

FACING THE CHALLENGE

CAUGHT BETWEEN HR AND DIFFICULT WORKERS

Ted Rogers Leadership Centre

You are an assistant food and beverage manager at a large Toronto hotel. In this role, you have responsibility for the property's "fast food" outlet, which, from the hours of 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. every week day, provides breakfasts to commuters and hotel guests. As described by your manager, the outlet's staff are long-serving, unionized employees who are unlikely to move up. When you started in your position, you met individually with each of the staff and asked what their expectations were of you. Everyone one of them said they had seen "up-and-comers" like you come and go and that they were a close-knit team who take care of each other. All they want from you, they say, is for you to secure their requested vacation times, and make sure the bakery and others in the hotel give them the support they need when they need it. Three months into your role not much has changed in terms of their attitude toward you.

At this time, Luisa, a server, returns to work after an extended sick leave, about which HR can provide few details due to confidentiality issues, although you are told that she needs to return to work because she cannot get further medical clearance to stay out on disability leave. Luisa is the single parent to five children.

Two weeks after Luisa returns to work, she starts to be verbally abusive to the staff in the kitchen, a clear violation of the code of conduct. When you approach the kitchen staff to ask about the abusive behaviour you witness, they shrug and say, "It's Luisa, being Luisa. She is probably off her meds. We will take care of her. Butt out!"

You seek advice from HR, who say you must begin to write her up, so action can be taken to get her off site permanently, before something bad happens. You know HR's recommendations could mean Luisa ends up with no support for her or her children. Empathetic to her situation and wanting to work with the team, you provide Luisa with a verbal, rather than a written warning, telling her that her abusive behaviour needs to stop or you will take disciplinary action which may ultimately mean suspension without pay or firing for just cause. You also offer support to her, if she will confide her needs. She rejects you.

Luisa's abuse goes unabated and kitchen staff continue to say, "If you don't want us all to escalate this somehow, butt out!" HR is calling wanting a copy of the written warning and to discuss what your next steps need to be. You now understand you are in a tough position having declined to follow HR directives and been unsuccessful in building relationships. How do you fix this and what recommendations can you make to minimize the damage?

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The Twist

As you are debating your options, Luisa cuts one of the cooks with a butcher knife. The kitchen staff go to HR with their union rep to claim that you and the hotel failed to take the steps necessary to either deal appropriately with mental illness or to protect the staff.

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