

# teaching note

## *It's Above Me Now: Managerial support of minority frontline employees*

### Case Synopsis

This case explores two overarching themes in creating an inclusive environment in the workplace. The first theme explored focuses on managerial support given to front line employees that may come from diverse backgrounds. This case mainly focuses on racial diversity and ethnicity, but the themes can be applied to several different identities such as gender, individuals who identify as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community, religious identities, or individuals with visible or hidden disabilities. The second theme explored focuses on the appropriate response of an organization to formal complaints. This case is loosely related to two different publicly available published materials as well as personal experiences of the first author.

The case begins by identifying that the fictional Gray Hotel is currently in a situation that could hurt its status in the community due to the actions of its assistant general manager, Jonathan. As the assistant general manager waits to talk with the general manager and the HR director, he reflects on the three different situations that lead to him being called in. In each of the three scenarios, a minority frontline employee is put in a difficult situation that Jonathan must respond to.

The first scenario is of a Latinx man who has accidentally spilled water on a guest. The second scenario featured an African American woman who was dealing with an overbooked guest. The third scenario addressed an Iraqi woman who was reassigned from housekeeping to laundry. In each of these scenarios, the guest exhibited either overt racism or microaggressions towards the frontline employee. Also, in each situation, Jonathan had to respond to the guest after their comments. His responses did not show support for the employee and he felt justified in the fact that he was providing excellent service to the guest.

After Jonathan reflects on the situation, the case addresses whether or not the culture created by the general manager, Samuel, of providing the excellent service facilitated Jonathan's responses. Samuel also has to ask himself if he should have been more aware of these issues based on "red flags" presented at the beginning of the case. Discussion questions are then presented to help students process the different components of the case.

### Desired Outcome

The authors of the case hope that this discussion of the complexity of multicultural interactions will lead to further discussion of cultural competencies and cultural intelligence. The authors suggest that this case study would work well within units focusing on diversity, dealing with difficult situations, and human resources.

### Target Audience

The target audience for this case is undergraduate students but can be augmented for a graduate student. At the undergraduate level, the authors would suggest that the case would fit within a senior level seminar course as a diversity component. At the graduate level, the authors would suggest additional readings on the topic of managerial support, diversity training, cultural competency, and microaggressions. Readings provided in the literature review of this case would be good resources for a graduate course.

### Learning Outcomes

The themes presented in this case can be found in different forms in organizations across the US and globally. As students are preparing to enter a diverse workforce, the goal is that this case study will provide them with an opportunity to critically think about how they will balance the needs of their employees to feel safe and protected and make sure their guests are having an excellent experience. Specifically, after completing this case study students should be able to:

1. Examine the intended and unintended impact of company culture on different facets of the organization.
2. Critically think about inclusive and reflective responses to difficult situations involving guest and frontline employees.
3. Analyze and create different responses to organizational crises.

### Lesson Plan

Prior to the lesson, students should read the case and come prepared to discuss in class. This case is designed to take place during one 75-minute period or can be split between two 50-minute periods. The plan and times below are based on a 75-minute period.

#### *In Class Discussion (15 minutes)*

At the beginning of the class, ask students to identify issues with Jonathan's responses. As some students may not be aware of some terms (for example: hijab) make sure to clarify any questions they may have. Try to stay away from having the students provide solutions to the identified issues as that will take place in a future step. Possible answers the students may identify are:

##### *Scenario 1:*

- Not addressing the racial slur or comment made by the guest
- Providing a benefit/reward to the guest after their comments may make Ben feel like Jonathan agreed with the comments
- Not addressing the situation with the staff after the incident

#### Scenario 2:

- Taking too long to address the elderly woman's original concern
- Cutting off Sarah while she was in the middle of explaining the situation
- Sending Sarah to the back when the customer said that she did not want to work with her
- Reprimanding Sarah for how she handled the situation

#### Scenario 3:

- Reassigning Akilah based on the customer complaint.
- Requiring Akilah to take off her approved hijab if she wanted to keep her position
- Telling Akilah quitting is an option.

### Small Group Activity (20 minutes)

Separate the class into groups of 3. Then assign each group one of the 3 scenarios. There may be multiple groups with the same scenarios based on the size of the group. Give the groups 10 minutes to create a response that would be more appropriate than Jonathan's response. After the ten minutes has ended, have all of the "Scenario 1" groups sit together and talk through the different possible responses. Do the same with the two remaining scenarios. Have each scenario large group select their favorite response, and that group will prepare to role play for the class.

#### Scenario Role Play (20 minutes)

Have each of the selected representative groups from the three scenarios act out their solution to the case. Then have students from the other two scenarios provide comments on their role play. For example: When the group representing Scenario 1 has completed their role play, ask students who were assigned either Scenario 2 or Scenario 3 to respond.

#### Group Reflection (20 minutes)

After the role playing is complete, ask the students to step into the role of the general manager at the property and decide what should happen to Jonathan. Make sure to not only provide the option of terminating or training, but also of doing nothing. There may be students in your class that do not yet understand the nuances of the question and by not providing them the option of nothing, you are disallowing their voices to be heard. Also make sure students justify their responses. There are several options on the continuum from "fire him" to "do nothing." A few possible permutations are:

- Suspension, but then he returns to his position.
- Diversity training and stays in his position.
- Demotion with no further action.

This is also a good opportunity to ask if students feel Samuel is at fault for creating a climate that may promote this type of behavior. If students do not do so on their own, parse out the difference between creating a culture of excellence and supporting your employees. The two are not mutually exclusive.

### Homework

As a final piece to the case study, have each student craft a response to the complaints submitted by Ben, Sarah, and Akilah and write an internal memo to all employees based on the conclusion they reached about Jonathan's status at the Gray Hotel.

### Discussion Question Guidance

1. *Should Jonathan be fired for the three scenarios presented above or should he go through a diversity training for managers? Is there another option? Provide a rationale for your response.*

Instructors should make sure students also think through the implications of any outcome. For instance, if Jonathan is fired, would he have a claim for wrongful termination? If he is allowed to keep his job, what impact would this have on employee morale. Students should think not only of the immediate implications for Jonathan, but also that of other stakeholders of the organization.

2. *If he were to be fired, would any one scenario be enough for his removal? Is it the cumulative effect of the three scenarios?*

This question allows students to evaluate the severity of each scenario. Instructors can use this as an opportunity to ask how managers should respond to situations that are deemed as less severe. If students determine that it is the cumulative effect, instructors can discuss what interventions could have taken place before the decision to terminate.

3. *Looking back at each of the scenarios, how would you have responded if you were in Jonathan's position? Assume you can anticipate the guest or employee's reaction to your response.*

This would be a good opportunity for the students to participate in role-playing as discussed above.

4. *Do you think Samuel is at fault? What could he have done differently to promote a different atmosphere among his managers?*

Instructors should make sure to focus on Samuel's initial decision to promote Johnathan despite the issues in the house-keeping department. Examine how the prior behavior of a subordinate should be addressed.

5. *How should the leadership of the Gray Hotel respond to Ben, Sarah, and Akilah's formal complaints and possible lawsuit?*

As discussed in the guidance for Question 1, the instructor should focus on the implications of any decision that is reached. Realizing that no decision is going to 100% satisfy all parties, what are compromises that can be reached to minimize discomfort.

6. *The case does not mention the cultural background of Jonathan. Would your interpretation of the scenarios change if he were identified as a minority versus a white man? Why or why not?*

Instructors may wish to encourage students to further investigate whether or not they assumed Jonathan was a white man and what led to that assumption. This question is intended to challenge perceptions and to think critically about how those perceptions influence their responses to a case study. Students should also be encouraged to discuss how those perceptions may influence their responses in a real-life situation.

7. *Is the customer always right? In situations where they may not be, how should a manager address the situation?*

Students should be encouraged to identify additional examples of when a customer may not be right and discuss ways that a manager could support an employee in the moment and afterward. Specifically, instructors should prompt students to discuss support for employees' psychological needs.

8. *As a young manager, what steps could you take to increase your own cultural competency?*

Instructors should prompt students to think about their current cultural competency, identify areas of need, and discuss different methods of increasing their competency. If a group is stalled, instructors may offer an example such as mentorship, attending diversity training provided by the company, or completing independent readings.

9. *If you were developing a diversity management program for the Gray Hotel, what components would you include? What considerations would you address from the case study?*

Students should be able to discuss types of diversity management programs, benefits, and barriers of implementation.

Instructors should prompt students to discuss which program(s) would be most appropriate for the Gray Hotel and identify details from the case scenario that would support a need for a given program.

10. *What service recovery should be provided for customers not directly involved in conflicts between employees and other customers? What type of support could you provide to staff that were not directly involved in the conflict?*

Instructors should discuss appropriate methods of service recovery as well as promoting goodwill. Students should also be encouraged to think about the impact of social media and "Cancel culture" on the hospitality industry. When thinking about staff support, students should be prompted to discuss ways to rebuild employee morale.

## Suggested Readings

- Baker, M. A., & Kim, K. (2020). Dealing with customer incivility: The effects of managerial support on employee psychological well-being and quality-of-life. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 87, 102503.
- Gajjar, T. & Okumus, F. (2018). Diversity management: What are the leading hospitality and tourism companies reporting? *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, 27(8), 905-925.
- Kim, B. (2006). Managing workforce diversity: Developing a learning organization, *Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality & Tourism*, 5(2), 69-90,
- Madera, J, Dawson, M., & Neal, J. (2017). Managers' psychological diversity climate and fairness: The utility and importance of diversity management in the hospitality industry. *Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality & Tourism*, 16(3), 288-307.
- Parfyonova, N., Meyer, J., Espinoza, J., Anderson, B., Cameron, K., Daljeet, K., & Vaters, C. (2019). Managerial support for employees' psychological needs: A multidimensional approach. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science/Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement*, 51(2), 122.