



A Question of Motivation

Alex and Stephanie have a few things in common. Both are students at their state's university, and both work full-time at a local supermarket to make ends meet and help pay for college. Though the pay isn't great, it's a steady job that allows them some flexibility, which helps when scheduling classes. Both students joined the supermarket two years ago, and, given their similar situations, became friends quickly.

Although Stephanie seems to enjoy her job, arriving and leaving work each day with a smile on her face, Alex often grumbles and complains about his work. Much of the time, Alex complains about his boss, Dan, who oversees the produce department. Stephanie works for Jonathan, a 10-year veteran who everyone generally admires for his friendly demeanor and relaxed management style.

Most employees want to work for Jonathan, as he often assigns his employees different duties each week so workers don't get bored. Stephanie, for instance, can be working at the checkout counter one week, stocking shelves the next, and the store's culinary center the following week.

The culinary center is a new service that the store is test-marketing. Employees show customers how to create exciting recipes from start to finish. It is Stephanie's favorite place in the store to work. She is also responsible for taking customers around the store to locate ingredients for a culinary center recipe, many of the ingredients being some of the store's finest. And she enjoys allowing customers to sample what she cooks. So far, the culinary center is a success, and many of the store's more expensive ingredients are becoming difficult to keep in stock. To help with this issue, Jonathan encourages his employees to notify him immediately when an item is running low and even empowers employees to reorder items from vendors. By doing this, Stephanie has quickly grasped how the supermarket operates.

Alex's supervisor, in contrast, prefers most of his employees to work in the same area each day—Alex is one of those employees. Dan believes that the best way to master a job is to do it over and over again. This means that Alex has to stock the same produce areas each day. As boxes of produce are delivered to the store's supply room, Alex unloads their contents onto the shelves to make them look as orderly as possible. Most of the time, though, he doesn't feel inclined to do either task.



After a particularly boring morning of restocking apples (the store had apples on sale that day), Alex met Stephanie for lunch in the break room. After sitting down, Alex reached into his lunchbox and pulled out an apple, a look of disgust on his face. "Ugh . . . If I have to look at another apple, I'm going to be sick."

"Bad day again?" asked Stephanie as Alex stuffed the apple back into his lunchbox.

"I stocked apples all morning—what do you think?" Alex retorted.

"Why don't you tell Dan you want to do something else?" Stephanie inquired. "I see that he lets Denise work in other areas." Stephanie leaned closer. "I've even heard that she gets paid more than you. Is that true?" she whispered.

"Apparently, she gets paid \$2.00 more an hour, but I do the same things that she does. Oh, that's right. One thing I don't do is tell Dan what a cool shirt he has on or how awesome his car is. They're both pathetic if you ask me," frowned Alex.

"Two dollars more an hour, but she's been here for only 3 months!" Stephanie exclaimed. "And I know that you work just as hard as she does. No wonder you're so irritated all the time."

"I don't even care any more. What's the point? If I stock more apples, or something meaningless like that, what does it get me—another sticker that says 'good job'? Oooh, that's really great. Thanks a bunch Dan!" replied Alex, punctuating his last sentence with a sarcastic thumbs-up. "Anyway, enough about my day. How's yours going?"

"Pretty good, actually. Jonathan and I met earlier today, and we both set a goal for me to sell 10 bottles of ruffle oil next week."

"Wow. That stuff is pretty expensive, isn't it?" asked Alex.

"Thirty-five dollars for four ounces," replied Stephanie. "It'll be tough, but I found a pretty good recipe that I'll be making for customers who stop by the culinary center." She paused, then said, "I think I'll be able to do it. I've made quite a few similar recipes before, and even though this one is more difficult, it shouldn't be too bad. Besides, if I sell the oil Jonathan said that he'll give me a \$75 bonus. So I'm definitely going to give it a shot. The nice thing is that I'll be able to do this on my own, without someone breathing down my neck".



“Well that’s certainly more than I’ll be making this week,” said Alex. “This job is okay, but I’d probably leave if I could. It’s too risky right now to just quit. If I can’t find something, then I’ll be in trouble when that next tuition bill comes around.”

“Look on the bright side. At least you make more than Jeans. She’s been here for 7years, still working in the deli,” replied Stephanie.

“That’s true,” sighed Alex as he returned to his lunch. He looked up at the clock. They had been at lunch for a half hour already. Dan was quite the stickler about keeping lunch to a minimum. Although store policy allowed employees 45 minutes for lunch, Dan often pushed his employees to keep it to 30 minutes. As Alex quickened his chewing, Dan strolled into the break room and opened the refrigerator, his back to Alex and Stephanie.

Wheeling around with a soda in hand, Dan commented, “Bit of a long lunch, hey Alex?”

Alex could feel the blood rising to his face. “It’s been exactly a half hour, and I’m almost finished,” he said.

“Well, we’re running low on apples again. So quite lying around and get back to work.” Dan walked toward the door, stopped, and turned around. “I thought that college students were supposed to be smarter than this. At the very least I would hope that they could tell time.” He added, -“ I guess the university must have glossed over your application.” And with that, Dan left.

“What a jerk,” said Stephanie after Dan was out of earshot.

“What else is new,” said Alex. “I’d guess I’d better get back to work.” Alex got up and returned what was left of his lunch to the refrigerator. When he opened the door, he noticed a sandwich labeled with a post-it note that read “Dan’s.” After glancing quickly to the door, he casually swept the sandwich onto the floor. Stephanie turned around at the sound.

“Oops,” smirked Alex. He paused, staring down at the sandwich. “Five-second rule!” he said as he picked up the sandwich, being sure to smear the underside of it on the floor. After putting it neatly back on the shelf, Alex turned to Stephanie. “Well Steph, have a good one. I think maybe I’ll take my time on those apples.”

Questions for Discussion



1. How can expectancy theory be used to explain the differences in motivation between Alex and Stephanie? What specifics from the case apply to expectancy theory?
2. Alex states that he is underpaid for the work he does. What motivational theory does this apply to, and how would it explain Alex's behavior?
3. Using concepts from organizational justice, explain why Alex knocks his boss's lunch to the floor. What should Alex's boss do to improve the fairness of his treatment?