THE CASE OF AN OVERACHIEVER, OR THE PERILS OF BEING TOO COMPETENT

Located in Tennessee, in the shadow of a fast-growing city, the historic town of Duckettville was experiencing steady population growth while trying to maintain its classic Southern charm. That charm was one of the reasons Meredith, the assistant manager of the Duckettville Branch Library, had moved to town. After having lived, worked, and studied in New England, Meredith jumped at the opportunity to experience life in the southern United States. Twelve months later, that excitement had faded, and she wondered why she remained.

In truth, Meredith had been a little bit surprised when she was offered the assistant manager position. Although her interview with Pam, the branch manager, went well, Meredith thought she didn’t have the experience necessary to get the job. Yet Pam offered her the position, explaining that she had been impressed by Meredith's hardworking, dependable, and creative attitude. If only Meredith had known that these words of praise were warning signs.

The first couple of months were wonderful for Meredith. The previous assistant manager had transferred within the department and was glad to help Meredith out until she got comfortable with her new surroundings. The staff of the library was helpful and polite. The patrons were eager to meet her and find out about her background. Her primary duty was the management of the part-time, student, and volunteer staffs. She was responsible for scheduling shifts, planning meetings, overseeing work assignments, and handling the payroll for those workers. These tasks kept her busy, but she enjoyed getting to know her staff and facilitating their work.

As time went by, Meredith became more and more involved with the various departments of Duckettville Branch Library. She was asked to learn how each different procedure was executed and to occasionally step in and cover shifts when employees were sick or on vacation. Whenever employees had questions or needed help, they asked Meredith. Soon Meredith was regularly working in other parts of the library. Even when she was out of the building, she’d get at least one call from a library worker asking about a particular policy or how to perform a specific job duty.

A couple of months after Meredith’s arrival, Pam called her into the office. Pam had noticed that most of the full-time staff had been looking to Meredith for guidance. Pam said she thought Meredith was doing
an excellent job informally managing them—such a good job, in fact, that she was appointing Meredith their official manager.

Despite Pam’s kudos, Meredith suspected that the real reason behind the change was the ongoing conflict between Pam and the library employees. Few, if any, of the full-time staffers enjoyed working for Pam. Meredith had observed that most employees spoke negatively about Pam; some didn't even speak to the branch manager, nor she to them.

As the weeks passed, Meredith also became well known to the library’s patrons. Having seen employees go to Meredith whenever they had a question they could not answer, the patrons began bringing their queries and concerns to her directly. And since Meredith's office was just off the library’s main entrance hall, people would often drop in to speak with her. She loved getting to know the patrons, but the steady stream of customer interaction was taking up more and more of her time.

While Meredith was taking on increasing responsibility, Pam seemed to be doing less and less. Often Pam would disappear into her office instead of interacting with the public or the staff. She would usually say that she was working on the budget (an annual proposal, separate from the daily reconciliation of expenses that was handled by the office staff) or the brochure (a twice-yearly publication that listed upcoming library programs and events). Pam also handled the upkeep of the building. This consisted of calling in maintenance requests to the county public works department; once the work was scheduled, the job of actually coordinating the work fell to Meredith.

After nine months Meredith started thinking about her job satisfaction. Although she enjoyed the people, the mission, and the atmosphere of Duckettville Branch Library, she could not say that she enjoyed her job. She was constantly rushing to get her work done and never felt fully caught up. She had been willing to help wherever she could, but burnout was beginning to set in. Meredith also felt the beginnings of resentment towards Pam, who seemed to have a much lighter workload than she did.

Meredith had told Pam she was beginning to feel overburdened, and Pam made some efforts to ease the situation. For example, she posted a memo stating that on days when Meredith was not at the library, staffers should come to Pam for assistance as needed. Some staffers did follow this directive. Usually, though, Pam would then call Meredith, claiming ignorance of how to handle a specific situation, so that
Meredith wound up calling the employee herself. Other staff members simply continued calling Meredith directly. At some point, without anyone noticing, the memo was taken down.

Meredith had also mentioned to Pam that completing the payroll for all library employees was very time-consuming. Pam offered to help by taking on some of the duties associated with payroll. Unfortunately, Pam often made mistakes that Meredith would have to catch before the payroll was sent to the county office. After a couple of mishaps, Meredith offered to resume handling all the payroll duties herself.

Though she had come into the job full of excitement and vigor, Melanie now felt Pam had taken advantage of her. She knew she could not continue to work under these circumstances, but had no idea how to make changes (or even what changes she should try to make). She knew she could simply leave the job, but Meredith wanted to resolve the situation; she felt it was unfair to leave the situation as it was, a trap for the next industrious assistant manager who came along.

What policies would you recommend the library adopt to keep Pam from transferring so many duties to Meredith? What do you think are Pam’s motives in assigning so much work to Meredith? If you were Meredith, what would you do?

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