

Chapter 10

Communication, Culture, and Discord: A Lesson in Leadership Failure

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ABSTRACT

This case study highlights and examines an avoidable failure of management communication and leadership in a non-governmental organization (NGO). The case study draws on a real-life example of a NGO that was established in Palestine with European Union (EU) funding and that became subsequently staffed by a team composed of local Palestinian employees and expatriate non-Palestinians who, as is commonly the case in international NGOs, were appointed to executive management and leadership roles. Overall, this case study highlights processes of cross-cultural communication between the local employees, the expatriate employees, and (indirectly) with senior executives of the EU funding agencies, whose distant yet decisive influence give a broader context to the localized communication and conflict management processes described and analyzed here. Finally, recommendations are made for future research specific to effective communication, leadership and conflict resolution in international organizations generally and in Palestinian organizations specifically.

CONTEXT

The European-Palestinian Project Office (EPPO) was opened in Palestine in the mid-1990s as a non-profit-making and non-governmental organization (NGO). EPPO was funded initially by the European Union and was designed to provide legal advice and skills training support to the newly founded Palestinian Authority (PA). Specifically, EPPO's stated mission was to *contribute to a sustainable*

and democratic rule of law within the Palestinian Authority.

Funded from a European Union (EU) office located in Brussels (Belgium), the first Director appointed to EPPO was a Swedish man (Yanne) who brought in a Spanish man (Miguel) as his Deputy. A senior official in Brussels had recommended Miguel, explaining to Yanne that Miguel would bring a keen strategic edge to the operation: 'He's tough', the official told him. 'Not always

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easy to get on with, I hear, but you'll need someone with a hard edge in such a difficult business environment'. Perhaps in order to balance the promised 'hard' with a softer and more familiar 'edge', Yanne persuaded the EU office to allow him to bring another Spanish colleague, a woman named Clara, as Yanne had admired her work in financial and administrative support on previous NGO projects. Yanne's first Palestinian or local appointment was Ahmed, whom he hired to act both as EPPO's logistics officer and as a source of local knowledge: none of the Europeans had worked in Palestine before, and none spoke or understood Arabic. From the outset, the sponsors required the working language of EPPO to be English, though Yanne soon discovered that Miguel and Clara occasionally chatted and joked in Spanish. Yanne didn't understand Spanish, and neither did Ahmed; but Yanne decided to let this continue until everyone at EPPO had settled into their work. He decided to insist on "English only" at EPPO later.

As the PA's activities became more diversified, so the requests for EPPO support increased. After two years of stop-start operations, Yanne and Miguel found themselves increasingly involved in managing relationships to external stakeholders across Palestine. Simultaneously, Yanne was spending more time negotiating EPPO's position with various donor and regulatory agencies in Europe. Unfortunately, it was around this time that Yanne's daughter - who had remained in Sweden with his wife - became seriously ill, meaning he started taking increasing periods of leave away from the office. As a consequence, another local employee (Eman) was hired as 'Office Manager' with general responsibility for the running of the office in Palestine and specifically to support Clara. Clara welcomed this support because the responsibility for balancing and accounting for budgets had increased exponentially as EPPO took on new projects while simultaneously clos-

ing others. The budgeting responsibility was becoming too too much for one person (Clara) and so Eman was brought in as the second local hire specifically in order to work under Clara on this core strategic and operational function. For reasons that we explain later, the story of this case study - and the conflict that forms its core - is told from Eman's perspective. But first we should define what we mean by 'conflict', and particularly where 'culture' along with 'cross-cultural communication' - or '*mis*-communication' - appear key factors towards describing the context for the possible causes and potential solutions to organization-specific conflict.

CONFLICT

In contexts for organizational behavior and management Robbins (2005:422) defines 'conflict' as:

A process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that the first party cares about

The emphasis Robbins gives here to perception is vital; for here we can recognize perception as a natural human propensity to process and interpret information coming through the senses, notably sight, hearing, touch, taste and the elusive fifth sense of intuition (Gleitman, 2001). In relation to conflict, perception works intuitively as a survival mechanism, guiding human beings and animals towards choosing to meet conflict head on or flee (Sperber, 1995). As individuals, we are each socialized into one or other cultures: for example, within the family, at school. It is through the experience of socialization that our perceptions of what is 'normal' or 'right' or 'wrong' are formed.

In the context of our current discussion this emphasis on perception becomes of practical

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