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Perks or Rights? Accommodating Neurodiversity in the Unionized Workplace

Jamie Manning, the new vice president of sales at the Acme Company, knocked on the open office door of Mitchell Brewer, the vice president of human resources. She was unsure how to proceed since she had never before encountered a situation like this one. As Brewer looked up from his desk, Manning decided to get right to the point. “Mitchell, I might have an issue with one of my star engineers, Fatima Hassan,” she stated. “It involves her autism.”

“Autism. Ah, Jamie, this is a real busy morning for me. How about if we talk at ...” he looked at his calendar. “Around 2? I should have a chance to review our disability policies by then.”

“Okay. See you then.” Manning returned to her office, somewhat relieved but still uncertain. At least she would have some time to go over again what the engineer had told her. She hoped she and Brewer could collaborate on a solution that would be fair to her employee and not disrupt company operations.

ACME Company

Acme was a mid-sized company selling materials handling systems to a variety of light manufacturing industries. It was best known for its production systems for food manufacturers, which required specialized knowledge of food-safe materials and other safety standards. Food items also tend to be fragile, so customized approaches were needed to avoid damaging delicate products like baked goods, chocolates, and fruits as they traveled along the assembly and packaging lines.

Acme had been in existence since 1952. The founder’s son, Thomas Knott, was CEO and ran the company much as his father did. The organization had a traditional bureaucratic structure with many levels, strict reporting hierarchies, centralized decision-making, and relatively narrow spans of control that allowed for close supervision and development of individual employees. This close supervision maintained the organizational culture, which emphasized product innovation and outstanding customer service and support. Knowing and maintaining the “Acme way of doing things” was highly valued.

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