

On the Edge

Teaching Note

(Author Name)

(Author Name)

Overview

This critical incident describes a conflict between Lisa, a fourth-year doctoral student, and her highly published but somewhat overbearing major advisor, Dr. Littlewood. The decision point of the incident occurred when Lisa was called into Dr. Littlewood's office, reprimanded for what Dr. Littlewood perceived to be unacceptable work on a research project, and told that Dr. Littlewood was contemplating letting her go and attempting to have her removed from the graduate program. With her career in serious jeopardy, Lisa had to decide how to respond. An epilogue provided in the teaching note discusses Lisa's approach to resolving the situation and suggestions for engaging students in exploring creative approaches to proactively addressing interpersonal conflicts where there are imbalances of power between the disputants.

This incident is appropriate for use in both introductory and advanced courses in organizational behavior, management, human resource management, negotiation, and in other courses that focus on interpersonal communication and conflict resolution. Major issues in the incident are conflict resolution and interpersonal communication. Additional issues include negotiation, power, social competence, and the notion of being proactive to avoid similar situations developing in the future.

Research Methods

This critical incident comes from an account described to one of the authors based on normal daily employment activities. It is written in the first person to preserve verisimilitude. The names of the individuals and organizations involved have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Learning Objectives

Learning Objective #1: Students will analyze and critique supportive methods of communication which could be used by Lisa to resolve the incident.

Learning Objective #2: Students will identify and contrast conflict resolution strategies which could be used by Lisa to attempt to resolve the situation.

Learning Objective #3: Students will analyze how power effects the situation described within the incident.

Learning Objective #4: Students will analyze and evaluate strategies which individuals in a low power situation can use to deal with entities that possess high levels of power.

Learning Objective #5: Students will identify and apply emotional competencies that can facilitate effective management of difficult situations such as the one presented in the incident.

Questions

Learning Objective #1: Students will analyze and critique supportive methods of communication which could be used by Lisa to resolve the incident.

1. What styles of communication can Lisa use to increase her chances of resolving the dispute with Dr. Littlewood? (LO1)

Learning Objective #2: Students will identify and contrast conflict resolution strategies which could be used by Lisa to attempt to resolve the situation.

2. How might Lisa go about attempting to resolve the conflict between herself and Dr. Littlewood? (LO2)

Learning Objective #3: Students will analyze how power effects the situation described within the incident.

3. What are Dr. Littlewood's sources of power in this situation? (LO3)

4. What, if any, sources of power does Lisa have? (LO3)

* & how do these powers effect the situation

Learning Objective #4: Students will analyze and evaluate strategies which individuals in a low power situation can use to deal with entities that possess high levels of power.

5. What is the proper response option for Lisa while still sitting in Professor Littlewood's office? Do her response options change a bit once she has left the office and both she and Dr. Littlewood have had time to calm down and process the situation further? (LO4)

6. What strategies can Lisa use to negotiate with Dr. Littlewood to try to repair their working relationship? (LO4)

7. How should Lisa go about setting up the follow-up meeting with Dr. Littlewood? What should she say during the meeting? (LO4)

Learning Objective #5: Students will identify and apply emotional competencies that can facilitate effective management of difficult situations such as the one presented in the incident.

8. How can Lisa manage both her emotions and the emotions of Dr. Littlewood over the next few days to increase her chances to resolve the situation? (LO5)

Answers to Questions

Learning Objective #1: Students will analyze and critique supportive methods of communication which could be used by Lisa to resolve the incident.

1. What styles of communication can Lisa use to increase her chances of resolving the dispute with Dr. Littlewood?

Lisa was clearly in a difficult position. She was scared of her advisor, who appeared to have mercurial mood swings and very unpredictable responses. She felt like she was walking on egg shells every time she came to his office.

Many factors made communication in this situation difficult. Lisa had very little power relative to her advisor (see answer to Question #3 below for the sources of her advisor's power). Both parties were also experiencing strong emotions. Dr. Littlewood was clearly angry and Lisa was both scared and angry. Lisa had invested significant time and effort into the project, but so had Dr. Littlewood. Furthermore, there was an expectation of a continuing working relationship between Lisa and Dr. Littlewood, so communicating in such a way that the relationship might be preserved was a paramount consideration for Lisa.

As we discuss in the answers to Questions #5-7 below, Lisa would probably be best served to wait for a couple of days for Dr. Littlewood to cool off before initiating a conversation to try to repair their working relationship. When that opportunity comes up, Whetten and Cameron (2011) suggest eight attributes of supportive communication, which are particularly germane for "difficult conversations" where individuals' feelings and identities are potentially on the line (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999). Four of these attributes are particularly important in this situation:

- 1) **Communication should be descriptive, not evaluative.** Lisa should describe what happened in objective, emotionally-neutral terms. Rather than accusing Dr. Littlewood of anything or implying any sort of evaluation that would make him defensive (e.g., "You were wrong..."), Lisa should simply describe what happened, what was said, and how she reacted to it. Her goal should be to explain the situation in such a way that Dr. Littlewood could understand her point of view, whether or not he agreed with it.
- 2) **Communication should be specific, not global.** Rather than making general statements about tendencies (e.g., "You always treat me this way..."), Lisa should focus on the specific details of this incident. The case suggests that Lisa and Dr. Littlewood have had an uneasy working relationship for some time, but the situation did not come to a head until this incident. Focusing on the details of this one event should make the conversation more concrete.
- 3) **Communication should be problem-oriented, not person-oriented.** There are many potential problems in this situation: a lack of open communication, a pattern of Lisa withdrawing for fear of her advisor and Dr. Littlewood becoming increasingly frustrated

by her lack of responsiveness or what he perceived to be her inaccurate coding of the data. The conversation would go off the rails, however, if either Lisa or Dr. Littlewood were identified as the problem. If either person becomes the problem, that person is likely to become defensive and there would be little hope for discussing meaningful solutions going forward.

- 4) **Communication should be validating, not invalidating.** The conversation should focus on statements that communicate respect, flexibility, and collaboration. Dr. Littlewood and Lisa are mutually dependent in that Dr. Littlewood needs Lisa's help to complete his research and Lisa needs Dr. Littlewood's help to learn how to do research and to publish. Emphasizing areas of agreement and shared interests should highlight opportunities for resolving the conflict more productively.

Learning Objective #2: Students will analyze and contrast conflict resolution strategies which could be used by Lisa to attempt to resolve the situation.

2. How might Lisa go about attempting to resolve the conflict between herself and Dr. Littlewood?

Dual Concern Theory (De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer, & Nauta, 2001; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986) outlines five basic conflict resolution alternatives which Lisa could consider utilizing. Such strategies differ based on how concerned one is about the outcomes which will result from the use of a strategy on oneself and others. The strategies are as follows:

Avoidance - involves failing to address the situation or confront other parties with one's concerns.

Accommodation - individuals give in to the demands of others, even at the expense of their own interests.

Competition - pursuing one's own interests without regard for the interests of others.

Compromise - "splitting the difference" to meet some of their own interests and some of the interests of the other party.

Collaboration - individuals work to develop a solution that is highly beneficial for both parties.

While in Dr. Littlewood's office, at the height of his anger, Lisa would be well-served to use an Accommodation strategy by apologizing and offering to do whatever she can (within reason) to remedy the situation. Avoidance and Competition are not advisable because there is certainly a conflict and Lisa cannot just avoid it. She is also in a low-power position, because her advisor has a great deal of control over her ability to graduate from the program in a timely manner, so following a Competing strategy would also not be the best approach.

Once Lisa leaves the office and both parties have had time to cool off, Lisa may want to attempt a Collaboration strategy. Lisa could present the professor a possible reason or two why the data may have been coded incorrectly and then suggest to Professor Littlewood that she could benefit from a weekly meeting on this particular project. In such weekly meetings, Lisa could discuss much smaller pieces of the project with Dr. Littlewood and update him on both the progress she has made and their goals for the next week. This kind of strategy may be beneficial for both parties. For Lisa, it would provide regular contact with the professor on the project which could help avoid future mistakes and also make her seem very interested in the project. For the professor, it would allow him to better guide the work so he does not get so frustrated in the future.

One of the notable things about the project is that it seems little if any contact was happening between the professor and the student on the project in the six weeks in which Lisa was coding the data. Such a lack of contact may have made the professor feel that Lisa was not particularly interested in the project or was putting it off. Collaborative conflict resolution involves proactive discussion, open communication, and mutual problem-solving between stakeholders. This situation may have resulted from too little communication and it is not too late for Lisa to remedy that issue.

Learning Objective #3: ~~Students will analyze how power effects the situation described within the incident.~~

3. What are Dr. Littlewood's sources of power in this situation?

& how do these powers effect the situation?

Power can come from *positional power*, one's position in the organization (Fiol, O'Connor, & Aguinis, 2001; Kanter, 1979) or from *personal power*, one's personal characteristics, knowledge, or behaviors (Bunderson, 2003; Whetten & Cameron, 2011). Sources of positional power include an individual's relevance and visibility in the organization, centrality relative to the flow of information, and flexibility or discretion to exercise judgment. Sources of personal power include expertise, the legitimacy of one's actions, personal attractiveness or charisma, and others' perceptions of the effort that individual puts in.

Dr. Littlewood has several potential sources of power. He has expertise, signified by his advanced degree and successful publication record. He also appears to have legitimacy, as the university has sanctioned his past actions by granting him tenure and offering continued employment. From the description in the incident we cannot be sure, but it may also be that Dr. Littlewood is charismatic if many graduate students want to work with him on his research.

Dr. Littlewood's most robust sources of power, however, are likely positional. As a professor, he occupies a highly visible and relevant position in the department. He also experiences a great deal of flexibility and discretion in how he spends his time day-to-day.

Does he have the discretion to unilaterally remove Lisa from the graduate program? Although departments vary in their policies, in most cases no single faculty member can single-handedly remove a student from the program without going through a review process. However, other faculty members may be inclined to defer to their colleague, particularly if he feels strongly

about removing a particular student. Lisa's concerns about the possibility of getting kicked out of her program should not be exaggerated, but they certainly are real.

4. What, if any, sources of power does Lisa have?

↓ how do these powers
(or lack thereof) effect
the situation

Lisa is certainly in a low-power position. She cannot expect to draw much power from sources of positional power because of her status as a graduate student. In order to work as a college professor, she will likely have to earn her graduate degree. She also lacks expertise relative to her advisor and would have difficulty completing research on her own.

One source of power that Lisa could seek to cultivate is the extent to which others perceive that she is putting in a great deal of effort. Perceptions of effort are often associated with perceptions of dependability, which is attractive to faculty who would consider working with her. However, because Lisa has been avoiding Dr. Littlewood, he has not seen the effort that she has been putting in on the data analysis over the past six weeks. He may very easily assume that she is not working hard and simply threw something together at the last minute.

To build her reputation as someone who will "do whatever it takes," Lisa needs to demonstrate the effort that she is putting in. Regularly checking in with updates of her progress is one way to demonstrate her effort. Another tactic would be to turn in her assigned materials ahead of her advisor's stated deadline. Of course, the most important component of demonstrating effort is for Lisa to verify what her advisor wants and to double-check her work to make sure that she does not make careless errors.

Learning Objective #4: ~~Students~~ will analyze and evaluate strategies which individuals in a low power situation can use to deal with entities that possess high levels of power.

5. What is the proper response option for Lisa while still sitting in Dr. Littlewood's office? Do her response options change ~~a bit~~ once she has left the office and both she and Dr. Littlewood have had time to calm down and process the situation further?

Because Lisa was in such a low-power situation, she needed to be diplomatic in her response while still in Dr. Littlewood's office. The primary issue of the dispute was the accuracy of the coding, which was important because inaccurate coding could have threatened to undermine the validity of the research results. Granted, if the coding was, in fact, inaccurate, Dr. Littlewood could have accepted some of the blame by admitting that the coding rubric was too ambiguous to interpret or that he had not spent enough time training Lisa. To place the blame on Lisa, Dr. Littlewood had to conclude (and perhaps convince himself) that the problems with the coding were the result of her lack of effort.

Thus, Lisa's goal should be to defuse the volatility of the situation without conceding a lack of effort on her part. She should point out that she did work hard coding that data and emphasize that she will do everything in her power to go back and fix any mistakes which were made in the process. One example of something that she could say is, "Dr. Littlewood, I am deeply sorry if there are mistakes in the data I coded. As you know, there were ____ number of participants and coding it took me six weeks. That said, I pride myself on doing quality work and if you will

kindly let me know what the problems are, I will fix them immediately. Again, I am sorry for any coding problems.”

At this point, Lisa should probably not expect a conciliatory response from her professor. However, it is important to remember that we have no idea about what else may be going on in her professor’s world that has caused him to get so upset with Lisa. Perhaps the data is coded incorrectly in some places, perhaps the professor had a problem in class that morning with a cheating student, perhaps the professor’s competence was called into question on another project that had nothing to do with Lisa. Given the strong emotions of the situation, we would suggest that Lisa should try to be apologetic and accommodating and get out of his office as soon as possible before the conflict escalates.

In classroom discussions, instructors can probably relate many stories about how escalating a conflict which is heated like this one without taking time to let both sides calm down is unproductive. It is not likely that the professor can kick Lisa out of the graduate program at this point and, given that Lisa has been a solid student for several years, she likely has a good reputation and could get support from other faculty in the department. That said, if Lisa reacts angrily in Dr. Littlewood’s office and a shouting match ensues, Dr. Littlewood would then have a stronger case with his colleagues to discipline or dismiss Lisa.

Students may be tempted to think that they can angrily stand up for themselves in situations such as this, where the professor is likely misguided in his accusations against Lisa, and justice will be served. However, angry outbursts, even when a person has the right to be angry, do not typically help individuals advance their cause in an organizational setting, whether it be a university or a large corporation.

Hence, the best thing for Lisa to do is apologize and withdraw from the situation as soon as possible. Lisa could then regroup and approach the professor a couple days later to try and patch things up. A possible option for Lisa is to approach that meeting as a negotiation scenario.

6. What strategies can Lisa use to negotiate with Dr. Littlewood to try to repair their working relationship?

A rich theory base exists that outlines negotiation techniques which individuals in low power situations can use to help advance their cause. Such literature argues that low power entities in a negotiation should develop additional alternatives and gently signal such alternatives to the high-power party with whom the low-power party is negotiating (e.g., Fisher & Ury, 1981). Negotiation scholars also posit that lower-power entities should work hard to enhance existing alternatives (e.g., Thompson, 2005). The stronger an individual’s “Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement” (BATNA), the more leverage they will possess in the negotiation itself.

Thompson argues that if “a negotiator has a great BATNA, negotiation is almost effortless” (2005, p. 152). That said, Lisa is in a low-power position and can only do so much to improve her BATNA. When individuals face low-power situations, Thompson suggests low-power entities should think creatively about their own options and do outside research to determine the other party’s BATNA. Further, low-power negotiators should prepare extensively prior to any

negotiation sessions and should be assertive, but not aggressive or angry during negotiation sessions (Rutherford, Tocher, Anderson, & Buller, 2012).

Hence, if Lisa is able to exit the office rather quickly without an angry exchange between herself and Dr. Littlewood, she should take a day or two and prepare for a meeting with Dr. Littlewood. She should treat this as a negotiation session aimed at getting their working relationship repaired and/or restarted. Lisa should prepare extensively for this meeting with Dr. Littlewood to find out what other issues may be affecting his behavior. She can do this by visiting other professors and or college employees and fellow graduate students about unrelated matters and then quietly asking if they have talked to Dr. Littlewood. She could state that he has been on edge a bit lately with her and she is concerned about why he is on edge. *Are there risks with this? If so, what are they & how can Lisa minimize or avoid them?* It is notable that the professor's behavior has drastically changed lately. Perhaps he is genuinely frustrated with Lisa's work and that explains the strange behavior. However, perhaps Dr. Littlewood is going through some other events, either at work or at home, that Lisa is completely unaware of but which are causing him to be on edge. The important thing to figure out here is whether there could be another event besides a couple of miscoded data entries which might account for Dr. Littlewood's outburst.

Lisa also needs to prepare by both analyzing her behavior over the past few months and developing other options for her dissertation. Lisa believed she had worked hard and does not deserve the criticism she received from Dr. Littlewood. However, perhaps Lisa seemed disinterested to the professor by not coming around much, not working in the office, and not maintaining regular contact about the coding. It is notable that Lisa says the coding work took her several weeks and she had sent it over that morning. Does the professor know this or does he think she did it in a hurry over the past few days? Perhaps she needs to show a bit more enthusiasm for both her dissertation and research assistantship work.

Finally, Lisa should consider other options at this point. While the professor may be limited in his actual discretion to unilaterally have her kicked out of the program, he can certainly discontinue their working relationship. Thus, Lisa should visit other professors and see if they want to do some research with her. She could state it as just wanting to do a paper on a specific topic and then come back later and propose a dissertation idea if Dr. Littlewood does not want to advise her anymore.

7. How should Lisa go about setting up the follow-up meeting with Dr. Littlewood? What should she say during the meeting?

During the meeting, which Lisa should set up in advance by email, Lisa should start by apologizing again for any poor work she did in any of their projects over the years. Lisa should then state that she believes she is a good student and a competent research assistant. She needs specific evidence for such a statement. For example, Lisa could say something like "remember when we worked on XYZ, you mentioned that I did a good job and that my work was one of the key reasons we were able to publish that paper."

Lisa should then transition and state that she really wants to keep working with Dr. Littlewood and will do anything within her power to make sure she does not make any more sloppy mistakes. However, she should also state that she would understand if he does not want to be her advisor anymore. At this point though, she should at least consider signaling other options by stating something like “perhaps I should switch topics and consider working with Dr. Smith. We did publish XYZ paper last summer. Do you think I am just more suited to write in that area instead of what I am working on at the moment?”

Lisa needs to be careful here though. She needs to come into the meeting with other options and be able to signal them to Dr. Littlewood if needed (Rutherford et al., 2012). However, perhaps Dr. Littlewood will be much calmer in the second meeting and will reassure Lisa that he likes her work and wants to keep advising her. If this happens, Lisa can avoid signaling her other options altogether. Out of the heat of the emotions, Lisa should be able to gain a better understanding of whether Dr. Littlewood sincerely does not want to work with her anymore or whether he was just having a bad day.

Learning Objective #5: Students will identify and apply emotional competencies that can facilitate effective management of difficult situations such as the one presented in the incident.

8. How can Lisa manage both her emotions and the emotions of Dr. Littlewood over the next few days to increase her chances to resolve the situation?

One competency that would serve Lisa well in this situation is emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is a person’s ability to recognize and manage their own emotions as well as the emotions of others (Salovey & Grewal, 2005). In such a heated situation, Lisa would do well to recognize that both she and her advisor are very upset and probably not in a good position to talk. Research suggests that individuals’ self-awareness of their emotional state is critical to their effectiveness in organizations, because they will be able to self-edit before they cross the line and say something that they would later regret (Geddes & Callister, 2007).

It may be valuable for instructors to discuss the emotional side of this conflict in more detail. In particular, students should understand that the intensity and immediacy of the anger felt by both Lisa and Dr. Littlewood reflected underlying issues far beyond a dispute over the accuracy of coding. For Lisa, who had already committed four years to working with Dr. Littlewood as a graduate student and who had poured her time and energy into collecting and coding the data for this project, Dr. Littlewood’s accusations may have been interpreted as an attack on her identity as a scholar and integrity as a worker. Dr. Littlewood, in turn, may have attributed Lisa’s coding to a lack of effort and disrespect of him as her supervisor. Thus, much like a doctor tries to diagnose the underlying, sometimes distal root causes of a patient’s pain, instructors should help students to analyze the underlying issues that fuel the emotions in a dispute.

Another important competency is perspective-taking, the ability to step into another person’s shoes to understand how that individual perceives the situation (Davis, 1983). Perspective-taking could be very helpful in enabling Lisa to imagine the world from Dr. Littlewood’s point of view. Maybe he was having a bad day or experienced frustration in some other capacity that he was

taking out on her. Understanding that his behavior may be coming from another source may help Lisa to depersonalize Dr. Littlewood's anger and deal with it more rationally.

Additional Issues

Lisa's story is an example of a professional turning point, a moment in her life when all of her work and preparation were on the line. Although Lisa's experience was unpleasant, it also pushed her to consider the possibility that she may have to pursue a different career path. Instructors may ask students to think about turning points they have experienced in their life, often as the result of some adversity (e.g., their parents' divorce, a death in the family, a health scare, etc.) and what they learned from it.

Based on the circumstances described in the case, Lisa's primary focus was to repair the working relationship with her advisor. However, there may times when a supervisor crosses the line from difficult to abusive. Whetten and Cameron (2011) describe characteristics of abusive bosses. Some of these characteristics, such as "mercurial mood swings" or "capricious, apparently arbitrary actions," may come close to describing Dr. Littlewood's behavior. Instructors may consider discussing the often fine line between managing a working relationship with a difficult supervisor versus cutting ties rather than continuing to allow oneself to be subjected to an abusive supervisor.

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Epilogue

Lisa's mind raced as she thought about how to respond to Dr. Littlewood. In a slow, stuttering voice, looking down at her shoes more than at Dr. Littlewood, she replied, "I'm really sorry about this. You have seen how hard I have worked for you for over three years and this is not the kind of thing that I would ever do intentionally. I will do what it takes to make it right."

Dr. Littlewood's face was still bright red, but Lisa thought that she saw his expression soften a bit. He turned away for a moment and then turned back. "Well," he said, "maybe we don't have to go as far as you leaving the program. But I don't want to see this again."

Lisa left the meeting feeling like she had dodged a bullet, but she was not satisfied. She was not convinced that she had done anything wrong and she was not sure how to fix the situation. She made a point, however, to visit her advisor more regularly. At first he seemed annoyed by her constant visits, but she persisted. Over time, their working relationship improved, but Lisa's trust had been broken and there was always a lingering tension.

Lisa went on to earn her degree, with Dr. Littlewood serving as her advisor. Lisa reports that she and her advisor continue to communicate a couple of times per year, but never by telephone.

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