

CASE 3.2

A Shift for Lieutenant Colonel Adams

Lt. Col. John Adams was an aeronautical engineer in the Air Force who was recognized as an accomplished officer; he rose quickly through the ranks of lieutenant, captain, and major. In addition, he successfully completed a number of professional development courses in the Air Force and received a master's degree in engineering. In the earlier part of his service, his career assignments required overseeing 15- to 20-person shifts that were responsible for routine maintenance schedules for squadron and base aircraft. As he progressed in rank, he moved to engineering projects, which were supported by small technical staffs.

Based on his strong performance, Major Adams was promoted to lieutenant colonel earlier than his peers. Instead of moving him into another engineering position, the personnel bureau and his assignment officer decided that Lieutenant Colonel Adams would benefit from a tour in which he could expand his professional background and experience. Consequently, he was assigned to Base X as the commanding officer of the administration branch. Base X was an airbase with approximately 5,000 military and civilian personnel.

As the administration officer, Adams was the senior human resource officer and the principal adviser to the base commander on all human resource issues. Adams and his staff of 135 civilian and military personnel were responsible for personnel issues, food services, recreation, family support, and medical services. In addition, Lieutenant Colonel Adams was assigned to chair the Labor-Management Relations Committee for the base.

At the end of the Cold War, as part of the declared peace dividend, the government decided to reduce its defense budget. In February, barely 6 months after Adams took over command of the administration branch, the federal government announced a significant reduction in the size of the military and the closure of many bases. Base X was to be closed as an air base and reassigned to the Army. The closure was to take place within 1 year, and the base was to be prepared for the arrival of the first Army troops in 2 years. As part of the reduction program, the federal

government initiated voluntary retirement programs for civilian and military personnel. Those wanting to retire had until April 1 to decide.

Orders for the conversion of the airbase included the following:

- The base will continue normal operations for 6 months.
- The squadrons—complete with aircrews, equipment, and families (1,000)—must be relocated to their new bases and operational by August 1.
- The remaining base personnel strength, both civilian and military, must be reduced by 30%.
- The base must continue to provide personnel for operational missions.
- The reduction of personnel must be consistent with federal voluntary early-retirement programs.
- The base must be prepared with a support structure to accept 2,000 new soldiers, expected to arrive in 2 years.

Adams was assigned to develop a human resource plan that would meet the imposed staff levels for the entire base while ensuring that the base was still able to perform the operational tasks it had been given. Faced with this daunting task, Adams conducted an extensive review of all of the relevant orders concerning the base transformation, and he familiarized himself with all of the rules concerning the early-retirement program. After a series of initial meetings with the other base branch chiefs, he laid out a plan that could be accomplished by the established deadlines. At the same time, he chaired a number of meetings with his own staff about how to meet the mandated reductions within his own branch.

After considering the target figures for the early-retirement program, it was clear that the mandated numbers could not be reached. Simply allowing everyone who had applied for early retirement to leave was not considered an option because doing so would devastate entire sections of the base. More job cuts were required, and choices had to be made as to who would stay, why, and in what areas. Adams met stiff resistance in the meetings to determine what sections would bear the brunt of the additional cutbacks.

Adams conducted his own independent analysis of his own branch before consulting with his staff. Based on his thorough examination of the data, he mandated further reductions in his sections. Specifically targeted were personnel in base housing, single-person accommodations, family services, and recreational sections. He also mandated a further 10% cut of military positions in his sections.

After meeting the mandated reduction targets, Lieutenant Colonel Adams was informed that the federal government would accept all personnel who applied for early retirement, which was an unexpected decision. When superimposed on the already mandated reductions, this move

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caused critical shortages in key areas. Within weeks of implementation of the plan, the base commander was receiving mounting complaints from both civilian and military members over the implementation of the plan.

Incidents of stress, frustration, and discontent rose dramatically. Families trying to move found support services cut back or nonexistent. Members of the transition staff were forced to work evenings and weekends. Family support services were swamped and asking for additional help.

Despite spending a large amount of overtime trying to address the diverse issues both base-wide and within his branch, Adams found himself struggling to keep his head above water. To make matters worse, the base was having difficulty meeting its operational mission, and vital sections were critically understaffed. The base commander wanted answers. When pressed, Adams stated that his plan met all of the required deadlines and targets, and the plan conformed to all of the guidelines of the early retirement programs. "Maybe so," replied the base commander, "but you forgot about the bigger picture."

Questions

1. Based on the skills model, how would you assess Lt. Col. John Adams's ability to meet the challenges of the base administration position?
2. How would you assess his ability to meet the additional tasks he faced regarding the conversion of the base?
3. If you were to coach Adams on how he could improve his leadership, what would you tell him?