

The Thermostat is Not to be Touched

By Adam Kotlarczyk

14 January

To: Staff

From: Gerald Dawkins

Re: Thermostat

It has come to my attention that early-arriving staff members have been turning up the thermostat from its usual setting early in the morning when they get here. This makes the office side of the building very warm, uncomfortably warm. By the time most of the rest of the staff arrives. Even more frustrating, when I have turned the thermostat back down to acceptable levels, I notice someone has been raising it back up to where it was. This is also a waste of the company's money. Heat isn't free.

This is just a reminder that the thermostat is not to be touched. Thank you.

15 January

To: Staff

From: Mark Sanders

Re: Office Environment

Because the office has been so cold this winter, many of us have agreed that the temperature needs to be set higher this year than it has been in years past. It's cold here in the mornings.

Because the part of the staff that works up front gets here early when they do, they should be able to set the thermostat to a comfortable level appropriate for the early hour. A

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warm staff is a happy staff, and a happy staff is a productive one.

16 January

To: Staff

From: Gerald Dawkins

Re: Thermostat

It is not up to the early arriving staff what the temperature in the office will be. What they fail to take into account is that while the temperature may be cool at the front counter, back in the offices it is quite warm. Since most of us back here are also wearing suits, it gets very uncomfortable. And if we have to entertain big clients or vendor reps, we can't have them sweating through their jackets can we.

THE THERMOSTAT IS NOT TO BE TOUCHED.

17 January

To: Staff

From: Mark Sanders

Re: Office Temperature

Where the work of this company is actually being done, it is actually quite cold. Not cool. Or at least it was with the old thermostat settings. This is an old building and the heat circulation is poor and it is drafty. That is why the thermostat has been adjusted to make it comfortable for all employees, not just the ones wearing suits sitting in the back offices. Especially for those of us who work up front, and don't have corner offices with not-one-but-two walls of baseboard heat. And we have to get here early, since that's when our customers

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come, and as most of you who are up by then know, it gets cold in Chicago early in the morning in January.

Okay, confession time: It is I. It is me who is adjusting the thermostat. But there's only four of us here early in the morning and we're always freezing, blowing in our hands and holding our faces over our coffee to get warm. Tim Stewart actually uses those chemical hand warmers. That's no way to work. We're not Bob Cratchitts here. So let's put some coal in the stove. So to speak. You know what I mean.

Last week my fingertips were so cold I could barely work the computer. I was trying to sell a fuel solenoid and kept keying in the part number for an A/C touchpad. This doesn't help the company, me almost selling the wrong part.

And let's be honest; this isn't about the heating bill. This company has bigger fish to fry than the heating bill. At least if the rumors about the Madison branch getting closed up this spring are true. I heard Gary Schaefer over there – good old Gary who's been with the company almost 25 years and who trained me – was told to start looking elsewhere. Twenty-five years. So if the company is really worried about the heating bill at a time like this, maybe they can pay it with the Christmas bonus money that we didn't get this year (again).

17 January

To: Staff

From: Gerald Dawkins

Re: Thermostat

I again had to adjust the thermostat back to an acceptable level this morning when I arrived. I would like to remind the staff of two important points: 1.) The thermostat is not to be touched and 2.) It is not appropriate to discuss happenings at other branches in a public forum. Besides, Gary Schaefer had been planning on leaving for a while, which all staff members would

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know if they had come to the company picnic last summer.

17 January

To: Staff

From: Mark Sanders

Re: Office

When you arrived “this morning.” That’s interesting. Do you still consider it morning by then? Most of us have been here for four hours by the time you stroll in. Then you lock yourself in your office for an hour, doing what exactly no one knows, then take a two hour lunch. Is it really killing you have the heat up during that one hour?

And I’m not the one who started all this in the public forum. I’m not the one who started taping up memos on the refrigerator. I, along with most of the 21st century, prefer email. So don’t get up in my face about it. I’m just trying to keep from freezing my ass off.

And the company picnic? Really, Gerry. Nobody goes anymore because you turned it into a board meeting; all that bullshit optimism about the future of the company. I bet I know all the speeches without even going there: “Moving forward” and “growing the business” and “gotta spend money to make money.” Spend money to make money. Ha. Unless it’s on the heat.

Back when this company was thriving and we had free medical and dental and the branches in Milwaukee and Springfield and Indianapolis were still open, back then the picnic was great and we’d go to Lake Springfield for the weekend and golf or play miniature golf with the wives and kids and the company sponsored a fishing tournament and we played softball and everyone got tee shirts and beer and the kids ate ice cream. People talked about retiring like they were looking forward to it, not like they were terrified of it. We talked about opening branches in Iowa City and even down in Kentucky, for a time. A couple years they even had

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rides for the kids.

Now what is it? A bunch of speeches and some godawful catered noodles. Last time I went I wasn't even sure what it was. Mostaccioli? And a couple cans of generic pop and a pay bar. A PAY BAR. Give me a break. Fifty hours a week fifty weeks a year with no paid overtime and they can't even pick up my beer for a day. No thank you, not to hear speeches about the company growing and why we all need to vote republican and then watch you and David Williams and those other office people ogle Fred Masterson's daughters and make bold empty declarations about our future.

Speaking of proclamations, I love the imperial passive voice in the latest memo. Maybe it's not quite commanding enough, though. Have you considered adding "Thou shalt not" at the beginning?

18 January

To: Staff

From: Gerald Dawkins

Re: Thermostat

Please refrain from using public space to criticize the company, company picnic, official memos, other employees, etc. If you have a concern about the company, its employees, or its direction, this should be taken up with your Supervisor or a member of the Office of Human Resources.

This memo would have been posted sooner but it wasn't called to my attention until this morning.

Continued offenses might be viewed as a Significant Performance Concern and need to be taken up with the Human Resources Office. And no one should blame the company's picnic for their wife leaving them and taking the kids so they can't go to the company picnics

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anymore.

18 January

To: Staff

From: Mark Sanders

Re: Office

Jesus Christ, Gerry, you had to bring that up again. Kristen left me because I was never home, I was always working, and that was fine back in the nineties when we were young and could get by (barely) on one income, but times have changed now, and we have a kid and we'd like her to go to college so she doesn't end up with a job like mine, freezing her ass off at a parts counter because her boss is too cheap to turn up the heat.

And it's not like there's anywhere to get promoted in this company with your and David's fat asses parked in those corner offices. So Kristen had to work too eventually and then we never saw each other and that's just what happens. You can't support a family on one income, not anymore, and so she had to go to work. And the pisser of it is: we used almost all her income to pay for daycare, so it was almost like she wasn't working at all, except that we never saw each other. After gas and some other expenses, we made just enough by her working to pay for her working. And she got to meet her next husband at her job. Because most workplaces are coed and all the attractive women aren't driven away by the front office creeps like they are here. Seriously. How many receptionists have we lost because David "accidentally" rubs himself on them while he's checking his interoffice mailbox? Or what about that one – Kim whatshername – who was here for two months before that visiting Branch Manager from Dixon "accidentally" walked into the women's bathroom while she was in there. Or remember the saleswoman that you guys hired and just about broke your arms patting yourself on the back for your liberal hiring practice because she was Hispanic and a woman, then she quit and filed a

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suit within a month because Harold grabbed her boobs. Christ, Gerry, he didn't even try to make up a story, he just grabbed em. So now we get to work at this sausage factory of old white men.

So Kristen left. Good for her. That was years ago. The marriage hadn't been good for a while anyway. That happens when you don't see each other. Also when her father thinks you're stuck in a dead-end job that a trained monkey could do. I don't know if I hated him more for saying it or for being right. I do miss Kayla, though, so thanks for bringing that up.

Do I miss my wife? A little. Am I sad to be alone? Sometimes. You have friends and go out and fill it up with other hobbies and other stuff, but there's nothing like it was, not like it was when it was good, anyway. Sometimes I drink, but I can't even do that right anymore, because I wake up the next day feeling worse and then I have to sit here miserable and freezing and hungover and answering the phones and helping customers while you sit back there and look at porn on your computer in your warm office. Don't act like you don't. Or working on contracts for that other job that no one knows about "officially."

You're right, though, I guess I could still go to those picnics alone. Whoopee. Maybe I can hear another story about your snotnose grandkids. I was really fascinated by the one where you couldn't decide what kind of car you were going to buy the one for her 16th birthday. What a dilemma. Would you like to know the last time I bought a new car? No? Neither would anyone else. Know why? Because no one gives a shit about what kind of car you buy.

18 January

To: Staff

From: Gerald Dawkins

Re: Thermostat

Everything is always the company's fault, isn't it? You people never take any

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responsibility for yourselves, not when there's someone to blame. That's why you are where you are. That's what's wrong with our country today, everybody thinks they deserve something special. Everybody thinks they should get a handout. You have to work in this country to get ahead. And don't blame other people just because they're more successful than you and can buy nice things for their grandchildren.

If you don't like working here anymore maybe you should just quit. Take your whiny ass somewhere else and see what they'll pay you.

18 January

To: Staff

From: Mary Welker

Re: Personal Comments

Gentlemen, can we please tone it down? There's no reason not to be civil to one another. There's enough blind division in this day and age that we don't need it at our office, too. I'm sure there are compromises that can be made if you would just sit down and listen to each other instead of these "shouting" memos. Life is too short.

19 January

To: Staff

From: Mark Sanders

Re: Workplace

It's no wonder I started drinking. You take the cake, Gerry. You make all your money by breaking the backs of the employees, then congratulate yourself for your ingenuity and

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resourcefulness. Yeah, you're a real self-made man, alright. We haven't had a raise on our side of the building in four years. How about yours? Doing well enough to have a summer car, that convertible. Or what about the new PCs that came in through shipping last summer. Somehow none of those made their way to the parts counter where we could use them to help our customers faster. No, last I heard they were all in those corner offices. Must help you get to your porn faster. You have to admit, too, that having the Viagra shipped to work was a bad idea, although they had a lot of fun making jokes about it down in shipping, and having it arrive about the same time that you all got your Christmas bonuses was bad timing. Or maybe just bad luck. And the executive bonuses coming two weeks after announcing the company was too hard up to give staff raises this year. You probably thought no one noticed. So yeah, you're the self-made man.

Did you even know you wrote "things" as a verb? And you're the one who went to college? This place is why I'm not religious.

And it's not like I can just leave. Have you seen it out there? No, you probably haven't. Why would you? Let's say I leave. Let's say being ground down by a bunch of self-righteous cocksuckers who don't even know how to sell a part finally wears me down, and I'm ready for a new beginning. Let's say I decide to test out the old job market. If I'm lucky I can maybe take a lateral move, go to one of our competitors with basically the same products and jobs and learn a new computer system and a new corporate bureaucracy and just hope the heat there is better. I can hope that no one's son or brother-in-law or cousin is looking for work so that the job will be open as advertised. Or maybe I can just try to get out of this shitty business altogether. But what happens then? What happens to me? Probably I go wait tables somewhere or point people to the garden hose aisle in a big box somewhere and get paid hourly with just enough hours to make sure I'm not eligible for insurance. No one hires someone my age when they can get some dumbass kid who doesn't know any better right out of college to do the work for half the price. Not that I've looked.

Maybe I could go back to school, get an education, try to be one of you executive types.

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Then I can work with the banks instead of the customers, too. That's what you're supposed to do when you're unemployed, right? Go to school, probably take out some loans, learn a new skill. What am I going to learn at my age that's going to get me a job anywhere?

Yeah, you've really got us over a barrel here, alright. I can't afford to work here and I can't afford to quit. Especially with the pay freezes I can't afford to work here. My alimony hasn't frozen, Gerry. Neither has the price of gas or groceries. My job hasn't frozen, either. You guys have me training all the new staff on the IX-computer system. I didn't get a raise for that. And when you laid off Miguel in Shipping and Receiving and told me I had to handle that two days a week, I did it and didn't complain because I thought eventually you guys would take care of me and recognize all the work. But I never got a raise for that, either. I've been here almost twenty years and I'm still working paycheck to paycheck.

I tried to put away a little for Kayla to go to college for a while, but funny thing, they haven't frozen the price of college, either. You know she gets straight A's? My dumb ass was already a dad when I was practically her age. You know how it is, thought I was in love, found "the one" at a graduation barbecue. A couple nights of backseat sex in the Wal-Mart employee lot and suddenly you're married and a dad and responsible for a family when you never even really learned how to take care of yourself. Maybe that's a sin, I don't know. Maybe I'm just getting punished for bad choices. I know that's what you think, you and those people back in the offices. Moral bad karma. Coming home to roost. Maybe we should all set aside our sympathy and let those be punished for their wrongdoings as though human suffering doesn't matter.

Or maybe that's just bullshit, just a story that you and all the other rich assholes that live behind gates tell each other so you think you did something to actually deserve it. You didn't get lucky, you just made better choices than people who knocked up their girlfriends in high school. Or maybe you knocked up the type of girls who could send them to "visit their aunts" for a couple weeks and come back unpregnant. So you deserve a life of bonuses and luxury and a summer convertible and six weeks of paid vacation and they deserve wage freezes and

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divorce and a life that never lets them forget that once, they got unlucky or made a mistake.

Anyway, that's how I ended up here. And now who else would take me?

I give up. You win. I'm too tired. It's exhausting, all of it, too exhausting to leave me energy to look up out of this hole. So I'm through with it Gerry. I'm through. You want to save a few pennies by keeping the heat down, that's fine. I can wear gloves up front. I need this job; I need the frozen income. Ha. That's funny. Frozen income for my freezing fingers. I'd have to move back in with my parents without it. At my age. What would Kayla say? God, I love that girl. She's the only good thing that's come out of my life. And I've failed her almost every way a dad can. I can't believe she even talks to me anymore. Having a job is about the only thing I can have that she respects me for. So there's no anger in it anymore, Gerry. No anger.

I apologize, in fact. I apologize for all of these memos and I take full responsibility and I think the heat should be set to whatever you guys in the back offices think it should be set to. Whatever's best for the company. The gloves can help, and maybe a wool hat. I could even buy a wool hat with the company logo and wear that up front. That's some free advertising for the company, right? The fact is I respect all you guys and if some of these memos seemed to get just a teensy bit out of line, no doubt that's just because I was momentarily overcome with my jealousy. I wish I could be more like you guys. I just really want to help move forward and grow the business. I don't even mind paying for the wool hat myself – you've got to spend money to make money, right?

So I consider it closed, this matter. With the thermostat. If I see anyone touching it I'll report directly to you, or to HR if you think that's the most appropriate place. Frankly, I find it hard to believe that anyone even needs to touch the thermostat. When the sun is coming in through the windows it can be quite toasty up front. Very pleasant. Even in the winter. Which reminds me, someone needs to get those windows clean; the company cut the service in the fall to save a little money. I'll take care of that this afternoon.

In closing, I can only say thanks so much for your time and for hearing me out in all this. I'm lucky to have this position at this company. I'm looking forward to our continued work

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together. It has been a genuine pleasure. Take care.

20 January

To: All Employees

From: Vic Mathers, Human Resources Manager

In the future, any employee wishing to discuss matters of workplace environment, including climate control, please refer to the Office of Human Resources. Please remember that these types of decisions are the domain of Human Resources, and we look forward to working together to seek a mutually amiable and agreeable resolution on this and all other matters. In the meantime, please keep in mind as we move forward that the thermostat isn't to be touched by any employee. Thank you and have a safe, wonderful, and productive weekend.

The End

Adam Kotlarczyk bio: A teacher at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy in Aurora, Illinois, Adam Kotlarczyk has recently published fiction and scholarship in Yellow Chair Review, The First Line, Cahoodaloodaling, and the Illinois Association for Gifted Children Journal. He has a Ph.D. in American literature and enjoys traveling with his wife.