

## **Feedback: Baby-Boomer Manager Offends Millennial Trainee**

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*Hana Tan, a recently employed college graduate was in the midst of her training program when her manager's manager, a fellow named Eric, humiliated her, in her view, in front of her training group by criticizing her use of a ponytail. She wondered, "Should I quit? Do I have to take this stuff to get ahead? Should I report him?" We discuss the incident in the context of phenomenology, Snyder's self monitoring, Goffman's presentation of self, embeddedness and the role of frank feedback.*

### **INCIDENT**

#### **Graduating and Getting Started**

Hana Tan, 26, took a few years extra to finish college because she had to work a great deal to pay her living expenses and university bills. This was true for other students as well and many were over 25 by the time they graduated. She's an Asian immigrant. Asians, consisting of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans, were the dominant ethnic group in the large public university she had attended on the US west coast. She speaks several languages and felt comfortable abroad.

She had spent a number of years of her childhood in Latin America, where her parents had a business, and had fond memories of playing there with friends and her sisters. Later her parents divorced and her mother moved her sisters and her, when Hana was in middle school, to a predominantly white suburb of a large city in the Pacific Northwest. There she too often felt marginalized in the largely Caucasian community.

After graduation from college she started her job search but became concerned since the economic downturn made it difficult to find a job. She continued with her job waiting tables in a Japanese restaurant to make ends meet and enjoyed the company of her friends. Then after nearly a year of looking, AMDEC (a fictitious acronym used to describe her employer) finally called to let her know that they had a training opportunity for her. If she could successfully complete the training she would become a sales support field representative for their high tech products in another state, distant from her west coast home. The offer included a salary of \$50,000 during training and \$60,000 upon successful completion of the training and obtaining certification for the technical aspects of her job. AMDEC was a leading company in its particular field.

## **Humiliation**

She packed up and moved to the training site on the opposite end of the country. The other trainees were generally congenial but there was little time for socializing since they were in training all day and had to prepare at night and over the weekend for the next training period. Training lasted three months. Trainees had to successfully complete the certification process through a series of increasingly more difficult exams. Hana didn't have a technical background but mastered the material through diligent preparation. She was tired but pleased with herself.

Presentation day arrived. Everyone in the program delivered a five-minute presentation. After the presentation, the presenter was asked to remain in front of the room to receive what Eric, a manager that had helped organize the training program, perceived as constructive criticism.

Hana described Eric as Caucasian, about 55 to early 60s in age, roughly 5' 7" tall and she thought he weighed around 250 pounds. One may challenge the relevance of this observation but in US culture size matters! Her perception was that a portly older guy criticized her for wearing a ponytail. She assumed that he had an engineering background given his high level position within AMDEC. Hana had been told that he was the one who had recognized that people too often lacked communication and human interaction skills. Therefore, he had started the training program Hana was in, where sales support field representative were trained extensively on how to communicate with people effectively and gain the clients' trust as skilled advisors.

Young people regarded Hana as an attractive young woman. She sometimes wore her hair up in a ponytail. Eric regarded the ponytail as inappropriate given her transition from college to work – from “backpack to briefcase” – college to work. He observed, with a chuckle, trying to lighten the impact of the feedback:

I don't know how to say this in a politically correct way so I will just say it. Asian women in traditional ponytails look like children. Look at her. She looks like a child. She looks more professional than anyone of us from the neck down, but the ponytail doesn't work. Everyone put your hands up by your faces and in your vision cover her face, now cover her body. Do you see? I'm telling you this because I think you, Hana, can present yourself better.

Hana couldn't contain her tears; she felt ridiculed and offended. She quietly walked out of the room. At the end of the day, she told Eric,

I understand that you think I should get a better hairdo, but I think it was unnecessary to ask the group to put their hands up to limit their vision to cover my face. I thought your actions were very offensive.

Eric responded,

I had no intention of offending you. I meant to tell you what was necessary for you and the class to learn. I'm sorry for hurting you. However, you need to toughen up a bit and learn to take candid criticism because that's the way the high-tech world works.

Hana later reflected on this and speculated that he was trying to say that when one looks young one loses credibility. Still, she was concerned about the way he delivered his message. His style resulted in unnecessary consternation for the trainees. For example, he had described the gait of one Black trainee as akin to that of a rapper. He also told one trainee that his shirt made him look like Charlie Brown.

Hana had never heard anyone criticize ponytails. In hot climates women often wore their hair up, either in a ponytail or bun. Since it was hot and humid during the summer where the training site was located lots of women wore their hair up. Even celebrities do so.

## **What to Do?**

Should she complain about Eric's tactlessness? She wrote to friends and former professors to get their feedback. She described the situation to one of her organizational behavior professors, a 60-year old man that had accompanied her honors study-abroad group to China. He responded in an email,

What he said was horrible and tactless. He should never have humiliated you in front of the group. However, I wonder if he wasn't the one who was humiliated by saying such an awful thing? Perhaps the people in the audience were sympathetic to you.

I think one does have to suck it up and take things that are harsh and not get too offended by them. This is much easier when you're 60 years old and try not to care what some people think (my situation). You're in your mid to late 20s and working in a new job so of course you would feel vulnerable. You're right to get offended but the best course of action to take would probably be to get a stylist to cut your hair in whatever manner you think is professional. I wouldn't make the issue an ongoing confrontation with your boss or superior since he'll win.

Part of it might be an effort to forcibly mold you into the AMDEC culture – just like the military takes young men and shaves their heads and then the drill sergeants scream at them for a few months.

You know you're a nice looking, presentable person. I suspect he might have been sincere in trying to shape you the way he thinks AMDEC people should look. However, I've seen a wide variety of AMDEC employees in my MBA classes, including one Indian engineer that wore a sari. I'll copy my wife to see if she cares to add anything.

Hana knew that the two professors had grown children slightly older than Hana that had probably endured comparable challenges. The professor's wife, also a professor, responded in an email,

It's always difficult to be the center of attention in this way! This may well be an example of a cultural difference in that some Americans are very blunt and believe directness is a virtue. They don't understand the concept of saving face. I imagine he could well have your best interests at heart. He may really be trying to give you what he sees as good career advice, but he doesn't understand that his public humiliation of you is not the best way for you to hear that message. I remember my female colleagues in Colombia, where I served long ago as a Peace Corps Volunteer, bought me clothes for my birthday because they didn't like the way I dressed, which was too conservative for them. I was slightly offended at the time but decided I might as well be grateful that they cared about me and tried to laugh it off. And I can think of many other examples where employees were asked to conform to a particular way of dressing in many countries. So it's not unusual, painful though it might be.

My advice would be to focus on his intent and the message, rather than the way he conveyed it. You already told him how you felt about it and he did apologize. Maybe he thinks you would have an easier time being listened to if you looked older. I would think about a different hairstyle – especially if you look around and don't see other women with ponytails. I don't know how much conformity is necessary at AMDEC, but many firms really do have a serious dress code. At the end of the day, what's really important is that you be taken seriously at work so you can be effective and use your talents. We always have a choice in these situations – we can let our critics continue to make us unhappy or we can just try to take it as a lesson and move on. In some companies, it's viewed as a good sign if new employees can accept negative feedback and act on 'helpful' advice. I'm sorry this happened and I wish you the best of luck.

Hana responded to both via email,

Thank you for sharing your experience and pointing out good points. I was feeling very powerless and vulnerable, but you made me realize that I have the power to choose the message I should take out of this situation. Thank you for making me more empowered!

A month or so later, she was over the worst of her humiliation but still wondered what to do.

She had written to friends too. Their suggestions were all over the map from “that's the way it is” to “report him.” Should she report Eric to HR?

## Epilogue

Hana wrote back to the professors four months after training,

Not too long after I arrived in my job site, an HR person called me asking about the presentation incident during the training program. Four out of the sixteen people in the class were from another department within the Client Support organization. These four people were already working for AMDEC. Their managers had wanted to see if the training would aid their employees to build better relationships with customers. At the end of the program, they were to report their

thoughts about the program and one person felt strongly enough about the ponytail incident to report Eric even though I hadn't done so. At the end of the HR investigation, I found that Eric already had several different incidents in his file. Mine was the last one. A month after HR called me, Eric was let go. Although I thought he had been awful to me, he had had great ideas that had fostered results for AMDEC. However, through my experience with him, I learned that his brilliant mind wasn't enough. Being socially acceptable is crucial to get people to listen to you.

In retrospect Hana reflected,

As far as that incident with Eric goes, I wish I could change how I handled the situation. However, I learned from it. Social skills are valued in the professional world. They are very hard skills to master. Maybe instead of tearing up and walking away, I should have immediately concentrated on changing the situation to my advantage by asking him specific questions. I could have asked: 'What specifically is the issue with my hair and how does it affect me professionally?' Then I should have thanked him. I should have not left the room. I could have gained more respect from my fellow co-workers and managers. Unfortunately, the way I handled the situation left a weak impression of me to those in the room.

## ANALYSIS

We discuss the incident from the perspectives of phenomenology, Snyder's self monitoring, Goffman's presentation of self, embeddedness and the role of frank feedback. We chose these because we thought they would enable us to develop a deeper analysis.

### Phenomenology

We'll describe phenomenology at greater length than the other concepts given its abstract complexity. Phenomenology, as a distinctive and influential philosophical movement, emerged in Germany in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A major goal of phenomenology was to heighten awareness in order to give reality "an opportunity to 'show' itself. That which showed itself, and the way it showed itself, was called 'the phenomenon' by the phenomenologists" (Safranski, 1998, p. 72).

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) explored consciousness and was interested in locating and describing the self, with its "primordial 'here'" that could be differentiated from other things out 'there' (Carmen, 2003, p. 847). He sought to understand the subjective nature of consciousness and how consciousness is directed by intentions toward objects. He described the process of reducing many objects in the real world to their ideal form or essence, recognizing that other objects were transcendent, so that aspects of them, not the whole, would become apparent, as in viewing a particular physical object and seeing only one side or contemplating abstract theories (Carmen, 2003, pp. 846-847).

By opening up the complexity of how humans construct reality—when one becomes aware of an object, what is seen, what is imagined, what is remembered, how the thing is used--Husserl has aptly been called a philosopher who managed to "philosophically discover the stream of consciousness" (Safranski, 1998, p. 79). But it was his student, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who posed a new kind of question that did not require divisions of experience into subject and object, inside and outside (Carmen, 2003).

Phenomenology, Heidegger posited, cut through metaphysical wandering and returned to the question posed originally by Plato and Aristotle yet not completely confronted: what is Being; what it is to be alive as a human moving through the world. The German word, *Dasein* ('there-being') (Heidegger, 2008, note by translators Macquarrie & Robinson, p. 27) is a key term. One sense of *Dasein*, of being born and 'thrown into the world,' makes questions about one's own being inevitable.

People are thrown into a world already filled with cultural institutions, history, ideas, and ways of relating to others. Life, not necessarily reality, is already organized around various views and values and traditions, so people can easily confuse using a cultural lens with using an independent eye. Heidegger (2008) writes:

*Dasein* always understands itself in terms of its existence—in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself. *Dasein* has either chosen these possibilities itself, or got itself into them, or

grown up in them already. Only the particular Dasein decides its existence, whether it does so by taking hold or by neglecting. The question of existence never gets straightened out except through existing itself. The understanding of oneself which leads *along this way* we call “*existentiell*” (§12, p.33).

The challenges of understanding Dasein and how that understanding or ‘neglect’ of it can impact a life are numerous for every human is ‘thrown’ into a world that already exists and includes not just nature but the products, the culture, of man.

Being will always be influenced, as Being strains to make sense of the world by the world into which it is arbitrarily hurled. In this world, objects can present themselves as tools, which can actually assist one in developing skills to live in the world. To be successful, people learn how to make the best use of things that are accessible—their own skills, the tools within reach—and those who perform deftly will become integrated into the world. Much activity, however needful, offers limited awareness of one’s own being, for living in a world already filled with nature and tools complicate the discovery of any real self as well as perceiving the true nature of other things, including people. Once things are seen in terms of use or custom or utility, their true nature is even more likely to become hidden.

Satisfaction with perceived utility that discourages keener consideration is largely due to the anxiety raised by Dasein, for Dasein is temporal. Nothing is truly fixed and Being comes out of Nothing into existence, filling humans with anxiety.

To penetrate objects, it becomes essential to avoid mental habits that keep reality hidden; many of those habits are themselves driven by a desire to escape from anxiety. The horizon can never be seen. One is trapped in one’s own body. The experiences of one person will never be exactly duplicated in another. To readily immerse oneself in a culture is to try to escape the anxiety of Being and the contingency of Dasein, owing to time.

Escape seems to amount to a turning away from Being in favor of the “They” of false comforts or approval (Safranski, 1998, pp. 160-165). Yet the very contingency of Dasein, its impermanence, offers humans possibility, if they are willing to accept contingency and explore the possibilities of being. Instead, humans drift, preferring to see a world that suits them, creating a comforting illusion of understanding geared to block out anxiety of unknown horizons and ultimate death. Reality needs to be allowed to disclose itself on its own terms. The authentic life must position itself to “stand outside” existence; to see reality means to “choose an attitude that will allow the phenomenon to ‘show’ itself” (Safranski, 1998, p. 154).

Phenomenological analysis goes beyond appreciating or tolerating differences. Being, thrust among them, has a chance to consider how such things relate to the authentic life.

To give into the norms risks losing sight of how to be authentic. Interpretation itself is shaped by the “constancy” of daily life, the “Averageness, leveling down, publicness, the disburdening of one’s Being, and accommodation” (Heidegger, 2008), §128). It is easy to lose the Self in the midst of so many others:

The Self of everyday Dasein is the *they-self*, which we distinguish from the *authentic Self*—that is, from the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way. ...If Dasein is familiar with itself as they-self, this means at the same time that the “they” itself prescribes that way of interpreting the world and Being-in-the-world which lies closest. Dasein is for the sake of the “they” in an everyday manner and the “they” itself articulates the referential context of significance. ...

*Proximally*, it is not ‘I’, in the sense of my own Self, that ‘am,’ but rather the Others, whose way is that of the “they” (Heidegger, § 129, p. 167).

Interpretation poses many challenges. Heidegger (2008) describes the way in which interpretation functions as disclosure:

we do not throw a ‘signification’ over some naked thing which is present-at-hand and stick a value on it; but when something within-the-world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is one which gets laid out by the interpretation (§ 150).

Heidegger (2008) explains that interpretation is always influenced by “something we grasp in advance: fore-having, fore-sight, fore-conception. A meaningful existence involves the search for

meaning, which makes things “intelligible” and “gets its structure from a fore-having, a fore-sight, and a fore-conception” (§ 151).

To have the resolve to confront the limitations of one’s own Being, including perceptions limited by nature, culture, and circumstances, is a precondition to the quest for truth. Interpretations of the world that are confined to everyday “averageness” will lead to inadequate understanding and might even compromise the quest for authenticity. Heidegger (2008) writes, “Any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted” (§ 152, p. 194).

A phenomenological analysis of what Hana and Eric experienced would have to begin by considering the various features or aspects of the phenomenological event.

This event poses challenges for the Dasein of student and teacher: (1) pleasing an audience (to what extent must the instructor and presenter conform to the “They” of the world?); (2) evaluating with ‘foresight’ what it takes for a presenter to succeed at Being-in-the-World while recognizing one’s own limitations.

Hana may have had a ‘fore-conception’ of her success in business that interfered with her ability to accept public criticism. When her face was ‘covered,’ Hana experienced the anxiety of Dasein: every Being is temporal. All faces finally disappear. To fail to make the right kind of entrance into the world is to become unseen. Instead of facing her limited ability to extend herself into the world, as she saw fit, Hana rejected consideration of this reality. Her own reality was that she was right, the ponytail was perfect, and she would force others to accept her own description of reality, even though that picture of the world might be distorted and even though acceptance by others might mean accusing them of insensitivity.

The ponytail, identified rationally, though harshly, as a style that could undermine her success in the world announced the limitations of her own existence. In the background is the cultural reality that many young Asian women were seen by Eric wearing ponytails. Yet setting aside Eric’s cultural lens, Hana’s ponytail would emphasize her youth. The choice of the ponytail also suggests a lack of sophistication since it is a fact that ponytails, however neat, can be created in less than a minute. This is a style associated with being carefree, simplistic and easy to make, thus suited to children. Hair that appears to have been professionally cut and styled, in contrast, conveys maturity and an interest in crafting appearance and even an ability to pay for professional services.

Unable to admit these limitations and to recognize her sense of honor may have been driven by her cultural background, Hana closes herself off from this new presentation of her Self, insisting she did not deserve any criticism. Instead, the obstacle to her success is not a future disapproving ‘They’ in the audience but Eric. It is not a sense of authenticity that drives Hana, for Hana does not present her case as a matter of Self against the “They.” The “They” in the classroom were satisfied until Eric revealed the flaw. That the flaw projected forward and out of the classroom into a future business setting is not taken into account. Unable to accept the forecast, Hana cannot project forward, immerses herself in the temporal “They” of the classroom and insists Eric is the outsider and she will prove this by having him ousted from the “They.”

The attitude Hana assumed, throwing up her indignation to avoid understanding Eric’s points, would not be one that allows reality to disclose itself. An attitude that condemns an effort to point out what may be facts, serves an ego that inevitably shuts out the kind of development essential to embracing authentic being-in-the-world.

Eric entered this presentation event with foresight concerning what business audiences need in order to value presenters. Eric’s arrogance, his sense of his own accomplished Being, disabled him from developing foresight that could have aided in opening Hana’s eyes to the reality of her own presentation. To develop that kind of foresight, Eric should have been interested—curious—about why such a successful and hard-working student came to choose the ponytail. Discourse, Heidegger (2008) explains, offers perception of something and can allow “something to be seen in its *togetherness*...with something—letting it be seen *as* something” (§ 33, p. 56). Questioning Hana about how she saw this hairstyle as advancing her Being in the World might have brought Hana into the objectification of her

presented Self, allowing her to appreciate how a future audience might find a lack of necessary sophistication in her appearance.

The phenomenon of the body as it relates to Being also escaped Eric's full appreciation during this event: how hard it is for any human to find physical limitations pointed out to others. Features of the body—hair, size, sex and shape-- are necessarily part of the phenomena of identity that are not chosen and remain basically inescapable until death. Eric, in carving Hana up by asking students to cover Hana's face, is reducing her to an instrument, a kind of living Power Point for the class. Heidegger makes it clear that humans ought to be caring, never treated as tools. Nevertheless, Heidegger opines that much of life becomes inauthentic owing to imagined egos and illusions of control.

That Eric lost his position becomes part of the observed event, even though it is possible that his dismissal was not based on his articulation of reality. Although this dismissal might be defended as the just result for his arrogance, one must consider again the purpose of education: places that offer sanctuaries for the truth. The educational institution that favors what is comfortable (cultural sensitivity) over efforts to disclose reality and does so in a punitive manner undermines the quest for enlightenment.

One returns to the idea of Dasein as possibility. Appreciation of Being should not be hampered by preconceived notions of order or rightness. In this event, possibilities of gaining understanding were missed by Hana, Eric, and those favoring Eric's dismissal.

### **Self-Monitoring and Hana's Situation**

Mark Snyder of the University of Minnesota popularized self-monitoring based on his extensive research beginning with his 1974 classic article. He was still active in 2011, 37 years later. Some people watch what others do and try to fit in while others act spontaneously without regard for others' views. The former are high self-monitors while the latter are low self-monitors. In organizational life those that are high self-monitors generally get along better and cause less disruption.

In low self-monitors, judgment skills might remain undeveloped, obstructed by a sense of the rightness of one's own opinion, which could lead to a closed mind or even ignoring the interests of others. Since leadership requires reaching out and listening to others, low-self monitors, unable to judge themselves well, would lose the ability to judge others and even situations fairly. Comedies are frequented by low self-monitors who conduct themselves ridiculously or offensively while remaining oblivious to the shocked expressions of others.

High self-monitoring can be very helpful when an individual's work calls for engagement with another culture. Shapiro, Ozanne, and Saatcioglu (2008) discuss how effective cultural engagement involves closely observing others to the end that behavior can be imitated, roles understood, and trusting relationships developed.

Hana "tried to fit in" on a social level as well as matching other honors students in conscientiousness and diligence at school, which would make her a high self-monitor. Her ponytail was a vestige of her school years and Eric thought she had not as yet made the transition to a more adult hairdo. Hana's inability to see her image from Eric's point of view shows that she is still developing high self-monitoring skills.

### **Goffman's Presentation of Self in Relation to Hana**

We are social beings and the reality we mutually create is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Goffman (1959) uses the analogy of theater in his analysis of social construction. The consequences of our actions are not the only thing that matters; we also create impressions in the process of relating socially to one another. We communicate both through our verbal or written language and our non-verbal and often unintentional presentation of self, including in Hana's case, her ponytail, which Eric thought portrayed her as childlike. One should strive for symmetry between our explicit verbal communication and non-verbal communication and the way we present ourselves. Hana found that Eric and she did not agree on the appropriateness of the ponytail and the way Eric delivered the feedback to Hana. This resulted in the following, to use Goffman's terms:

- They did not have a working consensus regarding the image or impression conveyed by the ponytail. Furthermore, Eric's message was lost in what Hana perceived as the offensive and humiliating manner he used to deliver it.
- Goffman believed that the first impression conveyed was important since it affected subsequent interactions. The ponytail conveyed a poor image in Eric's view and Hana believed the feedback from Eric was devastating.
- Goffman used the term front to mean how people subjectively perceived a given situation. Front is made up of the physical scene or setting, one's personal attributes (e.g., size, race, gender, speech patterns, age, etc.), and manner. Her ponytail becomes a prop in how she performed on this stage. It was her choice to continue with the ponytail that caused Eric to criticize her. He was trying to assist her in the transition from "backpack to briefcase" (a term used by Price Waterhouse Coopers in its training for young accountants), where she had to adopt business standards of how to present herself. Hana thought Eric should have been more diplomatic.
- Our actions may be inconsistent. People successfully dramatize what they wish to convey and the impression they intend to make, when their speech and presentation of self are consistent. When inconsistent, problems ensue. Hana tried to maintain her view of her coherent self with the ponytail. Eric thought it made her look childlike. Eric's sincere feedback was lost in the humiliation Hana felt.
- Eric thought that her interaction, given the social structure of her position, required adjustment in terms of hair style. Her sense of agency or choice to wear the ponytail had been incorrect in his mind, to use the sociological concept of agency and structure. Eric's position as a manager made the humiliation particularly acute.
- Hana and Eric had to develop an agreed upon definition of the situation in this particular interaction. Hana didn't object to the particular suggestion but rather to the humiliation she experienced.

In sum, Eric criticized Hana for a perceived lack of concern for the customers' context. Her actions had to reflect her interaction with them rather than pure individual choice. It's important to note that Eric's perception of the ponytail was at odds with what was generally considered acceptable and that the manner in which he delivered the feedback resulted in his dismissal.

### **Embeddedness and Socio-Cultural Context**

Embeddedness theory emphasizes that economic activities such as making a presentation to customers are embedded within relational and cultural contexts. Cultural beliefs tend to enable as well as constrain economic actions. This appears obvious now, especially since economists have become more inclined to accept the importance of social psychology in economic decision making but such was not the case when Granovetter (1985) published his seminal piece in the *American Journal of Sociology*. Cultural beliefs tend to enable as well as constrain economic actions. Hana is presenting herself to an economic audience (i.e., co-workers, superiors and customers) embedded in a cultural or social context. Culture consists of a particular group's understanding of the world, as evidenced in mutually accepted manners, habits of language, conduct, and the significance of symbols. Although culture is acquired from social surroundings, many fundamental components of cultures, such as mythologies and the idea of the sacred, reveal some universal aspects. In a culturally diverse society such as the US and in global businesses, managing cultural diversity is critical. Humans naturally perceive and interpret the world with a personal cultural perspective. As described by Malach-Pines and Kaspi-Baruch (2008),

Hofstede (1991) defined culture as "the collective programming of the mind which: ...distinguishes the members of the group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 1991, p. 5). Culture is learned, not inherited, and is manifested through symbols, heroes, rituals and values whose inter-relationship is described as the skins of an onion, with values representing the deepest manifestation. Cultures can be distinguished according to many criteria. Hofstede (1991)

suggested four: (1) individualism versus collectivism (the interest of the individual prevails over the interest of the group versus the interest of the group prevails over the interest of the individual); (2) power distance (the degree of inequality among people which people in a country consider normal); (3) masculinity versus femininity (assertiveness and competitiveness versus warmth and collaboration); and (4) uncertainty avoidance (the degree to which people in a country prefer structured over unstructured situations). (pp. 306-307)

The US and other English speaking nations tend to be individualistic. People often take exception to limitations on their appearance, as did Hana with her ponytail. One also sees this in the TLC's television program "What not to Wear," where two fashion advisors, a hair stylist and makeup artist all coach sometimes reluctant women to adopt a new presentation of self. In individualistic cultures we sometimes believe we can be ourselves and dress as we like but of course norms exist within organizations and different generations also have ideas of what is acceptable or not.

Culture is complex, and models for cultural analysis have been developing over the years, raising questions about the impact of cultures on individual values and more. See, e.g., *Beyond Hofstede: Culture Frameworks for Global Marketing and Management* (2009). For business leaders, "what is relevant is that low-context and high-context groups will have differences of opinions in how to manage and lead, and more importantly, how discipline or disagreement is handled" (Kemp, 2009, p. 41).

One prevalent approach to global cultures is division into low-context and high-context groups. Low-context cultures, evident in the US and European nations, stress individual responsibility, direct communication, and awarded achievement gained through overcoming obstacles and conquering adversaries. High-context cultures, prevalent in Latin American and Asia, promote the collective welfare, favor avoidance of direct confrontation, and place a high value on honor, the idea of not being humiliated in public. According to Kemp (2009, p. 42), "Losing face for high-context groups is nothing short of a nightmare for them...Not being able to prevent failure and avoid disagreement will result in dramatic loss of face." Eric's abrasive communication style and his direct criticism of Hana's ponytail proved unproductive. Eric's disapproval could be interpreted as a form of mockery and thus dishonorable. (See Kemp, 2009, p. 42.).

Both Eric and Hana would have benefited from a greater understanding of cultural skills, though how such skills can be developed is still being debated. Research on cultural intelligence, defined as "a person's ability to observe, interpret, and act upon unfamiliar and ambiguous social and cultural cues, and function effectively in a novel cultural setting," focuses on three areas of cultural intelligence (Shapiro, Ozanne, & Saatcioglu, 2008):

Earley's conceptual framework of CQ [cultural intelligence] encompasses three different facets: cognitive (i.e., various knowledge structures, external scanning, pattern recognition, and self-awareness); motivational (i.e., efficacy, persistence, goals, enhancement, and values); and behavioral (i.e., repertoires of practices, rituals, and habits)...Successful cross-cultural dyadic relationships require the development and nourishment of these intertwined cognitive, motivational, and behavioral skills and capabilities through adequate managerial training (Earley & Mosakowski, 2004). (p.72)

The kind of training offered is critical, and the training may prove inadequate if "cultural sensitivity" alone is the goal:

First, past research argues for the importance of culturally specific knowledge; however, little guidance is provided regarding the nature of this knowledge and the manner in which it is acquired, assimilated, and utilized. Second, while many researchers suggest that cultural sensitivity involves some type of skill, little agreement exists as to the specifics of what these skills actually are. Finally, cultural sensitivity involves somehow limiting the "bias" of one's own culture, but how this bracketing occurs is uncertain (Shapiro et al., 2008, p. 72).

Whether intercultural training could have resolved the differences between Eric and Hana is not certain, but any organization interested in business should recognize the value of intercultural training that seeks to develop cultural skills, not just to raise cultural awareness.

### **The Role of Frank Feedback**

Generational and cultural differences affect how we deliver feedback. American students have been educated to value self esteem; instructors are not to give public and direct negative feedback. Within the US families vary greatly in terms of direct feedback with many Caucasian families opting for encouragement whereas Chinese families might be more critical and direct. Hana's instructor wanted to give her direct feedback to help her correct what he perceived as a problem but she was devastated by the public rebuke.

But oral presentations are designed to develop rhetorical skills. Rhetoric, the skill of speaking and writing, demands attending to the needs of the audience because the audience will judge the speaker, fairly or unfairly, and the speaker wants the message to prevail. The speaker therefore will want to address the preferences of the audience, even if those preferences seem frivolous or entrenched in bias, if this can be accomplished in a manner that does not compromise but instead advances the speaker's own message.

A professional appearance enhances credibility, and if Hana's ponytail made her appear to be young, and inferentially inexperienced, that could undermine a first impression. The criticism that the ponytail did not infuse Hana with the image of professional maturity may have had some validity. Scelzo and Lerman (2009) describe how a young woman in China with a professional degree and a project manager position overseeing tours seeks to attain a professional appearance, which includes changing her hairstyle:

Kathy rarely wears cosmetics to work. In fact, when she is traveling with groups, her appearance is very casual, almost plain. She typically wears jeans and puts her long black hair up in a bun. Were it not for her authoritative voice and constant efforts to ensure that everything is running smoothly, she could easily be mistaken for one of the students in the group she is hosting. However, when delivering a lecture during one of her recent two-week tours, her appearance was anything but casual. For this occasion, Kathy let her hair down and put on some makeup to complement the black skirt, ruffled blouse, and hunter green skirt that she wore (pp. 114-115).

This professional businesswoman sometimes sweeps her hair away from the face (in a bun), which makes her look like a student, a look she can and does seek to alter, in part by changing her hair style to suit a business audience.

An audience will not usually openly express a positive or negative opinion about the speaker's appearance, which makes unfiltered and direct criticism of public speaking teachers essential. A common way to teach public speaking is to have each presenter serve as an 'example' of what to do and what not to do. The very phrases 'Make a good example of yourself,' or 'So and so made an example of me,' conjure up images of objectification: how one is seen and judged by others. People want to be treated as subjects, an 'I' with a distinctive face, not as objects, whose value is determined by outsiders. Business success necessitates continual examination of how much one's own preferences interfere with meeting expectations of customers and coworkers.

When Eric directed the class to "cover" Hana's face, he encouraged the class to stand back and try to see themselves analytically. This kind of stepping back and taking apart objectifies, which is the point of analysis. It is not clear whether Hana (or other trainees) was adequately prepared to be 'taken apart' and judged by anyone. Eric's method had the potential to objectify Hana to a high degree because he directed the class to cover her face: the very feature that personalizes humans. To become faceless would make anyone feel vulnerable. The need to swiftly restore Hana to her place in the audience as a subject of caring and security should have been evident, yet Hana left the room quickly. There might not have been time for reassurance owing to her departure.

### **Attributes of the Millennials and Hana's Response to Eric's Criticism**

According Raines' (2002) the Millennials were born from 1980 through 2000. Six principles of supervising them include:

- Managers need to lead since millennials expect supervision and structure.
- They want growth opportunities.
- They value the relationship of friends at work.

- They want to enjoy themselves at work.
- They want to be treated with respect.
- They want flexibility without excessively rigid schedules.

Hershatter and Epstein (2010) argue the technologically savvy Millennial generation, having grown up with structured support from families and educational institutions, are comfortable with organizational innovation, particularly driven by technology, so long as such innovation includes constant acknowledgement, reassurance, and encouragement.

Thus, unfiltered criticism in a class on oral presentations might be especially difficult for the Millennials. One question is whether this particular generation, owing to “digital immersion” proves, as research by “neuroscientist Gary Small” suggests, “more effective in some arenas, like multitasking, responding to visual stimulation, and filtering information, but less adept in terms of face-to-face interaction and deciphering on-verbal cues (2008)” (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010, p. 212).

What Boomers can offer Millennials include insights into the acquisition of analytical skills, stimulation of interest in foundational knowledge, and heightened recognition of complexity and ambiguity. Boomers might also model patience, independence, and humility.

Hana’s inability to consider the criticism in context and find some value in Eric’s views illustrates what may be a fairly common weakness among the Millennials: the desire for constant support, the expectation that there are always clear answers, and a tendency to resist analysis while favoring one’s own opinions and the swiftness of technological tools. Instead of realizing that Eric’s criticism, given his age and experience, might arise from knowledge surpassing her own, Hana simply rejected his view and rushed off, not to the library for books on public speaking but to email for long distance assurance and support. When she sought the guidance of professors, she was not after a transparent analysis but emotional support. In many respects, she may have simply been typical of her generation:

When a quick answer is readily available, Millennials tend to lack the motivation to seek a more nuanced one, and by failing to diligently follow a path of inquiry, they miss perspectives that would enable them to evaluate the analysis of others. They do not worry about response bias when they survey a sample population of their closest friends, nor do they necessarily contextualize the information, charts, and graphs that they so proficiently gather.

While it is true that, in most classrooms, Millennials are taught to understand the difference between reliable, verifiable data and editorialized content, daily search-and-retrieve behaviors may be too ingrained to overcome. They have been profoundly shaped by a new literacy, complete with different vocabularies and patterns of communication. ...research clearly shows that this generation reads far fewer books and many faculty members would agree that student research and writing has suffered as a result of a disregard for reading as well as the tendency to trust peer opinion and public consensus over original thought. (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010, p. 213).

Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, need to be sensitive to the strengths and weaknesses of Millennials, never forgetting that the Millennials are simply young. Aristotle (trans. 1941) identifies three age groups: “youth, the prime of life, and old age” (II, 12, 1389a35-56). He explains how the young may respond as if they suffered a great dishonor:

They [the young] are hot-tempered and quick-tempered, and apt to give way to their anger; bad temper often gets the better of them, for owing to their love of honour they cannot bear being slighted, and are indignant if they imagine themselves unfairly treated. While they love honour, they love victory still more; for youth is eager for superiority over others, and victory is one form of this. ...their hopeful disposition makes them think themselves equal to great things—and that means having exalted notions. ...They think they know everything, and are always quite sure about it...(II, 12, 1389a9-12, 31-34, 1389b5-6).

Having more than one generation in a business can be a tremendous advantage; it broadens the pool of knowledge and application skills. Without proper oversight, however, a company could leave a resource of intergenerational potential untapped or by ignoring it, allow generational differences to become the source of friction and unproductive conduct. Companies would benefit from having Boomers

serve as mentors (Hershattter & Epstein, 2010, p. 217) and encouraging employees from different generations to work together in various settings (See Dwyer, 2009). One must wonder whether, by terminating Eric, Eric's employer eliminated a problem effectively or missed an opportunity to address and improve the generational gap.

### **Eric's Feedback to Hana. How Well Did He Do?**

His employer fired him so he did not do well. Eric should be more sensitive in how he gives feedback. He should have avoided reference to ethnicity in his observation that Asian women with ponytails look childlike. Such comments are too readily perceived as stereotyping or just offensive. One has to be careful as well about judging fashion when one is much older and different than the young person. For example, lots of older people wonder why so many young people have tattoos and piercings yet young people with tattoos and piercings can appear to be in vogue in some retail settings.

The best teachers are sometimes the harshest critics. To argue Eric's disapproval of the ponytail should have occurred in private shifts the focus from educating the class about the real nature of judgment by the audience to a less educational goal of satisfying students.

A more sensitive approach could have been limited to suggesting Hana experiment with more formal hairstyles, avoiding consideration of hairstyles as communication barriers.

### **Hana's Response to Eric. How Well Did She Do?**

Hana appeared to appreciate Eric to some degree while still being critical. Initially she was overwhelmed and fled the room though she was later able to express her feelings to Eric. It's difficult to respond in a non-emotional and reasonable way when confronted in a manner that is surprising. However, one develops this skill with experience providing one is able to control one's impulses and emotions. One cannot lash out verbally and be an accepted member of most organizations and teams. Still, one should express one's discomfort when treated in a manner that one perceives as unjust or one will usually be dogged by resentment.

Ultimately, Hana was unable to find much value in Eric's criticism; indeed, her continuing complaints, even after Eric's effort to explain the criticism, show she approached the criticism in an adversarial way: she wanted to win and she wanted Eric to lose. Whether Eric was prepared to encourage the sharing of sympathy will never be known because Hana left. Her anger may have prevented her from stepping back to consider the goals of the lesson. If that is so, then learning took second place to personal and public vindication.

One cannot keep all the resentment in and then let go and dump all of one's frustrations from other moments or settings; the response must be commensurate with the perceived offense. Still, there are moments when one is too shocked to respond or times when one simply cannot let the offending party know how offensive his or her words are.

### **Critique of the Feedback Offered by the Professors**

- The male professor tried to empathize and be supportive: "What he said was horrible and tactless. He should never have humiliated you in front of the group."
- Then he tried to reappraise the situation: "However, I wonder if he wasn't the one who was humiliated by saying such an awful thing? Perhaps the people in the audience were sympathetic to you."
- He provided a reality check and advice: "I think one does have to suck it up and take things that are harsh and not get too offended by them. This is much easier when you're 60 years old and really don't care what some people think (my situation). You're in your mid to late 20s and working in a new job so of course you would feel vulnerable. You're right to get offended but the best course of action to take would probably be to get a stylist to cut your hair in whatever manner you think is professional. I wouldn't make the issue an ongoing confrontation with your boss or superior since he'll win."

- He gave an explanation of what he viewed as plausible explanations, while still being supportive of Hana: “Part of it might be an effort to forcibly mold you into the AMDEC culture – just like the military takes young men and shaves their heads and then the drill sergeants scream at them for a few months.”
- He also provided his perception of AMDEC: “You know you're a nice looking presentable person so don't take it personally in that sense. I suspect he might have been sincere in trying to shape you the way he thinks AMDEC people should look. However, I've seen a wide variety of AMDEC employees in my MBA classes, including one Indian engineer that wore a sari.”

The female professor provided an alternative explanation:

It's always difficult to be the center of attention in this way! This may well be an example of a cultural difference in that some Americans are very blunt and believe directness is a virtue. They don't understand the concept of saving face. I imagine he could well have your best interests at heart. He may really be trying to give you what he sees as good career advice, but he doesn't understand that his public humiliation of you is not the best way for you to hear that message. I remember my female colleagues in Colombia bought me clothes for my birthday because they didn't like the way I dressed, which was too conservative for them. I was slightly offended at the time but decided I might as well be grateful that they cared about me and tried to laugh it off. And I can think of many other examples where employees were asked to conform to a particular way of dressing in many countries. So it's not unusual, painful though it might be.

She gave direct advice,

My advice would be to focus on his intent and the message, rather than the way he conveyed it. You already told him how you felt about it and he did apologize. Maybe he thinks you would have an easier time being listened to if you looked older. I would think about a different hairstyle – especially if you look around and don't see other women with ponytails. I don't know how much conformity is necessary at AMDEC, but many firms really do have a serious dress code. At the end of the day, what's really important is that you be taken seriously at work so you can be effective and use your talents. We always have a choice in these situations – we can let our critics continue to make us unhappy or we can just try to take it as a lesson and move on. In some companies, it's viewed as a good sign if new employees can accept negative feedback and act on ‘helpful’ advice. I'm sorry this happened and I wish you the best of luck.

Based on the epilogue, neither of them suggested reporting Eric, which was what happened and AMDEC removed him from the company.

## CONCLUSION

There are many different perspectives to the ponytail incident. Eric was dismissed, which could lead one to conclude that he behaved poorly. However, Hana could have learned from him and not taken the comment personally. If we are to be effective in organizational life we need to both give and receive feedback in ways that foster understanding and communication. Context is crucial including generational differences. We hope the preceding frameworks enable the reader to take an apparently simple incident and better understand the depth of its meaning in the eyes of the various participants to better understand how to give and receive feedback.

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