You say your turnover rate is close to 40%? You’re right, that is serious, and yes, I think we probably could help you resolve the problem. Let me discuss this briefly with a colleague and get back to you,” Joe said, ending his call with Bill, the director of human resources at Dixie Weaving, Inc. They had spent the past 20 minutes discussing an ongoing cycle of challenges faced by Dixie Weaving with its production employees that was making it impossible for the organization to keep well-trained personnel on the manufacturing floor at all times.

Dixie Weaving is a fabric weaving company based in the southeastern United States that operates facilities throughout the country. Their Piedmont plant was experiencing unacceptably high levels of turnover, which prompted Bill Johnson, Dixie’s corporate human resources (HR) manager, to contact the faculty in the Masters of Industrial Organizational (I-O) psychology program at Southern Metropolitan University for help. The parties had worked successfully together in the past on other projects. An exploratory meeting at Dixie’s Piedmont plant initiated discussions about the situation and management’s belief that the solution was to be found in revamping the training program.

“Hey, Ian!” Joe yelled across the office suite to his colleague. “Any chance you’ve got time to work on a consulting job with me over the next few months?”

“Sure—who’s it with this time?” Ian asked.
“Dixie Weaving.”
“Oh, good. What’s the challenge?”

Joe relayed his chat with Bill, and he and Ian agreed that it was time to schedule a visit with Dixie’s HR and management team to figure out what was really going on with this high rate of turnover.

“Great to see you both! It’s been awhile.” Bill greeted Joe and Ian at Dixie’s main headquarters. “I’d like to introduce you to the folks who manage the departments we were discussing last week.” The team they greeted included Mike Payne, the plant manager and subject matter experts (SMEs) from the two departments—Winding and Weaving—most affected by the turnover bug, including the two floor supervisors, Hector Ramirez from Winding, and Sam Smith from Weaving; a senior operator from each department, Bubba Jones and T. J. Spratt; as well as the lead training coordinators for the Piedmont plant, Steve Troutman and Cindy Lee.

After the introductions, Joe initiated the discussion: “Before we get started, could you tell us a little about your operations and how you fit in Dixie’s grand scheme?”

“Sure,” said Mike. “I’m not sure exactly what you want to know, but I’ll give you an overview. The Piedmont Plant employs 1,500 nonunion employees in a 24-hour operation running two, 12-hour shifts, 7 days a week. We have two major manufacturing processes—winding and weaving. The Winding department is responsible for creating the nylon yarn used in the weaving process. The Weaving department creates the fabric that is used in our commercial products. We are dependent on our Chattanooga plant for raw materials, while several other plants are dependent on us for the fabric we produce.”

Joe said, “Now, tell us a little more about this turnover problem you’re having.” He and Ian then assumed the role of “sponges,” listening and absorbing all the details that this panel of experts could convey, including their ideas about possible causes and potential solutions. The team provided a bevy of good ideas and observations, each providing a unique perspective.

Providing the “big picture” perspective, plant manager Mike pointed out that “the current level of turnover is unsustainable and needs to be reduced quickly before it impacts our competitive position. I don’t care who’s responsible; we just need to do something before it affects the bottom line. If we can’t meet our production goals, it’s going to slow down other plants. If that happens, Corporate’s going to have my head!”

Bill expressed his frustration with HR’s inability to attract and hire qualified workers. “While these jobs don’t require a college degree, they do pay well and Dixie is a great company to work for. Our biggest problem is that we’re getting dangerously close to exhausting our local labor pool. Where are we going to find better people?”

Hector and Sam, the floor supervisors, expressed concern about day-to-day operations. Sam noted, “Under the current conditions, we simply can’t meet our departmental quotas.” Hector chimed in, “yeah, and it takes a while for new workers to learn how to do these jobs effectively and safely. We just don’t have the bench strength to keep up.
There are also a lot of rules that need to become second nature to all our workers to keep this place safe, but many of them are still focusing on the basics of their jobs. Someone’s going to get hurt . . . or worse. Just last week we had a guy turned into a pancake by a rolling machine. It was ugly.”

“And another thing,” Sam added, “I can’t even understand a lot of ’em, especially on the night shift, because they’re a bunch of foreigners. They barely speak English.”

Bubba and T. J., the most experienced workers on the floor, were rather quiet during most of the discussion, but Joe and Ian sensed they had something to say. When prompted, Bubba huffed, “Well, whatever happens, I’m tired of babysitting. You send these people into my area before they can even tie their shoes, let alone a weaver’s knot. And then you expect me to teach them the ropes while still meeting my quota.” T. J. nodded emphatically in agreement.

Somewhat defensively, Cindy, the training coordinator, stated with some surprise, “Bubba’s comments are interesting considering that we put all new hires through a rigorous 12-week training program before they ever hit the floor. If you’ve got a better idea, we’d love to hear it.”

Sensing a heightening of tensions, Ian shot Joe a look that suggested it was time to redirect the conversation. “Hey Mike, this input is really helpful to us as we start to get our bearings on this project. Before we leave today, do you think we could take a quick plant tour? I think that’d really help us put things in perspective as we organize a proposal for you all to consider.”

Mike agreed. “We just need to get you some PPE (personal protection equipment) and have you sign a waiver.”

With that, Bill took Joe and Ian to get outfitted with a safety vest, protective goggles, and earplugs. They also had to remove their watches and rings. They entered one of the largest enclosed spaces they’d ever seen. “How big is this place?” Ian asked.

“We’ve got over 40 acres under roof with over 1,000 winders and weaving looms. Our first stop will be the Winding department,” Bill said in a loud voice that Joe and Ian still had to strain to hear over the din. As they continued to follow Bill along the yellow-taped path, they noticed several large machines with freshly painted orange zones on the floors surrounding them. “What’s with the paint job?” Joe inquired.

“Remember that ‘pancake’ incident Hector mentioned? Well, that’s supposed to help prevent that from happening again—by the way, don’t go in the orange zone without a buddy,” Bill added with a concerned expression.

As they turned the corner, narrowly avoiding being run over by a forklift, Bill exclaimed, “Watch your step! You’ve gotta keep your eyes open around here. Anyway, the Winding department is where we produce the nylon yarn used in Weaving. It takes two people to operate a winder: one to load the raw materials and the other to remove the finished product. Operators are also responsible for monitoring the machine to ensure that it doesn’t break. We’ve had problems keeping these machines running lately.”

Ian asked, “So what happens when a machine goes down?”

“First,” Bill said, “the operators hit the emergency stop button and report the problem to their floor supervisor. The floor supervisor then makes an announcement over the
PA requesting help from any available workers. Typically, these are people who are on break or eating lunch.”

“How often does that happen?” Joe asked.

“About every other day, generally on the night shift,” said Bill.

After meandering through the vast complex, they finally arrived in the Weaving department. Joe and Ian were impressed by the size and complexity of the looms. Hundreds of spools of yarn were loaded on long racks of spindles that fed like a huge spider web into the weaving mechanism. Bill continued. “Each of these looms produces more than 50 yards of fabric a minute. A senior weaver and an associate weaver are responsible for monitoring the operation to remove empty spools and ‘tie-on’ new spools, all while the machine runs continuously. If they exceed a certain number of line breaks at any given time, the machine has to be shutdown and yarn has to be rethreaded, which can take 20 minutes or more.”

Joe noticed a rather forlorn-looking individual who appeared to be using something that looked like an anvil to scrape excess yarn off of the used spools. “What’s she doing over there?” he inquired.

“Oh, that’s one of our newbies, Harriet. She was hired about 6 weeks ago. It looks like this week she’s been assigned to work with Jimmy James, one of our best weavers, so he can bring her up to speed. We could use a dozen more just like him,” Bill thought aloud. “Anyway, she’s doing what’s called the ‘burn off.’ All of the used spools have to be free of yarn before they’re put on the spindle cart and shipped back to the Winding department for reuse. That bar is a like a hot iron that melts through the remaining yarn, which is then tossed in the recycle bin.”

“So is that all Harriet does for her whole shift?” asked Joe.

“Actually, that’s normally something they save for the last few minutes before their breaks and the end of their shifts to clean up the area. I’m not exactly sure why she’s doing it now.” Bill said somewhat puzzled.

Having been in the facility now for almost half an hour, Joe and Ian were feeling the effects of the oppressive heat. “Phew, it has to be 90 degrees in here,” Ian complained as he wiped the sweat off his forehead.

“I’d put it closer to 95,” Joe said. “I can’t imagine working in here on my feet for 12 hours at night during the winter, let alone during the day in the summer. No wonder I haven’t seen a smiling face since we left that air-conditioned meeting room. In fact, I think I’m about ready to head back.” Bill and Ian did not argue with him.

Having completed their tour, Joe and Ian did indeed have a better understanding of the operation and had identified some additional things to ponder. “Thanks for your assistance today, Bill,” Ian said. “I think we’ve got a much better sense of some of the factors likely to be connected to the turnover challenges your organization is facing. At this point, I think it would be very beneficial for us to take some time to perform a more comprehensive evaluation. Why don’t Joe and I put together a summary of today’s meeting, identify some possible directions for us to go, and get back to you in a couple days?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Bill agreed. “What do you need from us?”

Joe replied, “Access, more than anything else. Let us formulate a plan with more detailed needs and we’ll discuss them at our next meeting. See you soon.”
On the drive back, Ian was thinking that one of the many benefits of being a professor of industrial-organizational psychology was the opportunity to climb down out of the “ivory tower” to apply the theories and research that he taught in the classroom and find out just what does and doesn’t work in the real world. Each client presented a unique set of challenges that often required Joe and him to stray far from the beaten path to find truly creative solutions. Dixie was no exception. “Hey, Joe, do you think they have any idea of just how many issues are probably underlying this turnover problem of theirs?”

“Well, it sure doesn’t take a PhD to see that we’ve got plenty of paths to explore,” Joe replied. “You can’t spit without hitting something that could be contributing to their turnover problem. I’m really looking forward to seeing what else we can find out.”

They returned to their offices and immediately began working on their plan for a more complete diagnosis of Dixie’s current challenges. After reviewing their experience, they felt confident in their conclusion that turnover was just one symptom of much deeper problems existing in the organization. Both Ian and Joe felt that this organization development (OD) challenge would most definitely require an integrated systems perspective. All of the issues raised by the client SMEs were valid and Ian and Joe needed to figure out a way to reconcile them and to understand how they were all connected to turnover. No input-process-output (IPO) focus, or strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats (SWOT) analysis would suffice given the complex web of factors and the prevailing cultural norms that were clearly influencing the safety, morale, and behavioral issues that they observed during their plant tour. What they needed to do was to develop a work plan for a comprehensive diagnosis that Ian and Joe could use to help Dixie understand and help itself deal with its underlying process and procedure issues.

One of their biggest challenges now was for Ian and Joe to strike the appropriate balance in presenting their approach. It was obvious from their discussions and observations at the plant that morale at the plant was low and communication among the various constituencies was inadequate at best. They also had to guard against coming across as “egghead know-it-alls” sent down from on high to save the ignorant savages. Ideally they could adopt some sort of process consultative approach. Dixie management and employees had to see this as a collaborative effort or Ian and Joe were never going to get the level of cooperation they needed to complete this project.

To this end, they decided that the best approach would be to sketch out a rough summary of the areas they’d like to explore and propose to meet with the project team to hash out the details. This approach would provide them with additional perspectives and build trust that would be vital throughout the process.

Joe called Bill the next day with their proposal. “I’m sending you an outline of where we’d like to go from here based on what we learned in yesterday’s meeting. I’d like to review this with you briefly and, if it looks OK to you, I’d like to present it to your team tomorrow.” Joe felt confident that he and Ian had taken a good approach with this project and he was eager to move forward with defining the scope of what lay ahead.
When he received the e-mail from Joe, Bill was most interested in seeing what types of resources would be required to support this project. He was curious also about the scope of what the consultants were proposing to do. The e-mail read as follows.

Bill,

Based on yesterday’s meeting and plant tour, we feel that the turnover issue you identified is more complex than it appears on the surface. We are confident we can help you and Dixie resolve this issue, but we need to gain a more complete picture of your operations. We think the best approach is the following multipronged process:

- **Informational Interviews**
- **A series of interviews with employees at multiple levels throughout the affected departments, from both the day and night shifts. The topics that we will be discussing in these interviews include the following:**
  - Hiring Process
  - Training
  - Experiences on the Plant Floor
  - Supervision and Performance Management
  - Communication
- **Documentation Review**
- **An examination of the job descriptions and training materials related to the positions in question (because many of the issues raised in yesterday’s meeting involve HR-related practices and policies).**
- **In-Depth Job Observation and Analysis**
- **Conducting an extended period of observation of the workers in the Winding and Weaving departments. The purpose of these observations is to better understand the day-to-day knowledge, skills, abilities, and other personal characteristics required for safe and effective job performance.**

With your support, and using our full team of two primary consultants and four graduate student associates, we anticipate that the data-collection process will take no more than 2 weeks, and we would like to begin as soon as possible. Data analysis and development of our proposed solution should be ready for presentation to you 2 weeks after data collection is complete.

All data we collect during these interviews will be managed by us to protect the anonymity of the interviewees, but we will provide a summary report along with our recommendations. We recognize that this will cause some disruption to the normal daily operations and we will do everything we can to minimize the inconvenience. We would appreciate it if you would emphasize to all employees, and particularly supervisors, the importance of their participation in this process to addressing the turnover problems you are currently experiencing.

Best regards,

Joe and Ian
Case 5. Identifying the Scope of Work at Dixie Weaving, Inc.

Bill saw nothing in the e-mail that placed any particularly onerous burdens on him or his staff, although he was somewhat surprised at the scope of the information that was being requested. And, of course, he was a bit concerned that this “simple” issue was much more complicated than he had initially envisioned. He replied with his willingness to move ahead with the proposed plan and set up the following day’s meeting. There was a lot of work to be done, but he was excited to have Joe and Ian as partners in this process.

Discussion Questions

1. What important business details regarding data gathering and facilities access need to be addressed upon entering into this project?

2. Why might Dixie Weaving employees choose not to cooperate with the consultants at this stage in the project?

3. Do you agree with the multipronged diagnostic strategy outlined by Joe and Ian in their e-mail to Bill? How would you carry out each of the prongs they describe?

4. Do you agree or disagree with Joe and Ian’s time estimates for this diagnostic phase of the project? Why or why not? What factors would you consider in developing an estimate?

5. What are some creative and empirically sound ways to conduct in-depth observations within the plant without causing too much concern on the part of employees?

For Further Reading