

## teaching note

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### ***Inadequate Orientation and Ineffective Communication: The Case of the Intern***

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#### **Case Study Summary**

Organizations like Hotel Xcellence were grappling to find employees for vacant positions, given the growing labor shortage. Consequently, the hotel's Director of People Support had been sourcing interns to fill the employment void. Jase was offered an internship opportunity with Hotel Xcellence; she was the first intern at her university, so it was an honor to be selected. Jase was placed in the Food and Beverage department as a hostess for one of the hotel's restaurants. She worked for a couple of weeks but never received a complete formal orientation. Although other employees verbally shared dress code policy aspects with Jase, she had no formal communication from managers. When Jase wore earrings that violated the dress code policy, the manager reprimanded Jase in front of her coworkers instead of privately discussing the matter. A heated exchange ensued; Jase was accused of deliberately violating the dress code policy. As a result, Jase walked off the job, thus leaving the food and beverage department scrambling to find a replacement for the pre-Independence Day dinner crowd. After Independence Day, Jase returned to work but was called to a meeting with the F & B Manager and another departmental manager. Another disagreement ensued, and Jase was given three options: 1) acknowledge that she had violated the dress code, apologize, and receive a written warning; 2) resign, or 3) be terminated.

This case highlights critical areas of human resource management in the hospitality industry. The importance of orientation, effective communication practices, and policies, employing interns, and hard versus soft skills will generate in-depth discussions about handling these common workplace issues.

#### **Teaching Objectives**

##### **Learning Outcomes**

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to: 1. Assess the importance of effective communication within organizations; 2. Evaluate the importance of orientation to motivation, retention, and organizational success; and 3. Identify hard and soft HRM practices affecting communication in the workplace.

#### **Target Audience**

First and second-year undergraduate students are the target audience as they may be preparing for an internship experience and can garner critical learnings from the case study.

## Recommended Teaching Approach Strategy

### Lesson Plan

Before the lesson, students will be asked to read the case study and suggested readings on

employee orientation and communication in the workplace. Students will also be asked to demonstrate a general understanding of and be able to discuss the following topics:

1. employee orientation;
2. intern's role;
4. effective and ineffective communication;
5. managing grievances;
6. dress code policy;
7. human resource management (HRM) hard and soft practices

## Discussion Topics and Questions

### Effective Communication in Organizations

Communication is crucial for the organization to thrive and maintain its competitive edge; it involves sending and receiving messages using different methods and channels. Communication can be formal or informal, verbal or nonverbal. Essentially it involves the sharing or exchange of information between more than one individual. In organizations, communication involves exchanging information among managers and between managers and employees (Markovic & Salamzadeh, 2018; Stanciu et al., 2016). Communication is the tool that guides managers in fulfilling their responsibilities. To successfully execute organizational plans such as new hire orientation or onboarding, managers must effectively communicate the information to the rest of the organization. Managers, therefore, must be effective communicators if organizations are to progress, achieve, and maintain competitive advantage (Markovic & Salamzadeh, 2018).

Consequently, communication with employees is vital to alleviate misunderstandings, clarify job roles, and maintain employment sustainability. Hotel Xcellence is a service-oriented organization, and maintaining quality standards is paramount to the hotel's progress and brand image. Stanciu et al. (2016) noted that "there is a strong relationship between good communication and successful quality implementation" (p.393). Therefore, effective communication is necessary to ensure that the hotel meets and maintains its quality standards. Having an employee (intern) walk off the job during a dinner rush does not demonstrate excellence in service quality.

It should be noted that communication is vital throughout all organization functions and is paramount when recruiting, selecting, hiring, and orienting new hires, a function that HR undertakes. Throughout this process, communication occurs across departments, with and among various stakeholders. Thus, all members must communicate with each other, given that communication is widespread across different activities and organizational functions (Keyton, 2017).

In this regard, consider the following:

1. Do you think the F & B Manager's emotions affected his communication with Jase? If yes, what advice would you give to him?
2. How could the F & B Manager demonstrate effective communication skills when addressing the situation with Jase?
3. In the future, what could the F & B Manager do to have more effective communication with the Director of People Support?

## Importance of Orientation

Orientation is a structured process to provide all new employees with the relevant information to get started in a new job. Orientation is an opportunity to influence and shape the perceptions and attitudes of new hires. The word 'orient' means "to acquaint with an existing situation or environment" (Merriam Webster.com/dictionary, n.d.). When new hires join an organization, they are likely to have preconceived ideas about expectations and be anxious about making a good impression. Often, those ideas are based either on prior experience or word of mouth. Therefore, one of the primary purposes of an orientation program is to integrate employees into their new work environment. The goals of orientation are to:

- (a) familiarize new employees with the organization's history, current undertakings, and strategic plan;
- (b) inform employees about relevant policies and procedures; and
- (c) outline desired workplace philosophy and behaviors.

A critical point to remember is that new employees will feel comfortable in their new environment and a new job if orientation is focused on integrating employees into the organization. Effective orientation, therefore, contributes to an increase:

- (a) in employee commitment;
- (b) in productivity; and
- (c) a decrease in turnover (Dessler, 2013; Woods et al., 2012).

## Hard or Soft HRM

Hard and soft HRM are two HR approaches required in any organization. Hard HR is a mechanical approach to treating employees like machines of an organization. It is a way to get the work done with the help of employees at any cost. The main activities related to this HR approach are the recruitment and termination process. It is a rigid approach where employees have minimum communication and decisions flow from top-down on the organizational chart.

The soft HR approach is usually found in the service industry; employees are valuable contributors who help grow the business. Employee issues are treated individually, and employee needs are addressed accordingly, thus ensuring that individuals are satisfied. The soft HR approach helps train and develop employees by motivating and rewarding them based on their roles and responsibilities. The main objective of soft HR is to plan strategically for the long-term goals of the organization. A soft HR strategic plan ensures a two-way communication process where employees can participate in decision-making (Chukwunonso, 2013; Legge, 2005; Storey 1992; Wood, 1995). Organizations must operate effectively for the cohesive interaction of all systems, processes, structures, and people. All are critical elements of effectiveness. However, most notably are the people, especially in service-oriented organizations. Consequently,

- (1) Did the F & B Manager practice a hard or soft HRM approach when handling the situation with Jase?
- (2) Develop a scenario where the F & B Manager and Jase's outcome represent hard HRM tactics.
- (3) Conversely, create the opposite scenario leading to an outcome reflective of the soft HRM tactic.
- (4) Discuss the benefits and disadvantages of each method.

## Instructions

Concepts covered in this case study can be taught in various ways; guest speaker sessions, small group discussions, and student-centric presentations/discussions are good options. For example, guest speakers could be invited to the classroom (virtually or in person) and address disciplinary procedures, the importance of communication in the workplace, the purpose of orientation, HR's role in addressing grievances, and hard versus soft HRM. Alternatively, each topic could be addressed individually during separate class periods. This class plan is designed to be taught with a minimal requirement of 50 minutes.

## Guest Speaker and Group Discussions

Guest speakers from the hotel industry and professional HR groups such as Strategic Human Resource Management, who are subject matter experts, could be invited to address specific topics allowing for small group discussion of key concepts.

## Storyboard Presentations

In groups of four or five students, the class will be assigned varying concepts of a topic, for example, HR's role in handling grievances. The groups will then be instructed to create a storyboard (25 minutes) and provide a synopsis of the case study and the main points highlighted (15 minutes) via the storyboard presentation and question and answers at the end. Throughout the process, the instructor will pose guided questions based on the suggested readings.

## Check for Understanding

In the remaining time (7 minutes), the instructor will summarize the case study key points and conclude the discussion by asking students to summarize their understanding of the case study in a 3- minute paper (3 minutes).

## Assessment

Students will be questioned about the case concepts using a game-based platform. This game will be followed by an assignment to write a one-page report on one of the topic areas' main concepts, which defends their respective views on the case study.

## Analysis of Teaching Objectives

### Effective Communication in Organizations

Communication is the interchange of information between individuals. Successful communication is a two-way process requiring management to listen to staff members' views and ideas and share pertinent information with relevant personnel. Open communication is vital for organization success (Lussier & Hendon, 2017). Given that the hospitality industry is service-oriented, actions must be taken, and decisions communicated to all managers and staff. Ineffective communication leads to a breakdown in communication and can result in misunderstanding and conflict. The absence of or lapse in communication can create barriers to productivity and performance while creating issues like those between Jase and her department manager. Emotions can also create barriers to communication and give rise to misunderstandings.

A key obstacle to communication is one's belief that another's actions are attempts to harm them. It is easy to interpret communications regarding hidden agendas and status battles. In this case, the F & B Manager believed Jase was questioning his authority. The discussion raised in this section should challenge students to contrast effective and ineffective communication in the workplace and highlight the benefits of open dialogue and continuous communication in fostering an environment of collaborative problem-solving.

## Importance of Orientation

Students will gain an understanding of orientation, its emphasis on people, procedure, and information. In this regard, orientation helps new employees understand how the company is organized, its history, operations, and expectations. Interns should understand that they are welcome, valuable members of the workplace. Without a well-established and formal orientation program, organizations may experience high turnover costs. For example, the quick-service restaurant industry's turnover rate was estimated at 120 %, with turnover costs averaging \$5,864 per employee (Tracey & Hinkin, 2006). Students can discuss the ramifications of the absence of orientation regarding the cost associated with turnover and the high costs of poor customer service because of Jase's sudden departure during the restaurant's peak season. The host/hostess is an integral part of a guest's service experience, and without someone in this role, guest satisfaction may be affected. Guests expect to be greeted courteously and to be seated quickly and efficiently. The host/hostess is usually the first and last contact point for guests dining at the restaurant.

Consequently, how guests are welcomed into the restaurant will set the tone for their dining experiences. If the host/hostess does not greet guests politely or is not available when guests first enter the restaurant, they may feel that customer service is not a priority. Students should also offer suggestions for alleviating issues resulting from poor orientation. These suggestions may include structured orientation programs, supportive managers who pick up the responsibilities of HR functional areas, and closely monitoring outcomes of orientation.

## Hard or Soft HR Approaches

The literature on hard and soft HR indicates they are contrasting approaches representative of two extremes of management. Oftentimes, an HR department or an HR manager is likely to adopt elements of both hard and soft HR (Ishak et al., 2011; McGovern & Stiles, 1997; Truss et al. 1997). The hard approach represents HR as links to an organization's strategic objectives regarding employees' effective utilization. The soft approach emphasizes strategic inventions for employee commitment and organizational development (Worsfold, 1999). Legge (2005) highlighted that differences between the two approaches are not necessarily incompatible. Legge pointed out that organizations focused on labor-intensive, high volume, and low-cost profit-centric procedures are likely to adopt HRM strategies that view employees as capricious inputs and pay employees minimally. Consequently, a distinction between the two approaches is whether HR's focus is placed on human resources (i.e., employees) or other resources (Truss et al., 1997).

The discussion raised in this section should challenge students to contrast hard and soft practices. In this case study, an argument could be made that the F & B Manager used a hard approach when he reprimanded Jase in front of her coworkers, which eventually led to Jase abandoning her job. The problem here is that Jase was an intern who had not been oriented to the organization. Organizations expend time, effort, and expenses in recruiting the best individuals. Therefore, it is essential that organizations carefully organize and execute a good onboarding/orientation program that informs new hires of the organization's value, mission, history, and key personnel. The dress code policy was not formally communicated to her, and her initial dress code infraction was not documented. A structured effective orientation/onboarding program can help new hires become productive contributors and better align what they do with what the organization requires (Chillakuri, 2020). The use of soft HRM strategies could have been applied to mitigate misunderstandings.

## Additional Readings

- Kang, M., & Sung, M. (2017). How symmetrical employee communication leads to employee engagement and positive employee communication behaviors: The mediation of employee-organization relationships. *Journal of Communication Management*, 21(1), 82-102. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-04-2016-0026>
- Stein, M., & Christiansen, L. (2010). *Successful onboarding: Strategies to unlock hidden value within your organization*. McGraw-Hill.