

The Paradox of Rules and Authority:

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Worker Narratives¹

Sharon

Sharon is a well educated and experienced assistant city manager of a midsized, affluent suburban city. She has spent 17 years with her current city moving up in management positions. In her current role, Sharon is responsible for overseeing seven departments within the city, including the police department. Last year while leading the search for a new chief of police Sharon invited the top applicant for the position to town for a few days of intensive interviews. After meeting with several citizen and staff committees and passing a battery of psychological tests, the city management team – Sharon, the white male city manager and another white male assistant city manager – asked the interviewee, Steve, to lunch. Sharon noted that while at the lunch Steve was more than a bit nervous and barely touched his food. Steve requested a box for his leftovers. When the box arrived Steve looked at his food, looked at Sharon and expectantly said that his wife usually boxed his leftovers for him.

Sharon was flabbergasted. The request struck her as unprofessional and she later said she had never seen an interviewee behave so inappropriately. Sharon responded lightheartedly to Steve, saying that she was the assistant city manager and his potential boss, not a wife, and if he needed help boxing his leftovers she was happy to ask the waiter for him, but boxing leftovers was not part of her job description.

The applicant was not hired; Sharon said that after the lunch she decided Steve would not be a “good fit” for the organization. Sharon commented that she left the lunch feeling humiliated. The other members of the management team, both white men, laughed about the situation and teased her for days. While at the lunch they responded in a way that demonstrated the question was inappropriate, their later ribbing of Sharon accentuated her role as a female “helper” and reinforced the message that the interviewee had established. Sharon also received negative feedback from citizen and staff committees she had convened for the interviews; members of the community and staff all generally liked Steve and did not understand why Sharon did not appoint him to the position.

¹ Name is changed to protect the anonymity of the interview participant. Throughout the project I have used pseudonyms for the participants and changed minor details about the communities and organizations they work in to protect their anonymity. Data were collected as part of a larger research project. If you have questions or comments, please feel free to contact me: Shannon Portillo at sportillo@ku.edu .

Sharon, however, said that during the interview experience she clearly was not being respected as an assistant city manager should be, as an experienced, well trained professional. Steve did not see her as a professional equal or even potential superior. He saw the resemblance to his wife and asked her to perform a duty associated with a cultural role of female “helper.”

Sharon recognized Steve’s request as a challenge to her official authority and her identity as a professional. In order to combat this challenge Sharon referred to roles that were specified in the city charter and her organization’s hierarchy - if this man joined the organization he would officially be her subordinate. Sharon was careful, however, to frame her response in a light-hearted and feminine way. She simultaneously rejected the cultural role Steve was requesting her to perform, asserted her professional role and adhered to cultural norms of femininity while asserting her professional identity. She joked in a feminine and light hearted way, acting culturally deferential, while making sure that Steve understood she was professional and in charge of the situation.

Markus

Markus, an older Black department director discussed what he has learned over the years as a public servant. People are people, and I have trained a lot of people over the years, we are what we are and we bring a lot of baggage, whatever that prior experience is we bring that baggage and it is only through the knowledge, education and exposure and experience that we start unloading that baggage...it is only after people start unloading that baggage that they will see you for who you are and start listening to you as their boss. You will have employees who come and they bring all their baggage, they walk in and see you and they don’t like it. It is only through time they are going to drop some of their baggage. When they meet you because of your title they will leave some of it at the door, and then as you prove your knowledge, some more of that baggage will go, as you prove trust then more of that baggage will go.