

HARD-CORE? HELL, I WOULD HAVE HIRED HIM ANYWAY

*a tale of hiring
a black dropout
with an arrest record*

Oh no you wouldn't, Mr. Supervisor! The 22-year old black person you hired six weeks ago is a high school drop-out, has a spotty employment history and an arrest record.

You say you would have hired him anyway. Yes, now that you know him. Without the prodding by the personnel department and the preparatory meetings held by the company, you would still possess the skepticism, doubt and misgivings relating to the problems that might be encountered in your department.

Maybe it's time we refresh our memory about the events leading to the employment of Willie Jones.

THE COMPANY ORIENTATION

Vaguely you remember reading in various newspapers and in weekly magazines about the efforts in business to recruit, hire and train "hard-core" employees. Eight weeks ago you and a group of your fellow supervisors were called into the training conference room where you saw a film describing some very positive results a few companies have been having in employing the hard-core "unemployables."

You remember thinking during the film, that these results were obtained from a few companies far removed from our line of business and that it would never work in our company and, in particular, your department.

After the film, the personnel department representative explained that the company had committed itself to hiring 50 hard-core employees within the next two months. You also remember the whispered comment made by one of the attendees, "Now the company has gone into the charity business." Also remember your thoughts, "At least it will keep them off the streets, off welfare and out of riots."

About a week later, you attended another meeting called by the training department. The objective of that session was to attempt to anticipate some of the problems you might run into. These

problems fell into two categories: (1) those problems you were going to have, and (2) those of the hard-core.

One of the problems discussed would be in your selecting a "buddy" to which to assign your new man. You also had to decide what kind of training the man would require to qualify him for the job. After all, your trainee was going to be a high school drop-out. Another problem discussed was how were you going to reconcile this with the job specifications that called for "high school graduate"? Furthermore, you had a small, all white department, with some of your employees having a high degree of prejudice. What would be the trainee's effect on them, what would their effect be on him? How would this impact on the work flow? What kind of headaches would this give you? You concluded the company had committed itself to providing you with additional anguish and work that you hadn't agreed on when you accepted your position.

The training department pointed out some of the trainees' problems: He would probably have undependable transportation; he'd have a "show me" attitude since he had been fired from his last two jobs; his creditors would be after him the moment they found out he had a job; he communicates in a language that was difficult to understand, e.g., a car is a 'short,' a 'natural' is a kind of hair style and "my brothers" doesn't necessarily mean blood relatives.

Of most concern would be the man's attitude. The company explained that even before he could be considered for employment, he had to go to the State Employment Office to be certified as "hard-core." Incredible! He had to be told he was "hard-core," then asked if he would like to consider working for our company. Surprisingly, he said "Yes." Would you have said "yes" in similar circumstances?

The personnel representative told you about the employment process your new man was going to go through before he could report to you on that aus-

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picious Monday afternoon. The man would go through the regular employment "loop": the application, interview, security clearance, physical examination and supervisory interview.

MEETING WILLIE

It seems like yesterday, but it was six weeks ago that you interviewed Willie. He was neatly dressed. He was polite but relatively uncommunicative, answering questions cautiously and giving rather sparse information. You remember thinking about your stereotype: "shabbily dressed, talking jive and not really interested in working but happily living off of public assistance." Willie tore holes in your stereotype figure, didn't he?

Although Willie was quiet, you felt there was a spark of determination in him so you asked him to report to work the following Monday. You weren't quite sure he'd show up, but what the hell, the company was committed. Besides, hadn't the personnel representative just spent the last hour telling you how "underestimated" the hard-core was? He blandly told you that more hard-core people succeed on a job than don't. The representative stated that your company would help to provide whatever education and training was necessary to the man to help him be successful on the job.

Unknown to the personnel man, but the most persuasive point he made was his passing remark that "the hard-core may have to be tried out on several jobs before we can find one that is most suitable." You inferred, well, I'll keep him awhile, then transfer him out. I've got an escape hatch. I won't really have to keep him. With this in mind you told the personnel department to fill your open requisition with Willie Jones.

WILLIE STARTS WORK

On Monday morning Willie went through the usual company orientation. In addition, the personnel department explained to him that he would be treated just the same as any other employee.

Paradoxically, he was again reminded that he was part of a hard-core group and if he had trouble on the job to discuss his problems with personnel or his supervisor. The orientation ended with the invitation to call on the company if any situation would prevent him from being on the job. Perhaps it was this genuine offer to help, coupled with the straightforward hiring process that favorably impacted on Willie's "show me" attitude. It certainly wasn't the implication that because he was hard-core, there would be problems.

He learned a little about the company history and its products. The usual briefings on security, safety, insurance, etc. were given. Willie, like other employees, didn't really remember the details, but he did get a fairly favorable initial impression of his new company.

At any rate, when he reported to you right after lunch, he seemed anxious to start doing something. Doing something. What? Where was that training plan you had half-heartedly started and not finished?

You found it. It read: 1. Interview him, find out his skills. 2. Make our rules clear about attendance, no funny business. 3. Show him the job. 4. Introduce him to his "buddy." 5. Set up an evaluation system. 6. ---. You mutter to yourself, "Damn, I should have thought through the rest of the steps. At least I can kill some time by interviewing him."

While Willie sat waiting outside the office, you told Joe, over the intercom, "The new guy is here. I'll interview him for awhile, then I'll give him to you. See if you can keep him busy for the rest of the afternoon, meanwhile, I'll think about just how we're going to break him in."

Joe said, "Is this the hard-core deadbeat I heard we may be getting?"

You asked Joe not to jump to conclusions and again alerted him to receive Willie in a little while.

"Come in, Willie. We're glad to have you on board," you lied. "I'm Ron Grey, your supervisor."

Willie said, "Uh Huh."

"What did you do before you came here?"

"I been around, pickin' up a buck here and there."

"But where did you work before here?"

He named an outfit a few blocks away.

"How long did you work there?"

"A couple of months."

Other jobs turned out to be pretty much the same — menial and short-term.

You tried another approach. "Willie, how much have they told you about this job?"

"Not much 'cept it seemed to be a real job and the bread ain't bad."

"Bread?"

"Pay, man. It's better than living off welfare. Besides, the man said I better get a job soon or he was going to tell my parole officer."

"The man? What man do you mean, Willie?"

"The social worker."

"So you're only working because the social worker threatened to tell your parole officer that you haven't been trying to get a job? Is that true?"

"Right, and if I don't get a job soon, I'll have to go back to the slammer. Not that I haven't been after a job, but once the personnel cat hears you've been in jail, he won't give you a gig, no way. I think I know every employment lobby in the area."

"Why did your company give me the gig? Were they feeling they're not doing their thing?"

You were saved by Joe interrupting asking for some manufacturing procedural changes. It was easy to then introduce and assign Willie to him right then and there.

AT THE END OF THE DAY

Somehow Joe managed to keep Willie busy the first day. The tasks were menial and didn't really contribute

much to your departmental functioning. Nevertheless, it bought you time to formalize (write out) the rest of Willie's training plan.

At the end of that first day, Willie passed by your office on his way out of the plant. "How was it?" you asked.

"OK, but . . ."

"Want to talk about it?" You felt he might have sensed your lack of adequate preparation for his arrival. Now that you had completed the training plan, you felt confident. You could give him a concrete run-down on his activities for the near future.

Willie started out, "What's it for? What am I *doing*? Oh sure, I ran to the stockroom and got some parts, and I even put some things together today. But what did I *do*?"

"Why, you're making an assembly."

"For what?"

You misinterpreted, you put the emphasis on the first word. "So that you can work here and not have to be a . . ."

Willie interrupted, "No, I said for *what*?"

"Oh, I misunderstood. You're making parts that go into a gearbox. You'll be assigned to running a cable into the box."

"What does the box do?"

I then explained how the gearbox fitted into the product we were manufacturing. It took 20 minutes. I could have done it in less, but Willie interjected several questions. Surprising, I thought, he's really interested.

We left and Willie thanked me for the explanation. Guiltily I said under my breath, "My obligation to a new employee is to tell him *before* he gets on the job. Why didn't I do it with him?" The answer, of course, is that I didn't think he'd be interested, and besides that, you felt it was charity.

The next few days showed I had underestimated him in many ways. I began to get grudging reports from Joe.

"I never would have believed it, but he's a bit better than most trainees. He grasps quite quickly. I thought you said he flunked out of school. He's not stupid; in fact, he's pretty bright."

A TALK WITH WILLIE

The average new employee takes about two full weeks to come up to production standard. Willie was almost there at the end of the first week.

I called him into my office to compliment him at the end of the first week. He smiled when I thanked him for his effort. I guess that was the first time I saw him smile; but he still seemed reserved.

Why the defensiveness, the reserve? I decided to try and get through it.

"Willie, you've been here a week now. So far, we are pleased with your progress. How do you feel about it?"

"I bet I could do better if I wasn't so stupid."

"Stupid?"

"Yeah. I could earn more bread if I hadn't dropped out of school."

"You mean you could earn more money on this job? Or another job?"

"Both, man. I had a summer job similar to this when I was 15. This job a fool could do. The man told me to stay in school, but when fall came I didn't go back. I figured our family could use the bread. My sister was working and had taken care of us ever since our old man copped out. She was going to get married soon and the family bread was going to stop. I stayed on the job for almost a year. One day there were some tools missing from work."

"Someone said I did it. I didn't, but I was let go at the end of the week. Something about a "reduction in force." I knew who did it. It wasn't me; but I sure as hell wasn't going to fink after they canned me."

"I was madder than hell. Several people told me to go back to school since I wasn't working. I was so mad I couldn't sit still, so I took off for the nearest bar,

blew my exit bread and then some. I didn't get over that drunk for a week."

"So there I was, not quite 16, a 10th grade education, broke and no job. I started playing some games."

"Playing some games?"

"Uh huh, I broke into a couple of houses and took some stuff. Then one night I got busted in a grocery store taking some meat. I got off with "pro," because it was my first offense. I should have learned, but I knew it all. I tried to steal someone's ride one night, and they got me for GTA. I got sentence for that one. They taught me to do assembly work while I was sent up."

As Willie said "sent up," he stopped talking. He hadn't meant to reveal so much to me about himself.

"I knew you had been to prison, Willie. I saw it on your application. Besides, you alluded to it the other day when you mentioned your parole officer."

"You knew it and hired me anyway? I thought so."

"Yes. It really didn't matter."

In a sense this was true. Our firm had relaxed its policy of not hiring felons, because of this "hard-core" experiment. Nevertheless, this was the first ex-con I had ever met (or at least I thought I was certain about). Willie wasn't sure I had seen his application before he was hired.

"Willie, do you think you will be suspected in this job too, if something turns out missing?"

"Is the Pope Catholic? You're damned right I'll be suspected!"

"By whom? Me? Joe?"

"Puttin' it down front, Mr. Grey, you've been pretty straight with me so far. Joe didn't like me much at first, but he's been more friendly lately. Maybe you had a talk with him, huh? Anyways, I'm not worried about the man. I'm worried about some of these other dudes in the department."

"No, I didn't have a talk with Joe. If he has come around, it's because you've had quite an effect on him. As for the

rest of my department, people are people, Willie. There's good and bad. I hope the good outweighs the bad. I hope they're more open-minded than some of the people you've run across in the past."

"Will you take the statement for what it is? I really mean, Willie, that we will trust you as long as you give us no reason not to trust you."

"Speaking of trust, Willie, I notice you seem to be pretty much of a loner come lunchtime. Why don't you have lunch together with the rest of the guys? You know, people don't trust what or who they don't know. Let them get to know you. The more they know you, the more trust has a chance to build. Don't wait for them to come to you. They're just as shy or suspicious as you are. Why not break the ice?"

"I can see where you're comin' from, Mr. Grey. I can dig it that you want everybody in this department to feel part of the same team. But why should I trust *them*? Look what it's got me in the past. Honky is still honky and he'll turn on me or another brother just as fast as he always has."

"If you really believe this, we wouldn't be talking as frankly as we are and you wouldn't be trying as hard on this job as you do. You really are trying to make it, aren't you?"

"Damn it, that's all any person wants. I ain't no exception. I just want to do my thing — same as anyone else."

"Wait a minute, you're telling me to get out of my bag. I can't. I have to react as *me*."

"That's exactly right. React as *you*, as a person, as a human. Humans don't operate in society alone. They operate together."

"You mean you want to be together, with me? Really *together*?"

"Try me, Willie." The words came out so smoothly. I didn't even realize how natural it was.

* * * * *

A MONTH LATER

It's been a month since that "down front" discussion. Willie hasn't changed much, however, there are a few signs here and there that he's lowering his guard. It seems, the day after our discussion, one of the crew, Stanley, remarked that his car was giving him fits because it would miss and was difficult to start, despite new plugs, points, condenser and a carburetor boil-out. Willie said he had the same trouble once and found it was hairline cracks in the distributor cap. He said it might be worthwhile to look at it carefully.

That was it. Stanley asked Willie if he could buy him a beer to show his appreciation. Willie begged off, but this did not prevent them from eating their "brown bag" lunches together. I guess this broke the ice, because the next day Stanley and Willie were joined by the rest of the guys in the department. Now, they all eat together.

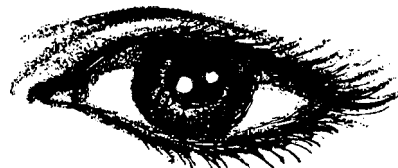
To me, the most gratifying event of all happened only yesterday. I gave Willie a special merit increase — not a hell of a lot, a dime an hour.

He didn't say much as I discussed his rapid grasp of the job and his good production record. He did seem to be a little receptive when I talked about continuing his education so that he'd have more of a chance to advance within my department or the rest of the company. But when I talked about his change of life style to the point where he could probably count on a paycheck every week, he seemed to freeze up and go uncommunicative again.

Nevertheless, the next morning before work started, he poked his head in my office and noting that I was alone, said, "Mr. Grey, I sure appreciate bein' here."

Then he went to his work bench and started running cable into the box — which was his *job*.

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER



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