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Wiretapping as a Management Tool

The FCC, being a communications agency, has come up with a wondrous new management tool—it's called wiretapping. It seems that the FCC was having a few problems about leakage of sensitive material that even the FBI couldn't solve for them. So, they turned to that trusted and time honored investigatory tool, the employee informer and came up with a whopping good lead. It seems that the informer had seen a particular employee stay late in his office—highly suspect behavior in some government precincts, apparently. Moreover, the employee had entertained a visitor after hours and had seemed to have been showing the visitor some papers. And, on top of all that, the visitor had seemed to be making personal calls on the late-staying employee's phone.

Well, what to do? Confront the fellow and his visitor with these dark suspicions? Not at all. The choice of alternatives apparently boiled down to a wall microphone with an attached tape recorder or a secret telephone extension attached to the employee's phone. The commission opted for the latter course. Your local Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company, ever obliging, worked after FCC business hours to install the extensions and made special billing arrangements to help keep everything confidential—except the employee's telephone conversations.

Well, everything turned out all right. The telephone

calls turned out to be trivial and non-incriminating and the employee and his friend were confronted and denied having done anything wrong. As a matter of fact, it even turned out that the employee had *special permission* to stay at work late.

For its part, the FCC thought the exercise was, on the whole, not too bad a thing. Chairman Burch told a House subcommittee that he thought the action taken—whether legal or not—was “sound and reasonable.” The general counsel of the agency wrote a memorandum justifying the wiretap and asserted that phone monitoring was part of “supervising employee performance” and of “maintaining a reasonable degree of order and security.” In the end, however, the FCC promised Rep. Harley O. Staggers (D-W.Va.), chairman of the House subcommittee investigating the matter, that there would be “no repetition” of the incident. So, the short unhappy life of an ugly management experiment ended with a promise that contained, if not a confession that the wiretapping was a mistake, at least a tacit admission that it wasn't necessary in the first place, and won't—presumably—be necessary again. In addition, in response to a subsequent inquiry by Mr. Staggers, 13 other agencies told the subcommittee that they do not engage in such “secret telephone monitoring.” It thus appears that the lesson has been read correctly across the government and that something positive and healthy has been gained from what was an essentially unhealthy episode.