

What To Do About Farida: A Case of Cross-Cultural Human Resource Management

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This factual situation describes the problems associated with managing a workforce in a foreign country with different and unique cultural values. An American university operating in the Middle East was attempting to apply Western human resource management practices in a culture much different from its own. The situation involves a problem employee whose poor performance is both criticized and praised. Readers are asked to evaluate the human resource practices of the organization and offer suggestions to solve this cross-cultural management issue.

INTRODUCTION

“I can’t believe his last day is tomorrow. He’s been my supervisor all four years I have been here.” Farida said to her friend, Kholoud, senior administrative assistant to the Director of Human Resources over lunch. Farida was referring to Trevor Cain, Associate Dean of Academic Services who was strongly encouraged to resign from his administrative position and return to faculty ranks or seek employment elsewhere. “He was a great boss, and I hope I like his replacement.” “Inshallah,” replied Kholoud.

In another building, a much different lunch conversation was occurring. The dean had appointed Marc White as interim Associate Dean of Academic Services. Before this new appointment, Marc was the department head for Liberal Arts. He was well-liked by his faculty and respected by those outside his department. He had a reputation for being a great leader who got things done and made good decisions.

In his conversation with the dean about the transition, he requested his current administrative assistant make the move with him. Liberal Arts had two administrative assistants, but only one was needed. Marc was aware of Farida’s poor reputation and knew he could not complete his objectives with her as his assistant. The dean accepted this request. “So, what do we do about Farida?” asked the dean.

BACKGROUND

The Organization

The organization is a branch campus of an American university operating in Doha, Qatar. It was established as a joint venture between a prominent public American institution and the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science, and Community Development, a private entity under the laws of the State of Qatar. The campus was opened as part of Qatar's "massive venture to import elite higher education from the United States to Doha using the oil and natural gas riches" of the country. It was charged with applying Western standards while still conforming to local cultural needs. Employees are over 95% expatriate workers representing 57 countries. The blend of diverse culture-based values allowed for an educational environment where all could learn from each other. However, it also contributed to interpersonal and organizational conflict.

The university organization invested a great deal of time and money in hiring recruiting, hiring and onboarding employees. Together with its US-based flagship campus, it is responsible for selecting and supervising all faculty and staff. Employment in Qatar requires a visa and sponsorship from an organization. Although both spouses may be sponsored, only one is required for a married couple to reside in the country. Sponsorship can differ by organization, but most provide housing and schooling for children. The university offered a competitive package that included above average housing, enough support to cover the best schools, a car allowance, and supplemental money for the employee and their immediate family members to travel to the employee's home country at least once. For administrative assistants, this organization was especially generous in Qatar and provided much more than other organizations in terms of pay and sponsorship benefits.

The university's benefits, sponsorship, and human resource policies are in sharp contrast to the practices associated with Qatar's immigration laws known as Kafala. Under this law, expatriate workers cannot leave the country without his/her employer's permission, even for a weekend jaunt. For labor and service class workers, passports are frequently confiscated by employers and only returned when their contractual obligations are fulfilled. Though changing, Qatar is a place built on employment practices that would be outlawed in the U.S. and most of the Western world. Notwithstanding the labor issues, Qatar stands out because of the money available for employee compensation. Workers in education, journalism, the arts, and other fields accustomed to low wages and job uncertainty find higher salaries and greater funding for programs in this emirate than might be found elsewhere.

Not all employees at the university were sponsored. Those who were not sponsored were known as local-hires. A local hire does not receive the benefits mentioned above, and are typically the spouses of individuals who are sponsored by another organization. Costs associated with their hiring are much lower.

The Country and Culture

The number of people in Qatar is difficult to state precisely. In 2017, it was 2.6 million, of which 313,000 (12%) were Qatari citizens and 2.3 million were expatriates. The number fluctuates depending on the season and the fact that the country relies on migrant labor. Non-Arab foreigners constitute the vast majority of Qatar's population with the largest group being from India numbering 650,000 in 2017. The next largest groups are from Nepal (350,000), Bangladesh (280,000), the Philippines (260,000), Egypt (200,000), and Sri Lanka (145,000).

Islam is the predominant religion enjoying official status in Qatar. Most citizens belong to the Salafite Muslim movement of Sunnis. Twenty percent of Qatari Muslims follow Shia Islam with a very small percentage following other Muslim sects. The country is 67.8% Muslim, 13.8% Christian, 13.8% Hindu, and 3.1% Buddhist. Other religions account for 1.6% of the population. The main source of Qatari legislation is religious-based Sharia law, which forms part of the Islamic tradition.

Management practices in Qatar and much of the Islamic world are influenced by tribal traditions. Managers are "expected to act as a father figure." This means that managers favor the continuity of the family over improved organizational performance. Management practices assume a fatalistic view of the environment, where ultimate control over it rests in the hands of God. This contrasts sharply with U.S.

culture, which has a strong control orientation with respect to the environment. In Qatar, setting and achieving organizational goals are challenging because of these cultural views of the environment. Thus, accountability for business outcomes is weak, making it somewhat common to attribute management and business mistakes to fate.

The national culture of Qatar is collectivistic with strict adherence to Islam, which governs individual behavior and provides a strong unifying social fabric. This permeates into the market environment and dictates that relationships trump business dealings. The sense of family, which is wide and extended, is an unquestioned cultural assumption as is spending time with family and preserving its honor. These cultural values and assumptions are cited as one of the major hindrances to achieving improved organizational performance. The collective orientation of managers in part accounts for why employees do not receive honest and candid performance reviews. Doing so might damage employees' self-esteem because it could be perceived as unfriendly and hostile. If information concerning poor performance is phrased too bluntly, Qatari employees will feel that the criticism is a personal insult. Managers believe that candid and honest feedback demotivates their employees – a perspective of collective thinking that relationships are valued over everything else. When they need to provide feedback, managers customarily provide it through an intermediary to avoid conflict and the possibility of sending the wrong message.

Qatari culture favors life employment, so managers typically do not purge poor performers and replace them with high performers. While management progressives may take a strong stance when it comes to dismissing low performers, the prevailing culture dictates against this as a practical matter.

Trevor Cain

Trevor Cain was the Associate Dean of Academic Services for nearly four years, and a professor at the university for three years prior to that. He was a strong Christian who helped start a Christian church in Doha. He was married with three daughters. During his time at the university, his eldest daughter was hired by the institution, and his wife worked part-time, moving into a full-time role the last three years they were there. In their early years in Qatar, they were well liked and involved in the expat community.

However, as a manager Trevor was lacking, and as a result, the departments he supervised had many issues. In the last three years, the Director of Student Success was the subject of two formal human resource investigations for creating a toxic work environment. The Director of Student Affairs was asked to leave, but his contract was still paid out. Jim, the interim Student Affairs Director who Trevor appointed, was receiving complaints for his lack of work ethic. The Director of Registration, with whom Trevor was close friends, was receiving complaints about his “my way or the highway” attitude. Lastly, the senior academic advisor had resigned after not receiving the promotion Trevor had promised her. Her work was high-quality, and students, faculty and staff were disappointed to see her go.

Farida Hammad

Farida Hammad, Senior Administrative Assistant to the Associate Dean of Academic Services moved to Qatar from Egypt. She was married with two children, and initially relocated to Qatar because of her husband's job. Her husband, also Egyptian, lost his job one year before Trevor left. Thus, she was initially considered a local-hire, but after her husband lost his job, the sponsorship of housing and schooling moved to Farida at the university. She was well liked by the other administrative assistants who were of Arab descent.

Farida would come in late most days and frequently left early. This went unmentioned by Trevor as it followed his typical schedule even though most other Americans who worked at the university still had a very monochronic concept of time. Farida was very confident in her abilities and believed she deserved a promotion. She received excellent feedback from Trevor on her yearly performance review. Since the senior administrative assistant title was the highest administrative position available at the university, Farida was seeking to advance her career by searching for program coordinator positions.

Perceptions of Farida's performance were poor, especially among the people she was hired to serve. Trevor appeared to be the only person who believed that Farida's work was exceptional, at least on paper. Among other things, she was responsible for processing student worker timesheets. Farida was highly

disliked by the students because she would frequently make errors when processing their pay. They would consistently receive their pay late and many times not receive it at all. Supervisors of the students also felt the same frustrations. It seemed as if she was never at her desk, and when she was, she wouldn't reply to questions and concerns. Farida was a nice person, but seemed unwilling to improve her ability to complete her core job tasks. Now that Trevor was leaving, there was a different problem. What department would she work in?

MOVING FORWARD

“So, what should we do about Farida?” asked the dean. “We can't let her go or she will be sent back to Egypt.” After some discussion, they decided that Marc would speak with his good friend, Jim, the interim Director of Student Affairs. Jim had been interim for a year with many false promises from Trevor of being appointed to director. Jim was delighted when he heard Marc would be stepping in as interim Associate Dean. He had observed many hiring decisions in the small expatriate community based on interpersonal relationships. With his friend now serving as his boss, he was certain he would get the director appointment.

Jim was willing to take Farida, but asked that it be on a trial basis to make sure it was a good fit. He was also well aware of her poor productivity, work ethic, and reputation with the students. However, he wanted to cooperate with Marc and hoped it would help make his promotion an easy decision.

The position change was presented to Farida as a positive change where she could have an impact on student development – something she believed she was good at and wanted to do more of. Marc told her that he wanted to continue to work with his administration assistant, and that this would allow her to grow her skills. At this point, Farida had still not been told that others had a poor view of her performance.

Farida was with Student Affairs for five months. During that time, Marc was taken off interim status and appointed to the Associate Dean position, giving him power to promote his friend, Jim. However, the promotion never came; instead, the director vacancy was posted to job boards.

During her time in Jim's office, Farida frequently came in late, took long lunches, left early to spend time with her children, and made many errors in the tasks she was assigned. After five months, Jim knew she had to go. She was making things worse for the office. After a conversation with Marc, it was decided that they would find another position for Farida, but it may take a little time.

Conversations began again about what to do with Farida. Fortunately, an administrative assistant position in the College of Engineering opened. Ahmed, the department head pushed against taking her, telling Marc, “we don't want her.” However, the decision was made, and again, a trial basis was allowed to soften the fact that the department head did not want her. Marc had many other things to worry about and hoped she would find this department a good fit.

After working for Ahmed for eight months, conversations about where to place Farida began again. Ahmed was fed-up and threatened to fire her if she was not moved to another department. “She does not fit in our department, and it doesn't seem she is trying” Ahmed said to Marc. Marc wanted to keep Ahmed happy as Ahmed was a well-known researcher who brought a lot of money from grants and contracts to the university.

Marc was frustrated that this was occurring again. He had many other tasks that required his attention. At this point, he contacted Martha, a faculty member that reported to him during his time as department head for Liberal Arts. Martha had been given the role of student success director in addition to serving as Assistant Professor of English. “Martha, I need to place Farida as an administrative assistant in your department” Trevor said. “Absolutely not” Martha replied firmly. Once again, Trevor was faced with the question of what to do with Farida.

While all of this was occurring, Farida could be overheard complaining to her friends about the poor leadership she had to deal with since Trevor left. She claimed that she was treated unfairly and received feedback that was not true. “Trevor was the best employee here, and they should not have forced him to leave” said Farida. “If he were still here, I would have received my promotion by now.” As tensions

continued to grow the question of what to do about Farida remained. Given the cultural constraints and the issue of sponsorship, the organization faced a tough decision.

ENDNOTES

1. A teaching note is available upon request from verified faculty.

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