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D. Kathleen Stitts

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our emotions, and our senses of self. These are not easy tasks; they sometimes take years. In the process, however, we tend to become more emotionally intelligent and balanced individuals. The more we practice, the more we evolve.

REFERENCE


Address correspondence to Conchita Franco Serri, Santa Clara University, Office of Affirmative Action, 500 El Camino Real, Santa Clara CA 95053; email: conchitaserri@yahoo.com.

LEARNING TO WORK WITH EMOTIONS DURING AN INTERNSHIP

D. Kathleen Stitts
Winston-Salem State University

BUSINESS INTERNSHIPS SERVE as a first step to permanent employment, providing opportunities for students to demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and abilities learned in the classroom (Clark, 2003; Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000). The internship experience also allows students to develop and enhance their communication skills (Ryan & Krapels, 1997) as they respond to the personalities and behaviors of their coworkers.

Student interns often engage in interactions that test their skills in handling situations professionally. Any misstep can create a negative image, affect work relationships, and hinder future employment opportunities. Thus, internships help students learn to adjust to the psychology of workplace cultures. This was the experience of one student, whom I will call Sara, who visited my office a few months ago.

One Student’s Emotional Challenge

At the time, Sara was a graduating senior with a grade point average of 3.8 and a double major in business. She was a star athlete, excelling in two sports, and held offices in campus organizations. She was often
asked to represent the university and the business school at campus and community events. As was expected, Sara secured a competitive internship with a major sports company.

When Sara visited my office, she stated that her internship was going well. She had adjusted to the team environment and had taken the lead on some of her projects. Yet Sara seemed a bit uneasy, and when I probed, she acknowledged some difficulties. The following is a summary (used with Sara’s permission) of our exchange about her interpersonal challenges during her internship.

What particular challenges are you having with your internship? Well, this one supervisor—a White male—is really giving me problems. It started when I was completing an assignment for my direct supervisor when another manager stopped at my desk and asked me to do another assignment. She asked me while my back was turned to her, and I said OK, and she moved on. A little later, the male supervisor said he needed something done. I said OK in the same manner I had addressed the other manager. He seemed perturbed and told me, rather loudly, to look at him. I turned around and looked at him and said that I would get the assignment done as soon as I finished the assignment for the female supervisor.

Later that day, the male supervisor said he wanted to talk with me. We went to the break room, and he said that he didn’t appreciate the way I handled myself when he was talking with him—it really “pissed” him off. He said that he had authority, and that he had a say over whether I worked there or not. My blood was boiling—I was hot.

How did you respond? Although I was very upset, I didn’t blow up. I just apologized to him and explained that I did not mean to offend him.

About a week later, my direct supervisor gave me my midsemester evaluation, and it was average. She told me that I was doing good work, but that I was “outshining” the other interns and that I need not do so much—to tone it down a bit. She also indicated that I was making some of the other supervisors uncomfortable. I explained the situation that happened with the male supervisor who had reprimanded me, and how I felt at the time. My direct supervisor seemed shocked about the implied threat from the male supervisor regarding my future prospects for employment. She indicated that she would speak with the male supervisor and reevaluate my progress.
Why did you react the way you did? I knew that I had to be professional. I was in a business setting, and professionalism was expected. I also knew my environment, and through observation I knew the type of person this male supervisor was—that my getting upset would only make matters worse.

What was the outcome of your encounter with this male manager? I continued to be very careful around him, and had little interaction with him. I still did what was required of me, and he did continue to give me a fair amount of challenging work. We never talked about the incident afterwards.

Do you feel you were treated fairly? Honestly, no. I saw other interns being treated differently. For example, one intern who was constantly late was not reprimanded individually as I was, but rather the entire group of interns was told to watch their time. In this particular situation, I think I was treated differently—perhaps because I am a female, perhaps because I am an African American, perhaps because I am more assertive—I'm really not sure.

Were you prepared to deal with such a challenge? I believe that I was taught and prepared well by my university and my parents. I was taught to be humble and to work hard. I was also taught that you have to stand out in a positive way, and that you may have to prove yourself.

What lessons did you learn about managing your emotions? Well, I think I can handle emotional situations. People will say and do hurtful things—I didn’t believe it until I experienced it firsthand. I also learned that when I encounter people who exhibit these behaviors that I may have to be the one to change my behavior, and then down the line I may be able to address the inappropriate behavior diplomatically.

How would you advise future interns about emotional challenges at work? While a student, handle student life as you will have to handle your professional life. You will have professors with different styles, just as you will have different managers with different styles. Try to get as much experience and exposure as you can with a variety of people and organizations and personalities. Don’t be complacent. This will
help you deal with many kinds of emotional situations in a professional manner.

Conclusion

From this experience, one of the obvious lessons is that effective communication is critical in influencing emotions in the workplace. Sara was unaware of how her nonverbal behaviors were viewed by her coworkers. And while she felt that being eager and assertive were positive traits, she was reminded that organizations often require conformity and may frown on those who “outshine” their colleagues. Fortunately, Sara was able to learn quickly, adjust her behaviors, and respond to the managers effectively, so that at the end of her internship, she received an excellent evaluation.

The internship experience, when coupled with professional development activities in the classroom, can be a valuable learning tool for students and a priceless lesson for managers as they mentor and challenge potential employees.

REFERENCES


Address correspondence to D. Kathleen Stitts, Winston-Salem State University; 601 S. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, Winston-Salem NC 27110; email: stittsd@wssu.edu.