

CASE STUDY I**Riverside State Hospital****BACKGROUND**

Riverside State Hospital is a five-hundred-bed, state-supported psychiatric facility located along the scenic banks of the Tennessee River. Admission to the facility requires a physician's order or a court referral. The hospital staff consists of physicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses, dietitians, pharmacists, therapists, technicians, and general housekeeping and groundskeeping personnel, all of whom are state employees. The hospital is run primarily as a bureaucracy, with levels of authority and salary based on seniority and rank.

All employees hold a government service (GS) rank, the lowest being GS-1 (groundskeeping trainee) and the highest GS-15 (administrator or CEO). In addition, within each rank are seven to ten steps, which are determined by seniority and achievement. Performance reviews are conducted annually, at which time promotions in steps or in GS rank may occur. Employees are given annual salary adjustments for inflation or cost-of-living increases. Full state benefits are provided to all workers.

Riverside employees work an eight-hour shift. Employees below rank GS-12 (head or chief) take a thirty-minute lunch break and two fifteen-minute breaks during their shift. Members of the professional staff (physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and the like) work on a three-shift schedule: 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., 3 p.m. to 11 p.m., and 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. The hospital operates year-round.

THE PROBLEM

A few days ago, a resident patient at Riverside State Hospital was killed when part of the wall next to his bed collapsed. Horace James Wilcox Jr. was fifty-six years old when he died. He had no family and had been a resident at the hospital for three years. He suffered from traumatic amnesia and scored in the borderline range on intelligence tests. He was otherwise in good health. He was also well liked and seemed to be responding to treatment.

In statements made to state investigators and the news media, hospital administrators called the accident a "tragedy." They explained, "There had been no indication that the wall was weak or that Wilcox was in any danger." You are the government investigator assigned to the Wilcox case. Your job is to determine whether any evidence exists that would make Riverside State Hospital liable for Wilcox's death.

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THE INVESTIGATION

You learn from your investigation that Wilcox was a quiet man who tended to keep to himself, although he did join the other patients on the ward for scheduled games and activities. During these times, he talked a lot about current news events. Watching the cable news channel was his favorite source of entertainment. He was known among the staff as the most informed patient on the ward.

Your investigation also reveals that Wilcox's amnesia was complicated by his belief that he was directly affected by whatever he saw on television. News events — particularly family tragedies — affected him deeply. The hospital staff had tried reducing his television viewing time to prevent further complications, but he became depressed. His television privileges were restored as a result, and the staff tried instead to use the emotions he displayed about news shows in his therapy. Perhaps, they reasoned, some family tragedy had produced the traumatic amnesia.

In addition, for the past month Wilcox had repeatedly exclaimed, "The sky is falling," especially when he was confined to his bed at night and in the mornings upon awakening. He would also point at the ceiling and walls of his room and cry out, "There is trouble here, trouble from the sky." On several such occasions he had to be physically restrained and calmed with drugs. During this same month, an Air Force fighter plane had exploded in the sky during an air show, and videotape of that event had appeared frequently on the television news. Given Wilcox's past history of responding emotionally to tragedies reported in the news, the staff linked his most recent behavior to the air show disaster. However, you think there may be more to it. Considering Wilcox's unwillingness to go to bed at night, his complaints about an impending tragedy may have had an altogether different meaning: Perhaps "the sky" was a reference to perceived structural defects in the walls and ceiling of his room. You wonder whether Wilcox was trying to direct attention to the actual physical deterioration of his room. Moreover, his psychiatric history may have led those in charge of his care to dismiss his allegations.

Upon further investigation, you learn that the walls and ceiling in Wilcox's room had been repainted three times during the past twelve months due to stains from a leaking water pipe. You think the leak may have seriously weakened the wall, and you feel that hospital personnel should have followed up on this situation. You also discover that state funding for maintenance had been cut back severely during the previous summer and that although there was structural damage to the wall, there was no indication that it was unsafe. From the hospital administrators' perspective, then, the culprits were an aging building

and insufficient state funding to repair it. Even so, they maintain that the collapse of the wall was "an unforeseeable accident." You obtain copies of the building inspection reports for the past three years. You note that in the past year, state inspectors recorded the deteriorating condition of the wall and ceiling that eventually collapsed. These forms are signed by Hillary Hanks, the head of resident life.

In an interview with Hanks, you discover that although her name appears on the state inspection forms, she did not actually sign them. She explains that her secretary, Nancy Ellis, regularly signs her name on state forms to save time. She adds, "There are so many forms to sign that if I signed them all, I wouldn't get any real work done." When you speak to Ellis, she confirms Hanks's story. Furthermore, Ellis is annoyed because the man who delivered the forms to her was supposed to point out any problems that required attention. The problem with the walls and ceiling in Wilcox's room had not been reported verbally to Ellis, and therefore she didn't notify Hanks. Now Hanks is in trouble with her superior, and that means Ellis will lose her chance at a promotion. Any trouble for Hanks generally means trouble for Ellis, too. Ellis admits that she regularly avoids telling her boss any bad news for exactly that reason, but this time, Ellis claims, she was unaware of the bad news. You ask Ellis what she did with the inspection report. She points to the overstuffed filing cabinet behind her. "That's where I put it," she says, "along with all the other paperwork that never gets read around here."

You find out that the report was prepared by state inspector Blake Barrymore, who gave it to a groundskeeper for delivery to the appropriate hospital administrator because "it was raining that day, and I was late for another inspection." He adds that it is not his official responsibility to deliver the report himself or to follow up on it. You discover that the inspection report was delivered by Jack Handy, a reliable and well-liked groundskeeper, but you also discover that Handy is illiterate. He did not know what the forms contained because he could not read them. He did not report any problems with the walls or ceiling because Barrymore didn't tell him there were any problems. Besides, Handy added, "Nobody listens to a groundskeeper anyway. I could tell the administrators that there was a bomb in the hospital, and because I'm just a groundskeeper, they'd let it pass. So I just do what I'm told to do." You file your report. The insurance company claims that gross negligence on the part of Riverside State Hospital indirectly caused the death of Horace James Wilcox Jr. At a press conference, the hospital spokesperson places the blame for Wilcox's death on Nancy Ellis, claiming that it was her responsibility to report the problem to her superior, Hillary Hanks. He adds that Hanks has been "reassigned" to other duties and is unavailable for comment. In a final statement, the spokesman says, "The hospital deeply regrets this tragic accident, and reminds the state legislature that until the requested funds for structural repairs are made available, the hospital administration cannot be held accountable for structural defects that are beyond its control."

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ASSIGNMENT

1. What management approach does Riverside State Hospital's style of management most resemble?
2. How does the management approach influence communication at the hospital?
3. Should Ellis be held responsible for Wilcox's death? Why or why not? In what ways did the hospital's organizational structure contribute to Wilcox's accidental death?
4. What recommendations would you propose to help Riverside State Hospital avoid similar occurrences in the future? How can organizational communication be improved?