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Time for a change: managing cross-cultural issues in Barbados (A)

Vinette Daley put down the phone after a lengthy and stressful conversation with the director of one of her partner agencies, with the question echoing in her mind. After three years in her current stint as chief executive of the Barbados subsidiary of Global Network Services (GNS), this call placed her dilemma sharply in focus: could she continue to support Komo, her Assistant Manager who had worked so well in Africa with her five years ago; or should she let him go and put his hitherto promising management career in a downward spiral?

Komo's technical strengths had provided good support to her initial reorganisation efforts in Barbados to link Caribbean initiatives to international resources, skills and finances. Now that the company was beginning to increase its portfolio of projects, and morale was generally improving, Vinette was concerned about the increasing rifts between Komo and the predominantly female staff. They resented what they saw as his insensitive and bureaucratic style of management. In the most recent incident, Komo had inadvertently undermined the efforts of Sonia Barnes, the Project Coordinator, and had almost derailed negotiations with a major regional partner. Vinette had to decide before next month's Global Executives' renewal of allocations: could she maintain the momentum of change in the company, and keep Komo?

This case was written by Norma Shorey-Bryan with supervision from Dr Richard Norman from Victoria University of Wellington at the Caribbean Case Course in Barbados, July 2004. It has been prepared as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The names of the company and of the individuals concerned have been changed to protect the privacy of all.

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Global Network Services

Global Network Services Inc was a well-respected international company based in New Jersey, United States, which linked international skills and resources to needs at national and community levels. A fixed percentage of the value of each initiative covered most of the operating costs and was supplemented by support from international partners.

The Barbados subsidiary of GNS had been established in 1979, with a staff of six persons. Within five years, other GNS subsidiaries had opened in Jamaica, Guyana and Trinidad. The Barbados subsidiary was responsible for the company's operations in the Eastern Caribbean (EC), and in seeking to respond to the needs of these countries, its scope of activities had expanded rapidly. By 1994 GNS had more than 30 staff in Barbados.

However, worldwide recession and contractions in the late 1990s led to a reduction of staff and closure of some of the Barbados/Eastern Caribbean operations. In addition, a series of poorly selected chief executives in the late 1990s had resulted in rifts between the New Jersey Headquarters (HQ) staff and the Barbados management. The pressures and uncertainties had led to a decline in the morale of staff, by now only 20 in number, and mainly women.

It was in this context that Vinette Daley accepted the position as CEO for the Barbados and Eastern Caribbean Operations. She was building on a successful career which had included roles as an Assistant Manager at HQ and as CEO in three African countries. Her strength was considered to be her strategic orientation and sensitivity to people.

Meeting the challenges

When she took up the challenge of her new position in mid-1999, Vinette was astounded at the low level of performance and morale. After the previous CEO had left, the office had been managed for almost 18 months by various junior officers and managers from HQ on short stints between substantive assignments. This unsettled situation and lack of leadership reinforced in staff the view that the Barbados office was of little value to HQ. Furthermore, they felt that Vinette's hidden agenda was to rationalise the complete closure of the Barbados operations.

Vinette had a different perspective: she saw the potential and importance of the Barbados and Eastern Caribbean office for serving the needs of the smaller and less developed Eastern Caribbean countries, and was determined to do whatever was required to ensure that Barbados operations were put back on a firm footing.

Shortly after her arrival, Vinette met with staff individually and collectively to assess the situation. Staff members, who were suspicious at first, quickly warmed to Vinette's direct and firm but fair approach. Morale increased as she addressed some of the outstanding and urgent issues. They knew she was honest in representing their concerns at HQ, whether the outcome was favourable or not.

When tough decisions had to be taken to further reduce staff, Vinette sought to lead that process carefully and slowly, being honest and transparent with staff about impending

changes beyond her control, and ensuring maximum benefits for the staff whose positions were made redundant. Recognising some of her own limitations, Vinette organised various activities to facilitate the change process. In spite of initial resistance from staff, she revived the annual staff retreat using an external facilitator. As one staff member confided:

“We had retreats before, and the one before this last one especially was a disaster. But our retreat really made a difference this time. We got a better understanding of what the company could become and the part everyone could play in achieving this and also meeting our targets!”

Vinette was not only concerned about the operations and about achieving targets. Staff were encouraged to consider what they could do to improve the working environment and the relationships among members. With the support of the facilitator, sessions on the process of change generated practical suggestions for restructuring the operations, and helped staff members realise that each person could make a difference. The morale of the office rose steadily. Some staff members who had worked with the company from its inception and were resistant to the new approaches were encouraged to take severance packages. With restructured operations and re-energised staff, the office was poised to take a more effective role in the regional arena.

Stabilising operations

Vinette’s second task was to stabilise the project operations. In this, her immediate challenge was to find a suitable Assistant Manager who had the required technical skills as well as knowledge of the international operations of the company. It was usual practice to select senior staff (like herself) from the international arena and after consultation with international colleagues she selected Komo Ametewa, with whom she had worked during her assignment in Nigeria five years before.

Komo had been with the company for ten years in various branches in Nigeria, progressing steadily from being a Project Officer to a position of Operations Manager. During the previous year he had been selected as part of a team on a short-term assignment at HQ. He knew the company’s procedures extremely well, and his methodical manner ensured that in the offices where he worked, not only were systems put in place, but they were operated effectively. Vinette felt that he would bring a professional and stabilising approach to the Barbados operations, particularly on the administrative side, freeing her to spend more time on the strategic elements and international linkages and demands.

Being selected by Vinette to be the Assistant Manager in Barbados was the right opportunity at the right time for Komo. He listened somewhat impatiently to the ambivalence of his wife about leaving Africa, and pointed out to her the advantage of the Barbados assignment to his career development as he moved from national to international staff status. While not fully convinced, Komo’s wife knew it was her duty to make a home for her husband wherever he went.

Coming to the Caribbean proved a rocky transition for the family, away from familiar sights, norms and behaviours, food and friends. It did not help that Komo threw himself tirelessly into his work, not fully appreciating the impact of the changes on his family.

While he met many people through work-related social events, his family seemed to be isolated. Yet without the traditional family support system, he often became irritated by their demands on him at home.

The Barbados staff greeted him with cautious reserve. The normal apprehensions about a new manager were lulled by the positive reports Vinette had shared about Komo's capabilities. As one person said:

“We were willing to give him a chance, because we trusted Vinette's judgement. If she said he would be an asset to our operations, we believed her.”

Komo's challenge

Komo arrived in Barbados full of optimism, determined to bring a professional and structured approach to addressing the problems which he had been briefed about. He wanted to prove himself quickly by installing effective systems and procedures.

At the same time Komo was unsure of what was expected of him in the Caribbean culture. While gratefully respectful of Vinette's leadership, he was surprised at the number of women in the Barbados operations, especially in the professional and technical areas. He was amazed and somewhat disconcerted by the openness with which staff discussed personal, professional and political issues. In addition he was puzzled:

“Why could they not understand that his personal life (including the way his family was adjusting to the Caribbean) was not for public discussion?”

He also felt somewhat alienated by the easy camaraderie in the office, uncomfortable with the hidden jealousies and often surprised by the impromptu celebrations for birthdays and personal successes that in his view interrupted the work week.

From his vantage point, the lack of strong administrative management had weakened the Barbados operations. Senior staff, including the Project Coordinator, Sonia Barnes, had carried out duties that were properly the responsibility of the Assistant Manager. Komo was determined to streamline and clarify accountabilities and bring them in line with the company's norms... quickly!

Komo envisioned his mission clearly and unequivocally: bring order and increase the standing of the Barbados operations within the global company operations.

The staff perspective

The Barbados staff saw things differently. Having experienced the trauma of poor management and administrative practices, they had taken on additional responsibilities and developed systems that worked within the Caribbean context, without conflicting with the international standards and procedures. While initially receptive to Komo's attempts to bring order and to introduce new systems, his high-handed and uncompromising approach created resentment and resistance. His strict insistence on doing things “my way – the proper way” created ripples of discontent. As Sonia put it:

“We agreed with Komo on the need for change. We did not like way the way he went about it. He does not understand our Caribbean context, and he does

not listen. He does not appreciate the need to deal with certain situations and circumstances differently.”

Sonia was one person in whom many of the staff confided their frustrations and fears. She recognised the importance of acting sensitively in dealing with the hidden “politics” of the company, as well as in relationships with partners in the Eastern Caribbean Region.

Practical arrangements such as travel budgets created conflicts. Komo found it difficult to understand why such a disproportionately large travel budget was required to respond to the needs of the small population in the Eastern Caribbean. He did not seem to appreciate that air-travel costs were high over relatively short distances, compared to his African continent experience. He would not be persuaded on the cost/benefits of travel expenditures. It seemed to staff that rather than supporting their plea to retain budget items, Komo seemed to be eager to cooperate with HQ in finding ways to reduce expenditure.

When Vinette was absent, and Komo acted as CEO, the responsibility and accountability seemed to become more burdensome. His typical response to difficulties was to delay decisions, sometimes until deadlines had passed, and “urgent” action had become irrelevant. When Sonia sought to represent staff concerns, or to introduce other perspectives on an issue, she felt that Komo listened politely but ignored her views. Komo, on the other hand, felt that the negativity that he encountered to his reorganisation efforts for change was personal, and that Sonia, and others, simply resisted his ideas for the sake of opposing.

Vinette’s approach

Vinette was aware of these rifts but decided to let Komo work them out and find his own way of dealing with staff. Having installed an Assistant Manager, she was anxious to focus on what she saw as her major responsibilities: identifying new resources and business opportunities, and building more substantive relationships with clients and customers in the Caribbean Region and internationally. She quickly released to Komo many of the responsibilities of managing the day-to-day affairs of the office. Paradoxically, one of her concerns was Komo’s obsession with streamlining administrative procedures. He seemed unable to think strategically and explore ways of creating synergies between limited project resources.

In spite of her busy travel schedule, Vinette met periodically with Komo, to help him appreciate the dynamics of working in small Caribbean island states. When he encountered conflicts with the staff, and particularly with the Project Coordinator and with his clerical assistant, Vinette tried to encourage him to be more flexible instead of using what staff perceived as his typical authoritative and often dismissive manner.

The crisis point

Komo seemed to feel that the hostility he encountered from staff was directed at him personally, so he retreated to aloof bureaucracy, documenting every concern and issue with a memo. Despite the discussions with Vinette, he did not seem to understand how

he contributed to the difficult situation. In his view, it was logical to expect acquiescence from junior staff.

“... if they report to me, they should listen to me! Why do they need to argue with me over everything? This is the way the company does things... is that so hard to understand?”

Staff resented Komo's high-handed approach and resisted. But the crisis for Vinette was an incident that affected the partner agencies. Sonia was the officer responsible for a pilot project that required a new type of partnership for the delivery of GNS's assistance. In negotiating this partnership with the agency, Collaborative Technologies Inc (CTI), Sonia recognised the need for compromise in the administrative and reporting processes, which were somewhat different from the traditional way in which GNS operated. Komo would not budge. He did not seem to appreciate the constraints faced by CTI. He was adamant that he had to do things the correct way.

In spite of other pressing commitments, Komo insisted on reviewing every detail, which slowed the process of the negotiations. Seeking to build bridges and foster a deeper understanding of the issues, Sonia arranged a meeting with Komo and the CTI Director. The meeting was a disaster. Komo's stance and the way in which he unequivocally presented company policy undermined all that Sonia had sought to achieve.

Vinette was dismayed when she returned to the office after her recent trip to find a tension that was almost unbearable. Sonia had tendered her resignation, but was persuaded to withdraw it. Vinette recognised the signs of the low morale that she had encountered on her arrival.

She was not at all surprised by the call at 9:15 am on the following Monday from the CTI Director. Referring to the recent meeting, he expressed his satisfaction at Sonia's professional manner, but shared his concern about how GNS's approach seemed to be changing from being a facilitating to a bureaucratic organisation. Did the Assistant Manager's approach signal a trend for the future?

Vinette soberly reflected on how this single incident had the potential to destroy valuable relationships with partners and also to undermine the hard-earned gains in stabilising office operations. Would she be able to maintain a cohesive team in the face of the rifts? What could she have done differently to integrate Komo into the Caribbean setting? Was Komo the right person to be her Assistant Manager? Maybe it was time to reconsider her choice.

She knew that a poor appraisal in his first international posting would be a blot on Komo's company record and would adversely affect further promotions. Komo had potential, but he needed to learn some lessons. Was it worth investing the time in his development? Could she forgive herself if she “abandoned” him now? If she wanted to foster changes in the office, was it time to change her Assistant Manager?

Vinette considered some of the options before her. She could have Komo transferred back home; send him to headquarters for training; arrange for executive coaching to help him develop skills to be more effective; or arrange for his transfer to another posting. What should she do?