

Name: Elisa Jaramillo-Mayor

1. The challenge or theme illustrated by this episode: How miscommunication, specially in the mist of a intercultural working environment, may lead to team collapse.

2. Brief statement of context:

For my *first* overseas experience, I was working with an international NGO in an HIV/AIDS program tailored for a rural community in sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the relevance of the program it received little or no attention because there was still skepticism in the organization about getting involved with the complex topic of HIV/AIDS. At field level there were three female expatriates: 1 project coordinator (Australian= Mary), 1 nurse (British= Amanda), 1 M.D. (Colombian= me) and 1 female national staff member (Susan). We worked and lived together in a small town where there were no other expatriates. In theory, there were no hierarchical relationships.

Susan was the only one with institutional memory as she had worked with the organization in another project. The rest of us were new to the project and with fairly limited experience in that field. Mary had a strong, straightforward, don't mix business with pleasure attitude that clashed with the more easygoing attitude of the national staff and local stakeholders (in this setting it was important to mix work with social relationships). Two weeks into the project, she had developed a reputation for being insensitive and intolerant of the local culture. Susan promptly decided she did not like Mary and was having a challenging time having her as the coordinator. Unfortunately, we did not realize how the situation affected Susan who suddenly began to get into a depression. Her state of mind affected her work and worried me as I was also responsible for the health of team-members.

Realizing that I could not manage my regular responsibilities, to which I added part of Susan's workload, and the stress of having a team member who seemed to deteriorate more and more, I asked for help from the capital team. Three visitors were sent to evaluate the situation but unfortunately, only spoke to Susan. The final conclusion was that Mary was doing a poor job and had to be more sensitive to Susan's needs. Consequently, Mary became an extremely insecure coordinator and resolved to avoid problems by avoiding any contact with Susan (despite the fact that we lived together and our work required strong team dynamics). Tension simply began to build up and every detail became a source for conflict. Eventually, Amanda and I were unable to be impartial about the situation. After four months of this situation, Mary was asked to leave, Susan was taken to the capital to recuperate and those of us who remained in the project had little or no trust in one another.

4. Lingering concerns, puzzles, or questions:

- I was not able to discern what really happened to Susan: was she so unhappy living with 3 expatriates (and were we being culturally insensitive?) that it drove her to an emotional breakdown and substandard work? Was she not ready for the responsibility that was given to her? How much was actually her fault and how much was ours?

- Is it impossible for a team of national and expatriates to live together? Why should this be so if we are all educated, mature, well intentioned individuals with a common goal? Why is there a policy in the organization for this situation never to occur again?

- How to avoid becoming partial to one side of the conflict in this situation? I assume it does require an outside perspective but when I asked for it, the situation became worse.

My Thoughts and Feelings	What We Said
<p>Mary, this is absurd, you are the coordinator of this team and you refuse to acknowledge one big component of it. Maybe I should be coordinating! Of course, if the management team in the capital is not supportive, this is what it has come down to.</p> <p>I am not sure if Susan is being neglectful because she is unhappy with us; because in these circumstances of extreme poverty, she wants to help her friends by allowing them to facilitate the workshop (for which they would get paid to do so) or she simply is does not have enough experience for this specific task.</p> <p>I wonder if Mary actually asked Susan for the bills. She is really upset today; personal feelings are getting in the way of decisions. Definitely, the capital team messed things up instead of helping.</p> <p>Am I creating more problems than solutions? I am curious about the technical quality of the workshop, maybe this is a good excuse to assist the workshop without offending Susan.</p> <p>What is wrong with this woman? I have never seen her react this strongly. Is this the final emotional breakdown? She has told me about very difficult episodes of her life before. Is it all piling up?</p> <p>To be fare, I was having doubts about her honesty not because I thought she was taking the money for herself, but to favor some of her friends by allowing them to facilitate though they may not have been the most appropriate people for the job.</p> <p>Mary has lost all confidence as a coordinator. She will no longer be able to lead this team as it is required and is not happy here anymore. So much energy is wasted in these personal debates and we are all losing motivation.</p>	<p>Mary: Do you know where Susan is today?</p> <p>Me: She is supervising the workshop with the teachers. She should be there today and tomorrow. I would feel better if I had the opportunity to go there and sit in for an hour or two. I am not too pleased with the people she chose as facilitators.</p> <p>Mary: I must finish the monthly accounting today and have to include the costs of the workshop. I need Susan to give me a breakdown of the bill. She should have discussed this with me but has avoided the subject. I will ask Jones (assistant administrator) for the bills she has submitted so far...</p> <p>Mary: Susan has not given anything to Jones and simply asked for an exorbitant amount of money. What can I do?</p> <p>Me: Maybe one of the drivers can go and ask Susan to come for an hour so that you can close the accounting books today. She is actually not presenting today, just supervising the facilitators.</p> <p>...40 minutes later Susan shows up in the office very upset:</p> <p>Susan: Mary, how dare you send a driver to interrupt me in the workshop?</p> <p>Mary: I simply need to put together the accounting of the month and need your information on the workshop. I had told you previously.</p> <p>Susan: I have not had the time. I am with all these people there. I have never been so insulted and accused of stealing and you...</p> <p>Me: Susan, maybe you should take a minute before you say something that you will later regret.</p> <p>Mary: (eyes watery and shaking) Susan, I am simply trying to do my job, you have not given me the information I needed from you. I am so tired of having to be careful with what I say or do around you. You get the drivers, money without any questions. We even have somebody cooking for us so you can eat!</p> <p>Susan after being quiet for about 5 minutes turns around and leaves.</p>