

Chapter 9

Communication, Culture, and Discord: A Case Study of Avoidable Leadership Failure in European–Palestinian NGO

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study examines an avoidable failure of management communication and leadership in a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) established in Palestine in 1994 with European Union (EU) funding. It has been staffed over time by European and Palestinian employees. This case study highlights processes of cross-cultural communication between local and non-local employees, the mismanagement of which appears to have led to conflict and a breakdown of relationships such that the achievement of the NGO's mission became threatened. Using a combination of verbatim testimony by the employees involved and reference to established theories of conflict management, cross-cultural communication, and organizational leadership, the case study illustrates how avoidable conflict can arise in organizations, notably in international NGOs. Furthermore, the case study illustrates how timely and effective leadership interventions might prevent conflict becoming both ingrained and detrimental to the health of the organization, thereby undermining its potential to fulfil its mission.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The European-Palestinian Project Office (EPPO) was opened in Palestine in 1994 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 and remains 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. Miguel had been recommended by a senior official in Brussels. Yanne was told that Miguel would bring a keen strategic edge to the operation: "He's tough", the official told him. "Not always 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 he 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. Later he decided to insist on "English only" at EPPO.

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 smooth-running of the office in Palestine and specifically to support Clara. This was because the responsibility for balancing and accounting for budgets had increased exponentially as EPPO took on new projects while simultaneously closing others. The budgeting responsibility had become 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

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