SHRM®
SOCIETY FOR HUMAN
RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The Case of the Writer
Who Couldn't Write

By Alan Cabelly, Ph.D.

PROJECT TEAM

Author:	Alan Cabelly, Ph.D.
SHRM project contributor:	Nancy A. Woolever, SPHR
External contributor:	Sharon H. Leonard
Copy editing:	Courtney J. Cornelius, copy editor
Design:	Terry Biddle, graphic designer

The Case of the Writer Who Couldn't Write

By Alan Cabelly, Ph.D.

Instructor's Manual

INTRODUCTION

The Case of the Writer Who Couldn't Write focuses on two key organizational issues:

- Staffing decisions (Case A)

- Performance management (Case B)

As students discuss these issues, key related issues include:

- Relationship between staffing and performance management.

- Managerial control and decision making.

- Termination decisions.

- The role of an established group in new employee socialization.

Student learning objectives include understanding all the issues listed above; instructors can focus on staffing, performance management, or both.

This case has been extensively pretested in undergraduate, graduate and executive situations using the methods listed below. It is based on a real case; students will be intrigued to find out what happened in the actual situation.

The case can be analyzed by using a traditional Harvard style analysis, by having students develop staffing and coaching techniques, or through the use of role plays. These methods can be combined.

TARGET AUDIENCE

This case can be adapted for use by either undergraduate or graduate students, in either an advanced organization behavior course or any level human resource management course.

THE PREMISE

A manager seeks to hire a new employee for a new position. She interviews one strong candidate and, despite the objections of one staff member, hires him. In Case B, performance problems soon crop up and resentment develops. The manager coaches and counsels, assigns a mentor and charts progress. Clients within the organization express concern, and morale suffers. The manager realizes that significant action is required.

METHODS OF CLASSROOM ANALYSIS

The case has been successfully utilized three different ways. It is up to the instructor to choose what might work best in different situations.

Traditional Harvard style case analysis, instructor at the board asking probing questions. We have used this method with both cases consecutively, and also focusing on either Case A or Case B depending on the topic area to be covered.

Staffing Analysis (Case A, 45-60 minutes). Students are asked to identify the procedures Laura Conroy used to make the hiring decision, evaluate those processes, and develop effective hiring techniques. Issues include:

Internal vs. external hiring. Discussion might focus on the advantages of each. For this case, does the advantage of bringing new ideas and methods into the department overcome the disadvantage of resentment among current employees who might have wanted the job? Additionally, what are the startup costs associated with bringing a new high-level yet inexperienced worker into a department where task needs are immediate?

Job analysis and selection criteria. There is no evidence that a job description exists for this job. What are the KSAs (knowledge, skills and abilities) necessary to perform the job? There is no indication that Conroy is prepared to make a hiring decision.

Utilization of the local newspaper as the only source for applicants. In the 21st century, this method seems archaic. Students should be asked what they use for job hunting, focusing on Internet services. The instructor should lead students to think about other sources, such as professional associations and executive search firms.

Selection criteria and a structured interview. Conroy does not have clearly defined selection criteria for the job. At best, she has only vague ideas about what she is looking for. She therefore is not prepared with a structured interview and has only general questions to ask a candidate.

Evaluating only one candidate rather than opening the process further. Why did Conroy stop after receiving only one strong résumé? Many managers believe that a job opening must be filled "yesterday," that immediate needs are more important than the long-term. Discussion should center on the importance of making the correct decision and the extreme costs of a poor choice.

Use of previously developed writing samples rather than having the candidate perform a test during the interview. The interview team has no method of evaluating these samples; they cannot determine who wrote the samples, or what the review process was if the candidate actually wrote the samples. A better process would have been to give the candidate a timed assignment and require the candidate to respond to that assignment on site.

Reference checking. Discussion could center on why Conroy stopped after two references and who those references were. It is crucial to speak with supervisors, either past or current.

Evaluating and discussing the concerns of the one individual who disagreed. In the real situation, this was vital. Normally, a hiring manager should decide how the decision should be made. Is consensus enough or is unanimity required? Responsibility belongs to the hiring manager, yet a senior co-worker can cause significant challenges for a new worker, especially if that co-worker acts as mentor. What steps should Conroy have taken with Hanson?

A natural conclusion to these statements is a question of whether Conroy was doing her job or just taking the easy way out. Has she been trained by HR to do hiring? What has the human resource department been doing throughout the entire process?

If the instructor uses the case strictly for staffing issues, significant classroom analysis stops here. There should, however, be a brief discussion about how ineffective staffing processes might lead to performance problems.

Performance Management Analysis (Case B, 45-60 minutes). Students are asked to identify the procedures Laura Conroy used to prepare Henderson for success on the job, evaluate those processes, and develop effective coaching techniques. Questions and issues include:

Orientation. How much introduction was Henderson given to other parts of the organization, especially the marketing and other departments he would be working with? Did he understand basic relationships between departments, and how different functions connected with each other?

Adequacy of initial training period. How much support does a new worker need? The focus here should be on preparing the new worker to do the job. Although workers are hired based on their skills, they sometimes do not have the skills that the hiring managers believed they had. These need to be developed. Additionally, whether or not they have the appropriate level of skills, there needs to be training and goal setting for the specific task in the new job. Reasonable expectations should be established for any new worker.

Assignment of Hanson as mentor. This issue has two facets. First, what tasks does a mentor have and how does a manager ensure that the mentor has the motivation and skills to perform these tasks? Second, based on Hanson's reticence to hire Henderson, was he really the best choice to be a mentor?

Resentment within the department. This issue reverts back to Conroy's decision to hire externally, to not even allow internal applications. The instructor should focus on department culture and the ability of a manager to have adequate control of and respect from her department.

Marketing department dissatisfaction. The technical publications department staff perform a service for the organization. Henderson is a key player in performing that service. What happens when poor performance affects a department's reputation and credibility? What must the manager do to first improve that performance and secondly, control the damage from poor performance?

Conroy's personal coaching and other actions. Conroy must ask a number of questions as she seeks to personally coach Henderson. First, does Henderson understand what his job is? If not, she needs to clarify her instructions to him. Second, does he have the ability to perform his tasks? If not, she needs to decide whether he would benefit from additional training; if she should move him to a different job; or if she should terminate him. Finally, is he motivated to do the job? If not (assuming he has the ability) she has to determine whether that motivation will change and what effect she will have on that improved motivation. In any event, she may choose to place him on a performance improvement plan with appropriate goals, timelines and consequences.

Options for action. Most students, especially those with little work experience, will want to fire Henderson. This is the easy solution. However, in reality, this does not serve Conroy's needs. She would again have an open position, would not deal with Hanson's insubordination (see the actual situation below), and would have learned nothing herself. This result would leave her in a worse situation than when she began. It is the effective instructor's job to help students find a positive coaching solution to the situation.

If the instructor uses the case strictly for performance management issues, the instructor should ask the class to consider the effect that parts of the staffing process have on Henderson's subsequent performance and their perceptions of his performance.

Total Case Analysis (additional 15-30 minutes beyond Cases A and B).
This utilizes discussion of parts A and B above and provides an overall systems framework. In addition to the discussion identified above, the case includes a component on how a poor selection decision affects performance. Key points here include:

■ Where was the human resource department during this process? The case presumes an inactive or reactive HR department. How would effective HR management respond to this situation? How could it have helped Conroy in selection, coaching and managing her department?

■ Was Henderson qualified to do the job? How does an untrained manager determine this? In a situation with a weak (or nonexistent) HR department, what can the technically strong but managerially weak manager do to improve her hiring skills?

■ Did Hanson's lack of initial support preview a future ineffective role as a mentor? Does one bad apple spoil the entire batch? How does a manager control the effective worker who acts against the team's best interests?

■ What should Conroy do now? See options for action, above.

Development of HRM techniques. This approach allows students to design their own HRM systems. Generally, this works best with 4-6 classroom groups, 5-7 people in each group.

Staffing Analysis (Case A). The focus of this method is the development of an entire staffing process. Utilize the material discussed in the Harvard style analysis above.

- Full classroom group: A brief discussion centers on an analysis of staffing processes Conroy used (10 minutes).

- Breakout groups: Have each group develop the staffing procedure that should be used at Big Time the next time an opening occurs (15 minutes).

- Individual groups report to class (3-5 minutes for each group).

- Full classroom group identifies the best methods to use; debrief (10-20 minutes).

Performance Management Analysis (Case B). The focus of this method is on performance management, either role playing a performance appraisal interview or identifying effective performance appraisal techniques (see below).

- Full classroom group: Discussion centers on an analysis of performance appraisal and coaching processes used on Henderson (10 minutes).

- Breakout groups: Determine what should be done with Henderson and why (15 minutes).

- Individual groups report to class (3-5 minutes for each group).

Role play. By this time, the class will have been polarized in at least three directions:

- One group will want to fire Henderson immediately.

- A second group is interested in process. This group wants to continue coaching and counseling.

- A third group identifies with Henderson, noting that he has not really had an opportunity to succeed.

The instructor now chooses a role play method and selects participants. Typically we select 3-6 people to play Conroy and 3-6 to play Henderson. We give each group 10 minutes to plan their role, asking them to completely stay in role (including the use of "I" statements) at all times. The role play begins in the front of the classroom with one student portraying each character. The players can change frequently. One method is to have one member of a group tap the current player on the shoulder and immediately take his/her seat. Another method is instructor driven, where the instructor calls out "switch" and a new player takes each role. The goal is to continue the conversation seamlessly. Students are told to continue where the previous student finished but then use their own approach (20-40 minutes).

If the instructor does not want to use the role play method but still desires to focus on performance appraisal methods, the instructor can ask students to identify the procedures Laura Conroy used to prepare Henderson for success on the job, evaluate those processes, and develop effective coaching techniques (20-40 minutes),

followed by a debrief (10-20 minutes) and concluding with a description of the actual situation (5 minutes).

Focus on Roles. This approach allows students to internalize the roles of each of the main characters in the case. This is best accomplished with no formal case analysis preceding the role play. Generally this role play works best with five classroom groups, 3-8 people in each group. The goal is to allow students to see the case from different perspectives. This method requires significant instructor interaction.

Establish roles (15 minutes). The five roles are: Conroy, Henderson, Hanson, all other actors as one collective group (Simpson, Miller, Sanders, etc.), and the "fly on the wall." Tell the first four groups to prepare for their role by identifying with their characters, asking them to feel what their character feels, to know what their character knows, and to simply "be" their character. Have the students work within their group to prepare. Begin by asking students to describe how their character feels at the conclusion of the case and what they believe their character wants to do. Encourage students to use "I" statements in describing their feelings as the character.

"Fly on the Wall." Tell this group that in the upcoming role play they will take on the role of the unbiased observer. In preparation for their role, ask them to study the case from all angles. Tell them that during the role play you might call on any of them to provide their observations immediately in short bullet points. This group will be thinking on their feet. It might work best if they could establish criteria for the role play they are about to see.

Instructor role. The instructor plays the role of external consultant, a longtime friend of the owner called in because the owner knows a problem exists and does not completely understand it. The instructor announces to the class what this role is and asks everyone to prepare for a conversation with the consultant. The instructor will speak with each group.

Process of the role play (45 minutes). All students return to the classroom and sit with their group. The instructor explains the premise of the role play, stating that the external consultant will conduct private conversations with each group. Everyone remains in the classroom during these private conversations, hearing the conversations "out of role." The instructor announces that the "flies on the wall" will occasionally provide commentary.

For each conversation, the instructor knocks on a table, indicating that the consultant is knocking on the person's door. The consultant explains that he/she is here to help and is on a fact-finding mission. The first question is always of the nature of "how are you, how's work, and (to everyone except Henderson) how's the new guy working out." The instructor probes with individual students, receiving appropriate information about how each person feels.

Hanson and the Simpson/Miller/Sanders group typically complain about Henderson not pulling his weight and about the extra work Henderson is causing. After appropriate complaints, the instructor needs to probe about whether

Henderson has been given a chance to succeed. The instructor also asks these groups what they think of Conroy's actions to date. The instructor concludes by asking what Conroy should do now. After listening to both of these groups, the instructor asks the observers for their analysis, reminding them to be brief.

The consultant now has a conversation with Henderson, asking him how the new job is coming along, how he interacts with his co-workers, whether he enjoys his job, and how Laura is supporting him. After this conversation, the observers again give their analysis.

The next conversation is with Conroy. Questions might focus on work group interactions, performance and morale. Detailed questions about Henderson follow. Finally, the consultant/instructor asks Conroy what she expects to do. Some will want to fire him immediately; others want to continue coaching. Observers again provide analysis.

Conroy and Henderson now have a meeting. Conroy is in charge and is given 10-15 minutes to come to a conclusion. As in the previous role play, students are urged to rotate the lead speaker role. This role play is particularly effective because the role players have now been playing and thinking their roles for a relatively long period of time.

After processing the role play, debrief (10-20 minutes) and then conclude with a description of the actual situation (5 minutes).

FINAL NOTE TO INSTRUCTORS

Case Overviews A and B, along with the organizational chart should be distributed to students to conduct the case. The description of the actual situation may be distributed only after the case has concluded and the debrief has been conducted.

Case Overview—Case A

In August, John Henderson submitted a résumé to the human resource department of Big Time Computers Inc. in response to an advertisement in the local newspaper for a senior technical writer. The résumé was forwarded to Big Time's Manager of Technical Publications, Laura Conroy, for her consideration.

Big Time Computers is a local high-tech firm with sales offices throughout the United States and Europe. At the time of the senior technical writer job advertisement, Big Time employed about 1,200 people. Big Time designs and manufactures high-end computer systems that sell in the $500,000 to $6,000,000 range. Big Time's products are sophisticated and complex, and the working atmosphere is highly technical. The engineering department is the largest and most dominant department. Engineers are in management positions throughout the company, including top-level management. Due to the sophistication and complexity of their products, employees in marketing, customer service, and technical publications are required to have strong technical backgrounds; many have engineering or computer science degrees.

The technical publications department employed 14 people. This included the manager, two senior writers (Mike Simpson and Craig Miller), seven writers, one technical editor (Clark Hanson), and three editorial assistants. The manager had a business degree and had been working in the technical publications field for 12 years. The senior writers had four-year engineering degrees; the other seven writers had engineering degrees, computer science degrees, or two-year associates degrees in a technical field. The technical editor had an English degree and an associates degree in electronics, and the editorial assistants had English or liberal arts degrees.

The department had a well-established set of procedures for new manuals and manual revisions. When given a writing assignment, the writer would do the necessary research by reading product specifications and interviewing the engineers involved with the product. The writer would then develop an outline which was reviewed by the appropriate engineers and the technical publications project leader responsible for that product. The writer then wrote a first draft which was edited by the technical editor and reviewed company-wide. The reviewer list included key people from each area of the company. After making necessary changes, the writer submitted the manual for a brief second review and made additional changes. An editorial assistant did proofreading and formatting before each review, and when the two reviews were complete, the editorial assistant did the final proofing and formatting. The manual was then printed. This extensive review procedure gave the writers a great deal of exposure throughout the company.

The current job opening was a new position at Big Time that was necessitated by an increased workload. Although some internal people wanted to apply for the job, Conroy believed that no internal candidates had the necessary skills for the position; besides, she thought it would be good to bring in new blood at the top. She found one strong résumé and began the hiring process.

In considering John Henderson's résumé, Conroy noted that Henderson had a computer science degree, was working toward a Doctoral degree, and had three years' experience as a technical writer in a local high-tech firm. Conroy was impressed with Henderson's credentials and scheduled an interview date. Conroy included herself, the technical editor and the two senior writers on Henderson's interview schedule. Conroy's interview was general, focusing on background, goals and work habits. Hanson, the technical editor, asked questions regarding writing skills and techniques, while Simpson and Miller, the senior writers, focused on Henderson's technical skills.

Conroy then met with the interviewers to determine if Henderson was qualified for the senior technical writer job. Conroy was pleased with Henderson's responses to her general questions and liked the writing samples he had given her. Hanson felt that Henderson had answered the interview questions well, but had reservations about his interpersonal skills and ability to integrate into the department. He also had some concerns about one of the writing samples. Simpson and Miller thought his technical skills were excellent and had no strong feelings either way about his interpersonal skills. Conroy, Simpson, and Miller all felt that Henderson should be hired; Hanson disagreed. Conroy checked two of Henderson's three references and got good reports on his skills and work habits. She hired him.

Case Overview—Case B

In August, John Henderson submitted a résumé to the human resource department of Big Time Computers Inc. in response to an advertisement in the local newspaper for a senior technical writer. After a short interview process in which three of the four individuals on the selection committee felt that he should be hired, Laura Conroy hired him.

Henderson spent a three-week training period learning departmental methods and procedures, becoming familiar with Big Time's products, and preparing for his first writing assignments. As a senior writer, Henderson was also expected to serve as a technical publications project leader for one of Big Time's product groups. During the training period, Henderson attended project meetings to meet the employees from other departments who were involved with that product group and to become current on what was happening within it.

Following the training period, Henderson started his first writing assignment, the revision of a software manual to reflect upgraded product software. Henderson went two weeks beyond the scheduled date for completing the first draft of the revision. In editing the first draft, Hanson felt that the writing quality and organization were poor, and suggested extensive changes before the manual was distributed for review. Henderson implemented these changes and prepared the manual for review. One week before the review, Henderson sent an advance notice email message to the reviewers, notifying them of the upcoming review. Mike Simpson, the project leader for the product described in the manual, pointed out to Laura Conroy that the message was sloppy, and had misspellings and poor grammar. He expressed concern that the credibility of the technical publications department was at risk if the quality of any of the written material that went out to the entire company was poor. Hanson and Simpson also expressed concern to Conroy about Henderson's writing ability.

Conroy decided to implement some procedures to monitor Henderson's progress and temporarily give him more supervision. She scheduled weekly meetings with Henderson during which he was to give her a detailed status report for the week, with particular emphasis on tracking manual schedules. She also required Henderson to send his work to the technical editor on a chapter-by-chapter basis, and each week Hanson would meet with Henderson to discuss his writing. Conroy also decided to postpone giving project leader responsibilities to Henderson, but she had him continue to attend project meetings with Miller and planned to give Henderson a project in the future.

Resentment was starting to develop in the technical publications department due to Henderson's failure to meet expectations. Several of the writers complained to Conroy because Henderson had been hired as a senior writer at a higher salary,
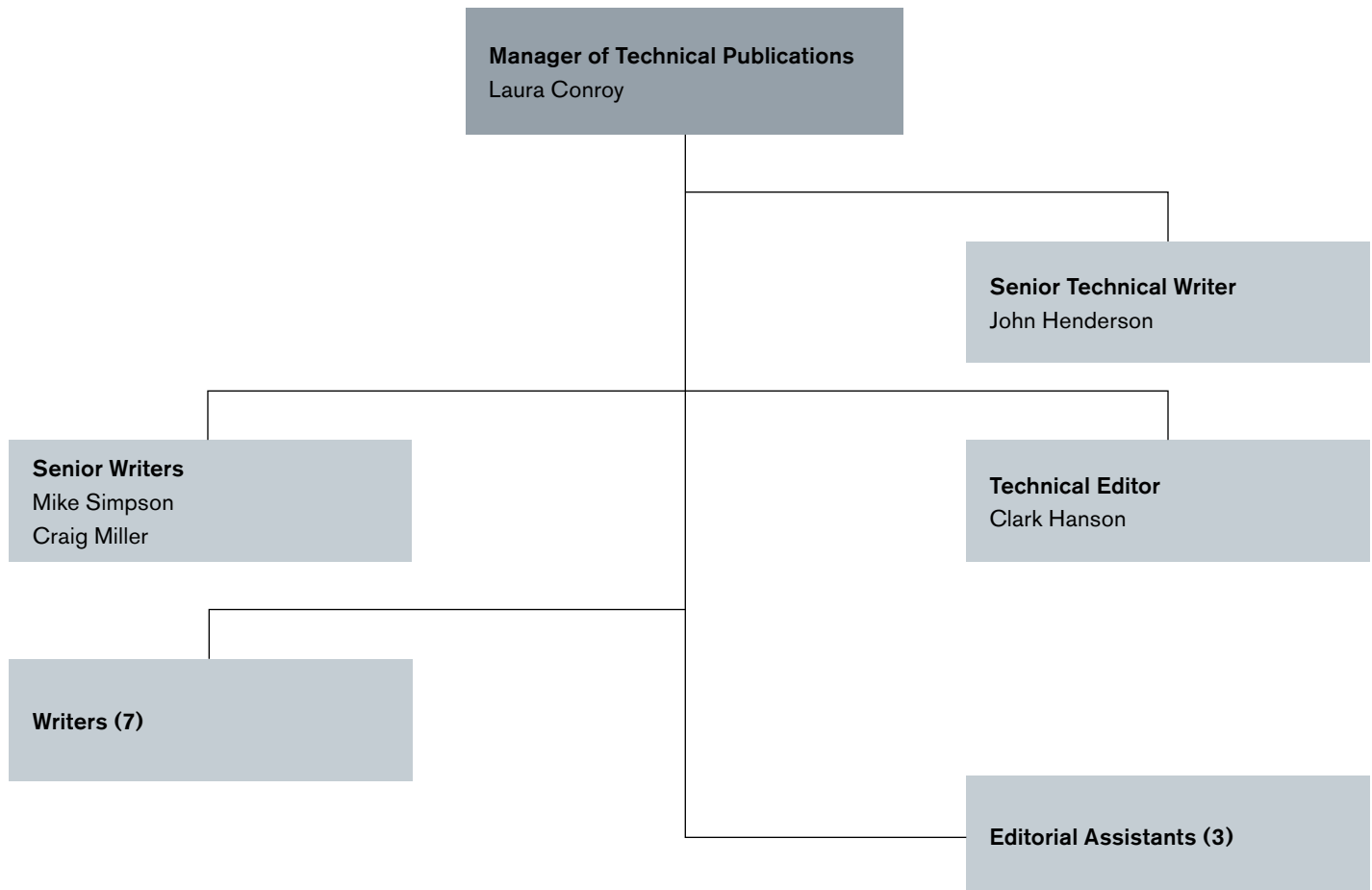
yet his writing skills were apparently inferior to theirs. Miller also expressed dissatisfaction at having to serve as project leader for two projects when the expectation was that Henderson would take one of the projects. Hanson fell behind in his editing assignments because of the extra time he was spending with Henderson, and the editorial assistants complained about the quantity of cleanup required because of Henderson's poor work. In private meetings with dissatisfied employees, Conroy expressed faith in Henderson's abilities and urged patience while she worked on developing his skills.

Henderson showed signs of improvement in his writing skills and his ability to meet deadlines under the procedures implemented by Conroy. As a result of this and because Henderson now had four months' experience at Big Time, Conroy assigned Henderson to write a marketing article on a topic related to his area of technical expertise. Henderson was to work with a marketing engineer and a marketing product manager to develop the article by a specified date. When the initial review of the article was due, Henderson gave the first draft to the marketing department without any review or edit from within the technical publications department. Marketing was dissatisfied with the organization and content of the article; Dick Sanders, marketing product manager, met with Laura Conroy to express this dissatisfaction. Although Conroy assured Sanders that technical publications could complete the article to his satisfaction and on schedule, Sanders decided to have the article written by a marketing employee.

Though his writing skills were slowly improving, lingering resentment continued about Henderson's status and salary as a senior writer. Morale in the department was low. Hanson continued to have a difficult time fulfilling his editing responsibilities because of the extra time he was spending with Henderson, and Miller couldn't meet manual schedules because of the time spent fulfilling project leader responsibilities for two projects. Laura Conroy knew that it was time to act.

Big Time Computers Inc.

Technical Publications Department

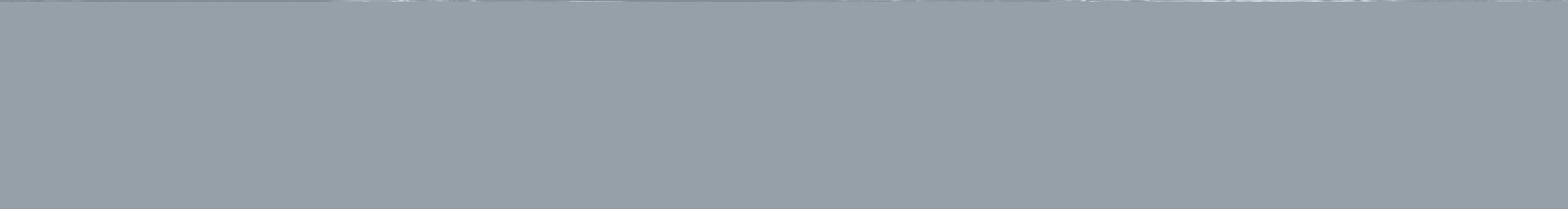|	
Manager of Technical Publications Laura Conroy	

Senior Technical Writer John Henderson

Senior Writers Mike Simpson Craig Miller	**Technical Editor** Clark Hanson

Writers (7)	**Editorial Assistants (3)**

Description of the Actual Situation

In the real case, Henderson was quite unhappy. He had come from a situation where all the writers and editors supported each other and he perceived the current work environment as one where a small clique of writers worked together and did not accept an outsider. Therefore, his writing, when working individually, was not up to the standards needed at Big Time. The quality of the writing samples he presented during the interview process was high; however, the work he presented was polished work, the result of an interactive process at his last place of employment.

Additionally, Conroy wanted to hire an outsider, bringing in new blood to shake up a relatively conservative group of writers who in her mind had gotten lazy and predictable. The rest of the group did not see it this way. They saw Conroy rejecting them, not giving them or their friends an opportunity for a promotion. Hanson felt this most strongly.

Henderson wanted to find a way to leave while saving face. Conroy needed to retain control of her department. She worked out an agreement with Henderson, allowing him to continue to work for an additional four months until he could return to school full time. She supervised and coached him directly. Shortly thereafter she began the hiring process again, this time with three strong candidates, and hired one. As Henderson did, the new writer had problems fitting in and was performing poorly. This time, Conroy monitored the situation closely, offering direct coaching and feedback. She also uncovered questionable activities among members of the work group, where they (especially Hanson) sabotaged the new writer, both within and outside the department. Eventually she fired Hanson and confronted the rest of her workforce. Productivity and morale improved almost immediately.