Did he just say, 'That's not my job'?

It’s the response that no boss likes to hear after asking (or telling) an employee to step up and do something that he or she doesn’t normally do.

“That’s not my job.”

It’s the ultimate punch in the manager’s gut because it’s taken as a direct affront to the boss’s authority. You’ve been challenged. Undermined. Dissed. Ouch!

You: Jim, can you file those boxes of folders? Jean’s been out for two days and we need to get those back into place.

Jim: That’s not my job.

You: (speechless).

Before you unload on Jim about your unflinching role as the delegator-in-chief whose decisions, orders and do-as-I-say whims should not be questioned, think of why Jim or any other employee would spew that line in the first place.

Here are three reasons why Jim (or others like him) stood his shaky ground and drew a line in the office carpet:

1. You didn’t make it abundantly clear when you reviewed his job description with him that his duties can and
will include anything that you need him to do for the benefit of the team. Repeat: for the benefit of the team. This should be done early in the interview stage and it should also be part of his annual review. It wouldn’t hurt to drop reminders at staff meetings or during other one-on-one chats.

2. You tend to pick on Jim when you’re looking for someone to fill in for an absentee or to pick up the workplace slack, perhaps just because you see him as an efficient, jack-of-all-tasks guy. Jim feels the sting of unfairness when he sees that you never cornered Jean to perform extra tasks. Somehow, she and a few others are exempt.

Take extra care to spread this out. Staff will quickly sense the inequity and label you as (a) uncaring; (b) out of touch; or (c) manipulative. Employees like Jim will call you on it.

3. If you’re not guilty of No. 1 or No. 2, then you don’t need Jim on the payroll. He’s just not a good employee. He’s insubordinate and a toxic component of your team. Such an attitude, if left unchecked, will suck the morale right out of your workplace.

It’s also important that when you play shuffle-the-tasks with your workers that you reward them. Not in pay raises or bonuses. But show your appreciation. Give them fun assignments now and then. Take them to lunch. Let them cut out early.

“That’s not my job” is a symptom of a deeper problem that you need to fix.

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