

Chapter 2: Case for Critical Analysis

Rio Grande Supply Company

Jasper Hennings, president of Rio Grande Supply Company, knew full well that a company's top executives were largely responsible for determining a firm's corporate culture. That's why he took such personal pride in the culture of his Texas-based wholesale plumbing supply company. It didn't just pay lip service to the values it espoused: integrity, honesty, and a respect for each individual employee. His management team set a good example by living those principles. At least that's what he'd believed until the other day.

The importance Jasper attached to respecting each individual was apparent in the company's Internet use policy. It was abundantly clear that employees weren't to use Rio Grande's computers for anything but business-related activities. However, Jasper himself had vetoed the inclusion of what was becoming a standard provision in such policies that management had the right to access and review anything employees created, stored, sent, or received on company equipment. He cut short any talk of installing software filters that would prevent abuse of the corporate computer system. Still, the company reserved the right to take disciplinary action, including possible termination, and to press criminal charges if an employee was found to have violated the policy.

So how was Jasper to square his cherished assumptions about his management team with what he'd just discovered? Henry Darger, his hard-working chief of operations and a member of his church, had summarily fired a female employee for having accessed another worker's e-mail surreptitiously. She hadn't taken her dismissal well. "Just ask Darger what he's up to when he shuts his office door," she snarled as she stormed out of Jasper's office. She made what Jasper hoped was an idle threat to hire a lawyer.

When Jasper asked Henry what the fired employee could possibly have meant, tears began to roll down the operations chief's face. He admitted that ever since a young nephew had committed suicide the year before and a business he'd helped his wife start had failed, he'd increasingly been seeking escape from his troubles by logging onto adult pornography sites. At first, he'd indulged at home, but of late he'd found himself spending hours at work visiting pornographic sites, the more explicit the better. Jasper was stunned. After a few speechless minutes, he told Henry to take the rest of the day off, go home, and think things over.

The president himself needed the afternoon to gather his wits. How should he handle this turn of events? On the one hand, Henry's immediate dismissal of the woman who'd tapped into another employee's e-mail when the operations chief was violating the Internet policy himself was hypocritical, to say the least. The person charged with enforcing that policy needed to be held to the highest standards. On the other hand, Jasper knew that Rio Grande employees routinely used computers at their desks to check personal e-mail, do banking transactions, check the weather, or make vacation arrangements. The company had turned a blind eye because it didn't seem worth the effort of enforcing the hard-and-fast policy for such minor infractions. Besides, Henry was a valued, if clearly troubled, employee. Replacing him would be costly and difficult. If Jasper decided to keep him on, the president clearly had no choice but to cross the line and get involved in Henry's private life, and he would be treating Darger differently from the treatment the female employee received.

When he met with Henry again first thing in the morning, he needed to have a plan of action.

Questions

1. What environmental factors have helped to create the situation Jasper Hennings faces? What factors does Jasper need to consider when deciding on his course of action?
2. Analyze Rio Grande's culture. In addition to the expressed cultural values and beliefs, what other subconscious values and beliefs do you detect? Are conflicting values present? When values are in conflict, how would you decide which ones take precedence?
3. Assume you are Jasper. What are the first two action steps you would take to handle the Henry Darger situation? How would your role as a cultural leader influence your decision? What message will your solution send to the other managers and rank-and-file employees?

SOURCES: Based on Willard P. Green, "Pornography at Work," *Business Ethics* (Summer 2003): 19; Patrick Marley, "Porn-Viewing Parole Agent Regains Job," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Jan. 24, 2006) (www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=387492); "Sample Internet Policies for Businesses and Organizations," *Websense* (www.websense-sales.com/internet-access-policy.html); and Art Lambert, "Technology in the Workplace: A Recipe for Legal Trouble," *Workforce* (Feb. 14, 2005) (www.workforce.com/archive/article/23/95/08.php).