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Purchasing bullies

Don't let purchasing or other ancillary departments run your company.



I had a purchasing clerk try to make her job easier at the expense of the entire engineering department. I saw this back in 1988 when I consulted to KLA instruments, a company that made semiconductor machinery. The engineers were astonished to receive a letter from a purchasing clerk, demanding that we fill out requisitions to the exact specification of some huge document she created the week previously.

Now, most of the people in engineering were scientists who even back then had 6-figure salaries. The purpose of the "purchasing guidelines" she wrote where to save the time of a low-paid support person, at the expense of the technical people who were in a mad rush trying to create new products.

The clerk was a bully that did not see herself working for the scientists, but rather, that they should all work for her, and toe the line while they were at it.

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MEMO

TO: ALL ATS STAFF
 FROM: LORRELI [REDACTED] /MRO BUYER
 SUBJECT: PURCHASING GUIDELINES

The memo and guideline given to you last week was not a "WHIM". It was put together after careful attention and considerable thought on my part and several other Engineering, Manufacturing, and Purchasing supervisors. It has become apparent (since I continued to receive [sic] incomplete purchasing reqs) that this guideline was largely ignored, and or misunderstood."

The text of the letter for 1988:

"The memo and guideline given to you last week was not a "WHIM". It was put together after careful consideration and considerable thought on my part and several other Engineering, Manufacturing, and Purchasing supervisors. It has become apparent (since I continued to receive [sic] incomplete purchasing reqs) that this guideline was largely ignored, and or misunderstood."

"If you do not understand the guidelines, please see me, and I will be glad to help with any questions you may have."

"If you haven't read it, please take the 5-10 minutes it would take to do so."

"In the future, incomplete requisitions will be returned before sourcing is even attempted. So if you don't understand something, please see me."

This purchasing clerk had a bully personality, and I think that comes out in the snippy tone of the letter, which I have saved for 30 years, as a treasure of corporate dysfunction. I will give her this, at least she had the honesty to be a

straight-up bully. That is far preferable to the passive-aggressive bully, who is harder to check. In this instance all the tech people went to the big boss and said this was crazy-- they thought that the purchasing people where there to find the exact company and part number to use and to make out a purchase order. This person wanted a requisition filled out to such detail, all she had to do was transfer the information to a purchase order.

That raises the questions as to what the purchasing department was for. Why not just have the engineers fill out the PO and get it signed off? We noted this clerk loved to get "face time" with the bosses for those signatories, where the tech people had work to do and would have hated it.

Decades later I ran into a passive-aggressive version of this clerk. This fellow was the "lab manager" of a semiconductor company. This meant he was like any other technician, only he had to replenish lab supplies and send equipment out for calibration.

As I walked by his bench, I said "Hey Bob, order some SMA cables." He swung into action. Not action to get me some cables, but action to slough off the work and make clear I was his subordinate, despite being an engineer.

"How long?" he called out. "Oh, I don't know, three feet," I replied. I just figured that we should have a whole selection anyway. "What company?" he asked. "I don't know, just get them from Digi-Key, I don't care who makes them." They he asked about gold finish and other key questions he knew I would not be able to answer. That allowed his his passive-aggressive master-stroke. He handed me the purchase form, told me to "just fill it out," and went to prowl the offices to get face time with the real bosses. Now I was doing his job, great.