YOUR RELIGION OR YOUR JOB

Lowder University is a private university with an enrollment of 28,000 students. Its library contains more than 1.4 million volumes and employs a staff of 225. Two months ago the library’s director retired, however, and the university is currently searching for a replacement. There are three deputy directors: one for public services, one for technical services, and one for automation. Forty seven year old Rosemary Shahn had the most seniority, having worked as a deputy director for 11 years, and was therefore appointed interim acting director. Easygoing and placid, Shahn was appreciated throughout the library for her administrative ability and good judgment.

She needed those qualities now as she pondered this week’s personnel problem.

On Friday afternoon, Simon Leffler had presented himself unexpectedly at Shahn's door. Leffler, a library programmer, was a subordinate three steps removed from her—Everett Coulter was the head of database services and Lois Prager was the deputy director for library automation. Shahn thought it was odd he would ask to speak with her, but she bade him enter.

"I'm in a work-related predicament," Leffler had said with a smile, “and I wonder if I might discuss it with you. I've spoken to Everett and Lois, and you're the next person in line!"

Shahn had looked at him with confusion. "I'm the next in line? This must be important." She waved him into her office.

Leffler entered but did not sit down. He stood in front of her desk, gripping the back of a chair. "I appreciate this very much," he faltered. "I've been at the library exactly four months, three weeks, four days, and five hours, and"—glancing at his watch—"37 minutes!"

Shahn looked at him with a faint smile. Leffler was one of two professional programmers in database services. It was true that he had not been there long enough to have had his formal appraisal at the end of the six-month probationary period, or she would know a bit more about him. He was a man of 28, tall and clean, with a mop of dark brown hair and a thick brown beard concealing his chin and upper lip. He dressed inconspicuously. His manner was pleasant and cordial. She assumed, with no indication otherwise from either Prager or Coulter, that he and his work were satisfactory.
Leffler went on. "About a month ago, due to my fiancée's influence, I left the Baptist Church and became a Catholic. Next weekend I would like to attend a cursillo—a sort of religious retreat—with my fiancée and members of her family and our parish. The problem is, the event starts on Thursday evening and goes to Sunday evening, and it’s not the sort of thing you can drop in on. It's a total commitment for the entire time. And I’d need to leave on Thursday afternoon, because it's being held at a Christian Formation Center 120 miles from here. All in all, I’d be out of the office for half of Thursday and all of Friday."

He paused to take a breath. “On Wednesday I went to Everett and asked him if I could take that day and a half as an unpaid leave of absence. He said he thought leaves of absence weren’t allowed until a person had been working here six months. We checked the policy manual and he's right; the manual states that employees can't have any vacation or time off, paid or unpaid, until they've been on the staff six months. So he said he'd have to refuse my request. He said he couldn't make an exception in my case because it would establish a precedent. He was sure that over the years other people had wanted time off before they had been here six months, and their requests had been turned down."

Shahn could see what was coming.

"I went to Lois yesterday and asked her if she'd grant me the time off,” he continued. “There won't be another opportunity like this for a whole year. I told her this is so important to me that unless the leave is granted I'll have to resign as of next Wednesday. I don't want to resign. I like my job. I'm doing exactly what I specialized in during library school."

"What did Lois say?"

"That she agreed with Everett, and that the policy had to be obeyed. That’s when I told her I'd have to resign next Wednesday. She said that if that was the way I wanted to play it, she'd have to accept my resignation. I told her that by my calculations I am only about three weeks shy of six months’ service. That didn't sway her. She repeated some of Everett's arguments, but then she added something that really disturbs me. She said it looked to her like a case of having to choose between my religion and my job, that that's what this situation boils down to.”
“I decided to try another tack. I reminded her that employees who haven't yet been with the library six months are allowed time off if there’s a death in the immediate family or in case of illness. I told her that I could have lied and said my sister died, or I could have said on Thursday morning that I felt ghastly ill and needed to go home. I could have stayed out Friday and nobody would have suspected anything. I asked her if there was no reward for being honest. You know what she said to this?"

"What?"

"That I'd get my reward in that great library in the sky. I think that's a terrible thing for a deputy director to say. Don't you?"

There was a moment's awkwardness. This was the sort of remark for which Prager was famous. A 44 year old woman with nine years as a deputy director, she had an authoritative manner and tended to say fearlessly what she was thinking, a habit that occasionally got her into trouble. Notwithstanding her uncompromising, determined exterior, Prager was a good-natured, energetic, and charitable person who enjoyed wide travel, the world of arts and letters, professional leadership and participation in a dozen library associations, and an existence rich with diverse experience. As the only other in-house candidate, she was said to have the inside track on the director position.

Under the circumstances, Shahn found it difficult to reply. She thought it better to say nothing, hoping Leffler would continue.

"I'm asking you, Rosemary, as the next in line, to please grant me this day and a half leave."

Still taking it all in, Shahn shook her head reflectively. "I can't give you an answer today, Simon," she said. “One of us will be in touch with you sometime Monday."

Now it was Sunday and she felt no closer to a decision. "What do I do about this one?" she asked herself.

*Adapted from a case written by Dr. A. J. Anderson, Professor Emeritus, GSLIS, Simmons College*