

Student Competition 2023

Writing Prompt

Association for Business Communication

Communicating with Customers and Employees: The Case of the Late Lifeguard

Case submitted by

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The Situation

RC, a communications professor at the University of Bristol, was a long-time member of the Bristol Health Club (BHC) where he liked to start his day with a brisk swim. Because of his busy teaching schedule, he was always the first into the water when the pool opened each morning.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the pool was closed from March 2019 through January 2020. The pool finally reopened in February 2021, but the start of the morning swim session was pushed back 30 minutes to 8:00 a.m. instead of its original 7:30 a.m. With a later open, RC's morning schedule was even tighter. With a limited amount of time to exercise, he relied on the pool's posted swim schedule to plan his day.

For years – both before and after the COVID shutdown – there had been a problem at the BHC pool: a frequently late lifeguard (LL). When LL finally arrived at the pool 15 minutes late one morning in January 2023, RC came to his breaking point and decided he had to act.

RC's Perspective

After an abbreviated workout, during which he could think about nothing but the LL situation, RC sent the following email to LL's supervisor:

To: Supervisor
Date: January 26, 2023, 9:45 a.m.
From: RC
Subject: Lifeguard LATE - AGAIN

Supervisor,

I am long-time member of the Bristol Health Club, and a frequent swimmer at the BHC pool. I am writing to alert you to the behavior of LL, the lifeguard on duty this morning.

Despite the fact that the start of the morning session was pushed back 30 minutes after the COVID shutdown, LL STILL DID NOT OPEN THE POOL ON TIME THIS MORNING. This is not one-time behavior – it has been an issue for years. In fact, I was there the morning he kept the mayor waiting for nearly 30 minutes. At that time, I told LL that he needed to be more respectful of others' time.

When LL finally arrived this morning, I told him that he couldn't keep opening the pool late. That he was stealing my time. His response was, "My supervisor knows." His response is troubling because (1) He doesn't show any concern for his impact on others, and (2) He seems to be suggesting that either this is acceptable behavior, or as his supervisor you are prevented from doing anything about it.

It's almost two years since the pool re-opened after the COVID shutdown. You're not doing him (or BHC members) any favors by condoning his delinquency – in fact, you are damaging BHC's reputation for

excellence. As a result, if you cannot address LL's behavior so that he knows tardiness is not acceptable, then I will be forced to post a negative review on multiple social media platforms for everyone to see.

Best regards,
RC

The Supervisor's Perspective

The BHC supervisor had been dealing with LL's tardiness for years. Despite the serious health crisis, she was relieved that she didn't have to deal with his tardiness when the pool was closed due to COVID-19, and then thought the problem would be solved when she pushed back the start time by 30 minutes to 8:00 a.m. LL had never been more than 30 minutes late before, so if he would have just followed his past behavior, then he never would have been late again. To her disappointment, LL persisted in his "delinquency." Although his tardiness was sporadic, over the years it had generated verbal complaints from several members. Unfortunately, neither her verbal reprimands nor positive encouragement had improved LL's behavior.

Because of liability issues, a certified lifeguard was required to be in the pool area whenever swimmers were present. As a result, no other staff member could open the pool if a lifeguard was late. In an ideal situation, she would staff the pool with two lifeguards during every shift, providing backup in case one lifeguard was late or sick. But the current situation was far from ideal: even two years after the COVID shutdown, she was still short-staffed throughout the club and had found it especially difficult to hire new lifeguards. College students from the nearby university were a possibility, but they typically didn't want morning shifts. Although he wasn't reliable, LL was willing to take any shifts he could get.

Given LL's history, it wasn't surprising when the supervisor sat down at her computer one morning in January to read the email from RC. "I can't let this go on," she thought. "But I don't have many options. I can't fire him because then I won't have anyone to open." After reflection, she concluded, "I assume opening late is better than not opening at all."

Based on a recommendation from BHC's HR department, she decided to "write up" LL for tardiness and place him on probation for three months. Probation meant that LL would be fired if there were any more incidents during the probation period. The supervisor hoped that this action would get LL's attention and give her time to hire more lifeguards so that two lifeguards were on the schedule every morning.

She still had to respond to RC's email. She wanted to validate his concerns and tell him that the LL situation was being handled. She knew that she couldn't make excuses and couldn't reveal sensitive personnel information, but she did want RC to understand the situation and some of the constraints she was working under. It was important that she maintain a positive relationship with RC and de-escalate the situation. Most importantly, she needed RC to not post anything negative about the club until she had a chance to act.

The Writing Task

YOU are the supervisor.

1. Write a memo to LL to document the situation. Inform him of his new probationary status and encourage him to improve his behavior. One-page limit.
2. Respond to RC's email using the facts provided in the case. One-page limit.
Use this heading:
To: RC
From: Supervisor
RE: Lifeguard LATE – AGAIN

Important Note: Winners will be notified by Student Competition Committee chair approximately 90 days prior to the conference. At that time, instructors will be asked to upload a file with a signed release from the student indicating: "I give permission for Association for Business Communication and Business Communication Research Foundation to use my name and document for educational or publicity purposes." (The upload is requested after notification in order to keep files anonymous to reviewers. Do not upload such file until requested.)