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PUBLIC SERVICES CANADA (C): THE FALL

Gerard Seijts wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The author does not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The author may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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The selection committee for the senior director positions in the Science and Technology Infrastructure Project concluded that their decision to offer Mattie Johnsen a temporary assignment as an EX-01 with the project was the correct route to take. However, recognizing that Johnsen could push her appeal further and slow the progress on starting the project, the committee decided to offer Johnsen a senior director position at the advertised level of EX-02, but still as a temporary secondment.

Johnsen saw the committee’s decision as a victory. She was confident she could demonstrate her value over the year and that the director general, Landon Kokomo, would make her position indeterminate without question. There was also the possibility that she could use the temporary position to parachute into a permanent position at an even higher grade.

In September 2019, Johnsen submitted the papers finalizing her leave of absence from her current permanent position. She hesitated for a few moments before signing the last of the documents—she was voluntarily giving up security in a job she found familiar and enjoyed. But, she reminded herself, her performance appraisals had always been good, and although she was giving up a secure position, the leave guaranteed her an equivalent-level job with the federal service upon her return, in case the new position did not suit her career goals. Besides, she was confident that she would surpass expectations, as she had always done before.

She had successfully navigated the temporary contract process when she first started working for Public Services. If necessary, she could do so again.

Success for Johnsen

Transition into the new position went smoothly for Johnsen. With her raise, Johnsen was able to afford a new condominium in a boutique development in downtown Ottawa, Canada’s capital city. Her hours were long, but she found the work on the science and technology project even more fulfilling than she had expected. She enjoyed the challenge of establishing new processes, such as building team structure, hiring staff, and launching new projects. She also enjoyed being in the milieu of science and technology. The challenges went beyond how to ventilate a building or improve the efficiency of heating and air conditioning. Instead, she was having to consider how to use, store, and dispose of chemicals. Ventilation systems needed to accommodate storage of everything from viruses to chemicals to waste.

The job’s one-year term was long enough for Johnsen to establish the specifications for “greening” one of the research laboratories at the National Research Council. It was an older laboratory with an historical footprint. Her specifications, if followed, would preserve the historical footprint, meet the required standards for environmental impact, and still complete the project within budget—almost unheard of in the federal civil service.

The team Johnsen had put together included some talented people. One team member, Kristof Warden, was an architectural technician who specialized in adaptive reuse of older buildings. Several other people had also been actively recruiting him, but Johnsen convinced him to join her team, where he would have scope to grow. His ability to translate Johnsen’s ideas into plans were largely responsible for the success of the project with the National Research Council.

Johnsen’s performance review for the duration of the one-year position was coming up within weeks. She had not found another permanent position during this term, but she was confident that her current position would be made indeterminate. She had met all required goals for the year, and success with the changes in this particular laboratory would provide the science and technology project with a green laboratory that boasted a preserved historical footprint.

Concern for Kokomo

Kokomo had also been preparing for Johnsen’s evaluation. He had assigned her a project with enough challenges to engage her, but with minimal risk that she would step outside her scope of authority. Kokomo ensured that the project was located in Ottawa, where he could supervise Johnsen’s progress closely. There were days when he regretted that choice; he felt stretched meeting his own goals, let alone constantly monitoring Johnsen’s work. This was not how he imagined spending the last few months before retirement.

Initial feedback from people involved in Johnsen’s project had been good. She had built a solid team and her casual, candid approach was serving her well with negotiations. Kokomo was concerned, however, when Warden accepted Johnsen’s offer over those of other team leaders. Warden was an asset to the department, and Kokomo wanted to be sure that he remained with the project for the long term. However, it did not take long before Warden came to Kokomo with concerns.

Johnsen was taking credit for Warden’s work, claimed Warden. Even more upsetting, she was holding him back from his full potential. She would often assign Warden menial tasks and suggest how he could do the things he specialized at differently. Kokomo had heard rumours that Warden was looking for work on a different project. Kokomo was becoming accustomed to the high turnover rate associated with Johnsen’s working style, which did not seem to be improving. However, losing a team member as valuable as Warden would be an unpleasant experience.

Employees at the National Research Council laboratory had also complained to Kokomo about Johnsen’s behaviour. Apparently, she was continuing in her tendency to be proprietary about buildings she was working on and had begun to treat the laboratory employees as though they were *her* employees working in *her* laboratory. The laboratory supervisor threatened to pull his building out of the project if Johnsen were not replaced. Retrofitting plans were in place and would come in under budget, if realized as proposed, but none of it would succeed without the co-operation of the laboratory supervisors.

The final challenge seemed to be Johnsen’s pursuit of perfection. She acted as though she knew she was being closely observed, and treated her secondment to the EX-02 position as a test she intended to pass. Johnsen would allow nothing to go wrong under her watch. She was unable to accept failure, or anything less than perfection, as the end product. However, her team members often felt demoralized. They argued that their work was innovative and required advancing with less-than-perfect proposals in some cases. This was the only way to learn about what worked and what did not work. But Johnsen was unsupportive of their efforts and ideas unless the promise of the project was the outcome Johnsen expected. She pushed the team hard, often leaving staff members feeling crushed by her criticism and warnings of failure.

The Review

On a warm September 2020 morning, Johnsen dressed carefully for her virtual performance review. The COVID-19 pandemic that had been raging across the country and the world since earlier that year had made the working environment particularly challenging. However, Johnsen had mastered virtual meetings, telephone calls, and distanced on-site reviews. She was feeling confident about the next step in her career.

Johnsen’s confidence evaporated, however, when she logged into the virtual meeting room and noticed that a human resources director had logged into the meeting with Kokomo. She was also concerned that Kokomo seemed to be avoiding Johnsen’s gaze, although it could have been only the camera angle.

After everyone was settled, Kokomo looked up at Johnsen and announced, “Mattie, I’m going to be brief and direct, and then we can discuss your options. We are not renewing your secondment. With restructuring through the pandemic, your previous position no longer exists, but we will support you in finding work at your previous level of pay in another department.”