

Role-Play Exercise: TastEE Foods

Directions for Instructor

1. Print copies of the role-play exercise pages (one copy of “Background” for each student in the class; one set of the roles for every five students in the class).
2. Develop teams of five students (there are five unique roles in TastEE Foods).
3. Have each student read the “Background” as an introduction to the exercise.
4. Assign each student a role to play and provide the specific role description.
5. Indicate the desired outcome of the process (e.g., press conference, written and/or oral presentation, short-term plan, long-term plan, employee meeting, etc.) and create feedback mechanisms appropriate for the desired outcome.
6. Teams will need at least forty-five minutes to review, discuss, and prepare.
7. Link the key issues to course training and learning objectives.

Key Issues

Product safety | Conflict of interest | Wrongful termination | Organizational structure | Employee relationships

Background

TastEE Foods is a canned food manufacturer founded in 1982. Its original product line consisted of canned vegetables that now account for 47 percent of its revenue. In 2000 the company diversified into canned fruit, which now accounts for 43 percent of their sales. The remaining 10 percent consists of baby food, a recent product line adopted only four years ago. However, the baby line seems to be the most successful. Although it has only been introduced in the northwest area, it has captured nearly 25 percent of the market. TastEE promotes the fact that it uses only the freshest organic ingredients to create its baby food. Due to efficiencies of scale, the company has been able to offer its baby food line at a lower price than most competitors in the organic baby food industry. Consumers appreciate giving their babies the best in quality at reasonable prices. TastEE believes revenues from its baby food line will only increase, which seems promising considering that the canned vegetable market has begun to experience declining margins.

TastEE Foods has plants in 12 different states. Its global headquarters is in Durham, North Carolina. Although the company has adopted standardized procedures for its different plants, management tends to favor more of a decentralized approach so that each plant can adapt to the different locations. Each plant is therefore responsible for a certain amount of planning, developing policies and procedures, and budgeting. TastEE also encourages its plant managers to come up with ideas on ways to improve the company. It believes this more inclusive form of decision making differentiates its plants from the traditional factory experience. Each plant has its own plant manager, and most plant managers have hired functional managers to run the different business areas and oversee the front-line managers.

TastEE depends upon its high reputation for quality. Its star factory is located in New Haven, Connecticut. A few years ago, the plant was a disaster, and corporate was on the verge of shutting it down. Yet this all changed three years ago with a new plant manager, Trent. Trent is thought to be a maverick who was able to convince corporate to invest \$20 million in canned corn and mixed vegetable baby food. The investment paid off enormously. Today the plant has the best gross operating margin and highest productivity of all facilities. Corporate wants to use it as a model for its other facilities.

Two months ago, calls began to filter in saying that babies in the northeastern area of the country were getting sick with vomiting and other symptoms. TastEE Foods products were implicated as the cause. A closer examination discovered bacteria that had somehow tainted the baby food. This discovery led to a barrage of phone calls from the press. Corporate headquarters quickly launched an investigation to determine where the tainted baby products had originated from and were dismayed when they learned they had come from its New Haven factory. The corporate office sent in a manager from the quality control office to investigate how this occurred, and it was discovered that faulty equipment had allowed the bacteria to sneak in. The CEO initiates an immediate recall in the regions supplied by the New Haven plant, but the damage has already been done. Although there have been no fatalities, at least 20 babies have gotten sick. The public is furious when the

media informs them that the factory responsible had faulty equipment and blames Trent. They are demanding that he be fired. The CEO has set up a meeting tomorrow with the Vice President of Operations, the Vice President of Quality Control, the Manager of Communications, and the Manager of Human Resources to discuss damage control and put together an action plan for what to do next. It also needs to consider what it should do with their star plant manager Trent.

Justin, CEO

You are the CEO of TastEE Foods and have been with the company for more than 15 years. You have high expectations for the company and do not like to tolerate performance that is anything less than superior. However, you have the reputation of being tough but fair. That is why when the New Haven factory began experiencing less-than-adequate performance, you gave them some additional time to clean up their act. When Trent became plant manager of the New Haven plant and completely turned it around, you were amazed. At first, you wondered about his methods, but you decided that he is simply a talented manager who has particular skills in turning around struggling plants.

You are highly dismayed at the negative publicity the company is getting and hate to think that a product coming from your company made babies sick. You are glad there are no fatalities, but you know that nonetheless, this could devastate the baby food business for the firm.

After you sent a team to investigate how the problem arose, they returned and told you that one of the plant's main machines had a serious malfunction, allowing the ingredients to be exposed to outside contamination. After hearing about the problem, you find it hard to believe that plant manager Trent could not have known about it. Malfunctioning equipment must be reported immediately according to company policy. Because the malfunction was so extensive, the company would not have been able to get it repaired and would have had to purchase a whole new piece of equipment. This particular piece of equipment was incredibly expensive and would have caused long delays for the New Haven plant. This is why you suspect that Trent knew about the malfunction but continued operating the equipment anyway. If true, then you want to terminate him immediately. Your no-nonsense attitude does not tolerate skipping corners, especially when it could have such a devastating effect on the company.

A day ago, you received a call that informed you consumers were filing lawsuits against the company. Sales of baby food have dropped drastically. The communications manager informs you that customers across the nation have lost faith in the product and that to allay concerns, TastEE should institute a recall throughout the entire northwestern region instead of simply recalling products from the New Haven plant. You do not see the need for this as none of the other factories seem to have New Haven's problems.

The more you think about it, the angrier you get at Trent. You feel that this one mistake could bring down the entire company. You talked to the human resources manager about firing him, but she was not supportive of doing so without more proof. Meanwhile, the press is hounding you day and night. You decide to call a meeting to discuss ways to deal with the situation.

Kayla, Vice President of Quality Control

You have worked for several different food companies in quality control, training, and operations for the past 17 years. TastEE hired you from Nestlé six years ago. Having begun your career at the manufacturing level, you have a good working relationship with the plant managers, especially with plant manager Trent. In fact, you were influential in hiring him to turn around the New Haven plant. You did not tell the hiring committee that you and Trent had actually dated quite seriously while you were in college because you did not think it was relevant. You do not feel that it constitutes a conflict of interest. You knew Trent had amazing managerial skills and was more than qualified for the job. It had nothing to do with your past relationship. However, you think it would be best if others were not made aware of it.

One thing that has made you uncomfortable since you started here is the decentralized structure of the different plants. While you think a decentralized structure has its place in certain occupations, you feel that a factory environment requires a much more centralized structure. You were not pleased when you discovered that each plant manager had their own type of quality control and training. Most of them seem to have appropriate controls in place, but you discovered that the plant in Lexington had eliminated formal quality control audits and substituted sporadic questionnaires filed by the plant managers.

Although you reported this to management, the issue has not been resolved. The Vice President of Operations seemed to adopt a nonchalant attitude toward the news, and you believe that all he cares about is productivity. You also feel uncomfortable around the Vice President of Operations due to some remarks he made about your good looks, but you don't think these qualify as harassment.

You were happy to learn that Trent had hired a seasoned quality control manager for the New Haven factory and had all the recommended processes and procedures in place. This is why you are so surprised when you hear that contamination has occurred at the factory. You are certain that Trent had no knowledge of the faulty machinery and wonder if the quality control manager for the plant had slipped up somewhere. However, from what you have heard, the CEO is incredibly angry with Trent and blames him for the problem. According to rumors, he is looking for the best way to fire him. You are certain he is innocent and do not want him to lose his job. You are especially nervous because you were the one who advocated for his hire.

Even worse, the Vice President of Operations stopped by yesterday and hinted about a relationship you are having or were having with Trent. You worry about whether he will inform the CEO at the upcoming meeting among the top managers.

Dimitri, Vice President of Operations

You have worked for TastEE for 20 years and have been proud to see your company come so far. You are incredibly loyal to the firm and want nothing to get in the way of productivity. You haven't had a vacation in years, much to your family's chagrin. You are considering taking early retirement, but you think you'd miss the thrill of working too much.

You especially enjoy working with the Vice President of Quality Control, Kayla. The more you spend time working alongside her, the more you are turned off by her seriousness and her belief that quality control trumps all other business functions. You especially dislike how she treats your role in the company. It's clear she thinks you do not contribute much to the firm, when in reality you have given a good chunk of your life and family happiness to making this company succeed. Some time ago the two of you got into an argument about a factory in Lexington that was not complying with quality control procedures. She wanted to implement new procedures that would significantly hinder production, and the Lexington plant is one of the firm's biggest. When you told her in no uncertain terms that the plant must continue operating as is, she blew up and accused you of only caring about the bottom line.

You are angered when the scandal breaks but feel secret satisfaction that the contaminated product came from the much-lauded New Haven plant and not the one in Lexington. Still, you realize a scandal of this magnitude could break the company, and you have worked too hard to let that happen.

A couple of days ago you heard a rumor that Kayla had had a past relationship with New Haven plant manager Trent. You did a little bit of digging and found that they had been very close in college. You also know she was the one who championed Trent's hire, which would have created a significant conflict of interest that Kayla was required by company policy to disclose. You feel that Kayla obviously got this man hired because of their past relationship and feel it is therefore her fault that this scandal is happening.

You were so annoyed that you stopped by her office yesterday and implied that you knew about the relationship. This morning she acted really nice to you, and you don't want to get her fired. You are unsure about whether to inform the CEO.

Eric, Communications Manager

This is your first managerial position, and you hope it will be your last. The moment you entered this job you have encountered obstacles. The communication systems in this company are atrocious. You especially hated having to be the one to tell the company plant in Albuquerque that it was closing and letting go more than 300 workers.

You feel that the other managers do not keep you adequately informed—which is a big deal since you are the communications manager. In fact, you were last among management to be informed about the contaminated baby food products. By that time the press was already breathing down your neck, and you felt stupid because you did not have any answers prepared for them. The CEO also refused to talk to the media, and you think this makes TastEE appear uncaring. Apparently, nobody else in this company has any idea how to handle a crisis situation.

You are really upset that the contaminated baby food was traced back to the New Haven plant because for the last year you have been promoting the plant for its high efficiency and production levels. You had even started a recognition program to recognize extraordinary individuals in the company. You thought this would be a good way to increase morale and publicity. Of course, the first recipient of the prize was New Haven plant manager Trent for his amazing accomplishment of turning the plant around. Now with all these demands for Trent to step down, you feel like a fool.

At this point, it matters very little to you whether Trent knew about the malfunctioning machinery or not. Either way, the company's reputation has been dealt a blow that it will likely not recover from anytime soon. You inform the CEO about consumer concerns that all baby food products from the company are contaminated and not just those from the New Haven plant. While the firm has recalled all products from the area served by New Haven, you believe a wide-scale recall of all baby food products is necessary to allay consumer fears. As usual, the CEO doesn't agree with you. However, he did agree to a meeting that will take place tomorrow with the rest of the top managers. You hope the managers will not spring anything new on you.

Courtney, Human Resources Manager

You have worked at this job for the past five years and are well-liked. In fact, you passed up jobs at other places so you could continue working here. You always strive to do your best for the employees. You view yourself as a buffer, ensuring that employee rights are respected and they are treated fairly.

Like the other managers, you are surprised and shocked about the contamination scandal. Although you did not hire Trent, you heard a lot about him and didn't think he would be the type of person to ignore a problem because it might halt production temporarily. You wonder if perhaps there is more going on at the New Haven plant than meets the eye. Employees seemed happy there, but what if they just acted that way to keep from being retaliated against? You decide to check records of complaints received through the hotline for the past year. Very few employee complaints have been about the New Haven plant.

A few weeks ago, the CEO burst into your office and wanted to know how he could go about firing Trent. The CEO is certain that Trent knew about the malfunctioning machine. However, you know the investigation has not proved that Trent had any knowledge that the machine was malfunctioning. You try to explain to the CEO that he would have to wait until the investigation into the contamination scandal was completed.

But the CEO didn't seem to care. He wanted to fire Trent outright with no severance package. Again, you claim that you cannot just fire him with no proof, and as the severance package was part of his contract upon hire, the company would have to prove he was willfully negligent to avoid paying the severance package. You also inform the CEO that more and more employees today are filing—and sometimes winning—lawsuits for unfair termination of employment. However, the CEO did not want to hear any of it. You hope the meeting tomorrow to address what should be done will go more smoothly.