a council doesn't act on anything publicly until it has already discussed and decided on the issue privately. Such an arrangement often leaves the manager vulnerable to the community's potential negative reaction. Further complicating this vulnerability is the manager's inability to argue publicly with the council. The bottom line result is council's tendency to "shoot the messenger."

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