

WHEN A DREAM JOB TURNS SOUR (A)

On an unusually warm night in December 2021, Tyler Lim lay sleepless in bed. The record-high temperatures reached 35 degrees Celsius on the sunny island of Singapore. His restlessness, however, was not due to the humid weather typical of the tropical city-state. As he gazed at the ceiling above, he could almost hear the stern voice of Neha Venkat, his boss, and her harsh criticism of his performance.

“Your work is simply not good enough. Your performance is not on par with the expectations of a hire at your level.”

His troubled mind replayed episodes of all their recent disagreements; each memory reaffirmed his growing discontent with a job he once loved.

Dreams Do Come True

In March 2020, Tyler joined the Singapore regional headquarters of InfiniTech. The multinational corporation had a global presence in more than 20 countries and employed thousands of employees. It was an employer of choice: every graduate (including Tyler) dreamed of working for it. Not surprisingly, it had a rigorous interview process—it was truly challenging to secure a job there. Yet, Tyler was undeterred. He had a passion for marketing and was confident in his critical thinking and data analytics skills.

A chance opportunity to work closely with Ashley Nelson, a Director at InfiniTech, was the turning point in his pursuit of his dream job. In August 2019, while working for Juggler Systems, an international marketing agency, Tyler was appointed as a consultant to work with Ashley on a high-stakes project for four months. The job was intense and demanding, and yet Tyler delivered throughout the project. He was passionate about the job and often stepped up to help Ashley and her team, especially after some of her team members had left. Ashley recognised his potential and suggested that he apply for a position at InfiniTech. Tyler underwent a three-month selection process during which Ashley spoke highly of his ability to thrive under pressure, highlighted his contributions to the previous project, and emphasised the value he could bring to the company. Her strong recommendation was influential in helping Tyler secure his dream job as a Marketing Manager at InfiniTech.

After joining the company, Tyler immediately took on several high-profile projects. The first quarter of 2020 coincided with the World Health Organization’s declaration of COVID-19 as a global

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pandemic. Governments across the world, including in Singapore, imposed stay-at-home orders to combat the spread of COVID-19.

Despite starting his new position working from home, he was energised by the fast-paced, competitive environment at InfiniTech. He managed multiple, critical projects and excelled at his job. By the end of his first year, he received favourable feedback and earned praise for his work, especially his willingness to go the extra mile to help his coworkers succeed. Both his peers and senior leadership appreciated this attitude, which led to him stepping up and taking on an expanded role as the interim team lead after his then-supervisor was redeployed.

In this role, Tyler reported directly to Ashley for about half a year. He had full autonomy over his work. He planned his work tasks, set priorities, and shared insights with his team on the different projects that he had undertaken. He built good relationships with Ashley, his teammates and members of the cross-functional teams in Singapore. Tyler was living his dream: he worked at a great tech organisation, with talented colleagues, and on projects he was passionate about.

About a year and a half after joining InfiniTech, he was assigned to a new manager. And then his dream began unravelling.

The New People Manager

In August 2021, Neha was promoted to a people-manager position in a regional role. Before the current role, Neha had been the Senior Events Marketing Manager for one of InfiniTech's largest markets in Asia. She had a master's degree in marketing from one of India's most prestigious educational institutions and was also a Certified Digital Marketing Professional. During the introductory meeting, Ashley introduced Neha as a senior manager with a proven track record of successfully delivering several complex projects in India. Neha would initially be working from Bangalore, India while managing the team remotely. The plan was for her to join the Singapore office when border measures were eased in six months or so.

As Neha officially became the team leader, Tyler stepped down from his interim role and reported to her. In addition to Tyler, Hera (who had been in the company for two years), and Joo Han (JH), a new hire, also reported to Neha (refer to **Exhibit 1** for the marketing team reporting structure). Tyler, the team's most experienced member, was tasked with onboarding JH, helping him adjust to the new job and integrate into the company culture.

Neha scheduled weekly video conferences with the entire team. During the weekly status updates, all team members were required to submit reports on their completed tasks and upcoming activities. Neha also appointed JH to document the meeting minutes to be referenced for tracking action items.

Over the following weeks, Neha appeared eager to prove herself and set ambitious targets. She wanted to replicate the success in her previous market in other markets in the region. This entailed organising high-budget events, conducting in-depth research, and organising large-scale marketing campaigns. One of her key goals was to persuade the headquarters in the US to develop customised product features for every market in which InfiniTech had a presence. However, the scope of this initiative was subsequently scaled down to Southeast Asia. Unfamiliar with InfiniTech's regional

business, she suggested implementing a common planning framework for Southeast Asia. Although it was a plausible alternative, the one-size-fits-all approach overlooked the region's unique markets across different countries in the area, as well as language and cultural diversity.

Tyler recognised the potential pitfalls of Neha's proposed approach. He had six years of marketing experience in Southeast Asia. Based on his past interactions with stakeholders in the region, he knew that they preferred to be consulted during the planning process. Neha's proposed approach also disregarded prior investments and the distinct trajectory of individual markets. Because of the region's relatively smaller market size for InfiniTech's business, Tyler assessed that the scale of investments Neha's plan required was unlikely to yield the projected returns. He expressed these reservations and indicated that the proposed plans seemed overly ambitious. He also suggested consulting the marketing teams across the Southeast Asian countries, but Neha chose to ignore him.

When the other marketing teams in the Singapore office learned about Neha's plans, they became anxious. They expected their already hectic workload to triple if the plan were to be executed. Other concerns raised included the lack of consideration for several Southeast Asian markets that were experiencing a resurgence in COVID-19 cases, which could significantly affect the execution of the plan and its outcome.

Two days later, JH confided in Tyler over lunch, "Honestly, I don't feel comfortable with how things are going these days."

"Neither do I", added Hera.

Tyler said it outright and objectively: "I'm not sure if we're even heading in the right direction with such a big bang. We're only a three-person team, and the local teams in the other countries have limited people resources."

"And her plans are getting more ambitious day by day", JH sighed. JH's concerns resonated with Tyler, who nodded in agreement.

"But what can we do? She's so adamant about doing things her way", said Hera helplessly. "And I'm not sure I'm getting the guidance I need from her as a boss. Do you feel the same?"

"Yeah, I feel like I'm guessing most of the time, so I'm worried I'll make mistakes. I jump a little whenever she pings on QuickTalk (InfiniTech's messaging app). I'm also caught between supporting her and sharing my honest opinions. It is hard, especially when I'm new", said JH, opening up about his insecurities.

Back at the office, Tyler thought over the conversation within his team. He was sceptical of the viability of Neha's plans and felt he needed additional information to support the part of the project he was responsible for planning. The next day, he initiated a survey among his local counterparts to gather their opinions on country-specific needs for upcoming marketing campaigns, the support needed from regional and global teams, and the best timing of local events for product and feature launches. Armed with on-the-ground data, he shared his ideas with Neha during their weekly team video conference.

“For my part, I have gathered some data that I believe will be useful and would provide further insights on your proposed plan. Let me walk you through the slides”, Tyler began to explain earnestly to Neha.

To Tyler’s disappointment, Neha sharply criticised his presentation. He had thought that sharing the empirical data he had collected, which was relevant only to his specific role, would be helpful to his team and his boss. She commented, however, that he should have included additional questions in his survey to gather information relevant to JH, Hera and her work tasks as well. “Look, Tyler, you didn’t prioritise the needs of your team but used the survey opportunity for your project. The questions only covered matters related to your role, and we missed the opportunity to gather feedback for the entire team. I can’t believe it. You are not acting like a team player.”

He acknowledged the merit of Neha’s perspective, which was to prioritise the team. Although it made sense to him at that time, he had a strange feeling in his gut that he might have unknowingly offended her and was now in trouble. “I understand your point. I will align with that objective and support the team’s goals moving forward,” Tyler stated.

JH and Hera observed Neha’s response to Tyler’s presentation and did not raise their concerns. Instead, they hoped the issues would somehow resolve themselves.

The Turning Point

Two months passed, and Tyler was busy finalising an important presentation on the regional team’s strategy for the new financial year. The presentation was scheduled to be delivered to the US headquarters and senior leadership team the following week. At the same time, he was managing a marketing campaign rollout across 15 countries. Despite his heavy workload, he spent his weekends working on the presentation. It was critical to present the regional team’s strategy effectively to senior leadership.

On the day of the meeting, during a final run-through of the presentation slides with Ashley and Neha, Tyler received a call from his cousin bringing devastating news. Tyler’s beloved aunt, his mother’s younger sister, had collapsed from a heart attack and was being rushed to the hospital’s emergency room. His cousin urged him to go over immediately before it was too late. Tyler broke the news to Ashley and Neha, both of whom insisted he take leave. The news left Tyler shaken and deeply saddened. To his regret, his aunt passed away before he reached the hospital. The timing of her passing could not have been worse.

“Tyler, I can’t imagine how tough this must be for you”, Ashley said sympathetically upon hearing the updates from Tyler. “Go be with your family now. They need you during this difficult period.”

Neha, who was also on the same call, added, “The rest of us can manage the presentation in your absence. Don’t worry and go ahead.”

Despite his overwhelming grief, Tyler felt a deep sense of responsibility for his role in the project and decided to deliver his part of the presentation that night (due to the difference in time zones between the US and Singapore). “Thank you both for your understanding!” he replied, his voice

tinged with gratitude. “The team has been working on this presentation for days, and I would really like to present my part. I want to make sure it all goes smoothly.”

“Of course”, said Ashley, “Together, we’ll make it work.”

That night, Tyler presented his segment virtually as planned. Once his part was over, he let his teammates take over and left immediately to assist his family with the funeral arrangements.

The Unexpected News

After five days of bereavement leave, Tyler returned to work. He was emotionally drained by the loss of his aunt but ready to resume work. On the day he returned to the office, Shelly, the local HR manager, delivered shocking news. She informed Tyler that he was being placed on a performance improvement plan (PIP)¹ with immediate effect! Shelly explained that his recent performance was deemed “below expectations” and not meeting performance goals.

Joining the meeting online from her home in Bangalore, Neha jumped in, “Your work is not good enough at your job level. It’s not what I expected from someone in your role. Even though you’re giving your maximum effort, you’ll need to step up and deliver the results we need for the team.”

Tyler was stunned by this turn of events. He said, “I wasn’t expecting this. Could you tell me more about what led to this decision?”. He remembered the extra workload he had shouldered, the dual roles he had undertaken, and his commitment to deliver the presentation before his leave. It seemed that none of this mattered. He wondered whether the data he gathered, which did not support Neha’s plans, had played a role in her unmet expectations.

Neha continued, “We recognise that you are committed to doing your best, but your work is inconsistent and not on par with those at your level. There have also been multiple occasions when you’ve not been a team player. Moreover, you don’t meet deadlines consistently. Your emails are not well written and always invite more questions. Such performance is unacceptable at our company, and that’s why we have decided to put you on the PIP. Please see this as an opportunity to help you improve. You will have all the resources you need, especially if you need to talk to someone amidst this stressful period.” Catching her breath for a second, she added, “I should also let you know that Ashley has reviewed these recommendations and agrees with me.”

Tyler found Neha’s assessment critical and unfair. He paused to collect his thoughts and defend himself. However, before he could utter a word, Neha continued, “With the help of HR, I have prepared a detailed document with a list of situations and the appropriate conduct for each. I will share it with you after this call. Shelly will follow up with you if you have any concerns.”

¹ A Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) is designed to address unmet performance goals, and provides employees with resources to improve. It also creates a “paper trail” for the employer in the event it needs to consider options such as demotion or termination. SHRM, “Performance Improvement Plan”, <https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/express-requests/performance-improvement-plans-pip>, accessed July 2024.

Reeling from shock, Tyler reluctantly accepted the six-month PIP starting November 2021. Shelly concluded the session and indicated that Neha would oversee the PIP process until January (when she began her maternity leave), and Ashley would take over for the last three months.

Under the Microscope

The days that followed were a blur. The PIP was a huge blow to Tyler's morale, and he struggled to stay focused. The pressure of meeting Neha's expectations weighed heavily on him. The demands of the PIP were relentless. Neha mandated strict processes, such as setting a minimum response time, vetting his emails before sending them out, reviewing his personal and team meeting minutes, requesting him to formalise the way he managed meetings, and attending calls with her whenever she needed support. All these requirements were very different from his usual *modus operandi*. He felt that Neha was scrutinising his every move, and he believed that her scrutiny would only intensify.

The ensuing months became increasingly difficult for Tyler as his workload intensified. He often worked late into the night. He had several calls with Neha whenever she needed clarifications or if some tasks required immediate attention. His calls would start at 9 PM, Singapore time (6.30 PM, Bangalore time) and stretch beyond 1.30 AM (11.00 PM, Bangalore time). On many occasions, Neha would request Tyler to work alongside her virtually, with his webcam switched on, making Tyler feel like he was under constant surveillance.

Tyler recalled one such 9 PM call. During that call, Neha wanted to simulate working together even though they would be working on different tasks that did not require any collaboration. As she typed her emails, she would occasionally ask for his opinion on minor details. For the next four hours, Tyler sat in front of his computer screen, feeling frustrated and tired. There were moments when he felt like he could use a quick break to call his family but feared that it might be taken as an issue and used against him. He thought, "We're not even working on the same thing. What's the point of this? I don't understand why this is happening. Should I check with HR if this is normal? Or maybe I shouldn't. I don't want to give them any reason to complain. Just bear with it, Tyler!"

He struggled to stay awake until 1 AM when Neha decided to 'call it a day'. After bidding each other goodnight, Tyler was exhausted, "I can't believe my day ends at this hour! My family is sleeping by now. I didn't get to talk to them today. I wonder if they are OK? How many more such nights will I have to endure?"

At the Crossroads

On Neha's last day of work before she began her maternity leave, Tyler initiated a call to seek feedback on his performance. He believed that he had diligently followed the list of tasks laid out in the PIP.

"Regarding my progress under the PIP, I have been focusing on the to-do list and would really appreciate your feedback to ensure I'm on the right track", Tyler began.

To his surprise, Neha's reply was far from encouraging, "I see that you have addressed some of the conditions but I'm still not seeing the level of commitment an InfiniTech employee should have. There are still areas that you need to work on. For example, last week's report was missing key details I told you about."

"I have included that information in the report", Tyler countered.

"But it was only after I told you to do so", Neha retorted. "You didn't put in enough effort. I have the impression that you don't seem to care enough about your work!"

Neha's words instantly killed Tyler's morale. She continued speaking loudly and using harsher language. Not only was she highly critical of his work but she also downplayed his efforts. Tyler felt bullied and feared that he would snap. He asked if they could end the call, but Neha did not allow it. Tyler started to break down.

Noticing Tyler's emotions, Neha said, "Managing the PIP is a lot of pressure for me too. I have to ensure everything goes smoothly and our team delivers a high standard of work. We can't afford to make mistakes, not even a small error." Tyler acknowledged her feedback, apologised that she still felt that way, and pleaded to end the call. She agreed, and the call ended with Tyler feeling dejected and drained.

Tyler reflected on his conversation with Neha. He found himself at the crossroads, wondering what his next steps should be. Would he be able to seek an internal transfer within InfiniTech? It was his dream company after all. Or should he do what JH and Hera were doing, which was to wait it out and see how the situation evolved, especially with Ashley taking over the second half of his PIP? Or perhaps it was time to apply for a new job and forgo the company of his dreams?

EXHIBIT 1: MARKETING TEAM REPORTING STRUCTURE



Source: Authors