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improving class contribution: Annie’s low score

Karen MacMillan and Abby Xiong wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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Annie Tang glanced at the time on her phone and groaned when she realized she had been reading cases for almost five hours straight. No wonder her concentration was lagging. She had probably read that last paragraph five times. Squeezing her eyes shut, she stretched out her arms, tired from being in one position for so long. Suddenly hungry, she padded out to the kitchen to get the leftovers from lunch that she hoped were still in the fridge. Fortunately, they had not been eaten by her roommate, so she zapped them briefly in the microwave before taking them to her desk. Although she still had a lot of work to do and had made it a rule to avoid distractions, she reasoned it would be okay to check her email while she ate dinner.

Interim Contribution Feedback

When Tang opened her school email account, her eyes were immediately drawn to an email from the professor for her leadership course. The subject line read “Interim Contribution Grades.” She smiled, and immediately clicked on the message. It was only a month or so into the term, but she had already received feedback from her other instructors in accounting, finance, and statistics, and had been gratified to learn that they thought she was doing well. As someone who prepared extensively for her classes, she felt good to see her hard work pay off.

An international student from China, Tang was used to performing well at school, even under a high level of competition. In her home province, many students vied for a limited number of program openings, so to be successful required long hours of study and strict dedication at every stage. She had put in the hours and performed so well that, eventually, she had received several offers from multiple well-known universities. Tang chose to study at the Ivey Business School, a top business school in Canada. Although it was a challenge to study in English alongside native speakers, she cherished the chance for a superior education that would help her launch a solid career, and she was determined to make the most of it.

After clicking on the email and reading the first few lines, Tang shook her head with confusion. It was not what she had expected at all. The letter had a lot of information about how class contribution was assessed and advice on how to do it well, but she stopped after reading the first paragraph, which stated: “Here is my assessment of your contribution after the first month of classes. I have divided the class into four categories: Low, Good, Very Good, and Excellent. Currently, you are in the ‘Low’ category.”

This assessment did not make sense. She closed the email and opened it again to check that it was really addressed to her and that she had read it correctly. (It was, and she had.) Next, she reasoned that if she was reading it right, clearly it must be the professor who was making a mistake. Perhaps the instructor had missed recording some of her contributions. Even though she was more of a “numbers person” by nature, Tang was pretty sure that she had spoken up once in every class. In her estimation, that should have made her an average or above-average contributor. She figured low contributors were likely the students who never or rarely participated in the class discussion. She had read the information on contribution in the syllabus and, while each of her professors assessed contribution differently, she knew this particular professor rated each comment on a scale of 1 to 3. Since she had carefully prepared for each class, she thought it was likely that she had received an average rating of 2.

Importance of Contribution

Tang had made a point of raising her hand in class until she was called on at least once. Although she had been in the program only a month, she knew that speaking up in class was very important at her case-based school, counting for a significant portion of the grade in all courses—for the leadership class, it was worth 30 per cent of the final grade. If the instructor considered her a poor contributor, there was no way Tang would end up with a good mark in the class.

Did this Happen to Others?

Tang paced around the room angrily. It seemed clear to her that her professor was not evaluating her fairly. Did she do this to everyone?

Tang sat back at her desk next to her untouched dinner and spent the next 30 minutes texting her friends. Several of them were not happy with the feedback they had received, but none of them was particularly surprised at their assessment in that class. Tang seemed to be the only one with a much lower-than-expected rating. She wondered whether the leadership instructor simply did not like her on a personal level for some reason. This rating was unfair and random—she had never interacted with the professor outside of class.

Tang tried to get back into her homework, but the dilemma kept nagging at her. If the professor had simply taken a disliking to her, there was not much she could do about that. It seemed she was going to have to learn how to live with an average or even a bad mark in the class. However, every time she tried to accept the inevitability of that outcome, she got angry again at the injustice of it all.

Back in Class

Over the next few days, Tang continued to wrestle with the problem. When she was in the leadership class, she made a few half-hearted attempts to contribute, but her heart was not in it. It felt somewhat futile. Part of her did not even want to try in that class anymore. Why make the effort if it got you nowhere?

As she sat back and listened to the leadership class unfold around her, she noticed that the conversation was broader and that, relative to her other classes, it focused more on qualitative analysis. That meant the discussion often meandered in directions she could not predict. Several of the ideas she had jotted down during her preparation were not really applicable. As she watched the other students participate, she was struck by the ease with which some students jumped into the conversation. It seemed as though some of her peers were just naturally comfortable with this type of discussion. She wondered whether this could be a signal that she had less aptitude for leadership. A few questions came to her mind. Would these students, the ones who were contributing so well, outperform her when it came to the exam because they were better able to solidify their knowledge? Did contribution lead to better learning? What about long term, after graduation—would they be better able to speak up and impress their leaders and colleagues when it came to talking about leadership-related topics?

Call from Home

Tang’s mother called from China one evening that week, and Tang explained what had happened. She had always been close to her mother, and it felt good to express her feelings of frustration and hopelessness to someone. After asking several questions, her mother thought for a moment, and ultimately said, “It sounds a little bit like you are giving up. That is not like you. There has to be something you could do. Why don’t you go and speak to your professor? Maybe she can help you understand what is happening.” Tang paused. She did not want to disagree with her mother when she was only trying to help, but she really did not want to go to the very person who had actually caused the mess in the first place. Still, she knew her mother was right about one thing: She had to do *something* to deal with the problem.