

SIVEY Publishing

BIRKENSHIRE CORPORATION: THE PINK TOWELS

Birkenshire Corporation (Birkenshire) was a large British organization in China, with more than 600 employees, both Chinese and non-Chinese. Chinese employees were mostly administrative and service staff recruited locally, while non-Chinese employees were mostly expatriates from around the world including Europe, North America, Latin America, Africa, Australia, and Asia. In their day-to-day work, Chinese and non-Chinese staff interacted frequently in a flat and functional organizational structure (i.e., with limited power relations between co-workers).

On March 7, 2012, one day before International Women's Day, all 244 female staff members of Birkenshire received an email from the human resources (HR) department announcing a gift of pink towels in celebration of the day. Within one hour of this announcement, a discussion commenced as an email thread among female staff and continued into the afternoon of March 8. The question facing the management of Birkenshire was whether they should respond and, if so, how and when.

THE PINK TOWELS

The email message from HR read as follows:
Dear All,

Tomorrow is International Women's Day (TWD). The first TWD was observed on March 8, 1911.
In China, March 8 was officially marked as Women's Day by the government in December 1949,
Each year on this day, there are hundreds of thousands of activities around the world for the celebrations.

Interestingly, in China this year, to celebrate the upcoming International Women's Day, women in bridal dresses and high-heels took part in a running contest in the Colorful World Park of Changsha, capital of the Hunan Province. As with our celebration of TWD this year, HR has prepared a towel gift set for each female staff member: We are putting the gifts in your pigeon holes this afternoon (by 4:00 p.m.). For those who do not have a pigeon hole, please go to the post room to collect your gift when you are free.

▲Page 2

The subsequent discussion included female staff, with a few male staff in management positions copied.
The first response read like this:

I don't want this to be mistaken as ingratitude, but I do start to wonder what kind of image of women is reproduced here? We have in the past been treated to pink-glitter picture frames and visits to kitchenware factories, and now the company is showing how much it is caring about our physical appearance by offering us pink towels! As a woman who has gained a Ph.D. and a decent job in a corporate environment that is still very much dominated by white men, I'm very aware of the struggle many women have had to go through to reach such a position. Up to this day, it still happens regularly that people I newly meet will turn to my husband and ask him what his work is in China. When he answers that it is me who is working here, they kindly ask if I am a language teacher! Certainly no woman can be an executive!

Because of this obvious, continued, subtle, and open discrimination of women, I feel that these kinds of presents are absolutely not the appropriate way of celebrating Women's Day. The company should set a good example in recognizing the professional achievements of the women working here instead of joining the general patriarchal chorus that sees women at work as a temporary, maybe even regrettable, incidence and thinks that women should rather care about their looks (towels), home (kitchenware), and children whose picture would look extremely nice in pink-glitter picture frames. There are certainly books, DVDs, and other kinds of gifts which express respect for women's intellectual and professional qualities rather than reducing them to pink towels!

Staff A

Some of the following comments expressed sympathy with the above statement.

Well said. I totally agree. The money could be far better spent on contributing to causes to help

other women in China.

Staff B

I support the sentiments expressed. Another idea might be to offer a fund for young women to

pursue higher education.

Staff C

Soon, the discussion expanded its focus and began to take on other issues.

I've lived and worked in three different countries –the United States, the United Kingdom, and China—and have to say this: it is nice to be receiving a gift in the workplace to commemorate such a day as it is not something I expected. It is special to be in China, so I take it as part of the wonderful Chinese protocols. However, as you pointed out, the symbolism of the items selected is deeply rooted and as one of the few women holding a high position in the company, it is appropriate that you point it out. Perhaps next year more individuals can be consulted about what might constitute an appropriate gift to mark this occasion before someone goes shopping with the company's money? The idea of a contribution to a cause for women in China sounds like a great idea and something most of us could agree on.

Staff D

The following comment took a personal perspective and further expanded the focus:

Thanks to [Staff D] for reminding us all of the fact that we are in China which, as you correctly point out, has its own protocols—the symbolism of which is very deeply rooted. On that point,

▲Page 3

maybe the following may shed more light. My mother, who was born and brought up in China before emigrating, returned to the land of her birth just once (in 1973 and by boat), when she brought, amongst other things, bales of towels for the very reason that towels have long been popular presents for men and women in China. As for the colour, it should be remembered that, whilst the choice of pink has certain connotations in countries such as Germany and Britain, it has no such connotation in China, as far as I am aware.

As for Britain, I worked there for 20 years in two organizations where my employers never once offered any material token of their appreciation for all my hard work. The tokens of appreciation offered by Birkenshire are therefore much appreciated by me, as I accept them in the spirit in which I feel they are meant.

Staff E

The two following commentators also expressed their appreciation for the gift:

Yes [Staff E], I agree with you and thank you for your comments. Actually most

of us Chinese staff appreciate the gift from the company. We don't think too much about it. This case might be a good example of what "cultural conflict" is

Staff F

Thank you for such an interesting email, [Staff E]. You are right about the colour issue in China. Do look around and you will see how pink has a different connotation here. I could not agree with you more in appreciating the gesture from Birkenhead. I am happy to belong to a work environment that expresses recognition for my work through such small details. Thank you to the people who thought about us, the women at Birkenhead, and thank you for the little token.

Staff G

At this point, the first commentator, Staff A, provided further input to the ongoing discussion:

I am sorry that this issue is now interpreted as a cultural conflict. This is absolutely not the case. I do not object at all that a present is given nor do I want to contest that pink/red might have another meaning or that towels are not seen as offensive. What I am objecting to, however, is that women are given household goods as gifts by their employer. If towels are a common gift in China, then I can assume that men, too, receive pink (lucky) towels as gifts from the company? No, of course not. I would imagine, though, that key rings, agendas, purses, business card holders, and similar items of daily use can be given as gifts, too; right? Why then household goods to working women? This is a gender issue and not a cultural one. It is about appreciating women's work, and not about Chinese versus Western culture.

The conversation continued to split from there with more comments and perspectives being contributed:

Different women have different views towards gifts. I just got the pink towels and they are lovely. I really love them.

Staff H

I am a working woman and hope to become an executive in the future. I don't think someone or my employer buying me a pink towel or a business card holder could change the fact that I am a professional woman. I'd interpret the type of gift being selected here simply because compared to

business card holders, towels could be useful to everyone. I have to say, having lived and worked in the United Kingdom for more than 10 years, the last one and half years at Birkenhead have been

▲Page 4

very different, but certainly memorable to me as I feel I have been recognized and considered after all the hard work. I very much appreciate all gifts being offered by Birkenhead, not just the money being spent but the idea, the time, and people who organize all of these. To some extent I won't mind any gift being offered.

Staff 1

Although "cultural conflict" makes the issue sound more fun, I have to agree with Staff A that this is a gender issue, instead of a cultural one. As a Chinese person, I am not bothered at all by the pink towels, or red, but as a woman, I do find it ironic to have this "Women's Day." Does it mean all the rest of the year are men's days? I would rather there were solid regulations considering working women's welfare, for instance longer maternity leave, or better/more chance for professional development, etc. That said, I will still pick up my pink towels. Just hoping, next year or in the near future, we can see a difference and not just pink towels.

Staff J

It's a real shame that in an organization, where thinking is exactly what we are meant to do, Staff A's astute points about gender get distorted into ingratitude to the hospitality that China offers and, worse, escalates into the ever-convenient discourse of a Western attack on China. She is spot on.

Staff K

The first commentator, Staff A, continued to offer more input:

The Day of Women's Rights and International Peace actually celebrates:

[www.un.org/](http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/women/womday97.htm)

ecosocdev/geninfo/women/womday97.htm;

www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/iwd/history.html.

Women's Day is to remind us that women's rights had to be fought for and that this is still the case today. It's not Mother's Day.

The email discussion continued on until the afternoon of March 8 before eventually quieting down. During the course of discussion, the management of Birkenhead had not responded, but a

few (male) staff in top management positions, including the head of HR and the chief executive officer, were copied on the emails and therefore were aware of the discussion while it developed.

Leading Across Cultures at Michelin (A)

1. What mistakes did Chalon make as he took over this large North American division?
2. What differences in American value systems and French value systems might be at root of the difficulties Chalon is facing as he implements a new strategy?
3. Why did Chalon have so much difficulty recognizing that his staff was displeased with the way he was managing them?
4. In Chalon's specific case, what cultural differences are causing his team to react negatively to his leadership style?

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Business Communication Mg. Kenny Neira

BIRKENSHIRE CORPORATION: THE PINK TOWELS

1. How should the management of Birkenshire interpret the situation?
2. How should Birkenshire respond to the staff?
3. Recommend a future plan for Birkenshire in dealing with related issues.
4. Why did the workers react in that way to this situation?

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