

BERMUDA WORKS

Bus strike shows why it never pays to compromise on accountability

EMPLOYMENT MATTERS

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The Bermuda Government's decision to end the strike last week by compromising on the dismissal of a bus driver reminded me of a time when I purchased a candy bar for my daughter after she began misbehaving in a grocery store.

At the time it seemed that I had made a very good decision. She did not get exactly the candy bar she wanted and the customers witnessing her tantrum were relieved that the screaming stopped. But about one week later, after the same thing happened again, I learned a valuable lesson: never compromise on accountability.

In particular I learned that the benefits of such compromise are always short lived. More importantly, I learned that my daughter's expectations had changed radically in two ways.

First, she no longer expected to be punished for her misbehaviour; on the contrary, she expected it to get what she wanted. Second, she learned that the most effective way to get me to compromise in her favour was to act out in public places where it was the greatest inconvenience to me and others. It just increased the pressure on me to give in to her demands no matter the standards that I had set.

As a management consultant I frequently share that story about my daughter. It is my way of illustrating how so many incidents of employee misconduct are actually the consequence of mismanaging previous misconduct.

So how should management correct problems of recurring misconduct? There is only one way.

Management must declare a new day. This starts with an open and frank admission to employees that misconduct and substandard performance in the past was poorly managed. Management must make crystal clear the standards of job performance and workplace conduct, admitting that these standards may seem unreasonably high because the substandard performance of yesteryear was not properly managed.



Photo by Tarnell Simons

Reaching out: BIU president Chris Furbert makes a call to Minister of Transport Terry Lister prior to meeting members of the BIU at Public Transportation Headquarters after bus drivers went on strike last week in support of a colleague whose employment had been terminated. The worker was later given his job back.

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Last, but not most importantly, management should make certain that there is no doubt about their commitment and resolve to manage conduct and performance properly going forward.

When declaring a new day, I often encourage management to articulate their

approach to employee discipline using the analogy of a hot stove. Just as everyone knows that a hot stove will indiscriminately and immediately burn all that touch it, so too will the employer administer employee discipline promptly, consistently and impersonally. And just as one

who feels progressive amounts of heat as they get closer to touching a stove, a fair and law abiding employer will progressively warn employees who fail to meet expectations prior to disciplining or terminating them.

Once the new day is declared, it's just a matter of keeping the stove on. No more turning it off when an employee complains of unfair dismissal.

The first time someone is held to account after a new day is declared is always particularly helpful for the employer, employee and the union.

First, the employer's expectations are reinforced and the fairness of its employee discipline policy is demonstrated. Second, from his mistake the employee will learn a critically important lesson and go on to work more productively in the future, even if it has to be with a new employer.

And if the employee was unionised, union leaders can use the incident as a powerful example to its members of how the union cannot protect those who fail to heed the warnings given by an employer that has managed them properly. Simply put, accountability helps us all become more productive.

If you are wondering why this sounds so sensible yet so unrealistic in the Bermuda business context, just imagine the challenge I had with my daughter the next time I was in the supermarket. It was nearly ten years ago but I remember it vividly.

Apprehension consumed me as I persevered disciplining my little girl as she screamed bloody murder in front of a huge number of inconvenienced customers. But she never again behaved that way. Those customers were much better off in the long and, most importantly, my relationship with my daughter was not weakened. Standing my ground actually led to less conflict in the future.

Bermuda can end wildcat strikes once and for all. We need to declare a new day and administer some tough love. All it requires is for Government to have faith that enforcing our labour laws will strengthen – not harm – their union brothers and sisters.

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