

Things are not always what they seem... (continued)



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It was not looking good for PTF Roy. His T-6, Harriet, reported finding bundles of a local newspaper, *The Reporter*, in a trash can inside of a trailer park mailroom the day after Roy had taken them out to the street for delivery. The *Reporters* were addressed to an apartment complex that is delivered immediately before the mailroom. Roy admitted that he took the *Reporters* into the mailroom, but denied putting them in the trash can. Management did not believe Roy, so they issued him a notice of removal, charging him with discarding deliverable mail. No one actually saw Roy dump the mail, but management decided there was sufficient circumstantial evidence that indicated that it was likely he did. To overcome this,

the union would need to provide a plausible alternative explanation for how the mail ended up in the trash can.

Having learned the “Always go to the scene” lesson the hard way (see my article in the January 2013 *Postal Record*), I decided that the first thing to do was to go to the mailroom to check it out. So I called the trailer park manager and made arrangements to stop by on Saturday around 4 p.m. The manager, Ruby, said she worked Tuesdays through Saturdays, from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and had worked the Saturday in question. Ruby said that no one from the post office had interviewed her. She said the manager’s office had a key to the mailroom. As we left her office, she also grabbed a garbage bag.

When Ruby unlocked the mailroom, I saw a garbage can beneath a large mail slot built into the wall. Outside, the slot was labeled “trash.” Ruby explained that they had installed the mail slot because tenants had been dropping junk mail on the ground. This way, tenants could push the mail they didn’t want through the slot, into the trash can inside. Ruby removed the garbage bag containing the discarded mail and replaced it with a new one. I asked her how often she did that, and she replied, “Every Saturday afternoon, just like today. I take it from here and put it in the dumpster. It’s the last thing I do before going home.”

Things were already looking better for Roy. If, as management surmised, Roy had put the *Reporters* into the trash on Saturday around noon, Ruby would have put them in the dumpster around 4:30 p.m. and they would not have been in the mailroom trash when Harriet arrived on Monday. That meant they had to have been dumped in the mailroom trash can after Ruby emptied it. This left two possible alternatives: either Ruby was mistaken, which did not seem likely, or that Harriet found them in the mailroom on Monday and set Roy up. More proof would be needed before making such an accusation.

On Monday I interviewed Harriet and was careful to not let on that she was on my radar. She told me that she noticed the *Reporters* because they were sticking up out of the trash. She said that at first she was not going to say anything because she didn’t want to get anyone in trouble. After she thought about it, she was worried that if someone else saw them and called in, management might try to blame her, so she called to report it. She added that Roy was a “lazy carrier” and she always had to take out full coverages that he should have delivered the day before.

I then interviewed the supervisor who had taken the call from Harriet around 1 p.m. He said that when the station manager got back from lunch, the two of them went to the mailroom and recovered the *Reporters*. He said it appeared that Roy had tried to hide them, as they were under other trash. I asked if they could be seen without digging for them, and he said, “No.” Next I interviewed the station manager, who confirmed what the supervisor had said.

The significance of finding the *Reporters* only after digging seemed lost on the two managers. To them, this meant Roy was trying to hide them. It did not occur to them to question how Harriet could have noticed them if they were buried, but I kept this piece to myself for the time being. The station manager showed me a stack of *Reporters* in his office and gave me a list of the addresses. I noticed there was one apartment number missing from the list, C-101. He replied, “Yeah, we couldn’t find that one.”

I next spoke to Roy and asked him how he got along with Harriet. He shook his head and explained that she lived on his route, and because he wouldn’t let her take her *TV Guide* from his case without permission from the supervisor, “She’s been a pain ever since.” I was surprised to learn that Harriet lived on that route, so I asked Roy where she lived. He said, “In the Cedar Grove apartments...C-101.” *Bingo!*

So there it was, the plausible alternative explanation. When I met with the supervisor, I laid it out for him: Roy had left the *Reporters* in the mailroom on Saturday, just like he said. He could not have thrown them in the trash, or else they would have been taken to the dumpster by Ruby that afternoon and would not have been there when Harriet arrived. When Harriet saw the *Reporters* on Monday, she seized the opportunity to frame Roy by placing them in the trash and covering them to look like he tried to hide them. She then called to report finding them to direct attention away from herself. But she just couldn’t leave the *Reporter* addressed to herself in the trash; she had to take it with her.

As expected, the manager said something to the effect of, “Are you telling me I should fire Harriet instead?” I told him that would not be a very smart thing for him to do, because I had a plausible alternative explanation for her, too. I held up the removal notice he’d issued to Roy.

So, whether you are a steward investigating a grievance or a carrier formulating an opinion about a co-worker, remember that things are not always what they seem.