

CASE STUDY: LA BOULANGERIE DU VILLAGE

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Abstract:

Taking place in a region of the province of Québec, Canada, the case presents a major change situation due to the departure of a key employee of a family business in the bread industry. The measures adopted within the change, which were appropriate and meant to improve the work conditions for the employees who decided to stay, proved to be difficult to apply and having undeniable negative consequences upon the organizational climate and the employees' satisfaction at work. Addressing to management students, the case places them in the role of the change management expert who should propose solutions in order to solve the problematic situation.

Key words: bread industry, organizational change, organizational climate, employees' satisfaction at work, change management expert

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The industry

The bread and cake industry has always been seen from a rather artisanal perspective, yet with the technological progress we know today, things have really changed. Now it is possible to produce bread on a large scale and still provide quality and freshness. In the province of Quebec, Canada, although professional bakery training is available, the persons hired to do this job often benefit from work-based learning. The profession is thus acquired « on the job », which requires time and patience from the company trainer, especially when it comes to the area outside the big cities, as the availability of labour force is much more reduced here.

Since the quality resources are very rare on the market, it is difficult for the companies in these areas to hire young or experienced bakers, which makes their operations very complicated. In this field of activity, several causes can explain this problem, especially the work schedule, often during the night or in the weekends, as well as the salaries which are at a quite low level. The work premises are often narrow and the bakers must deal with heavy work tasks. These work conditions leave very little room to a quality personal life.

Bread making requires a lot of complex stages before obtaining the final product and this is the reason why the baker must correctly manage his team in order to obtain quality bread. In addition to this, the baker must keep in line with his clients' consumption tendencies and organize his work in an efficient manner.

Unfortunately, as far as the manpower in Quebec is concerned, the candidates who possess the necessary skills to hold the job of a baker and pastry cook are very rare. It is not unusual for the companies operating in this area to recruit personnel from abroad or even train its own baker, since this profession is not very popular in Quebec.

To La Boulangerie du village

La Boulangerie du village, situated in a small municipality in the southern-eastern part of Abitibi-Témiscamingue, in Quebec, does not constitute an exception to the rule. Since its main competitor has closed his business, the company had a hard time trying to keep up with the increasing demand of the clients in the area. Hiring and selecting new candidates are

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difficult tasks considering the limited recruiting pool. During the latest years, the high rate of the personnel migration from one workplace to another has a negative effect upon the dynamic and harms the work climate. As a matter of fact, it is quite difficult to maintain and keep the employees who have developed skills within the company. The company *Boulangerie du village* counts 31 employees. The majority of them are over 40. They often have a low level of qualification and must be trained at work. On the contrary, we notice that over generations, the management, the executives and the bakers are increasingly trained. The employees are not unionized. Men represent 55% and women 45% of the manpower.

The manufacturing process

The company is semi-industrial; the work is done in part using specialized machines, the rest is made manually. The recipes for every type of bread are made by the head baker. This requires a very high level of expertise so as to be aware of the different impact the ingredients may have on the bread quality, since it varies every day according to temperature, humidity, the various kinds of flour quality and the seasons. Afterwards, the bakers handle the machines which knead and divide the bread. The baker recovers these breads at the end of the production line and places them in carts for the test room. Once they are prepared, the oven employers place them manually into the oven and take them out at the end of the baking process, then places them in a cart. Afterwards the packing employees prepare the products so as they can be sold.

A departure which hurts...

With the mine effervescence which has spread all over the area, several employees are tempted by the astronomical salaries which are offered within this industry. Obviously, as the majority of the companies, this one is incapable of offering salaries or work conditions similar to the standard provided by the giant multinational companies.

Thus, one winter evening, the inevitable occurs and the head baker Mr. Ghislain Girard informs the owner Mr. Daniel Dery that he is going to leave his current job next summer to go work in the mines. This was a major loss for the company since Mr. Dery had gathered over 20 years of experience and he was the most skilful of the three bakers. The reasons why he chose to leave his job were due to the work schedule which was becoming increasingly unbearable as well as to the pressure caused by the growth of the demand. Moreover, he was always complaining about having to train new work colleagues who completely lacked of experience in most of the cases.

Time to question

After this announcement made at the beginning of the year, the managers started analyzing their staff management. They wanted to find a solution in order to meet their clients' requirements and a method to become better organized, considering the unfavourable circumstances. The perspectives did not seem to be very bright once summer arrived, as it was the busiest time of the year. Especially that the company, since January until June, has not managed to find a satisfactory internal solution to replace the head baker. In fact, the latter had actually received a job invitation from his new employer and had already set with the management staff a departure date, which was in a few days.

A few days later...

The departure of the head baker had the effect of an actual shock wave within the company, mainly due to the loss of a major link in the production chain. The management notices that the departure of its head baker is a significant loss as regards the knowledge transfer. As a matter of fact, the only solution in that situation was to appoint a new head baker, but the respective employee had been promoted to this position too quickly and he was not prepared yet to carry out all the job tasks. The group of employees was disorganized because the new leader was not capable of guiding them, besides executing his own tasks.

This situation required an additional effort from the other employees since they always had to support their colleague. The lack of qualifications had as an effect many production faults. The bread quality was affected, many orders were delivered late to the clients, who clearly expressed their discontentment.

Weeks have passed and the situation did not improve, the tension was growing to the point that certain employees decide to follow the head baker and leave their jobs. It was the case of the packer Martine Lapointe, who did not want to work during the night all the time. She used to complain about being incapable of reconciling work and family life considering the work schedule and she also said that her former employer used to offer her better conditions. As for Luc Tremblay, an oven employer for 1 year, he quitted the job at the same moment for approximately the same reasons, but he added: «It's really the work climate, which has become unbearable, that makes me want to leave this job ».

Looking for solutions...

One morning, being aware of the employees' complaints and recriminations concerning the work schedule, the Human Resources Manager (HRM), Mrs. Carole Camirand, suggested to the management to carry out a complete reorganization of the work schedule, by replacing the evening and night work with day and evening production. This change could reduce the employers' complaints about working at night and neglecting their personal life. Although the logic of the night shifts was to maximize the freshness of the products, after consulting expert bakers, Mrs. Camirand sustained that a few extra hours could not make a big difference.

Being somehow taken by surprise by this suggestion, the management tried to understand why everything worked so well during the last 60 years and, all of a sudden, such a change proved to be necessary. Mrs. Camirand explained that times have changed and reconciling family life, work and leisure represented an important principle of the new generation, and this was the neuralgic point that pushed everybody to leave their jobs within the company.

Lacking solutions, the management team gave its approval to the HRM to proceed with the shift revision. According to the management, this change could bring a certain degree of stability to the company since, besides strengthening the production control, it could compensate for the lack of competence of the employees, increase the productivity and improve the work climate.

A little bit of planning...

Mrs. Camirand started by asking the opinions of her key staff, respectively the remaining bakers, Mr. Hugo Hachez and Mr. Yan Iberville. Somehow stunned by the news, they said they had no other option than accept this if they wanted to regain the level of efficiency they used to have. The day when the decision concerning the shift revision was taken, the management team and the HRM worked until the next morning to set up the new schedule and the new work teams. Obviously the selection was made according to the employers' length of service and individual skills.

And finally at the end of the week the management displayed on the notice-board the structure of the new work teams and, of course, the new schedule. It is obviously that the change could not be made entirely smoothly since the rumour about the shift revision had already spread during the last few days and several employers were already hoping they would be assigned the day shift. Unfortunately, a few of them were quite shocked to see that they were going to work in the evening shift.

A lot of protests and uncertainties...

Besides the shift and work team revision, the management has also announced orally that it was going to proceed to an enlargement of the employers' tasks. This measure was taken with the aim of limiting the waste of time, but especially to give a sense of responsibility to all the employees regarding the quality of the products and the maintenance

of an appropriate production rate. Among the enlarged tasks, there were household tasks to perform during the bread baking, the machine maintenance and the preparation of the ingredients. A few employees protested against the addition of these tasks, for example Marc-Antoine Gravel, a packing employee for over 3 years who, in order to express his disapproval, decided to entirely ignore the new tasks. Mr. Gravel stated loud and clear « If they thought I would start doing the household, they are entirely mistaken, after all I'm not a servant...». As a matter of fact, several colleagues complained about this, but the management did not take any measure as they thought it was a passing reaction and that they would finally accept the situation.

The change had been presented as a test for a certain period of time, which ended up by creating a lot of uncertainty to the employers since they believed they had to adapt once again if the scenario proved to be unsuccessful. Several employees sustained it was a major change in their routine and that they refused to go through a similar situation once again. Many conflicts continued to occur, mainly regarding the tasks which had to be fulfilled, and several employees used to get involved in vivid arguments about who had to perform a certain task.

A few weeks later...

Three weeks have passed since the work schedule revision and unfortunately things did not seem to improve; the work atmosphere is very strained and the employees quit their jobs one after the other. Yet, the management team believed they had reached the sore point by identifying the cause which made the employees leave et were convinced that, by improving the work schedule, it was going to be easier to draw work force rather than to keep their old employees.

With the terrible result and a lot of questions pending, the owner often considers closing his business. Yet, he has heard people talking about a group of experts specialized in business rehabilitation with a good reputation in the field. Mr. Dery does not exclude the possibility of consulting them, yet he is aware of the fact that this may be his last chance.

Case questions:

1. Can you identify the triggering element and the nature of the change?
2. How did the change take place? (Analysis according to the model of Collettere *et al.* 2013).
3. Identify the change actors. By relying on the text, please describe the change resistance manifested by the recipients?
4. Let's suppose that you are a member of a group of human resources change consultants which was asked to find solutions for implementing such a change within the company la Boulangerie du village. Which would be your recommendations regarding this aspect?

References:

1. Collettere, P., Lauzier, M., Schneider, R. (2013). Le pilotage du changement. *Presses de l'Université du Québec*¹.

¹ The authors can provide a model of Collettere *et al.* (2013) on demand.