



**NORTHERN ARIZONA
UNIVERSITY**
The W. A. Franke College of Business

**Re-Branding the Leper Colony:
Challenges of Changing Culture and
Managing Difficult People**

Working Paper Series—09-10 | July 2009

Joe S. Anderson

Professor of Management

Jack Dustman

Professor of Management

and

Susan K. Williams

Associate Professor of Management

The W. A. Franke College of Business

Allison Kipple

Assistant Professor

Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering

All of Northern Arizona University

Primary Author as Contact:

Susan K. Williams at Susan.Williams@nau.edu or 928-523-0940

Re-Branding the Leper Colony: Challenges of Changing Culture and Managing Difficult People

Would You Run Screaming?

(Authors' note: Direct narration from Anika appears in italics.)

It was a beautiful day in the high deserts of the southwest U.S., as usual, and I glanced up from the computer screen and gazed out the window for a while. Near my window, roadrunners and quail scurried between the sage and mesquite bushes, always watchful for a clever coyote. From my "temporary building" the land sloped upwards through pleasant, cottonwood-shaded creeks and continued to rise through the piñon pines and ancient oak forests before reaching snow-covered peaks far above. The peaks were almost always framed by a spectacularly blue sky. A slight breeze played with the simple white curtains around my window and carried the tune of a bugle, calling the present day version of the cavalry to a meal. The call echoed the rich history of a land where Native Americans, Spanish Conquistadors, and later U.S. Cavalry and copper miners had found respite.

How lucky I, Anika, was! Who would have thought that someone like me could escape Dilbert-land and conduct challenging technical research in such a beautiful and historic setting? When my colleagues - who regularly ventured into the desert to test prototype high-tech devices - were stumped by bizarre data, it was my job to investigate the problem and provide explanations and solutions when possible. I was working part-time while finishing my Ph.D. in engineering at a nearby university. I was learning as much at work as at school, not to mention being paid well. My colleagues were friendly and fun, and my boss was great – who could ask for more? I returned, contented, to the computer screen when I heard the sound of slow footsteps approaching my building.

It was my boss. He had recently been promoted and was now responsible for several divisions and a few hundred employees, and his face was already showing the strain. He was somber and reserved, in stark contrast to his usual outgoing and cheerful self. "Let's go outside and talk," he stammered before disappearing from the doorway. Visions of lay-offs, next-of-kin notifications, and other horrors raced through my mind as I followed him to the picnic table. As we seated ourselves under that gorgeous sky, my boss said, "Would you run away screaming and quit if I put you in charge of the leper colony?"

Leper Colony aka Testing Range (TR)

It was surreal in almost every sense. It was truly isolated – a small group of people stationed in the middle of a silent desert that was scattered with unexploded ordinance. There were times when the military base had been closed for an emergency, and everyone had forgotten to notify the TR.

The leper colony, officially the Testing Range (TR), was a unit of a Department of Defense (DOD) facility.¹ The desert environment that Anika described had very few inhabitants and vast expanses of open space. These factors made it an ideal environment for testing. The TR existed to help governmental organizations and private companies with experimental and operational testing of advanced-technology equipment and systems. The DOD facility employed hundreds of federal government and contract employees, including engineers, scientists, computer specialists, technicians and support staff.

The TR was one of a dozen testing units and had facilities that most companies could not afford to build. Most of the companies using the services were major defense contractors. When the defense contractors were developing a new product, they would use the testing range to help test, debug, and prove the product's performance. Additionally, some work came directly from the military. If the military wanted to compare the performance of several technical devices, for example, the TR would perform the tests.

The testing range partnered with its clients to plan, design and execute the required tests. There was a wide range of capabilities among the clients. Some were very knowledgeable and sophisticated and the testing range staff was needed just to run the range equipment. Other clients relied heavily on the technical expertise of the range staff to design the test and debug problems that arose. Federal employees comprised about half of the TR staff. The remaining employees were contracted from commercial companies.

Some of the most stressful and challenging jobs were those of the commercial clients when they were debugging a product that was not working. They frequently had aggressive product delivery schedules that if not met would delay the release of a new product. Such delays could be very costly to the company. Debugging and testing new products rarely went smoothly. Flexibility and creativity were required to find out why the product was not functioning. Sometimes tests needed to be invented on-the-fly or performed in an unusual manner to narrow down the potential problems.

Testing frequently happened at night. Such timing was required so that environmental noise would not interfere with the tests or so that the tests would not interfere with civilian activities. In either case, this dimension simply added another challenge to the working environment for the TR staff.

Chief of the Testing Range – Anika

Anika started working in the DOD in 2001 as a Test Officer. Initially she worked at the main site and would occasionally go to the TR to help with tests and check the data and reports, acting as the science lead. There were many 'anomalies' – unexpected results or measurements – that management wanted to understand better. To do this, Anika might, for example, compare data obtained during tests with the results predicted by computer models.

¹ The situations presented in this case are real. The names of people and organizations have been changed or disguised.

... Would I run screaming? Me? In charge of the leper colony?! Now, that was a nightmare I had never considered! As I sat in a stunned stupor, my boss hurriedly explained his reasoning. The physical infrastructure of the range was in fact an impressive test facility. The problem was the staff. For decades, the worst of the worst employees had been transferred to the remote facility, where management could essentially ignore them until they quit or retired. This had long rankled my boss, and now that he had authority over the facility, he could implement his vision. He envisioned a facility renowned for not only its unique technical infrastructure but for its talented, professional employees. He saw a facility that hummed with activity, where experts from around the country would come to obtain help in testing and improving their cutting-edge equipment. He saw me as a critical part of this vision.

I, on the other hand, saw a facility that was the laughing stock not only of our organization, but also of those national experts that my boss so longed to impress. I saw once-impressive equipment that had been ruined by incompetence and neglect. I saw offices with piles of intermingled broken equipment, decades-old paperwork and discarded Burger King wrappers. The staff had cleared foot-wide paths so they could walk between these piles of junk. Not surprisingly, rodents were attracted by the discarded food wrappers, and there were rodent droppings everywhere. The smell of rodents decaying in forgotten traps permeated the office area. The restrooms hadn't been cleaned in months. It was truly disgusting. What worried me most, though, was employees who were openly insolent and completely out of control. They often ignored regulations and organizational policies, not to mention the guidelines of polite society. They delighted in telling me repulsive sexist jokes when I had to take data at the facility, and I had seen them hurl the foulest insults at bosses several levels above me. I couldn't fathom managing those people. I did manage to recover my voice:

Me: "I'm only a part-time employee."

Boss: "We'll give you time off to complete your dissertation, and then you can go to full-time status."

Me: "A lot of the equipment is ruined."

Boss: "We'll make the facility a top priority for our infrastructure improvement funds."

Me: "I have hardly any management training or experience – I'm a scientific theorist."

Boss: "We'll provide training, and you can call me for advice whenever you need it."

Me: "The lepers, I mean employees, out there are truly incorrigible."

Boss: "After consulting with me and with human resources, you will have the authority to transfer or fire personnel who continue to undermine the facility's operation."

Me: "I won't even consider working with Mr. X out there."

Boss: "Done."

Me: "Surely there's someone else who is better qualified to take this position."

Boss: "Name one person in the organization who understands the technology out there better than you do."

Me: (Dang.) "I'll think about it."

And I did think about it. Did I, as a young professional, want to be associated with the infamous leper colony? How would that affect my undeveloped national reputation in my field of study? On the other hand, my organization typically didn't promote someone to such a high level until they had contributed nearly 15 years of outstanding performance to the company, so the promotion could be seen as quite an honor. If I could handle the agony of some inevitable defeats along the way, I could also learn an incredible amount from the offered training and mentoring, not to mention the practical experience of dealing with the ultimate "difficult employees." But would these skills be valuable to me when I had planned a career in research? I would gain important practical knowledge, but would that compensate for the lost research time?

The advice I received from employees at other facilities was not encouraging: "Don't do it! Oh my Gosh, that would be death to your career!" and "Haven't you met those guys out there? They're horrible!" In the end, however, I accepted the position. In large part, I saw it as my duty to help the company. I also thought that taking control of the facility might be the best way to improve the quality of tests that I had to conduct there.

Bets were immediately placed on how long I would last at the leper colony, the shortest prediction being two months, the most generous being two years. As it turned out, I managed the facility for three years before returning to research. By that time, the TR was nearing full operational capacity, with double shifts becoming commonplace. The staff had received numerous accolades for their significant technical contributions to visiting experts, having helped those experts isolate and resolve problems in their cutting-edge systems. Visitors frequently commented on the staff's professionalism, work ethic, and general friendliness as well. I had obtained a strong national reputation for turning the facility around, including internal and external awards. The work helped me to secure a research position when I decided to return to that path, and the skills gained in dealing with those difficult employees have proved invaluable in all aspects of life.

But that was years away...

The Organizational Culture of the Testing Range

Anika was invigorated by the beauty of the desert environment, but it wasn't without its challenges.

There were rattlesnakes everywhere. While walking down some metal steps at the facility, I had looked down to see a rattlesnake coiled around the support post. I had seen rattlesnakes looking at me through cable conduits while I nervously installed some equipment, and I had once turned around to pick up some equipment, only to hear the distinctive warning of a rattler who had slithered into the area while I was working. Killer bees apparently thought highly of the place as well, and the removal of killer bee hives was common. Black widows found that the port-a-potties made excellent homes, and tarantulas crossed the facility's sandy expanses in their season.

Illegal immigrants also crossed the facility in droves, and employees joked that the facility's port-a-pots and water stations must be marked on the immigrants' maps. You could be conducting a sophisticated technical test, look up to see a group of illegal immigrants running by, then watch a

Border Patrol vehicle go tearing after them, and finally be left in absolute silence again. But all this was nothing compared to the facility's outrageous employees...

On top of its unusual physical location, the TR had an unusual staffing structure. Anika was a federal employee. Some people that worked at the TR were also federal. Those that weren't federal were contract employees. Contract employees actually worked for an external commercial company though they spent all of their time at the TR. The commercial company had a contract that was reviewed and renewed regularly with the federal government through this facility to provide labor at many levels of skill and experience. These employees were managed by and reported to a manager within the contract company, not the TR nor the DOD facility.

Thus, the TR had an amalgam of influences shaping its culture: military, federal government and commercial components all were represented in the values, beliefs, underlying assumptions and behaviors of the employees. For Anika, coming directly from the academic culture of a doctoral program in engineering, and indirectly from her commercial work experience, the military components of this culture were quite alien at the beginning.

When I was first hired I was confused by how frequently people asked what my GS level² was. Coming from industry, I associated this question with my pay grade. My reaction to the question was irritation: Why did everyone think they had a right to know how much money I made? Later I realized that they were trying to determine their relation to me in the organization's hierarchy. Similar to the military, if I were in a higher position than these people, they would address me as Ma'am, treat me respectfully, and maintain a distance. If these people were at or above my level, they would call me by my first name and maybe even insult me every now and then to "keep me in my place."

When I became Chief, most of the staff members expected me to treat them in this authoritative, somewhat demeaning manner. If I wasn't authoritative, the staff would begin to question whether I was fit to "command," and they would essentially try to command me. For example, most of the original staff members truly disliked it and became unruly when I asked for their opinions on a technical matter.

How bad was it, really, when Anika became Chief?

The facility was literally a pile of crap when I first moved out there. Even though I was a newly-minted Ph.D. and was highly paid, I spent a lot of time those first few months sorting through piles of junk. I found some important manuals and missing equipment in those piles, but mostly I took truckload after truckload to the dump. I even found 'lost' equipment that had been repurchased. Decked out like an investigator of a nuclear explosion, I also cleaned up those disgusting rodents and their droppings, using Clorox as if it were water.

Not only did the staff not care about their working environment, but they were belligerent and insubordinate, and did not follow safe work practices. Clients said that it was difficult to work

² GS level is the General Schedule level which is used to describe the pay-scale for most white collar workers in the Federal Government. <http://www.federal-resume.org/gs-levels-explained.aspx>

with the range staff. They claimed they had to first ‘de-bug’ the TR before they could start debugging their products and they had to manage the range employees as well as their projects.

How were they belligerent? When I first started working at the DOD facility before I became Chief, I would go out to the range and try to help improve the test setups. That was part of my assignment. After making some modifications that improved accuracy and performance and reduced the data anomalies, I would leave and return to my work at the main facility. Then the staff at the range would flip the settings on all the equipment back to what they had been before I had done the modifications.

Safety guidelines were frequently ignored. At the TR, safety was critical. We typically worked at heights between 30-100 feet, with up to 30-ton test items being lifted to those heights, and at power levels so high that the Federal Communications Commission would only allow us to work at night.

Before I moved to the facility, I requested that the worst safety offender (Mr. X referred to earlier) be transferred. He had made an intern climb up and down the 30-foot platform without even a ladder, which not only could have caused a deadly fall but was also guaranteed to cause heavy bruising on the intern’s arms. I had learned of this and had told the staff member never to do such a thing again. The next day, that staff member made the intern climb without a ladder again. Due to this and several other serious incidents, I considered that staff member to be an incorrigible liability and requested that he be removed.

Along with safety and security violations, employees would openly discourage customers from testing at the facility. If the customers insisted on coming, the employees would provide minimal assistance. When the customers noticed something strange in their data, for example, the employees would say, “That looks like an anomaly,” and would refuse to help debug the problem.

One of the most popular employee activities was listening to and then discussing radio talk shows – Rush Limbaugh was a favorite. Anywhere you went on the facility, you could bet that there would be a radio nearby, loudly broadcasting one of these programs. The employees would add their personal comments to the programs, often using foul language to see how a customer or visitor would react. They spent much of their time listening to the radio and not working.

A customer once told me that he was testing at the facility on September 11th, 2001, the day that terrorists attacked the Twin Towers in New York City. The employees had been sitting in the building while the customer operated most of his own tests. When the employees told the customer that there had been terrorist attacks and the facility had to shut down, the customer thought that the employees were simply trying a new tactic to get out of work. When the military police drove by and told the customer that he had to stop testing, the customer was as much surprised by the fact that the employees had been truthful as by the actual terrorist attacks.

As a result of these behaviors, the facility averaged a pathetic two billable weeks per year. The employees clearly were not putting the other 50 weeks to good use in terms of maintaining or

otherwise caring for the facility. The expectation was that 80% of the facility's time would be billable to clients.

How did it get that bad?

In the federal government, it is extremely challenging to fire someone. It can take a year or more to work through the process, even for the most difficult employee. As a result, a pattern had developed. When an employee was particularly bad, meaning that they were not only lazy but also caused disturbances and upset the manager, the employee would be transferred to another department. The new boss of this transferred employee was often not informed of the employee's previous behaviors, and these problems were typically not documented in the employee's file. The very worst employees seemed to be sent to the leper colony. The facility was so remote that managers might not have to interact with their problem employees ever again.

When several of the worst employees had been sent to the TR and continued to receive no consequences for their poor behavior, a dominant culture of insubordination and laziness was created. These employees were responsible for training new or transferred staff, and they would indoctrinate the new staff in their insubordinate ways.

In addition, management put a priority on minimizing turnover. I recall interviewing for the job of Chief of the TR, and a commonly-asked question was, "How long will you stay?" I wondered, "What was the big deal...? Why were they so focused on this? People moved to new opportunities in their careers all the time." This was an example of management's concern with how long people were going to stay around – for the Army, if you were career military they were certain you'd be around for your whole career. As a result of this, many outstanding potential employees near retirement age were not considered, and several mediocre potential employees (who had few job opportunities elsewhere) were considered desirable. This created a base pool of lower performing employees.

For difficult contract employees, I struggled with a different type of management problem. In fact, by law, I was not allowed to manage or discipline the contractors directly and was required to work through their managers, who frequently avoided the facility entirely. It took a lot of pressure before I could convince the contractors' manager to come to the facility and observe his employees' blatant safety and security violations. When the manager finally did come to the facility, he stepped out of his car, looked around, and said, "Wow, it's been 5 years since I was last down here."

This was the culture that Anika found in her position as the new Chief of the TR. The facility had an entrenched culture of poor performance and insubordination, and the broader organization had its own dysfunctions. How would Anika break the cycle? What issues would she need to address first, and then what should she do to solve the most pressing problems? How could this new manager improve the cultural environment and the performance of the TR?

VIGNETTES

Write This Way

Billy was employed at the TR when I arrived. He was intelligent, knowledgeable, and hard working, so I thought that with some skill on my part, Billy could become a positive contributor to the facility. Billy was raised in rural Arkansas and his upbringing had set him back in terms of both his educational and social training. Billy once confided to me that his mama had called him a stupid idiot and had beaten him on nearly a daily basis. This may well be the reason that Billy had such a chip on his shoulder, closer to the size of Texas than Arkansas.

*Billy was hired, in part, because he was young and management didn't think he would leave until he retired. The facility had a problem with turnover, especially among young engineers and technicians, due to the work environment and the fact that there wasn't much social life in the nearest town. Billy had served in the military and had been stationed at the DOD facility as a soldier. He had left the military to get an engineering degree, was married and had children, and he **wanted** to return and settle in a nearby town. The previous management had some concerns with Billy's talent and social skills, but the likelihood that Billy would stay for decades trumped any concerns.*

Billy could not handle even the most gentle correction or criticism. His typical response to criticism was to spend hours writing a lengthy e-mail to defend himself, and then he would send this e-mail to as wide a distribution list as possible. We considered ourselves lucky that e-mail was Billy's outlet, having heard about several times away from work when Billy had lost his temper and beaten someone into a pulp.

As thoroughly as he couldn't take criticism, Billy sure could dish it out. Anyone he considered to be below him – including employees from any other division or contractors such as electricians, mechanics, or crane operators – was a target. As a result, these employees and contractors would only help us when explicitly ordered to do so, and the employees with the least ability, seniority, or other capital would be sent to assist us ... a few hours late.

There were other concerns as well, but I had been counseled to pick my battles, so I chose to tackle Billy's writing skills. Billy was in a relatively high-level position as a Test Officer, with a B.S. in Electrical Engineering. As part of this position, Billy was responsible for corresponding with customers and writing test reports. Billy's skills in written English were so poor, however, that it would often take me several hours to convert one of his reports into an acceptable product, and I was embarrassed by his e-mail communications with customers. In communicating with a project manager at a well-known engineering firm, for example, he sent an e-mail message containing almost no capitalization or punctuation, numerous run-on and incomplete sentences, and at least one incorrect spelling per sentence. We're not talking about tricky grammar rules, but very basic sentence construction.

However, I could not spend so much time on Billy's reports and still perform my own job, so I asked if technical publications group could fix Billy's reports as part of their editing process. They looked at an example of his work and refused, putting it solidly in the "not my job"

category. Next I asked if I could hire a part-time worker to review Billy's writing and was told no, that writing was a fundamental part of Billy's job description and therefore one of the things he was being paid to do. A mentor suggested that I offer English (writing) training to Billy. I investigated this possibility and found that the company would pay for Billy's tuition and other expenses related to this training, but that Billy must take the course or seek tutoring on his own time. Happy to have found a potential solution, I presented it to Billy. Eyewitness accounts indicate that Billy's truck peeled out of the facility approximately 10 seconds later, with Billy going directly to my boss's office and creating a scene by yelling, "I ain't got no English problem, and I ain't gonna take no \$#!* English classes! You can tell that %\$!* you promoted as our new manager to go take her own \$#@% English classes!"

So, how would you handle this situation with Billy?

My Way

Frank was also at the facility before I arrived. Frank had some excellent attributes, including a positive attitude, a good sense of humor, curiosity, creativity, a solid work ethic, an ability to learn quickly, and a core set of technical skills. As you may guess, Frank stood out as someone who might be a valuable asset to the facility. However, Frank had unfortunately worked with the other difficult employees long enough to have picked up one of their strongest and most unifying characteristics – insubordination. For example, there was a time when I thought that the employees were well-trained enough that I could go away on vacation without worrying about the facility. After I left, Frank changed all the procedures I had put in place. When I returned, all the data that had been taken while I was gone was invalid, and there was no room in the facility's schedule to retake the data.

*Frank was also inconsistent. There was a time when the facility's staff was working overtime to prepare for an upcoming, critical test. We knew that Frank was somewhere on the range, but we couldn't find him. When we finally found him in an isolated building, Frank explained that he was repairing a fan so that the following summer, people working in that building wouldn't get so overheated. We explained that the goal was to get ready for **tomorrow** so that everyone could go home **tonight**. These types of incidents would happen often, and there seemed to be no logic in the way that Frank's mind worked. Similarly, on a technical topic, Frank's approach to debugging equipment sometimes seemed completely bizarre and unproductive.*

After a year or so, I was exhausted and losing patience. Frank was highly paid, and he should have been able to take more responsibility. Any time I tried to let Frank run the show, he reverted to his random behavior and put a customer's test at risk. He also continued to indoctrinate new employees into the culture of insubordination. Frank thought (and said) that he was indispensable and irreplaceable because he knew how to operate all of the equipment, and to be honest, I thought he was irreplaceable as well. Frank had been at the facility longer than any of the other staff, and nobody including me felt confident running the equipment without Frank. I wanted his situation to work out, but he kept testing my limits. One day, Frank crossed the limits by a mile.

A very sophisticated helicopter was to be placed onto an elevated test platform by a contractor. This helicopter was almost 60 feet long and over 15 feet tall, and it weighed about seven tons. It could fly nearly 200 miles per hour at top speed. To an engineer, it was an awesome machine, and the price tag was an awesome \$20 million. The particular helicopter we were testing had been purchased by a foreign country, and the customer had added some complicated upgrades that had to be certified by us. In fact, the test was complicated in many ways, from the advanced electronic technology to unstable international relations, so tensions were already high. Due to the technical complexities of this case, the precise manner in which the helicopter was to be placed onto our platform had to be analyzed and approved by a licensed mechanical engineer. This had occurred, and representatives of the mechanical engineering firm were present to observe the test and certify that we followed their recommendations. Several different organizations had a possible liability for any damage to the helicopter as well; so many other high-level representatives were present.

As this ensemble, including several facility and contracted employees, made preparations to move the helicopter, Frank approached me with an idea for doing it differently. I told Frank that we would place the helicopter as the mechanical engineering company suggested. No question, this was not even a point for discussion. I later learned that after talking to me, Frank almost immediately presented his alternate idea to a representative of the mechanical engineering company, and again Frank was soundly refused. Frank then went to the head representative from the helicopter company and this person also refused to entertain Frank's suggestion.

In the meantime, I had rushed to my office nearby to get something (soon to be forgotten), and found that my phone was ringing. Hesitant to leave the helicopter for long, I cautiously answered the phone. It was the contractor's manager: "My operator who's out there helping you just called me. One of your technicians is requesting that the helicopter be placed in a way that my operator considers to be unsafe. Given the cost and complexity of the test item, my operator is exercising his right to refuse this job, and I'm standing behind his decision. We are stopping your job as of this moment." After sitting down and collecting myself, I asked the contractor's manager to thank his operator for halting the unsafe activity and assured him that I would immediately return to the scene and resolve the situation.

How would you respond to Frank's behavior?

Suntan Man

Although he didn't arrive at the TR until after I was Chief, Suntan Man may have been the most challenging employee during my stint as the facility manager. By the time Suntan Man entered the scene, some of the difficult employees had been reformed into productive workers, and several new employees had brought their unique talents and perspectives to the facility. The team had developed a strong camaraderie, received several awards, and was exceedingly busy. Along with our usual tasks of helping industry experts debug their prototype technical systems, we were often assigned "Military Emergency" projects where we had to analyze complex systems under very short notice. This made strategic planning almost impossible, and we were overworked. Unfortunately, we were also under a hiring freeze. The only way we could obtain additional staff

was to receive a transfer from another division, and as you may guess, other divisions didn't exactly offer their best employees as transfers.

The scene had been played many times that year. After a particularly strenuous week, with individual employees working 70 hours or more, the team would wearily raise the possibility of requesting a transfer employee. Sometimes we could find niches for the transferred employees, and even though those employees might be certifiably peculiar, they would provide significant contributions to the team and were therefore warmly welcomed. Other times, a transferred employee just drained the team further. For example, we had received a "technical writer" who had never used a word processor, a "field worker" who could barely walk (even though our job description stated "must repeatedly climb 30-foot ladders"), and a "technician" that I probably should have pursued on charges of sexual harassment against my secretary.

A transfer employee was a risk, but we were desperate. We particularly needed an engineer who could design and lead entire projects. I submitted the transfer request, and Suntan Man was the result. He was a federal government employee at the DOD facility, and I don't remember hearing anything negative about Suntan Man before he was transferred to our facility. He had an engineering degree and was older, probably in his fifties. I remember being told that he was smart and that he was excited to work at the facility. The warning flags soon started to fly, however. Before his transfer I stopped by Suntan Man's office to introduce myself. During that introduction, Suntan Man informed me of his frequent ESP (extra-sensory perception) visions and his excitement about working at my facility, where he could ride his mountain bike.

When Suntan Man arrived, I reviewed the facility's employee guidelines with him. The dozen or so guidelines had been created and approved by the whole team of employees, supported by upper management, and primarily dealt with safety concerns. Because of the inherent dangers of working in the desert environment, the guidelines included, "At least two people should work together when working outdoors," and, "Notify the secretary when you leave the facility and when you expect to return to the office." Suntan Man rolled his eyes and pointedly yawned as I reviewed the guidelines with him.

I assigned Suntan Man a few small technical projects as a starting activity. The next two weeks were extremely busy, and I was often in the field and unaware of Suntan Man. Given that he was 20+ years older than I was and his pay grade was nearly as high as mine, I assumed that Suntan Man could probably regulate himself for a little while. During one of my dashes through the office, however, the secretary stopped me to discuss several incidents with Suntan Man. Apparently he would arrive late, leave early, and disappear for a few hours every day without notifying the secretary. I was aware that Suntan Man hadn't come to work a few times in those first two weeks as well, since I had received e-mails from him regarding emergency dental work and so forth. When he was in the office, Suntan Man would apparently goof around and encourage other employees to do so, teasing my secretary for working when I wasn't there. Last but not least, Suntan Man would reportedly don biking shorts, lie down and suntan next to the office's front door whenever I informed the secretary that I would be gone for a few hours. On the same day that the secretary expressed her concerns, a few technicians commented that they had seen Suntan Man walking around the range by himself for a few hours that morning, talking on

his cell phone. By this time the employees had formed a tight-knit group, and it was extremely rare for one employee to tattle on another, so I took these complaints very seriously. It was past time to pay attention to Suntan Man.

I stopped by Suntan Man's desk, and he presented his progress on the assigned projects. Though the amount of work seemed low, the quality was good, and we discussed many technical aspects of his projects. Then I raised the issue of sun tanning by the office door, stating that it created an unprofessional appearance and that it needed to stop. Suntan Man countered with freedom of expression, an argument I didn't accept. He could, like some other employees, sit behind the office at a picnic table during lunch and short breaks, however. I chose to raise one more issue, reminding Suntan Man of the facility's guideline that he needed to notify the secretary when he left the range. Suntan Man had a fit, stomping around the room, rolling his eyes back and forth, and declaring, "I've never been so micro-managed in my entire life!" I waited until he calmed down and reiterated the request, explaining the safety concerns behind the guideline.

*More time passed, and I received more e-mails from Suntan Man about dental emergencies, family emergencies, and so forth. When I tallied the absences, I realized that he had been absent more than 40% of the month that had passed since his arrival. After querying Human Resources personnel, I found that I could not question Suntan Man about his family emergencies. At this time, I also started receiving phone calls from Suntan Man's previous managers, who would say things like, "Hey, how's Suntan Man doing? Does he still disappear for a few hours each day? Ha ha!" I was mad: "He did this at your facility? Why didn't you do anything?! Now I have to deal with someone who thinks it's acceptable to work four out of eight hours each day!" The response would typically resemble the following: "I **did** do something. He's **your** problem now! Ha ha!"*

It was past time for another discussion with Suntan Man. At our next meeting, I again noted to myself that Suntan Man's progress was slow but the technical quality was good. I told Suntan Man (STM) that I would need to start transitioning him from these small technical projects to his role as a test officer, and the result was surprising:

STM: "No, I won't do the work of a test officer."

Me: "That is the opening we have here. That is what we need, and you knew that was the job when you agreed to transfer here."

STM: "I want to continue doing small, interesting technical projects like these."

Me: "I can't afford that, and that isn't the position. The position is 'test officer.'"

STM: "I won't be a test officer."

Me: "Your title before you came here was 'test officer.' You were originally hired as a test officer. You signed a contract to be a test officer."

STM: "I won't be a test officer."

Me: "Then we have a problem. We only have an opening for a test officer here, so you'll need to investigate a transfer to another division, or another job altogether. I can help you some, but I don't have much time to spare."

STM: "I will only go back to the same division and work on the same project in the same position that I was originally hired for."

Me: "I don't know if that's possible. I'll have to refer you to a higher level manager."

Luckily for Suntan Man, my (new) boss was tenderhearted. He made an appointment with Suntan Man to see if an agreeable transfer could be made. Suntan Man again refused any position but his original one. Unfortunately for Suntan Man, there were issues (that he had created) which made it impossible for him to work on that project or work for that customer again.

As the story came to me, when Suntan Man was first hired, he was put in charge of an important design project. There were quarterly reviews of the project's progress, and the entire team of highest-level managers would attend. After the first review, management thought that progress was slow, but they were accommodating since Suntan Man was so recently hired. When the next review was as garbled as the first, management started to become concerned, and they asked Suntan Man if he needed additional support. After the third poor review, management took action: "You need to develop a plan of attack and list some deliverables. We need to move this project along and keep hard on these dates." Apparently Suntan Man went home that night, found the customer's home phone number, and called him to say, "I don't really want to work on your project anymore."

It was a multi-million dollar project. The stunned customer in turn found the manager's home phone number, called him that night and said, "So, I hear you don't want my multi-million dollar project!" After a significant amount of effort, the manager was able to calm the customer. However, the customer insisted that Suntan Man be removed from the project, or the customer would no longer work with the company. The only thing management did when Suntan Man came to work the next day was transfer him to a different department. They didn't tell him why, they didn't reprimand him, and they didn't discuss any problems with him.

Upon learning of these issues, I was flabbergasted that Suntan Man had not been fired or at least received a serious written reprimand for his earlier behavior. Instead, he had been transferred (and transferred and transferred) without having received even a verbal reprimand and nothing was documented in his file.

Suntan Man, on the other hand, wasn't about to admit any responsibility for his current situation. When my boss told him that he could not return to his original position, Suntan Man stormed from my boss's office.

Anika needed to work out a plan. She didn't want to continue the habit of passing poorly performing or problem employees around. Dismissing someone, though, could be a lot of extra work she didn't have time for. In addition, because Suntan Man was so difficult and reactive and a federal government employee, any response would require particularly careful and detailed planning and implementation.