

Teaching Note

The Language Barrier

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Critical Incident Overview

This critical incident describes a discrimination issue between an employee at a retail store and an angry customer. The incident illustrates the issue of language discrimination in the workplace. An employee did not understand what the customer needed because the customer was not clear with her request. Then, she began to ridicule the employee because English was not her primary language.

This incident can primarily be used for illustrating how to handle discrimination in the workplace and is useful for management, organizational behavior, and sales courses. These courses can benefit from this critical incident because it demonstrates skills that individuals can use. This critical incident was developed for use in and was tested by students in an undergraduate Organizational Behavior class.

Research Method

Our research is based on an interview secured from an employee who experienced the situation presented. The names of the individual and the company have been altered to preserve their reputation and privacy.

Learning Outcomes

In completing this assignment, students should be able to:

1. Determine a response that will exercise emotional intelligence.
2. Evaluate situations in the workplace where language discrimination takes place.
3. Determine a model of self-management that could assist in coping with this issue.
4. Evaluate different ways to exercise stress-management strategies that will ease tensions in the workplace.

Discussion Questions

1. What role does emotional intelligence play in language discrimination? (LO 1)
2. What evidence supports the idea that verbal harassment or language discrimination in the workplace occurred? (LO 2)
3. How could the employee practice self-management when dealing with the customer? (LO 3)
4. What stress-coping strategies could the employee implement in this scenario? (LO 4)

Answers to Discussion Questions

1. What role does emotional intelligence play in language discrimination? (LO 1)

Emotional intelligence is the ability to accurately recognize and understand emotions in others/oneself and use that emotional information productively (Baldwin 2013, p.27). Emotional intelligence also helps an individual understand the reasons behind one's behavior, which assists in being able to communicate better with that person. In this scenario, if Heather were to display a high sense of emotional intelligence, she would have perceived the customer's emotions by reading her nonverbal cues, such as body language and facial expressions. If Heather knew the customer was angry, she would have to stay calm and respond in an appropriate manner since screaming at each other would not resolve the situation. If Heather were to put herself in the customer's position, she would have been able to interpret the cause of the customer's anger-the delayed service due to a language barrier-and manage it well in order to communicate better.

On the other hand, the customer displayed no emotional intelligence. The disgruntled customer did not try to understand how the employee was feeling; therefore, she could not use those feelings to guide her thinking and behavior. Her lack of emotional intelligence hindered her ability to manage her emotions in a way that could have effectively resolved the *miscommunication*, which is defined as the lack of adequate communication. In this case, the customer's emotions consumed her, which affected her ability to cooperate with the confused employee. If the customer had thought rationally before getting angry, or maybe placed herself in the employee's position, then she would have displayed high emotional intelligence and probably would have been more sympathetic to the language barrier presented.

2. What evidence supports the idea that that verbal harassment or language discrimination in the workplace occurred? (LO 2)

Heather contemplates as to what reaction she should have towards the discriminatory comment the customer made. Her one thought is to ignore the customer's request and protect herself against that comment. The reason why this thought occurs is because Heather feels harassment in the form of *verbal abuse* when the customer says, "Then Trillium Department Store should not hire employees whose primary language is not English. Now I have an order to pick up so will you go get it?" *Verbal abuse* is defined as a form of emotional abuse that occurs with the use of abusive or demeaning language or words (Baldwin 2013, p.148). Even though Heather feels harassed, some students suggested that this incident does not display harassment in the workplace because it is a customer-bad-behavior versus employee issue. Harassment in the

workplace occurs between employees in the job and not between customers and employees. On the contrary, other students disagreed and supported the idea of harassment being involved in this incident. They believe that the employee was harassed and that she should protect herself against the customer's comments. Finally, Heather is personally affected by the customer's response as it shows that language discrimination in the workplace still exists. She is having *feelings of anxiety and attack* that could potentially cause her to exemplify a counterproductive behavior, which could influence her performance in the organization. *Feelings of anxiety and attack* are feelings that create uneasiness and distress to an individual when situations get tense and unpredictable (Baldwin 2013, p.148).

3. How could the employee practice self-management when dealing with the customer? (LO 3)

In this scenario, Heather could have engaged in the five behavior-focused strategies to improve self-management. These five strategies are: Self-observation/Exploration, self-set goals, management of cues, positive self-talk and rehearsal, and self-reward and punishment. Of those five, three particular ones apply to this situation:

a) *Self-observation/exploration* refers to the ability to observe and collect information about the specific behaviors you have targeted for change (Baldwin 2013, p.24). Heather could immediately stop and think about how she is going to respond to the customer and create a plan of action for her targeted response. By observing and collecting information, she will be able to react to the situation in a respectful and thoughtful way.

b) *Positive self-talk and rehearsal* allows one to go over the behavior in his or her head and imagine its success application (Baldwin 2013, p.24). It also helps to practice the new behavior at available opportunities and seek feedback. In this situation, Heather needs to have an immediate positive self-talk and rehearsal before engaging with the customer again. She can either do it silently in her head, or ask the customer if she can be excused for a moment so she can go in the back re-evaluate what she will say. This will:

- 1) Diffuse anger for the employee and
- 2) Prevent the employee from saying something unprofessional to the customer in the heat of the moment.

After Heather rehearses for a few moments about what she will say, she can re-enter the conversation with more confidence and refresh her professional image. At the end of the day, what is important is for Heather to be able to represent her organization in a respectful way.

c) *Self-Reward and Punishment* provides oneself with personally valued rewards that are linked to performing desirable behaviors or with punishments linked to undesirable behaviors (Baldwin 2013, p.24). Since Heather was by herself during this situation, it is important that she recognizes her own accomplishments and good doing. If Heather does the right thing in the situation, she should personally reward herself to bring self-accomplishment forward. When taking this approach, it is vital to personally reward yourself for good behavior and punish yourself for wrong doing because then it is more likely to influence your future decisions. If Heather is engaging in *self-management*, it is

up to her to reward or punish herself appropriately. *Self-management* is the process of modifying our own behavior by systematically altering how we arrange different cues in our world, how we think about what we hope to change, and how we attach behavioral consequences to our actions (Baldwin 2013, p.22).

4. What stress-coping strategies could the employee implement in this scenario? (LO 4)

There are many different ways that Heather could deal with her stress in this situation. Heather could either do these exercises when she is still with the customer, or simply ask to be excused for a moment and do them in the back employee room. Some key points however, are:

a) *Muscle relaxation* is the process in which muscles get relaxed after a tense and vivid situation (Baldwin 2013, p.61). Muscle relaxation only takes a few moments and works immediately. One way of doing this is by tensing the muscles and then releasing them. In this situation, Heather can simply roll her shoulders back, or even scrunch and release her toes in order to be a little more discrete.

b) *Deep breathing* is the process where inhaling and exhaling is deep and involves slight meditation (Baldwin 2013, p.62). It makes a difference for short-term stress relief. One way of doing this is by deeply inhaling, holding your breath for a moment, and then slowly exhaling. In this situation, Heather can also simply just focus on her deep breathing for relaxation. However, she should note not to make her deep breathing a dramatic act for the customer. She should engage in deep breathing when her back is turned away from the customer, or just under her breath. This way the deep breathing will not signify to the customer that she is angry.

c) *Mood repair* refers to the strategies individuals can occupy to alter their mood from a state of sadness to a state of happiness (Baldwin 2013, p.62). People with a positive mood can deal better with stressful encounters. It is also true that one can “repair” his or her mood by having positive thoughts or by thinking of something that triggers happiness for that individual. When Heather starts to get offended by the customer, she can take a moment to think about the positivity she had in her day, or simply just something that might make her happy. This technique will help her in easily responding to the customer in a pleasant and professional manner.

General Discussion

This critical incident teaches individuals how to respond in a respectful and professional way when times are tough. It is in the employees’ best interest to display ethical commitment and represent the company well when handling stressful situations. In certain incidents, personal feelings should be put aside so as to protect an individual’s job and the company’s reputation. Miscommunication can result in irrational problems whose solution is vague and sometimes non-existent. This teaching note is designed to introduce students in [to] the idea of diversity, which

at times creates discrimination problems. As a result, it will assist students acquire skills that would eliminate these problems.

Other Pedagogical Materials

This incident lends a good opportunity for roleplaying. This allows students to put themselves in the shoes of the annoyed customer and the frustrated employee. It is particularly useful to help US dominate culture students understand every day issues people face when English is not their primary language.

For example, if the faculty member chooses to use role play to explore various concepts presented above, the following is a suggestion as to how to do this:

1. One student could remember a time where they were dealing with an angry customer and take that mentality with them in playing this role as the employee, while another student can take the role as the annoyed customer and try to play the part of feeling frustrated.
2. Then after they play out this situation, each student will have to explain how they felt at that very moment.
3. In the course this critical incident was tested in, the outcome of the role-playing between two students in class was that the student who pretended to be the customer had a hard time being mean to the other student. It was difficult for that student to discriminate against the other student because of her accent. Finally, students suggested that the employee should have kept calm and never admitted that she did not know what the customer requested. Instead, she should have let the customer know that she will look into the situation and find someone that can help her locate the customer's order.
4. The class then re-examined the key terms/concepts and were able to articulate a deeper understanding of them.

In addition, if further reading is desired, the following to articles could be read along with the critical incident. The concepts in each article could be used to analyze the case and create further suggestions as to how a company might address globalized workforce issues.

- Meyer, E. (2014). Navigating the Cultural Minefield. *Harvard Business Review*, 92(5), 119-123.
- Minguet, L. (2014). Creating a Culturally Sensitive Corporation. *Harvard Business Review*, 92(9), 78-79.

Epilogue

Heather chose not to bring up the incident with her direct supervisor as she wanted to demonstrate that she was able to cope with issues on her own and because the customer left satisfied with her package. Heather felt escalating the incident up to her management would not solve any issues. However, she did seek out advice from a mentor outside of the workplace and practiced a variety of types of responses. Among these were the following:

1. To say nothing, but practice methods to not take on the frustrated customer's stress.
2. Put herself in the customer's shoes to understand the source of the stress and understand it was not really about herself.
3. Create an arsenal of polite and respectful statements that might gently point out to the customer that she was, in fact, discriminating in her approach.
4. Create some ways in which she could approach her supervisor in a feedback session discussing the incident and her potential approaches to the incident.

Through this mentor discussion, Heather felt empowered to address the next situation that came along calmly and with less emotional turmoil.

References

Baldwin, Timothy T., William H Bommer, and Robert S Rubin. *Managing organizational behavior*. 2nd ed. New York. McGraw-Hill, 2013. Print.

Meyer, E. (2014). Navigating the cultural minefield. *Harvard business review*, 92(5), 119-123.

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