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When No News Is Bad News: The Case Of The Bubbled Executive

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Hipponax BioMed Corporation: A Teaching Case and Self-Assessment Tool Instructor's Teaching Notes

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Case Summary

After a successful 15-year stint in charge of research and development at a Fortune 500 pharmaceutical company, Dr. Jean Chen is now heading a new venture, namely Hipponax BioMed Corporation. Hipponax was founded five years ago primarily to launch a new drug to treat high blood pressure; this drug was inspired on a potentially revolutionary biotech procedure that Jean Chen had developed herself. Jean Chen is portrayed to be a detail-oriented manager and researcher, whose prior successes were due partly to her ability to keep up and control the details of the rather complex product launching process. However, the new product launching had turned out to be less than smooth. Specifically, the current formulation of the new product did not pass an important lab test that was needed to obtain the final drug approval from the appropriate regulatory agencies, namely the dissolution test, which is related to the hardness of the tablets. Meanwhile, Jean's management team seemed involved in a game of mutual blame. Claudia Holmes, an aggressive manager whom Jean knew from her time at the Fortune 500 company, had become Hipponax Director of Manufacturing. Claudia attributed the problem to faulty testing conducted by the Quality Assurance area, whose Director was Patricia Lemus. Patricia was a soft-spoken, methodical manager who had trouble adjusting to Claudia's "go-getter" style. The case takes place in the context of a meeting called for by Jean Chen to discuss the issues that are hampering new product approval at Hipponax.

Case Objectives

The case described here mixes and matches accounts of real business situations reported by many managers who were interviewed for this purpose. Contrary to the cases typically employed in business classes, this one takes place in "real time." That is, the reader learns about a number of business situations involving three different managers.

The case describes how one or more of these managers react to the situations as they experience them. However, as the case proceeds, the reader is also presented with a number of questions regarding how she/he would have handled the situations. The reader is asked to step back from the case for a moment and take the time to answer the questions before s/he continues reading the case.

The case's primary objective is to increase the participants' self-awareness about the extent to which their management style encourages employee feedback-seeking behavior. Specifically, there are three possible styles evaluated in the questions inserted throughout the case: (1) micromanager, (2) zero-tolerant manager, and (3) conflict-avoidant manager. These styles are described in detail in the article by Sherry Moss and Juan I. Sanchez (2004) entitled "The Feedback Gap: Leveraging Organizational Learning through Meaningful and Effective Dialogue about Employee Performance," published in the *Academy of Management Executive*, Volume 18(1), pages 32-46. The description of each one of the three main actors in the case illustrates typical reactions of a micromanager (Jean Chen), a zero-tolerant manager (Claudia Holmes), and a conflict-avoidant manager (Patricia Lemus). The descriptions of the actors' reactions in the case provide participants with a framework that helps them reflect about how they would handle such situations themselves. The answers describing their hypothetical reactions are then captured in the questions inserted throughout the case. Their answers are combined to compute three individual scores describing the extent to which their management style reflects the one of a typical micromanager, zero-tolerant manager, and conflict avoidant manager. Individual scores are then shared with the participants, who can then compare them to the normative data describing how respondents have scored so far.

In addition to the self-assessment, this case provides participants with a series of dilemmas encountered when interacting with managers who present one or more of the dysfunctional behaviors that characterize micromanagers, zero-tolerant managers, and conflict-avoidant managers. Everyone has had some experience with these managers; in fact, because all of us probably behave a bit like them at times, the case provides a double opportunity to (1) anticipate how one interacts with these types of managers and (2) prevent falling in the trap of becoming one of them.