

# Integrative Case Study:

## Change and stress management at HIA



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The Housing Industry Association (HIA) is Australia's largest residential building organisation. Founded in 1965, HIA's members include builders, trade contractors, design professionals, kitchen and bathroom specialists, manufacturers and suppliers. The organisation has offices in all capital cities in the country. Melinda Henderson and Deborah Walcott are co-workers at HIA Brisbane, and have been working together for about two years. Melinda was employed as the secretary to the executive director and has been with HIA for two years, while Deborah was the office manager and has been with HIA for 15 years. In March 2008, HIA's executive director, David Gunsberg, visited Brisbane from Canberra and chaired a meeting with HIA's Brisbane staff. After the meeting, David informed Melinda that she was to be promoted to executive support manager, and that she would be in charge of five staff members at HIA Brisbane. This involved Melinda managing two receptionists, one stationery manager, the office manager and a secretary to the executive director. David mentioned that this was part of his plan to have an executive support manager supervise the roles and responsibilities of HIA's general staff.

David then sent out an email to inform all involved parties of the change in management, and to Melinda's team telling them of her new role. In the email, David also outlined the various changes in management that he was proposing to implement across HIA. Upon hearing of these changes and Melinda's promotion, Deborah immediately felt threatened. Deborah had been used to doing what she wanted for the past 15 years in her current role. She often took two-hour lunches, one hour more than allowed given the company's working hours. Her co-workers also noted that she frequently arrived late for work and tended

to leave half an hour early, often with the excuse that she needed to 'avoid the traffic and to pick the kids up early'.

Having been in this routine for such a long time, and being used to getting her own way, Deborah was worried that Melinda was going to implement stricter policies at work. She grew more distant from Melinda over the next few weeks, and this eventually led to some negative behaviours. She began bad-mouthing Melinda to other staff, saying that she didn't deserve to be promoted after being in the job for just two years. This later extended to more aggressive accusations about Melinda, criticising her for being an 'egotistical slave-driver with no regard for the people she was supervising'. The other staff also noted that Deborah was very moody at work, often expressing a reluctance to interact with others who didn't share her point of view.

Melinda knew that Deborah was unhappy with the new management structure, and attempted to reason with her. She scheduled a time when she could discuss the issue over coffee with Deborah privately. In the meeting, Melinda stressed that, as the new executive support manager, her role was to ensure that her team worked the contracted hours. She also mentioned that she wanted to show David that she was the right person for the job and that she was herself personally motivated to do her best in the new role. Deborah, however, asked if she could work out some sort of 'deal' with Melinda. She asked Melinda to let her carry on with her work in her own time, as she had grown accustomed to. Her argument was that being in the organisation for the past 15 years entitled her to such flexible working arrangements. Melinda refused, saying that giving preferential treatment to any of her team members would reflect poorly on her as a newly promoted executive support manager.

Melinda and Deborah's working relationship deteriorated over the next few weeks. Deborah continued to act coldly towards Melinda, showing obvious signs of displeasure and reluctance when asked to stay back after-hours to finish off some paperwork. The new change in management and organisational structure meant that Melinda's team had to work long hours in the office for the next three months, providing support to senior management, because the changes were incrementally implemented across the organisation. Melinda herself felt stressed from the increased workload, in addition to keeping pace with and learning the new roles and

responsibilities that come with being an executive support manager. It didn't help that Deborah continued to be unresponsive and unfriendly towards her in the workplace. Melinda began feeling very irritated with Deborah's attitude and at times felt like reprimanding her in front of her team members in order to make a point. The hostile relationship between them came to the point where Deborah would verbally abuse Melinda in her office whenever she was made to stay back and work after-hours.

As much as Melinda tried to reason with Deborah, the issue was never resolved amicably. Two months after Melinda's promotion, Deborah asked David if she could be moved to another role, in a department away from Melinda. The women now work in different departments, and their relationship is such that both parties make deliberate attempts to avoid running in to each other. Melinda told her team members that she would not attend HIA's Rewards Night, as she could not trust that Deborah would 'not get drunk and say something to her'.

### QUESTIONS

1. What do you think caused Deborah to react in such a manner towards Melinda? Do you think these reactions were justified?
2. What could Melinda have done to better resolve this issue with Deborah?
3. Is organisational change more stressful for team members or team leaders? Identify the possible stressors for organisational members experiencing change in the workplace as depicted in the case study.
4. How might the situation be influenced by organisational or national-level culture?