

Can I Say No?

Navigating Race and Power As A New Advisor

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; International Student and Scholar Services; Management and Operations; Personnel Management; University/Higher Education

Setting

The Office of International Services (OIS) is responsible for providing advising, immigration services, and programming to the international student population of a large public research university. The team is comprised of a director, a human resources administrator, and nine student and scholar advisors.

There are 6,000 international students at the university, and enrollment has increased considerably over the last five years. Cassie has been an advisor at the OIS for four years, and was recently promoted to Assistant Director of Student Services. She has been spearheading discussions about hiring another advisor, as the advising team has been struggling with meeting the increasing demand for their services. They will also need additional support for their 'peak' season, which lies in the few months before they welcome thousands of new students for the Fall semester. She gains approval from the OIS director to bring on another team member, and within a few weeks, Zoe – an immigrant-born Black cis-female who has recently completed a Master's degree program in International Development - is hired. It is agreed that she will report to Cassie. This will be Cassie's first time serving as a supervisor.

Case

Cassie and Zoe meet to review her new responsibilities, and how Zoe will support the team during peak season. Cassie believes that Zoe would also be a 'good fit' for two projects in particular. First, she would like

for Zoe to act as the OIS 'liaison' to all 98 international student clubs on campus. Cassie explains to Zoe that she perceives her as 'naturally friendly', and that she will be able to relate to the students well. She also believes Zoe could help pull in students that have been historically challenging for the office to connect with. As an example, she cites the African Student Union.

Cassie would also like for her to solely coordinate the OIS's International Student Peer Mentorship Program. With almost 300 members, she warns that managing the entire cycle of the program will be a 'unique challenge' if she is 'up for it'. She reiterates that Zoe's friendly disposition and perceived ability to relate to students make her the best fit for this project.

Both projects are public-facing, with considerable event planning involved. During an initial conversation earlier that week, Cassie asked Zoe what her goals for her new position were. Zoe admitted to Cassie that she is an 'introvert' with little confidence in her programming abilities, and that she hopes to be able to use her time at the OIS to build her immigration and advising skills instead. Zoe refers to this conversation, but Cassie insists that despite the magnitude of these projects, she will excel at both. She also reminds Zoe that all advisors have a programming requirement to fulfill. Zoe reluctantly agrees to lead both projects. Cassie tells Zoe that she will need to work overtime to manage the projects. She directs her to their HR administrator, Maria, to formally request overtime approval.

A few days later Zoe meets with Maria. Maria explains that Zoe can accrue overtime in either additional vacation hours or monetary compensation. Zoe wants monetary compensation, but Maria explains that she will likely be denied approval due to the OIS's limited budget. Reluctantly, Zoe opts to request for additional vacation hours, and is approved.

Shortly before applying to the OIS, Zoe attended a large international education and development conference in Washington D.C.. There, she attended a session led by Black and Latino higher education professionals entitled *Being Black and Brown In The Ivory Tower: Pathways To Success for Young P.O.C. Professionals in Higher Education*. The speakers led a segment teaching attendees how to manage instances when teams make their black and brown colleagues responsible for public-facing diversity and inclusion work that does not align with their own professional goals. One of the speakers – a Black cis-female professor at another public research university – became a mentor to Zoe. Zoe contacts her, and discusses her meeting with Cassie. She admits that as the only black and immigrant-born person on her team, she feels she is being unfairly loaded with large programming projects that use her as a way to make students feel like the OIS is 'relatable' and diverse. Zoe's mentor believes that to be the case. She also confides that she was afraid to not take the projects because she doesn't want to be seen as combative or uncooperative. Zoe's mentor empathizes, and also expresses her discomfort with Zoe not being monetarily compensated for the additional work.

Six months into her role as advisor, Zoe is overwhelmed with her peak season workload and the two projects. Cassie has approved one hour of overtime a day. However, at their following weekly check-in, she warns Zoe that she cannot exceed a certain amount of overtime, and begins discussing time-management skills. Zoe explains that her work-load from the two programming projects, and not her time management, is her challenge. In an effort not to appear combative, Zoe then presents current and historical data she has gathered that shows decreasing enrollment numbers for the peer mentorship program over the past five years, and a decreasing amount of communication between the international student clubs on campus and the OIS liaison over the same period. She suggests either downsizing both programs, or outright eliminating them for the immediate future. However, Cassie emphasizes that the OIS Director insists that these programs remain as is, and that the OIS especially needed to produce inclusive programming for international students in this current

'climate'. She then continues to share time management skills with Zoe, because she would also like for her to lead an upcoming community service event that the office organizes annually.

Two months later, Zoe feels unable to keep up with the demands of her position. She formally resigns, explaining to Cassie that the position ultimately did not align with her professional goals. A month later, she obtains another position outside of higher education.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Does it matter who the 'face' of the programming at an international office is? Why or why not?
- As a supervisor and part of the dominant culture, what responsibility does Cassie have in developing an understanding of racial and ethnic power dynamics in a team, or in the higher education field at large?
- What additional methods, if any, could Zoe have used to initially decline the two programming projects?
- Was it necessary for Zoe to resign, or could she have found another way to manage her situation?
- If there is only one team member outside of the dominant culture in an office, how can the team intentionally create a 'safe' space for that colleague?
- What groups support and advocate for higher education or international education professionals who identify as people of color? How can you engage with these groups?
- How could the international education field prepare new professionals to negotiate compensation and workload at the time of hiring and beyond?