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**A NARRATIVE OF A YOUNG FEMALE IN AN OLD MAN'S INDUSTRY: SEXISM AND AGEISM IN A MACEDONIAN FAMILY-OWNED BUSINESS**

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**Abstract:** Communication between supervisors and subordinates is a crucial aspect of organizational communication, because its quality can truly mean the difference between organizational success and failure. If supervisors and subordinates within a company have respect for each other and are able to communicate in a healthy, effective manner, the company's chances of achieving its goals are greatly increased. On the other hand, when power disputes and rivalries arise, much energy is wasted, and potentials (both individual and collective) are left unfulfilled. This case study uses a narrative of a dysfunctional relationship in order to analyze the conflicts that occur between younger female supervisors and their older male subordinates within the specific context of family-owned businesses. This particular type of conflict is of special interest for traditionally male-dominated societies, where we can realistically expect to encounter such conflicts. Also, because family-owned businesses employ a significant portion of the global workforce, this analysis can contribute to the resolution of such conflicts in other organizations. The dysfunctional supervisor-subordinate relationship was analyzed through the lenses of family business theory, sex stereotypes and age-based beliefs. After analysis four solutions were given for improving the narratives' dysfunctional relationship.

**Keywords:** organizational communication; supervisor-subordinate relationship; family-owned business theory; ageism; sexism

**1. NARRATIVE**

<sup>■</sup>In 2003, B-Computers was a small, family-owned Information Technology firm, operating in the West of Macedonia. Its three partners and five employees all shared the same office space, knew each other on a first-name basis and were used to working in a healthy, collaborative environment. The company's three partners had very different backgrounds and played idiosyncratic roles in its day-to-day operations. Frank, B-Computer's founder and CEO, was a fifty-five-year-old Mathematics graduate with 25 years of professional experience in the IT industry. Due to his technological leadership and longstanding career in IT, he was greatly respected and admired by his employees, especially those in technical positions, with whom he worked closely. Susan, a fifty-six-year-old Psychology graduate and Frank's wife, had recently begun working at the company part-time as a way of 'helping out', and had taken on the role of Director of Human Resources. She dealt with employees mostly on administrative and bureaucratic matters. At the age of twenty and about to complete my undergraduate degree in Public Relations, I was by far the youngest and least experienced member of the firm

For most of my first year at B-Computers, I relied heavily on my father (Frank) and the senior employees for help on understanding our company and the industry's business practices. Because I came from a very different background (Management/Communication), I was not familiar with the IT concepts and jargons the employees routinely used, and I often felt like I had to work extra hard in order to make up for my lack of technical knowledge. With time and with my father's encouragement, however, I grew to realize that although I was still dealing with older and more experienced professionals, I nonetheless had valuable input to contribute to the team's work. After all, I was the only person in the group with a business-related degree (i.e.: non-IT), possessed skills that made it easy to communicate with customers and business partners alike, and was quickly learning about the products and techniques used in IT sales.

In 2004, B-Computer's partners decided that the company needed a professional sales force to grow. In the span of 18 months, we hired three salespersons: Logan, a thirty-year-old male with a degree in Business Administration; Joanna, a thirty-year-old female with a degree in IT; and Michael, a forty-year-old male with a degree in Engineering. Because there was no real Sales executive in the firm, the salespersons began to report

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<sup>■</sup> The events in this narrative are portrayed as remembered by Julia, Director of Marketing for B-Computers between 2013 and 2017. B-Computers and its collaborators have been given fictional names, in order to preserve the privacy of the individuals and the organization. The italic font effect has been used to indicate the portion of the text in which Julia narrates the story in the first person.

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directly (yet unofficially) to me. I knew I was in a bit over my head, because I had very little practical sales experience, but I welcomed the challenge and looked forward to learning on the job. Within a few weeks of working with the two younger salespersons, I was able to negotiate and exercise considerable leadership. We established respectful supervisor-subordinate relationships, a reasonably systematic work schedule (including meetings and deadlines) and basically agreed that, since none of us had had that much sales experience, we were all going to have to work hard together to meet the common goal. Michael's introduction to the company, however, carried a different meaning. In Frank's words, "Michael isn't green like the others [salespersons]. He's a professional salesman. Selling is what he does, period. And that's the kind of leader we need if we're going to have an effective sales force. This guy's got the potential to become a Manager very soon, and I think we can learn a lot from him." Susan, the hiring officer, agreed with Frank's take on the candidate, and so it was that Michael joined B-Computers. I did not realize it at the time, but my first meeting with Michael was very foreboding: After a short joint meeting with Frank, I went into a separate conference room with Michael and personally welcomed him into the company. Dressed in a dark gray suit, white shirt and silk tie, with his dark hair neatly combed and his shoes shined, he was not a handsome man, but he carried himself with distinction. As I showed Michael our product line, our promotional materials and explained our work ethic-philosophy, he took systematic notes, and I remember admiring his very elaborate penmanship. Then, in an effort to corroborate my father's expectations, I told him that I realized he had significant experience in IT sales and hoped that we (collectively) and I (personally) could learn from him. What I expected in return was a reciprocal attitude of respect and humility. Instead, Michael proceeded to list a number of things he needed from me: the user manual to his new corporate cell phone, an assortment of pens and paper, file folders, and, of course, permanent business cards (the temporary ones he'd been given were not up to his standards). I was confused and taken aback by Michael's attitude, but considering the high regards and expectations Frank had for him, I didn't feel confident in telling him, 'this is a secretary's job, not mine.' I convinced myself that there was nothing wrong with helping a new team member find his bearings, and that he would eventually come to respect me once he realized I did add value to the company. To my displeasure and frustration, over the following months, my relationship with Michael became increasingly difficult to manage. At first, he subtly undermined my authority, disregarding procedural instructions I issued to the sales force and reporting news of successful sales calls directly to Frank. (This did not go unnoticed by the other salespersons, of course.) With time, he settled into a routine of consistently challenging my decisions (both in private and in public), disobeying my direct orders and even back-talking to me in front of Frank.

I was very uncomfortable with the growing tension between us, and felt that part of the problem might just be a matter of communication style. So I tried different approaches in talking to Michael: I explained the rationale behind my decisions; I communicated with him both orally and in writing; I asked Frank to be present when I issued him an instruction; I tried saying 'please'; and in the end, I tried giving outright orders. But I still could not get him to comply with my authority. A particular incident, however, shed new light on the partners' appraisal of Michael's work: Rina, a very dear, respected and knowledgeable female sales manager in a business partner firm of B-Computers's, made an informal complaint to the partners about Michael. "I was explaining to him that this server configuration wasn't completely accurate," she said, "but Michael wouldn't listen. He was really quite rude and asked me who I thought I was to challenge his judgment. He informed me that he was a certified professional in this product line, and therefore knew better." The final blow came when Rina called me, this time to ask that I personally accompany her on a sales call to one of B-Computers's long-time clients. She tactfully insisted that I be the one to represent our company, instead of Michael, the assigned client liaison. After a tense visit to the client's headquarters, Rina explained that the IT manager (a personal acquaintance of hers) had specifically asked to be serviced by another firm (other than B-Computers), because he would not agree to be called on by Michael again.

This took the partners only partly by surprise, since we suspected that our senior salesperson hadn't been providing his assigned clients top-quality service. And while the exact nature of the client's complaint wasn't entirely clear, it was undeniable that Michael had become a PR liability to the company. Two years after he joined B-Computers, Michael was fired. Frank sorrowfully informed him that he was being let go, and Susan handled the paperwork, with tears in her eyes as she wished him good luck. I was conveniently away from the office when it happened.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

Communication between supervisors and subordinates is a crucial aspect of organizational communication, because

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its quality can truly mean the difference between organizational success and failure. If supervisors and subordinates within a company have respect for each other and are able to communicate in a healthy, effective manner, the company's chances of achieving its goals are greatly increased. On the other hand, when power disputes and rivalries arise, much energy is wasted, and potentials (both individual and collective) are left unfulfilled.

In this case study, we will use Julia and Michael's dysfunctional relationship to analyze the conflicts that occur between younger female supervisors and their older male subordinates within the specific context of family-owned businesses.

### 3. ANALYSIS

After reviewing the narrative and previous research on supervisor-subordinate relationships, the nature of the problem became apparent: Michael and Julia's inability to communicate in a healthy, effective manner was preventing them from achieving common goals and creating a negative workplace environment. Michael's resistance to Julia's authority was probably due to a combination of three factors: the context of a family-owned business, sex stereotypes and age-based beliefs.

For the purpose of analyzing the dynamics of the relationship between Julia and Michael, we will first consider the organizational setting of B-Computers as a family business. Chua, Chrisman and Sharma (1999) define family business as: "A business governed and/or managed with the intention to shape and pursue the vision of the business held by a dominant coalition controlled by members of the same family or a small group of families in a manner that is potentially sustainable across generations of the family or families (p. 25). According to this definition, B-Computers is truly a family business, as its three partners (members of the dominant coalition) all belong to the same family nucleus. Frank, Susan and Julia jointly exercise both ownership and management of the business (Chittor & Das, 2007). Due to this, B-Computers can be seen as the interaction of two complex social systems (McCollom, 1990, as cited in Lee, 2006): the B-Computers business system itself and the Julias family system. Both systems are intricately related, and the dynamics of one sphere can 'spill over' into the other. For example, the business system and the family system often compete for time resources, and there is a tendency in most family businesses to prefer the first to the detriment of the latter (Lee, 2006). This overlap was true in B-Computers: Frank and Julia regularly worked 60-hour weeks and (despite Susan's objections) habitually discussed business matters during weekends and family meals. Father and daughter agreed that the company was going through a necessary growth revolution (Greiner, 1997) and that, to get through it, an extra dose of dedication was required of them.

Despite her efforts and increasing commitment to B-Computers, Julia's role in the company still carried somewhat of a double message: she was perceived, by both the family and the team, as a mixture of businesswoman and daddy's little girl (Dumas, 1992). The latter image was reinforced by the fact that Julia was the youngest person working at the firm at the time, had no prior work experience (outside BComputers) and was a woman holding a managerial position in a traditionally male-dominated industry (such as is Information Technology). While most of Julia's subordinates regarded her as a viable (and probable) successor to Frank in the role of B-Computers's CEO, Michael disputed this probability and displayed (at first subtly and later more openly) a strong resistance to her authority. In the family business literature, this is referred to as 'non-family member rivalry,' and it is one of the most common challenges daughters face in family business successions (Vera & Dean, 2005). (The other most common form of rivalry is sibling-daughter rivalry, but because Julia is an only child, she did not face this challenge.) Michael's behavior towards Julia fits closely with the literature's description of common non-family member manager's reactions, which include "excluding the daughter from important decision-making meetings [e.g., discussions of sales strategies in key customer engagements], badmouthing the daughter, and making her out to be 'the enemy'" (Dumas, 1989, as cited in Vera & Dean, 2005, p.329). But Michael's resistance to Julia's authority did not stem exclusively from the family-owned business power dynamic. Quite obviously, Michael held sexist stereotypes towards female managers. He demonstrated this since his first meeting with Julia: even though she had been introduced to him as the company's Director of Marketing, he treated her as if she was a secretary, instead of his supervisor. While Julia graciously welcomed him to the company, acknowledging his experience and knowledge on the field, Michael did not express the same level of respect towards her. Instead, he responded by giving her a list of requirements, which were not consistent with her job responsibilities (i.e., office desk supplies, permanent business cards). As Schuck and Liddle (2004) explained, women receive fewer challenging assignments and have to fight in order to earn respect, as opposed to having it granted by reason of position.

Michael's sexist behavior did not stop with his first meeting with Julia. His prejudices against the presence of women in management positions became even more evident when he persistently refused to collaborate with her and

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undermined her authority. Basically, he did not perceive her seriously. Michael's attitude indicates that he felt uncomfortable dealing with a female authority figure. Coming from a male-dominated culture, he had been taught to feel and act superior to women. He believed it was his natural right as a man to hold a higher position than the women around him. This supports existing scholarly research on women in management, which found that successful leaders were assumed to be male (Dubno, 1985; Brenner et al., 1989; Willemsen, 2002; Shcuck & Liddle, 2004). Moreover, in a male-dominated culture such as Macedonia, the notion of men reporting to women was highly incongruent: as Valdez (1994, as cited by Pelled and Xin, 2000) pointed out, the tradition of patriarchy and the cultural machismo ethic discourage men from being submissive towards women. As reported in Brenner et al.'s (1989) study, male managers adhere to a male managerial stereotype: men view successful managers as inherently masculine.

Age-based stereotypes also help explain why Michael's behavior towards Rina improved after Frank's reprimand, but not his attitude towards Julia. The combination of age and sex-based beliefs proved all too powerful. As consequence, he did not respect Julia, he did not value her opinions, and did not follow her orders. As Smith and Harrington (1994) put it, "older subordinates who are highly dogmatic, i.e., close-minded and inflexible, would likely respond to a younger manager in a less favorable manner, i.e., resist leadership" (p.810). Sadly, the beliefs held by Michael are not uncommon in male-dominated cultures like Macedonia. In such cultures, age indicates status, and people who are older instinctively demand respect (Pelled & Xin, 2000). Michael saw Julia's position as a role reversal, and it affected his ego that someone less experienced than he had been placed higher up on the company ladder. Basically, his opinion was that she did not have the necessary qualifications (mainly experience) to be a director in the organization. From his perspective, Julia did not deserve to occupy this position: she was there only because of her family's ownership, and not because she possessed the right skills. As found by Perry et al. (1999), subordinates who are older than their supervisors may experience status incongruence and may often perceive that the supervisor does not have the capacity to lead. This was not always the case, however, as Julia was able to establish healthy relationships with her other two subordinates, who, while younger than Michael, were also older than she.

Julia made considerable efforts to improve the strained relationship between herself and Michael. She utilized different communication techniques, from polite requests to direct orders, and tried in several ways to accommodate to him. Without knowing it, Julia attempted all four of the communication strategies described by Bingham (1991) in her review of assertiveness literature: non-assertive, aggressive, assertive and assertive-empathic. Despite Julia's efforts, still Michael avoided her authority and sought Frank's approval. His stereotypical perceptions of women and younger persons prevented him from accommodating to Julia's efforts and instead he conveniently 'forgot' that Julia was his supervisor. This behavior was in accordance with McCann's and Giles's (2006) findings. Young bankers in their study reported more problematic communication with older bankers than with same-age young bankers. Older persons tend to be less accommodating than their younger counterparts.

In conclusion, on the most basic level, Michael's defiant attitude was fueled by sex stereotypes and age-based beliefs. But there were several other factors that contributed to Julia and Michael's turbulent supervisor-subordinate relationship. At an organizational level, B-Computers's lack of formal governance mechanisms (such as periodical employee evaluations) and the non-existence of a publicized succession plan identifying Julia as Frank's successor made it harder for Julia to exercise her authority over Michael. Frank's reluctance to place Julia 'in the line of fire' between himself and Michael reinforced the businesswoman vs. daddy's little girl double message. Finally, Julia's lack of familiarity with techniques for overcoming sex and age-based beliefs and her inability to credibly and clearly articulate the problem to her parents/partners prevented her from garnering the support she needed to diffuse the conflict situation.

#### **4. SOLUTIONS**

After analyzing Julia and Michael's dysfunctional supervisor-subordinate relationship through the lenses of family business theory, sex stereotypes and age-based beliefs, we realize that the situation at hand would have benefited from the simultaneous application of three solutions.

First, B-Computers should have implemented mechanisms of formal corporate governance, including an organizational chart, with a clear definition of roles and individuals' hierarchy within the company. These mechanisms would benefit the company's operation as a whole, enabling it to grow in an organized and effective manner (Ward, 2004), while also make way for the creation of a formal employee evaluation system.

Second, B-Computers should have seriously considered organizing a stereotype awareness workshop for its team

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members. Because the age- and sex-based beliefs underlying stereotypes are transmitted culturally, it usually takes an effort of rationalization to become conscious of one's own beliefs (Smith & Harrington, 1994).

Finally, Julia should have openly addressed the issue with Michael. By having a one-on-one meeting in a controlled environment (such as the office conference room), supervisor and subordinate would have been able to discuss the relationship problems they were experiencing. Expecting to encounter resistance from Michael, Julia should have been prepared to use influencing strategies such as re-framing and transcendence, communication techniques which have been recommended in cases of hostile behavior between men and women (Bingham, 1991). In this meeting, Julia would have the opportunity to point out to Michael how she was working to help the sales force (and him) achieves the common goals (and, by comparison, how his resistance was working against the team's interests). She should also be prepared to demonstrate how her work at B-Computers was having positive effects on the organization's overall performance, therefore positioning herself as a credible and viable successor to Frank (Vera & Dean, 2005). And even if Michael were not verbally forthcoming about his resistance to Julia's authority, she would still be able to unequivocally communicate her expectations of him as her immediate subordinate.

## 5. CONCLUSION

We are convinced that the simultaneous implementation of all four proposed solutions would have maximized the chances of improving Julia and Michael's relationship, as well as benefited the B-Computers organization as a whole. And while these solutions were unlikely to have eradicated the sex- and age-based beliefs that contributed to the problem, B-Computers could at least pride itself in not condoning the enactment of such stereotypes in the workplace.

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