

Professionally Pulling Staples: An Intern Abroad Stuck Between Doing the Right Thing and Risking Professional Relationships

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues, Education Abroad, Leadership and Strategy, Management and Operations, Personnel Management

Setting

SOL Study Abroad Center ('The Center') is based in South America. The Center hosts university student groups and individuals for short and long-term study abroad programs. The Center was created over 30 years ago and has been growing into an accredited university study abroad organization that focuses on social and environmental studies. The Center was founded by a U.S. male, Marco, and he is and has been the CEO and Director since its creation.

The team at The Center includes Marco, six local staff, and an occasional U.S. intern. Marco has worked with some of the local staff members for several years and some for more than 10 years. The local staff are friendly, intelligent, experienced professionals that work extremely well with the visiting students to help them adapt to South America and The Center's programs. Living and working in the country for so many years, Marco claims he has strong relationships with the locals and treats them like family. He is proud that his center mostly employs locals.

Jessica is a U.S. college student majoring in International Development and minoring in Spanish. Her background is in Latin American Studies, Community Engagement, and Spanish language. She is living in South America for a semester on a credit-based placement and is working as an intern for The Center. Jessica was selected to receive a scholarship from her university for this internship position. Her primary contact and connection is with Marco and he has given her the title of *Program Associate and Support*. She knows that she has the knowledge, resources, and experience to connect with the local culture and do great work at The Center. Jessica is excited to get to work and use her research, studies, and Spanish language at The Center.

Case

After months of preparation, Jessica arrived in South America and began her semester-long internship. She spent a week adjusting to her new home and got settled in quickly since she has lived with many host families before. Jessica was welcomed into The Center by Marco and was introduced to all of the local staff. She was the only U.S. intern at The Center during her time there. Everybody was friendly, helpful, and generous during Jessica's transition at The Center. She made friendships with her local colleagues right away. After about a week of getting familiar with operations, Jessica was eager to begin to use her professional skills and expertise to support The Center's programs and projects.

The Center held weekly team meetings, however, there was a tremendous lack of direction and instruction between Marco and Jessica. She found herself constantly looking for work, shadowing local staff, sitting in on student classrooms, and trying to fill her free time with subsidiary projects. Jessica was autonomous and could work fine on her own but there were not any significant projects, tasks, assignments, or responsibilities delegated to her. Jessica would seek direction from Marco and he would ask her to complete mindless tasks like pulling staples from old documents, recycling used paper, cleaning out filing cabinets, and answering the front desk phone. All the other staff were very busy and even stressed with their own work in their particular departments within the office.

Jessica felt frustrated, underwhelmed, and shocked by the lack of leadership and work there was for her at The Center. She tried to start new projects, make suggestions for the office, and help facilitate the programs at The Center but she always felt like just a receptionist. She sought comfort in the local staff who she considered friends and often spent time getting to know them outside of work. She would eat lunch with them, ask about their families and interests, and share quality time with them as much as she could. She considered them her closest companions during the internship program. Marco, being seen as The Center's founder and boss of everyone, was more detached with the local staff and didn't make the effort to get to know them on a personal level. He never ate lunch with the staff and always was running in and out of the office without anyone knowing where he was going.

The work-life relationship was awkward for Jessica and Marco because he would kindly invite her out for family weekend trips or holiday lunches and she accepted even though she resented the work he made her do at The

Center. Jessica felt strange accepting his invitations out since she noticed he never invited the locals (plus, she didn't want to sound impolite or get on his 'bad side' since she needed his professional recommendation after the internship). Marco's intentions were friendly and his wife and children always accompanied him but Jessica felt like he wasn't giving the locals the same invitation even though they've worked at The Center for so long. When Jessica would pack up her things and leave with Marco at lunch, the local staff would seem annoyed and roll their eyes, as if they've seen this happen many times before.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What issues are present in this case?
- How could communication and connection be improved between student intern and Director? Director and local staff?
- What would you have done if you were Jessica?
- What roles did nationality and race play in this situation? What about status and privilege?
- What intercultural activities or training could help improve the work environment at The Center?
- How can Jessica report this issue to her university without harming her relationship with the Director? What steps could her home university take to mediate the situation?