

## Sick Leave

Kelly tried to control her anger as she thought about her supervisor. She couldn't understand why he was being so unreasonable. Maybe to him it was only a couple days of paid leave and not worth fighting over, but to her it meant the difference between being able to go on vacation during Golden Week or having to stay home.<sup>1</sup> She looked at her contract and the phone number of CLAIR on her desk. She wasn't the only person in the office affected by this. She sat and thought about how she should proceed.

### Kelly

Kelly was 22 years old and had been working for the past six months at the Soto Board of Education office in Japan. This was her first job after graduating from college with a degree in management, and she was really excited to finally be in the real world.

Kelly was born in Calgary and had spent most of her life in Alberta, Canada. Kelly's father was a successful lawyer in Calgary, and her mother was a high school English teacher. Kelly had an older sister, Laurel, 27, who had just passed the bar exam and was working for a corporate law firm in Edmonton.

Kelly had studied Japanese in high school and in university and spoke and wrote the language quite well. When she was 15 years old, Kelly spent four months in Japan on a school exchange. She had enjoyed the time she spent there and always planned to return one day. Upon graduating from high school, Kelly went to the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, to study management.

During her final year at the university, Kelly heard some of her friends talking about the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program. She was told that it was quite easy to get accepted—all an applicant needed was a university degree and an interest in Japan—and that it would be a great way to make money and see another part of the world. Kelly would have her degree by the end of the year and thought that having lived in Japan and knowing the language showed enough interest to have her application considered. Kelly thought that a year or two in Japan after her management degree would improve her Japanese and give her more of a competitive advantage when she returned to Canada to begin her career. She also thought that it would be a great way to make money and have some fun before she came home to start a real job. She asked her friend how she could apply to the program and returned home that night to work on her résumé,

# The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program

## Before the JET Program

The origins of the JET Program can be traced back to 1982. In that year, the Japanese Ministry of Education (Monbusho) initiated a project known as the Monbusho English Fellows (MEF) Program, which hired Americans to work at the local boards of education in order to assist Japanese English teaching consultants who acted as advisors to the Japanese teachers of English in the public schools. The task of the MEFs was to oversee the junior and senior high school English teachers and to assist them with their training. In 1983, the British English Teachers Scheme (BETS) was inaugurated by the Ministry of Education. However, from the outset the British teachers were stationed at schools, and the goals of the program did not only concern English instruction but also sought to increase mutual understanding and improve friendly relations between the peoples of Japan and Britain. While there were some differences between the two programs, both shared a common goal: inviting native English speakers to Japan to assist in improving foreign language instruction.

## The Birth of the JET Program

The realization that Japan must open itself more fully to contact with international societies resulted in an awareness of the importance of promoting internationalization and international exchange at the local level. This brought about not only expanded English instruction, but also a rapid increase in exchange programs. Taking these new circumstances into account, the Japanese Ministry of Home Affairs in 1985 released a paper titled "Plans for International Exchange Projects" as part of its priority policy of local governments for the following year. In the paper, the Ministry of Home Affairs proposed a definite course for the internationalization of local governments, which ideally would lead to smoothly functioning cultural exchanges. All of these ideas were finally implemented in a concrete project: the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program.

The Ministry of Home Affairs abolished the two projects currently in effect (MEF and BETS) and created a new one that was entrusted simultaneously to three ministries: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Home Affairs. However, the concept of appointing local authorities to implement the program and act as host institutions was preserved. While discussions were held with each of the local authorities to work out the details and ensure the smooth implementation of such a massive program, the formation of a cooperative organization for all local government was expedited.

## The Creation of CLAIR

CLAIR, originally the Conference of Local Authorities for International Relations, was established in October 1986 by the *Todofuken* (the 47 prefectures of Japan) and the *Seireishiteitoshi* (the [then] 10 designated cities) as a cooperative organization responsible for implementing the JET Program in conjunction with the three Japanese ministries just named.

## CLAIR's Role in the JET Program

To ensure smooth implementation of the JET Program, the three ministries, the local authorities, and CLAIR were all given specific functions. The functions that the conference attempted to fulfill for implementing the JET Program were as follows:

1. Advice and liaison during recruitment and selection.
2. Placement of participants.
3. Participant orientation, conferences.
4. Guidance for local authority host institutions.
5. Participant welfare and counseling.
6. Travel arrangements for participants coming to Japan.
7. Liaison with related groups and institutions.
8. Publications and reference materials.
9. Publicity for the program.

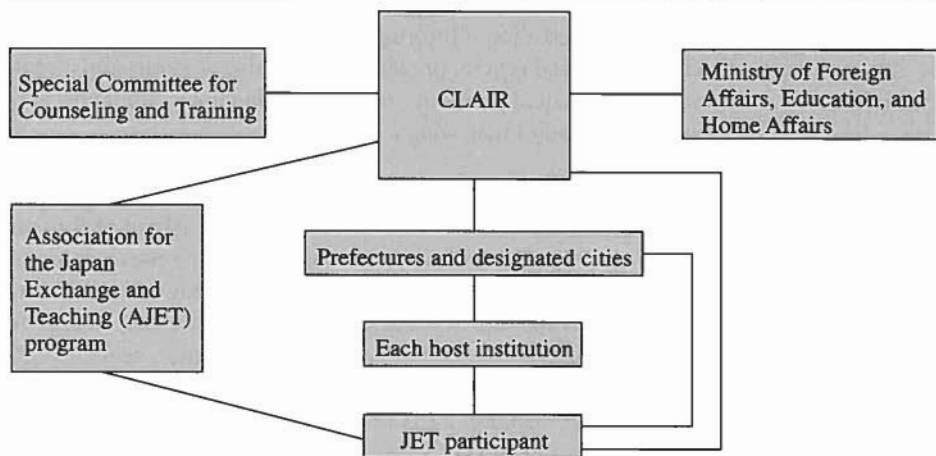
The larger goal behind these functions of the conference was the promotion of international exchange at the local level. Independent of this development, the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (a public endowed foundation) was inaugurated in July 1987. The council's main duty was to study and survey participating nations' local authorities overseas with the ultimate objective being to support local government programs for the promotion of internationalization. By fostering international exchange at the regional level, the council came to assume the same duties as the Conference of Local Authorities for International Relations. It was suggested that both organizations merge since they held information relevant to each other's work and shared the goals of improving work efficiency and performing their tasks more effectively. Moreover, the annual growth of the JET Program led to an increased number of interrelated duties and tasks. Thus it was necessary to strengthen the structure of the Conference of Local Authorities for International Relations.

It was decided that the operations and financial assets of the conference would be assumed by the council, and in August 1989 they were amalgamated, under the acronym of CLAIR, to form a joint organization of local public bodies in Japan to support and promote internationalization at the regional level.

## Counseling System of the JET Program (Figure 1)

1. *Role of the host institution:* Basic problems that JET participants faced during their stay in Japan were addressed by the host institution. If a JET had a complaint or a problem at work or in his or her private life, the JET could alert his or her supervisor, who took up the matter and attempted to solve it.
2. *Role of CLAIR:* Problems or difficulties that JET Program participants faced were as a rule dealt with by host institutions. However, if the issues were difficult to solve at this level, or if they concerned grievances between the JET participant and the host institution, CLAIR employed a number of non-Japanese program coordinators who would intervene and respond directly to participants' needs.

**FIGURE 1** | Counseling System



CLAIR would then step in on behalf of the JET participant and work to solve the problems with the host institution.

3. *The Special Committee for Counseling and Training:* The Special Committee for Counseling and Training consisted of the staff members of the three ministries (Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs, and Education), embassies of the participating countries, and host institutions. It took charge of orientation, conferences, public welfare, and counseling. If necessary, it answered the questions and concerns of the JET participants.

## AJET

The Association for the Japan Exchange and Teaching (AJET) Program was an independent, self-supporting organization created by JET Program participants, whose elected officers were all volunteers. Membership in AJET was also voluntary. AJET provided members with information about working and living in Japan and provided a support network for members at the local, regional, and national levels. Many Japanese and JETs considered AJET to be the union of the JET Program participants.

## The First Job

Kelly looked over the information she received from the JET Program. There were two different positions available: (1) the coordinator for international relations (CIR) and (2) the assistant language teacher (ALT). The first position sounded quite interesting to Kelly since applicants were required to have a functional knowledge of Japanese. ALTs, on the other hand, were not required to know any Japanese before arriving in Japan. She realized that her odds of getting accepted were greater if she applied to the second position since almost 600 ALTs were selected across Canada, compared with only 25 CIRs. Kelly was chosen for a CIR interview but in the end was offered a position as an ALT.

At first she was a little disappointed, but then she reminded herself that her original goal was to perfect her Japanese, and she started to look forward to her trip to Japan.

Kelly received a lot of information about working and living in Japan from CLAIR. CLAIR also offered several predeparture training sessions and orientations about life in Japan and its potential problems, but she decided not to attend because after four months in Japan she already knew what to expect.

## The Placement

Kelly was sent to Soto, a medium-sized city on the island of Shikoku. Kelly found the area a far cry from Osaka, where she had stayed the previous time she was in Japan. Soto was, in Kelly's opinion, "a small provincial town, stuck in the middle of nowhere." She had enjoyed the activity and nightlife of Osaka and, except for sports, her only entertainment options in Soto were one movie theater, several pachinko parlors,<sup>2</sup> and scores of karaoke bars. Kelly very quickly developed the habit of going away on the weekends to tour different parts of the island. She would also use her holidays to take advantage of visiting parts of Japan that she might never again get a chance to see. After a few months, Kelly decided that Soto was at least a good place to improve her Japanese since not many people spoke English very well, and only a few other foreigners lived there.

Kelly worked at the board of education office three days a week and visited schools the other two days to help with their English programs. There were three other JET participants who worked in the same office: Mark, 27, another Canadian; Andrea, 26, an American; and Suzanne, 25, from Great Britain. Like Kelly, Suzanne had been in Japan for only the past six months, while Mark and Andrea had been working there for a year and a half. Kelly was on good terms with the other JETs in the office, although she was closest with Suzanne since they had both arrived in Japan at the same time and had met at their orientation in Tokyo.

Although Kelly had lived in Japan before, this was the first time she had worked in a Japanese office. She had learned about Japanese work habits in a cross-cultural management class at the university, yet she was still surprised at how committed the Japanese were to their jobs. The workday began each morning at 8:30 with a staff meeting and officially ended each night at 5:00 p.m., yet no one left the office before 7:00 or 8:00 p.m., The Japanese also came in on Saturdays, which Kelly thought was absurd since it left the employees with only one day a week to relax or spend time with their families.

JETs and the other JETs in the office had a standard North American contract given to them by CLAIR which stipulated hours, number of vacation days, amount of sick leave, and so on (Figure 2). The contract stated that the JET participants only worked from Monday to Friday until 5:00 p.m. and did not mention working on Saturdays. Neither Kelly nor the other foreigners ever put in extra hours at the office, nor were they ever asked to do so.

Kelly's supervisor was Mr. Higashi. At first Kelly thought that he was very kind and helpful because he had picked her and Suzanne up from the airport and had arranged their housing before they arrived in Japan. Mr. Higashi even took the two women shopping to help them buy necessary items like bedding and dishes so they did not have to be without, even for one night.

**Article 11: Paid Leave***Section 1*

During the period of employment and with the approval of his/her supervisor, the JET participant may use 20 paid holidays individually or consecutively.

*Section 2*

When the JET participant wishes to make use of one of the above-mentioned paid holidays, he/she shall inform his/her supervisor three days in advance. Should the JET participant wish to use more than three paid holidays in succession, he/she is required to inform his/her supervisor one month in advance.

**Article 12: Special Holidays***Section 1*

The JET participant shall be entitled to special holidays under the following circumstances:

1. Sick leave—the period of serious illness or injury resulting in an acknowledged inability to work.
2. Bereavement—the period of 14 consecutive days, including Sundays and national holidays, immediately after the loss of father, mother, or spouse.
3. Natural disaster—the period the board of education deems necessary in the event of destruction of or serious damage to the JET participant's place of residence.
4. Transportation system failure—the period until the said problem has been resolved.

*Section 2*

Under the conditions of Article 12, Section 1 (1), above, the JET participant may take not more than 20 days of consecutive sick leave. Moreover, if the interval between two such periods of sick leave is less than one week, those two periods shall be regarded as continuous.

*Section 3*

The special holidays noted above in Article 12, Section 1, are paid holidays.

**Article 17: Procedure for Taking (Sick) Leave***Section 1*

When the JET participant wishes to make use of the special holidays/leave specified in Article 12, Section 1, he/she must apply and receive consent from his/her supervisor before taking the requested holidays. If circumstances prevent the JET participant from making necessary application beforehand, he/she should do so as soon as conditions permit it.

*Section 2*

In the event of the JET participant taking three or more consecutive days of sick leave, he/she must submit a doctor's certificate. The board of education may require the JET participant to obtain the said medical certificate from a medical practitioner specified by the board.

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**Mr. Higashi**

Mr. Higashi was born and had lived all of his life in Soto. He was 44 years old and had been teaching high school English in and around Soto for more than 20 years. Two years ago, Mr. Higashi was promoted to work as an adviser to all English teachers at the Soto Board of Education. This was a career-making move, and one that placed him on the track to becoming a school principal.

This new position at the board of education made Mr. Higashi the direct supervisor over the foreign IET participants in the office, as well as making him responsible for

their actions. He had worked with them before when he was still teaching in the schools, but since they only came once a week to his school, he had never had the chance to get to know any of them really well.

Mr. Higashi found it very difficult to work with JETs. Since they were hired on a one-year contract basis, renewable only to a maximum of three, he had already seen several come and go. He also considered it inconvenient that Japanese was not a requirement for the JET participants because, since he was the only person in the office who could speak English, he found that he wasted a lot of his time working as an interpreter and helping the foreigners do simple everyday tasks like reading electric bills and opening a bank account. Despite this, he did his best to treat the foreign assistants as he would any other *kohai*, or subordinate, by nurturing their careers and acting as a father to them, since he knew what was best for them. Mr. Higashi was aware that his next promotion was due not only to his own performance but also to how well he interacted with his subordinates, so he worked hard to be a good mentor.

Mr. Higashi took an instant liking to Kelly because she spoke Japanese well and had already lived in Japan. Although she was the youngest of the four ALTs, he hoped that she would guide the others and assumed that she would not be the source of any problems for him.

## The ALTs' Opinion of Mr. Higashi

At first, Mr. Higashi seemed fine. All of the ALTs sat in two rows with their desks facing each other, as they used to do in grade school, with Mr. Higashi's desk facing Kelly's. The foreigners all agreed that Mr. Higashi acted more like a father than a boss. He continually asked Kelly and Suzanne how they were enjoying Japanese life and kept encouraging them to immerse themselves in Japanese culture. He left brochures on Kelly's desk for courses in flower arranging and tea ceremony and even one on Japanese cooking. At first Kelly found this rather amusing, but she soon tired of it and started to get fed up with this constant pressure to "sign up" for Japanese culture. What she resented the most was that Mr. Higashi kept insisting she try activities that were traditionally considered a woman's domain. Not that she had anything against flowers, but if she had been a man, she knew that Mr. Higashi would not have hassled her this much to fit in. She knew that Japanese society was a male-dominated one. On her first day at the office, Kelly had looked around and noticed that there were no Japanese women who had been promoted to such a senior level within the board of education. The only women who worked there were young and single "office ladies" or secretaries. Although they were all very sweet young women, Kelly was not about to become one of them and "retire" if and when she found a husband.

Kelly had been very active in sports back in Canada and bought herself a mountain bike when she arrived in Japan so that she could go for rides in the country. At Suzanne's encouragement, Kelly joined a local Kendo club. She had seen this Japanese style of fencing before back in Calgary, and had always been attracted to the fast movements and interesting uniforms. Kelly hoped that Mr. Higashi would be satisfied that she was finally getting involved in something traditionally Japanese and leave her alone.

On top of his chauvinistic attitudes, Kelly didn't think much of Mr. Higashi as a supervisor. If Kelly or any of the other foreigners had a problem or question concerning living in Japan, he would either ignore them or give them information that they later found out was incorrect. Andrea told Kelly that she stopped going to Mr. Higashi when she had problems and instead consulted the office lady, since she was always able to help her. Andrea had even joked that the office lady should be their supervisor because she was by far more effective than Mr. Higashi.

As far as Suzanne was concerned, Mr. Higashi was utterly exasperating. He was forever arranging projects and conferences for the ALTs to participate in, then changing his mind and canceling at the last minute without bothering to tell them. He would also volunteer the ALTs to work on special assignments over the holiday periods and then get angry when they told him that they had previous plans and were unable to go. Suzanne recalled that one week before the Christmas vacation, Mr. Higashi announced that he had arranged for her to visit a junior high school. Suzanne informed him that while she would love to go, it was impossible since she had already booked the time off and had arranged a holiday to Seoul, Korea. Mr. Higashi got angry and told her that he and the board of education would lose face if she didn't attend. Suzanne told Mr. Higashi that losing face would not have been an issue if he had told her about the visit in advance so she could have prepared for it. As a result, Suzanne lost all respect for Mr. Higashi as a manager and continually challenged his authority. Whenever a problem arose, she was quick to remind him that things were very different and much better in Great Britain.

Mark also had difficulties with Mr. Higashi. Mark was not much of a group player and resented Mr. Higashi's constantly telling him what to do. He preferred to withdraw and work on his own. He didn't like Mr. Higashi's paternalistic attitude. He just wanted to be treated like a normal, capable employee and be given free rein to do his work. As a show of his independence, Mark refused to join in on any of the "drinking meetings" after work.

## The Japanese Opinion of the ALTs

The other Japanese employees in the office found it difficult to work with the ALTs because, as far as they were concerned, the ALTs were never there long enough to become part of the group. It seemed like just after they got to know one ALT, he or she left and was replaced by another. Another problem was that since the foreigners usually did not speak Japanese, communication with them was extremely frustrating.

The biggest problem that the employees at the board of education office had with the ALTs was that they were so young and inexperienced. All of the men in the office had worked a minimum of 20 years to reach this stage in their careers, only to find themselves working side by side with foreigners who had recently graduated from college. To make matters worse, these young foreigners were also hired to advise them how to do their jobs better. The employees were also aware that the ALTs earned practically the same salary as their supervisor each month.

The Japanese employees did not consider the ALTs to be very committed workers. They never stayed past 5:00 p.m. on weekdays, and never came to work on the weekends even though the rest of the office did. It seemed as though the ALTs were

rarely at the office. The ALTs also made it very clear that they had a contract that allowed them vacation days, and they made sure that they used every single day. The Japanese employees, on the other hand, rarely ever made use of their vacation time and knew that if they took holidays as frequently as the foreigners, they could return to find that their desk had been cleared.

## The Incident

Kelly woke up one Monday morning with a high fever and a sore throat. She phoned Mr. Higashi to let him know that she wouldn't be coming in that day and possibly not the next. Mr. Higashi asked if she needed anything and told her to relax and take care of herself. Before he hung up, Mr. Higashi told her that when she came back to the office, to make sure to bring in a doctor's note. Kelly was annoyed. The last thing she wanted to do was to get out of bed and go to the clinic for a simple case of the flu. As she was getting dressed she thought she was being treated like a schoolgirl by being forced to bring in a note.

Two days later, Kelly returned to the office with the note from a physician in her hand. Andrea informed her that Mark and Suzanne had also been sick and that she had been by herself in the office. She also said that Mr. Higashi was suspicious that the three of them had been sick at the same time and had commented that he knew that foreigners sometimes pretended to be sick in order to create longer weekends. Kelly was glad that she had gone to the doctor and got a note so she could prove that she was really sick. Kelly said good morning to Mr. Higashi and gave him her note. He took it from her without so much as looking at it and threw it onto a huge pile of incoming mail on his desk. He asked her if she was feeling better and then went back to his work.

At midmorning, the accountant came over to Kelly's desk and asked her to sign some papers. Kelly reached for her pen and started to sign automatically until she noticed that she was signing for two days of paid leave and not sick leave. She pointed out the error to the accountant, who told her that there had not been a mistake. Kelly told the accountant to come back later and went over to speak with Mr. Higashi. To her surprise, Mr. Higashi said that there had been no mistake and that this was standard procedure in Japan. He said that typical Japanese employees normally did not make use of their vacation time due to their great loyalty to the company. If an employee became sick, he often used his paid vacation first out of respect for his employers.

Kelly responded that this was fine for Japanese employees, but since she was not Japanese, she preferred to do things the Canadian way. Mr. Higashi replied that since she was in Japan, maybe she should start doing things the Japanese way. Kelly turned away and looked at Andrea, not believing what had just happened.

The next day, both Mark and Suzanne returned to the office only to find themselves in the same predicament as Kelly. Suzanne called Mr. Higashi a lunatic and Mark chose to stop speaking to him altogether. Kelly was furious that they were being forced to waste two of their vacation days when they were guaranteed sick leave. She threw the JET contract on Mr. Higashi's desk and pointed out the section that stipulated the number of sick days they were entitled to and demanded that he honor their contract as written.

Mr. Higashi looked extremely agitated and said that he had to go to a very important meeting and would discuss the situation later. The accountant reappeared with the papers for the three ALTs to sign, but they all refused. Suzanne started to complain about Mr. Higashi's incompetence, while Mark complained about the Japanese style of management. Suzanne said that it was a shame that none of them had bothered to join AJET, for wasn't this the kind of problem that unions were supposed to handle? Kelly stared at the contract on her desk and said that they could take it to a higher level and involve CLAIR. Andrea said that things could get ugly and people could lose face if it went that far. Kelly took her agenda out of her desk and started looking for CLAIR's phone number.

### Discussion Questions

1. What should Kelly and the other ALTs do now?
2. Why did conflict occur? How could it have been prevented?

## Endnotes

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1. Golden Week is the period from April 29 to May 5, in which there are four Japanese national holidays. Many Japanese employees and their families take advantage of this period to go on vacation.
2. *Pachinko* is a Japanese-style game of chance that resembles a cross between pinball and a slot machine. It is a very popular pastime among certain groups and, like any form of gambling, can be quite lucrative.