

A \$5,000 Anonymous Phone Call

C. Kenneth Meyer, Lance J. Noe, and Jeffrey A. Geerts

Jim Johnson began work with the Health Facilities Program in December and after an orientation period became one of five environmental health sanitarians whose responsibility was to survey licensed medical facilities within the state to determine their compliance with licensure, Medicare, and other regulations. He was also responsible for providing part-time consultation to hospitals and nursing homes. Each survey team consisted of a registered nurse and an environmental sanitarian. The nurses were mostly mature, gray-haired women, while the sanitarians, although relatively young, tended to appear straitlaced and serious. Johnson, on the other hand, had curly brown hair that almost touched his shoulders and he wore faded blue jeans and sandals.

Johnson's supervisor was Tom Blake. "I'm a little concerned about Jim's effectiveness as a surveyor-consultant," he said to Frances Maner, his administrative assistant. "I'm afraid many of the people he will be working with will classify him as a worthless bum because of his casual way of dressing."

"But, Tom," countered Maner, "you know he was the most-qualified applicant we interviewed. We both agreed he was intelligent and that there was a great deal of promise hidden under his unorthodox appearance."

"I know," Blake said, "but he doesn't dress professionally!"

Johnson learned quickly and soon showed ample confidence and poise. He was fully capable of performing surveys after he had been on the job three months and showed potential for being a good consultant. Six months after being hired he attended a university for an intense, one-month specialized training course required of all health facilities personnel conducting surveys under the Medicare and Medicaid programs. When Johnson returned, Blake noticed a marked improvement in his written reports and felt certain his survey activities would also show an improvement. After accompanying Johnson on two surveys, Blake decided he was doing as well as, or better than, any other sanitarian under his supervision.

One morning, while Blake was expressing his satisfaction in Johnson's work to Maner, she reminded him of his earlier reservations. "I know," he confessed, "but Jim has really proven himself, and now he has my full confidence."

"I think Jim will be the best sanitarian on our staff in a few years," Maner agreed. "Just wait and see."

A year after Johnson had been in the hospital and nursing-home program, Blake was called into the program director's office. Larry Dandurand, the program director, and Ralph Andrews, the chief inspector, were there, both looking upset.

"I received an interesting, although anonymous, phone call yesterday that I think deserves our attention," Andrews said. "It concerns one of the staff members, Jim Johnson."

Johnson was stationed in a district office in the eastern part of the state, sharing it with two other Health Department staff members, neither of whom was in the same program. Andrews said that the caller complained of all three persons engaging in horseplay while in the office, although this was not often since they were seldom there between 8 A.m. and 5 P.m. Andrews said that the caller phoned because he thought the central office should know about it.

"I tried to explain that because our staff was involved in survey activities they had to spend quite a bit of time away from the office," Andrews said. "The caller was quite persistent, insisting there was 'more productive work done by the inhabitants of a cemetery than done by the Health Department employees.'" Andrews said the caller ended the conversation with an accusation that Johnson was the worst offender and that he also was associating with undesirable persons, including drug users.

Blake proposed that the episode be ignored since the caller had refused to identify himself, but Dandurand made it clear that he had no intention of letting the matter drop and, since Blake was Johnson's supervisor, it was his responsibility to gather the relevant facts. Andrews suggested that Blake make discreet inquiries to substantiate the information given in the phone call. The idea of going behind Johnson's back to determine the accuracy of the phone call was repugnant to Blake. "Suppose I talk to Jim and ask him pointblank if what the caller said is true?" Blake asked.

"Fine," said Dandurand, "but let's get this thing cleared up right away."

After returning to his office, Blake tried to clarify the whole situation in his mind. He knew that Johnson did not spend any more time in his office than necessary. In fact, he recalled many unsuccessful attempts to reach him during scheduled office hours. When he had talked to Johnson about his absence from the office, Johnson admitted that he had some "problems" in "disciplining" himself to observe normal office hours. Realizing that he was very young to be placed in a field office without any direct supervision, Blake chalked up the irregular office hours as the price the program had to pay for running a decentralized operation. Besides, Johnson was getting the job done and that was the important thing. But Blake was upset that one of his sanitarians had been criticized by an anonymous phone caller.

The following week Blake visited Johnson at his office and related the whole story to him. "As far as I'm concerned your work is excellent and that anonymous phone call is of no consequence as far as your performance is concerned," Blake explained. He made it clear, however, that the program director was upset over the whole matter and that, as a state employee, Johnson would be closely scrutinized by the public.

Then Johnson admitted that earlier he had had problems keeping office hours but that in the past two months he had really tried to be in the office when not doing surveys. Blake knew this was true, since he telephoned all of the sanitarians at least once a week and during this period Johnson had always been there. Johnson said also that he did have two cousins who had been convicted of using drugs and that he saw both of them frequently. Johnson declared, "If the state is going to dictate who my friends have to be or the way I have to look, they can take this job and shove it."

"Jim, I assure you nobody in our office is trying to choose your friends," Blake said. "Whom you associate with is none of the state's business. What I really want to do is forget that phone call completely, but I did want you to know about the director's reaction, since it may have a bearing on your advancement potential in the Health Facilities Program." Blake looked Johnson straight in the eye and said, "As far as your personal appearance is concerned, it's a fact of life that external appearance affects the public's opinion about the quality of the work we do. Success is not always measured in terms of hard work and productivity."

At the end of the conference, Blake felt that Johnson had accepted the discussion constructively. But two months later Johnson resigned. Blake telephoned him to find out the specific reasons for this resignation. He learned that Johnson was not leaving state government for a larger salary and, in fact, had no other job lined up.

Johnson explained, "I just wanted to try doing something other than working for the state, and I guess I should make the change now, while I'm still young."

Blake asked him if the anonymous call had anything to do with his resignation. Johnson said that it had helped him make the decision but was not a primary reason. Blake urged Johnson to change his mind and stay with the program, but after a long discussion he felt that Johnson's mind was made up and the resignation was irrevocable.

After working with Johnson for a year and a half, Blake was certain that the telephone call had far more to do with his resignation than he had admitted. If the phone call could be considered the primary reason Jim resigned, Blake told himself, then it cost the state at least \$5,000 in money lost training Jim for the job.

Questions and Instructions

1. Since the phone call was anonymous, should it have been given any consideration at all?
2. How could the substance of the phone call be verified or disqualified by a discreet investigation? If the caller's information could not be substantiated, would it have been necessary to tell Johnson anything at all?
3. Would it have been wise for Blake to transfer Johnson to the central office where he would have had the benefit of direct supervision?
4. Should more emphasis have been placed on the observance of normal working hours when Blake became aware of Johnson's work schedule?
5. If you were Blake and had time to reflect on this incident, what policy recommendation would you suggest to prevent this type of Problem from occurring in the future? Should the central office consider having a definite number of hours or specific times during the day when field personnel should be in the office? What are the implications of this type of policy?
6. Is it possible that Johnson's appearance was beneficial in his employee client relationship? What should be said or done about an employee's personal dress or appearance?
7. Is a supervisor responsible not only for informing an employee of undesirable attitudes or behavior but also for designing a plan to correct or improve them?