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A MATTER OF RESPECT

Mary Mearns

A manager tries to decide how to deal with cultural conflict between two members of her work team.

Amy sighed. As the executive director and CEO of a small international nonprofit organization, International Culture Partners (ICP), she usually loved her job. She had joined the organization in its infancy because she cared about the mission—to educate employees of aid agencies, nonprofits, corporations, and governmental organizations about cultural differences and help them to be more effective. The organization had been a great fit with her ideals. She had wanted, and still did want, to make the world a better place, to help professionals to learn about other cultures so that they could better provide services for their clients and customers. While housed in the United States, ICP had always attracted employees of different nationalities and backgrounds. The organization had started with a small but diverse core of young employees who worked together, played together, and felt that they really did make a contribution. It was an exciting place to be and everyone shared a passion for the work.

In fact, Amy still felt that the organization was making a difference; it was just harder and harder to manage the staff. In the early days, they had been more like a family, working together and supporting each other. When had things gotten so out of hand? It was still a small team, only seven year-round employees plus other part-time and temporary workers who came in when things got busy with conferences and workshops. The employees were still idealistic and motivated by the mission. What had changed was the atmosphere in the office and the dissension among the staff, especially between two of her key employees. When Amy looked back, it seemed to her that over the last three years, as ICP had gotten more successful and busy, team morale had disintegrated.

Amy thought back to a conversation she had had that morning with Helga, the staff accountant. Helga was from Germany, but had been living in the United States for twenty

years. Helga was one of the original employees, and she and Amy had been friends from the beginning. Her business focus and task orientation had always been a blessing for ICP—she got the work done when it needed to be done and had helped ICP stay afloat in the early days. She worked closely with all of the other members of the group. Unfortunately, Helga was having a problem with another staff member, Mariana, a young Brazilian, who worked as a staff assistant for programming, helping to arrange seminars, workshops, and conferences.

Just this morning, Helga had turned to Amy and said, "I just can't take it anymore—it's a matter of respect. Mariana doesn't respect my time or the expertise I've gained over the last ten years doing this work. I don't care what everyone else is doing as long as they get their work done on time and cooperate; I just want to get my work done. But every time I get immersed in my tasks, she interrupts me! That just doesn't cut it when you're handling money and can't make any mistakes."

Mariana had started as an intern while she was earning her master's degree, but had returned to work as a full-time employee after she graduated the following year. Amy liked to give potential employees a chance to prove themselves by starting out in a less permanent role, and Mariana had been an excellent intern. She was very smart, organized, and responsible. When she came back as an employee, she quickly became part of the team. In the four years she had worked at ICP she had completely reorganized the office. Amy thought she was a wonderful addition to the staff. Mariana could take on coordination of projects, did not need much supervision, and had high standards for excellent work. In fact, some other members of the group would grumble when she criticized them for not maintaining her high level of expectations. She was increasingly given the responsibility for working with executive clients and serving as a team leader, coordinating the work of other members. Amy was concerned to hear that the antagonism between two of her most responsible and productive team members was increasing.

When Amy asked for more specifics about what Mariana did, Helga said, "Well, sometimes she offers to help me, but she doesn't have accounting skills and with money, you have to be very careful. Then other times, she asks me if I need anything . . . really—I just need to be left alone. She's trying to brown-nose with me and wants everyone to like her, but really, I think she wants to take over. I don't trust her at all. She drives me crazy!" Amy began to worry, but her conversation with Helga was interrupted by a phone call from a client.

That afternoon, the ICP staff members had their regularly scheduled staff meeting. Amy was excited to share news of a new international training contract with the staff. When she asked who wanted to be on the project implementation team, Mariana jumped in to volunteer. She added, "Helga would be great, too, but she's so busy with other projects we'll have to survive without her." Amy was surprised. Mariana sounded as if she was sincerely disappointed that they couldn't work together. Amy mentioned that, as the staff accountant, Helga's expertise would definitely be needed. Mariana countered, "We can always consult with her if financial questions come up, but we can muddle through if we need to. We have to be respectful of her time." Helga crossed her arms in front of her chest and said

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nothing. As soon as the meeting was over, she walked briskly out of the room without say-
ing anything to anyone, went in her office, and closed the door.

Amy asked Mariana to stay after the meeting to touch base on another project, but she re-
ally wanted to ask about the staff problem. While initially reluctant to talk about the ten-
sions between her and Helga, Mariana opened up, saying, "I really respect Helga. She's
been here a long time and I know you really trust her. But she is so disrespectful towards
me! She acts like she doesn't trust me, plus she can be so abrasive! I try to be nice to her,
to develop good rapport, but she just snaps at me. I get along with everyone else here, but
it seems like Helga is sabotaging me and trying to get everyone else here on her side. Jeff
and I hang out together after work and Akiko is very sweet, but I think the others are
being poisoned against me. Please, Amy, know that I am trying very hard to get her to like
me for the sake of the team, but it seems like a lost cause. I thought it would just be better
if she was not part of the team for that reason."

As work was wrapping up in the office for the day, Amy had a chance to talk to three other
members of the team about the situation. Akiko, Jack, and Jeff were waiting for a response
from a client and were reminiscing about how they had gotten interested in working with
ICP. When Amy came by, she asked them what they thought of Helga and Mariana's work-
ing relationship and how it affected them as team members.

Akiko was an international graduate student intern at ICP. Her answer was vague: "I love
working at ICP. It's a wonderful opportunity for me, but the United States is very different
from Japan. Some of the behavior that I see, well, it's not what we would do in Japan.
Helga is very kind to me—she helped me to get this internship. And Mariana is very
friendly—she always talks to me. I like being part of the team. Sometimes, though, work-
ing at this office is very difficult for me."

Jack, a middle-aged American, said, "I just want to focus on my tasks for the team and our
mission, but both Helga and Mariana keep pressuring me to take their side. Just yesterday,
I was working with Mariana. She said that she 'needed my support,' but really she just
wanted me to take her side over Helga's. Later in the afternoon Helga checked in with me
to make sure I wasn't turning against her. They act like this is high school when they're
both adults. I refuse to take sides, but still get sucked in with it all. It makes it stressful for
everyone on the team."

Jeff, an American thirty-something, was much more blunt. "Here's the story. Helga is used
to being in charge and being your right hand. She's threatened by Mariana because
Mariana works hard and everyone likes her. Helga is afraid Mariana is going to take her
place in the hierarchy. It's kind of a joke—there isn't really a hierarchy anyway. We all work
as part of the team. I've told Mariana that she should sit down and talk to Helga, but she
says that she doesn't feel comfortable confronting her and doesn't want to be disrespectful.
I wish Helga could just have some respect for Mariana and the rest of us, too!"

That evening after everyone else had left, Amy sat in her office and tried to figure out what she
could do. Helga and Mariana both had too much history and were too good as employees to

fire them, but how could they get past the problems? How could the organization teach others about cultural differences when they could not get along themselves? You can't force people to respect each other, can you? What is respect, anyway?

KEY TERMS

conflict style
culture
diversity
group climate
leadership

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is respect? What concrete behaviors do you believe are respectful and which are disrespectful?
2. How does a group member's background and experience influence their evaluation of respect and disrespectful behavior?
3. In what ways is Marianna being respectful? In what ways is she being disrespectful?
4. In what ways is Helga being respectful? In what ways is she being disrespectful?
5. How is Marianna and Helga's conflict impacting the rest of the group? What should or can other group members do about this situation?
6. What should a group member who feels disrespected do? Who is responsible for resolving this behavior?
7. How can you minimize the potential for disrespectful behavior in groups?

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CONFLICT ON CC

Understanding the Influence of God, Making during a Sea Kay

Bruce Martin and Le

A kayaking expedition changes course after the water.

As they loaded their kayaks in preparation for the designated leader of the day, informed the group of the day is to cross Core Sound and make up the mile day had been difficult for the group. They were on Banks of North Carolina as part of an Outdoor Lead Part of the curriculum involved having students leading the group for a day. Although most of the recreation majors and enjoyed being outdoors, seveance in sea kayaking.

The students had begun their sea kayaking expedition of excitement about finally getting on the water. H the going would be tough as they paddled from the a point into a strong headwind and waves of two t become separated. Several paddlers struggled to while others struggled to simply keep their boats group forged on, finally ending the day several mil Patrick announced the travel goal for the day, a g group.

Initially, the group made good progress on their paddling well and remained together as a group