**High Heels and Low Morale**

**Introduction**

Maria sat at her desk wondering, for the hundredth time, what she should tell the Human Resource Director of Internships. It was her last week at Fashion Couture, a high-end style magazine. She had learned at lot during these past six months – not all of it pleasant. Although exit interviews were not the norm, the Director had asked Maria to speak with her on her final day. Maria knew that the Director would want to know more about her experiences over the past six months: what had worked, and what had not. But more than that, Maria had a feeling that she would also be asked about the internship program as a whole, given the recent monumental changes at the magazine.

During Maria’s first month in the New York City offices of Fashion Couture magazine, the long-time editor was fired. People who were in the room when the announcement was said the tension was as stifling as the August humidity outside (Steigrad, 2014). The news was shocking, to say the least. The interns, though temporary employees, also realized the sensitivity of the moment and the possibility of a difficult transition ahead (Steigrad, 2014). They knew that there would be changes in the intern program, and wondered how the changes would impact them (Steigrad, 2014). Not surprisingly, after the firing was announced, many other people also left – choosing to leave given the changes (Pompeo, 2013). As Maria sat at her desk trying to figure out what, if anything, should she say to the Director, she was struck by how the Magazine did not have a culture of concern about the interns. Would this be any different? Maria did not want whatever she said to have unintended consequences. Although she wanted to be frank and provide her insights, she also wanted to leave the company on good terms, since she might need a letter of recommendation from her supervisor in the future. What should she do?

**Background**

Each of the eighteen Fashion Couture offices had twelve interns, which resulted in over two hundred “employees” under the age of twenty-five who had not yet completed their college degrees. Some of these interns were working for college-credit, while others were being paid a small wage (Steigrad, 2014). The 200+ interns however, carried out the brunt of the routine work at the magazine (Bridges, 2013). Small staffs supported by a large team of interns that turned over every six months had managed to attain high levels of performance primarily due to their task-focus at the Magazine (Zillman, 2013). The use of interns was crucial to efficient functioning but the continual cycle of interns presented an issue when there was a lack of overlap between experienced and new interns. There was no stability in the processes performed and no systematic way to transfer learning such as time spent on training (Renson, 2013). Maria’s six months had been characterized by high turnover not just among interns but also among key staff members. Many staffers had chosen to leave, often for the same salary and positions, at equivalent magazines and publication houses due to the unsupportive environment.

Given the small staffs, even one person leaving required others, usually the interns, to step in and finish the daily work. Thus the interns had to often rotate in and out of various roles and help out. All this raised concerns with everyone about how staffing decisions were made and the lack of attention paid to organizational morale. There was also little effort made to educate employees on the responsibilities and tasks of their positions. Much like the interns, employees were expected to learn by themselves through trial and error, but while successes did not necessarily lead to positive rewards, errors were quickly pointed out. Maria had been with the company through all of these transitions. She observed employees being fired and hired, tears and anger. Alongside that, she had been a part of the many successes in the company. In the second half of 2013, Fashion Couture newsstand sales rose 44 percent (Bazilian, 2014).

In September, Fashion Couture had announced its new Editor-in-Chief. About a week later, many regular staffers were called into the newly appointed Editor’s office and let-go. Everyone was told the same thing, “your services are no longer required” (Steigrad, 2014). That a new chief would want to change things around was not a surprise to anyone, especially since sales had been lagging. Maria, however, wondered about the new direction for two reasons: First, aside from one meeting in September to address the layoffs, the editor-in-chief along with her new creative director, had not shared their long-term plans for the magazine with the remaining staff (Steigrad. 2014). Second, employee morale seemed to be at an all time low. The environment had never been very positive, but now people cried, snapped at each other, and were passive aggressive even on emails to one another (Hohman, 2013). People were shaken by the layoffs and uncertainty. The prestige of working at the Magazine was no longer sufficient (Sheffield, 2013). Maria had noticed the lack of relationships between managers and their teams. She knew that the Magazine paid well and staffers often received gifts from high-end fashion companies, including expensive shoes, bags, electronic products, and clothes. Nonetheless, the relationship between employer and employee was not one of mutual respect or collaboration (Hohman, 2013). People did their jobs well but rarely went beyond the requirement, and did not seek to help each other.

Maria routinely met her friend Stephanie, who also worked for Fashion Couture but in a different location, for coffee in Midtown Manhattan. They discussed work and the various changes that had happened since the firing. Both women, who were juniors in college, had entered their internships with the goal of working full-time at a magazine like Fashion Couture. But Maria was rethinking if that was what she really wanted. She told Stephanie, “It is basically grunt work and the environment is very hierarchal”. Stephanie agreed as she had found her situation to be very similar: “I don’t think they value their interns very much, I feel more like hired help than part of the team” (Mau, 2013). Maria felt torn about her feelings, “it’s a great entry level position, and I think it could open a lot of doors. I really am grateful for this opportunity” (Mau, 2013). Their coffee ended on a confused note: The two young interns were unsure if the fashion industry was the place for them.

Meanwhile, the industry had also received backlash from two young women who were interns in 2009 and 2010. One of the interns, Jennifer, was quoted in the media saying “one of the editors even commented on the poor working conditions for interns there, comparing it to Anne Hathaway's job in The Devil Wears Prada” (Peppers, 2013). The situation had gone viral and even received coverage on CNN, Forbes, and several well- respected fashion blogs. Due to the outcry, Fashion Couture had considered dropping their internship program entirely.

**The Challenge**

The possibility of the internship program being dropped had led Maria to reflect on her time at the publication: this experience had granted access to the beauty magazine she had yearned to work at for years. She remembered walking in on her first day, excited to immerse herself in what she had always dreamed of doing (Sheffield, 2013). Now it was her last week and she still had no idea what she was going to tell the Director. Maria wanted to be frank and provide her insights, but she was unsure of how her comments would be received. She knew if she spoke candidly about the realities of being an intern, it might push the program out of existence. Would she ruin the opportunity for other students? She wanted to leave the company on good terms. She might need a letter of recommendation in the future. How should Maria respond to her Director’s questions?

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