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Opinion #24

What the newspapers won't tell you!

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Join Clark County and receive...

GUARANTEED LIFETIME EMPLOYMENT

...regardless of your ability

County workers are hired for their presumed talent but can only be fired for "cause."

What does this mean? If you lose your mojo or miss the point, you still get to keep your job...

Forever!

BY GLENN CAMPBELL

A few months ago, Clark County leadership stepped up to the plate and approved scores of new child welfare positions for the Department of Family Services. This is a good thing, right? Caseloads have to be brought down, and apart from taking in fewer children, more staff is the only way to do it.

But could there be an underside to this positive turn of events? DFS is currently on a hiring binge like never seen before. If there are too many open positions and not enough qualified candidates, isn't this going to draw down

our standards?

If our needs are huge and the candidate pool is weak, might we be taking on a massive influx of mediocre employees who will be with us forever? Could this be a time bomb in the making?

The risk is exacerbated by the nature of government. Government is the last bastion of secure employment in the modern world. Pay is lucrative; benefits are generous, and once you join the force, you never have to face unemployment again.

In Family Court, government is represented by the County of Clark, which employs nearly all of the resident workers except the judges themselves. The county employs the caseworkers, the juvenile probation officers, the juvenile DAs as well as the public defenders who oppose them, court clerks, hearing masters, bailiffs, family mediation specialists, janitors, groundskeepers and those invisible geeks who make the computers run.

Welcome To
County of Clark
The new Worker's Paradise!



From each according to his ability; to each according to his needs. What's wrong with that?

Overall, the County of Clark is a huge empire of some 10,000 employees. The majority are protected by a union which assures that no one is fired arbitrarily and that everyone gets to share in the fruits of the American Dream. That dream, of course, is to be able to purchase whatever useless product you see on TV, acquire real estate that could house an army of Pakistanis, and to spend yourself deeply into debt regardless of your income.

It is a far cry from the unions of yore, which defended the truly helpless Worker from ruthless exploitation by The Man, who would pay him only pennies a day. Today, the union protects the gravy and keeps it flowing, while the helpless ones are the clients of government services and the taxpayers who must foot the bill.

Things work a bit differently in the private sector, where you may still have unions but you also have a concept called Reality. Reality means that the organization as a whole has to compete with others and produce a product, and if it doesn't make the grade, it is going to collapse, union and all.

Government, on the other hand, is never going to collapse, because it is supported by the taxpayers. It is like an old growth forest that never has a forest fire so never has an opportunity to clear out the dead wood.

As DFS takes on some 100+ new staff, the question arises: How many of them will be dead wood who will clutter up the forest for decades?

We are already starting from a disadvantage: too many positions and not enough qualified candidates. This means that any warm body with the right resume is likely to get the job.

Unfortunately, there is a lot about a person that doesn't appear on their resume. They also have a factor called "personality," which may only become apparent months after they start work. Personality is an individual's style of operating (or their unique mental illness, if you prefer) which is pretty much fixed by the time they reach adulthood.

This style means that a person is suitable for some jobs and not for others. A hard-driving salesman probably won't make a good social worker, while a computer programmer might not fly as a

fashion designer. When people find the job that is right for them, they "click" into it, and you don't have to give them a lot of training or explanation.

When personality doesn't match the job, you've got problems. The employee doesn't "get it" on their own, so you have to stop and explain it to them, again and again. You have to develop more rules and procedures to keep them in line, and if you forget to explicitly warn them about something, they won't notice it on their own. If you've got 100 employees who get it and one who doesn't, pretty soon your whole organization is revolving around the one. He requires more structure, which in turn burdens the rest.

We can live with incompetence at the DMV, where the only things at risk are driver's licenses and car registrations. At DFS, there are lives at risk. A worker who doesn't grasp the non-verbal subtleties of their craft can cause enormous devastation, not just now but for generations into the future.

If a caseworker doesn't intuitively know the essence and ethics of their position, then there probably isn't any training program or Performance Improvement Plan that can give it to them, yet they may have done nothing "wrong." Usually they don't know they don't get it. As they place an abused child into an inappropriate foster home, they think they are doing a fantastic job or at least aren't responsible for the outcome.

In government, it is extraordinarily difficult to get rid of these people. This is due, in part, to the many hoops you have to jump through to fire someone, but it is also a natural product of human loyalty when insulated from Reality.

When you are hiring people, you only want the best. If there are 20 qualified candidates for one position, you are going to choose the one who you believe is the best "fit" for the job. However, once you have hired them, the presumption shifts. They now become a member of your family, and you don't want to hurt them.

Joe Schmoe may not get it, but when you go into his office, you see a photo of his own family who you know depends on him. You know he is trying his best within his limited ability and would be

devastated if you turned against him. How can you tell him he doesn't get it?

In government, you may try to hire the best talent, but you can only fire for "cause"—that is, for something explicitly done wrong. There can be a huge gap between the two. In the middle is mediocrity—nothing done provably wrong but nothing done right either.

The most powerful tool against mediocrity is the probationary period. During the first few months, management has the power of God over new employees and can drop them without cause and without union interference. Furthermore, under the new union contract, this period can be extended for up to 12 months.

This tool is rarely used, however. There is still family loyalty, which kicks in well before the end of the probationary period. Even if the employee shows an obvious lack of talent and intuition, there may still be a sense that "we can work with him" because the alternative—rejecting him, disrupting the social structure and starting over from scratch in the hiring process—seems too painful to face.

Then there are the employees who lose their mojo after the probationary period. Maybe someone has been on the job for ten years and has been promoted to their "level of incompetence." A good caseworker may make a poor supervisor, because the skills are different, but once he reaches that level he stays, and stays, until only retirement can relieve us of him.

It is a tragedy when a child welfare worker burns out and leaves. An even greater tragedy, however, is when they burn out and don't leave. They stop feeling, and the children they deal with just become objects.

Creative management can solve these problems, even within union constraints, but it takes strength, wisdom and courage. It is easy enough to hire, but firing is as painful and difficult as divorce. Nonetheless, it has to be done or a manager isn't really managing.

Your family at work may be important, but the families being served are even more important. —GC