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Chapter 6: Early Contingency Theories of Effective Leadership

Foreign Auto Shop

Part 1

Alan has been the owner and manager of a small auto repair shop for 7 years. The auto shop has a steady and loyal clientele who appreciate the fact that they receive quick, reliable service at a fair price. Alan employs seven mechanics and two office workers.

Gil and Hans are the two oldest mechanics, and they are the easiest to supervise. When Alan assigns work to them (mostly high-precision, specialist jobs), they do it quickly and hardly ever make a mistake. Bart and Herbie are also skilled mechanics. Bart specializes in repairing motorcycles, and Herbie is a whiz at troubleshooting engine problems. Three younger workers do the jobs that call for lower-level skills, under Alan's more careful guidance. Kirk has a degree in Industrial Arts, but he couldn't get a job in his specialty without moving to another city, and he seems to have resigned himself to auto repair work. LaMont enjoys working on sports cars and is getting to be quite expert at operating the electronic diagnostic machines. Joanie does general mechanical work and does it well.

Alan takes care of customers when they drop off their cars in the morning, then he plans the work schedule and assigns the mechanics to work on particular cars. Most of the work is done by individual mechanics, but occasionally a job requires two mechanics to work together. The work of repairing cars and conducting routine maintenance on

them is well-defined; there are standard procedures and standard times to perform each type of repair task. Mechanics receive feedback about the quality of their work from testing the car and from customers (who will complain if something is not fixed properly). Alan does not spend much time actually directing or supervising the repair work. He leaves the mechanics alone unless they are having a problem and need technical advice. He almost never tells someone to do something in a directive way. Instead, he suggests various ways to deal with a problem, or he shows them how he would have handled it. When not busy with administrative responsibilities, Alan enjoys working alongside his mechanics, where he is available to answer any questions about the work. Alan's style of leadership suits his easygoing personality.

Alan also encourages his employees to participate in making decisions such as what new equipment to purchase or how to improve quality. They know that Alan is sincere in asking for their opinions and is not just doing it as a manipulative strategy to minimize their opposition to decisions that have already been made. Alan's fairness and openness have earned him the continuing respect and trust of his employees.

SOURCE: Adapted from William J. Wasnuth and Leonard Greenhalgh, *Effective Supervision: Developing Your Skills Through Critical Incidents*. Prentice Hall, Copyright © 1979

Part 2

Alan looked anxiously out of his office window. The sky was very dark over the nearby hills, and the storm seemed to be advancing rapidly toward the valley where his auto repair shop was located. Just to be on the safe side, Alan went out and rolled up the windows of the customers' cars in the car park. He noticed the creek was already running high, the result of melting snow during the warm spring days. Before he could get back into the shop, a sudden downpour of huge drops of rain soaked his clothing. Some of the mechanics laughingly teased him for "not having enough sense to come in out of the rain."

After 15 minutes of the pelting rain, Alan realized that this was no ordinary rainstorm. He went out to look at the creek again and found that it had already risen to almost the height of its banks. Alan figured it wouldn't be long before the muddy water would flood the car park and come swirling around the shop doors. He ran back into the shop and announced in a loud voice that the creek was going to flood. He told three of his mechanics to drop everything and start moving cars. The cars that were parked next to the creek needed to be driven, pushed, or towed up to the high ground across the road. Alan told the other mechanics to put the tools away and help move all the boxes of parts and supplies off the floor and into the storage racks in the storeroom and the office. Alan had everybody's attention, but nobody seemed to be moving. If anything the mechanics seemed to be amused.

Kirk strolled over to Alan with a tolerant smile on his face. "Come on, Alan," he said. "There's no sweat. The water's never been more than a few centimeters deep in the parking lot. We've never had any inside . . ." Alan interrupted him, looking him right in the eye, and said in an assertive way, "Listen Kirk, and listen good! You and the rest of the crew are going to do what I say, and you're going to do it now! We can talk later about whether it was a good idea."

This time, the mechanics dropped everything and began preparing for a flash flood. Alan barked instructions as he helped them move everything that could be damaged by water. All of the boxes were off the floor before the first trickle of water came under the door. By the time the water was ankle-deep, all the cars inside the shop had been jacked up and were sitting on cement blocks.

At its peak, the water was 25 centimeters deep in the shop, but by then the rain had stopped and the sun was already shining. The water level began to recede slowly, but it didn't drop below shop-floor level until after 9 p.m. At 10 p.m. the mechanics voluntarily returned to the shop to help with the cleanup, which was not completed until 3 a.m. Alan personally thanked each one and gave them all the next morning off.

The next afternoon, Alan gave an informal "speech" during the coffee break. He gave the mechanics all the credit for avoiding thousands of dollars of property damage. He even went to the trouble of pointing out particular contributions each of them had made. For instance, he thanked LaMont for his quick thinking in throwing the master switch before the water reached the electric outlets. He thanked Kirk for the idea of jacking up all the disabled cars inside the shop. And so on until everyone's contribution, no matter how minor, had been recognized.

At 5 o'clock, everyone left but Gil, the oldest mechanic. He decided to stay and chat with Alan. "You really surprised us yesterday!" Gil told Alan. "We could hardly believe it was you."

"Whaddaya mean?" Alan asked, pretending to be offended. "You sounded like my old drill sergeant!" Gil chuckled. "Usually, you're so mild mannered we forget you're the boss!" "Maybe I'm a little too mild mannered," Alan replied. "When I told you guys to prepare for the flood you all laughed at me."

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