

Viewpoint

Whose side is the manager on?

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He's resistant to new ideas," was the comment of the district manager when asked for a reference on a dining service manager who formerly reported to him.

"He puts his client's interest ahead of the interests of [the food service contractor]," the manager's former client said.

Two reasonably valid comments about the same behavior from different perspectives. Other than this point, the two references agreed. The candidate is bright, experienced, capable and had good relations with the people of the company he served.

So, should he be hired? That depends.

Actually, the "candidate" is a composite of several men and women, some of whom worked for me in the past and others I've interviewed on clients' behalf.

He is the bane of a food service contractor's existence: a competent person who doesn't always play with the team. Every contractor has a few. Most don't know what to do with him. They're afraid to fire him and alienate the client, so, usually, they grit their teeth and go along with him (or her).

This manager bonds with his client and looks out for the client's interests, even when that conflicts with the interests of his employer, the contractor . . . sometimes. And sometimes, this manager is playing off the client and his district manager against each other for his own benefit.

"The client doesn't want this," the manager tells the DM when, say, the company wants to introduce a new feature. "They won't let me do that," he tells his client, when the client wants something that may require a little extra work. Unless the DM and client have good communication, the manager has it both ways.

Of course, there are plenty of instances when the contractor's objective – maximum return for minimal cost – really conflicts with the client's goal, best possible service at the lowest possible cost. A manager's conscience may tell him to resist his own company when, for example, the contractor adds charges to the operating statement for services not performed.

So, how do you tell the conscientious manager from the politician? The capable manager accomplishes your objectives without alibis. He knows how to work within his company's system. The politician spends his time explaining why "they won't let me (whatever).

- Tom Mac Dermott