

Golembiewski, Robert T., Jerry G. Stevenson, and Michael Whitehead). 1997. Cases in Public Management. Fifth Edition. Itaska, IL: FE Peacock Publishers

21

Hail to the New Chief

Bill Pickles has been promoted to Regional Health Officer of the State Health Department, which provides a wide range of medical services to clientele not covered by general healthcare programs. As Regional Health Officer, Bill is in charge of almost 100 employees in a wide range of professions (e.g., nurse practitioners, psychologists, pharmacists, and lab technicians) that serve 10 counties.

During Bill's early efforts to become acquainted with his new job, he discovers that considerable fragmentation and conflict exist within the health department, and this is causing reduced efficiency in service delivery. The department is made up of people from the local area (primarily staff and administrative personnel, but some technicians also) and people recruited from around the nation (primarily doctors, pharmacists, and other professionals from large universities).

Some tension seems to exist between the two groups, as well as a split between older and younger employees of the agency. The older personnel tend to see the department as relying more on local businesses for supplies and service, while the younger employees urge bringing in the most advanced technology from national and international companies. In addition to these conflicts, there is considerable tension between sections in the department. The technicians and lab workers think that the administrative personnel are foolish and "unscientific." The administrators and staff personnel think the technicians are narrow-minded, overly specialized, and ignorant of political realities. One of the older administrators is fond of saying: "There's no room for pure science in public service."

These various conflicts in the department seem to have been exacerbated by Bill's predecessor. Bill learns that the former Regional Health Officer had been ineffectual in dealing with departmental problems and shied away from making decisions. He had been brought in from another state with an impressive record in public health administration, but he quickly alienated many in the department by reorganizing the sections to give more power to his newly appointed staff. He further upset some members of the department by hiring his mother-in-law as an "Executive Assistant to the Regional Health Officer" at a salary higher than most professionals in the department. When employees came to him with problems or complaints, he seemed alternately uninterested or unsympathetic. Occasionally he feigned interest by saying, "I'll take care of that right away," and then never did anything at all. Health Department personnel noticed that this Regional Health Officer was primarily interested in remodeling his home. Whenever a lapse in the conversation occurred, he would start talking about various projects he had undertaken.

Bill realizes that many of the conflicts in the department are due to the inept leadership of his predecessor, but visits from his employees during the first few months of his new position also reveal deeper problems. The first visitor is an elderly member of the staff (Bill Hicks) who grew up in the area and joined the department at 20 years of age. He says:

This here department was much nicer when it was smaller. Back in the old days we were like a family here. We took care of everyone in this area and didn't work too hard. I know I speak for many here when I say that this department was better back then. All these young whippersnappers from the city with fancy degrees from Harvard and the University of Kentucky, they've ruined this department. We oughta get rid of 'em and make this place like it usta be.

Bill's next visitor is a young pharmacist who came from Boston to work for the health department two years ago. He says:

Hi there! My name is James Youngblood. I can't tell you how glad I am to see a new Regional Health Officer here. That old guy, what a jerk! Can you believe it? All he could talk about was remodeling his house! But now we've got a new, dynamic leader and things are really going to take off! I've written down a few ideas for you to consider (he hands you a 350-page typed manuscript) for improving the department. The first thing is to get rid of all those old fogies! What a lot of deadwood we have floating around here! We've got to transfer all of our contracts to IBM and get the latest computers! It's really going to be exciting!

Several other members of the department visit Bill with additional problems, and he asks them about his earlier visitors. Most think Bill Hicks is a nice old fellow, but point out that he has frequent lapses of memory and often is found sleeping under his desk. James Youngblood is considered very talented and dynamic, but he has had affairs with every secretary in the department.

As Bill considers the problem inside his department, two crises occur. First, a memo comes from the State Health Director, saying that the State General Assembly is threatening to cut the Health Department's budget, beginning with the least efficient Regional Offices (such as his). Second, Bill arrives at work the next day to find every secretary (except the former Regional Health Officer's mother-in-law) marching in a picket line protesting for higher wages and a union. All of the other employees (except James Youngblood) are hanging out the windows watching the secretaries march. This strike further cripples the department, just when the State General Assembly is looking for places to cut the budget.