

Navigating performance punishment: Laurel Aisling and Blue Canary Distributing

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ABSTRACT

Blue Canary Distributing is a well-established construction equipment manufacturer in Oklahoma. The company has a long history manufacturing and distributing high-quality construction equipment. Laurel Aisling is an experienced employee who has been with the company for over 17 years. Her longevity and experience have made her a respected figure among her peers. However, Laurel faced a setback when she attempted to secure a new position within the company. Disheartening feedback from the administration suggested a potential form of performance punishment. This case study introduces the challenges of performance punishment, examines workplace mistreatment, discrimination, and bullying through the issues faced by Laurel, and explores potential strategies for navigating this issue. The case details an actual situation, however, the company and employee names have been disguised. This case is appropriate for courses in human resources, ethics, organizational behavior, and supervisory management. Teaching Notes are available from the lead author.

Keywords: performance punishment, workplace mistreatment, workplace discrimination, workplace bullying, negative career consequences for high-performing employees

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INTRODUCTION

Blue Canary Distributing is renowned for its innovative approach to construction equipment manufacturing. Laurel Aisling, a devoted project associate, has been an integral part of the company for 17 years. Her expertise and dedication have contributed significantly to the company's growth, positioning her as a respected member of her team. However, reoccurring setbacks over the years have left Laurel questioning her future in the organization and contemplating her next steps.

Despite her experience and reputation, the last time Laurel attempted to apply for a different position within the company, the administration told her supervisors to “pick another name.” When both her supervisor and then when she heard the response, it raised concerns. Both suspected that Laurel was too valuable in her current role to the administrator—that Laurel was irreplaceable in her currently assigned job. Such attitudes toward employees who are passed over, as well as others who are burdened with so much overload because of their capacity, are examples of what can be defined as performance punishment. Performance punishment, also known as negative career consequences for high-performing employees, can lead to dissatisfaction, reduced motivation, and employee turnover within an organization (Hillier, 2023). Laurel began to feel disillusioned and discontented, which are indications associated with performance punishment.

Performance punishment, in the context of workplace mistreatment, discrimination, and bullying, refers to the use of performance evaluations in a manner that limits career advancement for an individual. It also includes the misuse of performance assessment tools, such as performance reviews, promotions, or work assignments, to unfairly target and penalize an individual within the organization. Studies demonstrate that mistreatment results in reduced psychological and physical health, worsened job attitudes, and diminished performance for both targets and bystanders (Dalal, Sheng 2018; Dhanani, LaPalme 2019; Kawasaki, Shaw 2023; Vranjes, Lyubykh 2021). Even the popular press has taken notice, with Davia Sills of Psychology Today recently stating flatly, “If you’re rewarding the top performers on your team with more work and responsibility, you may be driving them right out the door” (Sills, 2023).

Workplace Mistreatment

Workplace mistreatment refers to any form of negative, unjust, or unfair behavior directed at an employee in a professional setting (Nyberg, 2010). Workplace mistreatment refers to harmful actions that cause physical or psychological damage to an employee, arising from sources both within (such as supervisors or coworkers) and outside the organization (like clients, customers, or patients). It encompasses various forms including threats, harassment, or bullying, which can take shape as incivility, exclusion, conflict, aggression, unwelcome sexual behavior, or abusive supervision.

Workplace Discrimination

Fekedulegn et al., (2019) described workplace discrimination as an employee being subjected to biased performance evaluations, denial of advancements and promotion, and ... based on factors such as race, gender, age, religion, or other protected characteristics. Biased actions can impede an employer's career advancement and sustain an environment of inequity

within the company. Encountering discrimination in the workplace and the ensuing stress have been associated with various adverse consequences for both the organization and the employees (O'Brien et al., 2016). These consequences include diminished satisfaction with one's job, decreased dedication to the organization, impaired work performance, diminished propensity to assist others, and heightened intentions to leave the organization.

There are two forms of workplace discrimination: "formal," which is explicit or overt in nature, and "interpersonal," which is more indirect or subtle (Heble et al., 2002). Within organizational contexts, discrimination can appear either formally, such as in job-related matters, or through interpersonal matters. This interpretation aligns with the differentiation made by Dovidio and Gaertner (1986) between explicit and nuanced discrimination. Formal discrimination pertains to biases in recruitment, advancements, accessibility, and allocation of resources. On the other hand, interpersonal discrimination is more nuanced, encompassing nonverbal, paraverbal, and even certain verbal behaviors inherent in social exchanges.

Workplace Bullying

Walsh et al., (2019) described another term *Workplace Bullying* as a person engaging in long-lasting, widespread, and severe mistreatment of another person. Performance punishment can be a tactic used by workplace bullies to intimidate, undermine, or exert power over a targeted individual. This can involve unjustified criticism, unreasonable work demands, or the withholding of resources necessary for success, all of which can lead to emotional distress, anxiety, and a toxic work environment for the affected employee. Hollis (2012) conducted a study that showed people who feel bullied are less committed to their organization and are considering resignation.

BACKGROUND

Blue Canary Distributing is widely known for its dedication to quality manufacturing and skilled workforce. Among the 700 employees, Laurel has been a valued team member for over a decade. Her commitment and competence have earned her the respect of her colleagues and supervisors. She has received numerous commendations for her contributions as an associate in the project management department, consistently exceeding performance expectations. Over the years, she had continuously applied for various positions such as marketing consultant, content specialist, and purchasing assistant in the marketing and purchasing departments to advance her career. Yet, time and time again, she was passed over for promotions.

Recently, Blue Canary Distributing opened a new position, operations coordinator, in the planning and control department. Laurel was eager to apply for the transfer as she knew she was the most qualified employee for the position. She had actually been assigned part-time to help the recently retired coordinator over the past five years. She informed the supervisors in the planning and control department of her interest in the position and asked to be considered for what would be a career and compensation advancement. The supervisors were enthusiastic about her interest in the role. The following day the three supervisors went to the Vice President with her name and were immediately told to "pick another name."

Jack Malachi, Laurel's co-worker with six years of experience at Blue Canary Distributing, was named to the new position. With limited industry-specific knowledge and minimal formal training, Jack lacked the practical skills and educational background typically

expected for the position he had been appointed. Despite his eagerness to learn, Jack's limited training and educational background hindered his ability to contribute meaningfully to the planning and control process leading to him relying heavily on Laurel.

Laurel continued to do the necessary tasks to keep the planning and control process functioning. Laurel's years of experience and in-depth understanding of the company's operations positioned her as a valuable source of knowledge and mentorship to Jack. Jack utilized Laurel as though she was the operations coordinator. Laurel felt punished for knowing the ins and outs of the planning and control process. Ultimately, she became the work horse without the title in addition to her role as an associate in the project department.

Despite her own disappointment and feeling undervalued following yet another rejection, Laurel continued to demonstrate professionalism and dedication in assisting Jack for months. She patiently imparted knowledge, provided guidance on complex procedures, and offered insights into the subtle facets of the role. Her willingness to support Jack in his endeavors to master the complexities of the job highlighted her commitment to the success of the team, demonstrated her loyalty to the company, and showcased her impeccable leadership and mentoring skills.

THE DILEMMA

Sometimes performance punishment is subtle. Sometimes it is patently obvious. The consistent dismissals of Laurel's aspirations for new positions have left her feeling undervalued and overlooked. Despite her 17 years of service, she began to consider her future with Blue Canary Distributing. Perhaps, her professional development within the company had reached its limit. Though she remained a loyal employee and consciously tried to avoid personal bitterness, Laurel could not help but note the unjust treatment. She speculated whether it could possibly stem from some unknown, undisclosed internal discord between herself and the Vice President.

Ultimately, Laurel felt as though she experienced performance punishment. The workplace mistreatment, discrimination, and bullying that occurred was impossible to ignore. From rejection and disillusionment to uncertainty about her future growth, Laurel struggled with disillusionment and a decline in her morale, negatively affecting her productivity and enthusiasm for her current role. With her aspirations crushed, she faced uncertainty regarding her potential for career advancement within the company. While maintaining her composure and commitment to her responsibilities within the company, Laurel must prioritize addressing the issue of performance punishment in a proactive and constructive manner.

What steps should she take to navigate and resolve the situation effectively? How can Laurel formulate a thoughtful and strategic response to the performance punishment she has faced? What steps should Laurel take to navigate and resolve the situation effectively? Has Blue Cannery practiced bias and unethical behavior? Is Laurel a victim of performance punishment? Should she file a grievance or contact the EEOC? Should she explore potential new opportunities elsewhere?

CONCLUSION

Performance punishment takes many forms. Some face a failure to advance because of supervisors and administrators who have no plans for succession for a valued employee they fear is irreplaceable within their current role. As a result, that employee is effectively punished. Other

employees can be bullied and mistreated. Others face outright discrimination, and some are taken advantage of with extra assignments and long hours and added responsibilities not commensurate with their role or remuneration.

In the case of Laurel and the Blue Cannery Distributing Company, Laurel was effectively being punished for being an excellent employee. Eventually, Laurel began taking night courses at a university, completed her MBA and another organization recruited her as a director in their training and development program. Blue Cannery now hires Laurel on an annual basis as a paid consultant (with her current employer's blessing).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is Blue Canary Distributing practicing bias and unethical behavior?
2. Did Blue Canary Distributing perform performance punishment?
3. Was Laurel a victim of performance punishment?
4. Should Laurel file a grievance or contact the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and file a charge of discrimination?
5. Should Laurel explore opportunities with other companies that recognize her potential?
6. After reading the conclusion and knowing Laurel left the company, what are the lessons that Blue Cannery should apply to their own organization?



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