

## TEAM BUILDING ACROSS DIVERSITY

*Alison Konrad and Vania Sakelaris 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.*

*This publication may not be transmitted, photocopied, digitized, or otherwise reproduced in any form or by any means without the permission of the copyright holder. Reproduction of this material is not covered under authorization by any reproduction rights organization. To order copies or request permission to reproduce materials, contact Ivey Publishing, Ivey Business School, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada, N6G 0N1; (t) 519.661.3208; (e) cases@ivey.ca; www.iveycases.com. Our goal is to publish materials of the highest quality; submit any errata to publishcases@ivey.ca.*

Copyright © 2023, Ivey Business School Foundation

Version: 2023-03-20

As she ended her call with her human resources (HR) business partner, Alexandra Thorn wondered how, in 2016, a report of implicit bias could be dismissed as a minor issue. Thorn, the vice-president of business development for a large Canadian life and health insurance service company, was surprised when her HR partner interpreted an unpleasant experience with a team member as an interpersonal issue that did not warrant intervention. As a long-time employee, Thorn was well-versed in the organization's values, and acknowledged and appreciated its efforts to embrace diversity and inclusion. She also knew that the company had a deep-rooted belief in consistently, equitably, and sustainably doing the right thing. As such, having witnessed unwelcome bias and inappropriate references to sexuality during a client meeting, Thorn felt compelled to report the incident. Compounding the situation was the fact that the employee in question was underperforming and already on a performance improvement plan. As a values-based leader who knew that the organization's goal was to deliver value beyond the bottom line in collaboration with its clients, teams, and communities, Thorn reflected on her call with HR and thought about the next steps concerning this employee.

### ALEXANDRA THORN

Thorn had begun her progressive career as a financial analyst in Kamloops, British Columbia in 1996. She subsequently held various roles within the company's personal and business insurance service divisions across multiple industries at the corporate head office in Victoria. She credited her drive to become a leader to an early mentor who left a positive impact as an inspirational role model. As a passionate and committed leader, Thorn's track record included a reputation for developing talent and helping people reach their potential. She focused on employee engagement, given her belief in the strong link between employee experience and customer experience. She was passionate about building strong and effective client-focused teams and recognizing employee contributions to the organization's success. Thorn maintained that success was the sum of all parts; that there were many star performers on a team, and that her success as a leader was directly related to the successful performance of her team.

In 2012, Thorn had experienced an uncharacteristically poor year in terms of her professional performance. She attributed this to her decision not to disclose to her peers and team that she was a lesbian, even though she was preparing to marry her American partner after divorcing her husband. As a result of this decision, Thorn avoided company events to mitigate any potential negative impact on her professional relationships. She feared that openly declaring her sexual orientation could result in a variety of reactions by internal and external stakeholders.

Doing so weighed heavily on Thorn, who felt she was not herself. The suppression of her values and identity resulted in an unanticipated negative impact on her performance, prompting her to take action.

Coincidentally, the company had launched a five-year diversity renewal initiative in 2012, which focused on using deliberate and measurable diversity and inclusion strategies and programs to transform organizational culture, the talent pipeline, and senior leadership ranks. The company had also won numerous awards in recognition of its promotion of career and leadership development for women.

In 2015, upholding her values of honesty, authenticity, and respect, Thorn disclosed her sexual orientation. She was committed to honouring her identity and sharing the truth. She was then subjected to regular acts of microaggression, including being referred to as “one of the grown men” around the decision-making table. She was told several times that she could not possibly relate to challenges for women in a male-dominated industry because she had a wife at home. It became evident that discussions with many male peers reflected their discomfort with the issue of sexual orientation and their implicit biases.

Her manager became aware of Thorn’s efforts to relocate her partner to Canada, which involved a two-year delay in immigration processes. In early 2017 the company promoted her to a corporate leadership role in Windsor, Ontario, so she would be in closer proximity to the Canada–United States border and her partner’s location. This aligned with the company’s commitment to having its practices guided by its values, which included integrity, empathy, and diversity. The organization’s business code of conduct reflected a responsibility to demonstrate behaviours driven by doing what is right, putting others first, and learning from each other’s differences.

In alignment with the organization’s HR processes for leadership development, Thorn was assigned an executive coach to support her transition to a more extensive portfolio. Thorn’s progressive leadership was reflective of the organization’s commitment to expanding opportunities for women in business.

In her role of vice-president of business development, Thorn was accountable for growing the insurance service business in collaboration with current and new commercial customers, including those in a predominantly agricultural community that included Indigenous communities in the region. These clients often had generations of families who had built solid relationships with the organization based on trust. It was not uncommon for clients to invite insurance representatives to their homes and host business meetings at their kitchen table.

## **NORMALIZING DIVERSITY**

As news of her sexual orientation surfaced, Thorn learned that her team members thought it best that she not attend client visits. There was a sense, based on team members’ experience, that her personal life might impact business relations with some members of this traditional agricultural community. Thorn had not previously experienced this type of reaction within a business context. She elected to lean on her values and to discuss the matter openly with her team, with a view to removing the perceived barrier and enabling continued success. She engaged them in a discussion regarding the potential risks that they had assessed, and facilitated discussions grounded in the organization’s inclusive values. Thorn helped them grow through open and frank discussions on key topics and viewed this as a core element of team building. Thorn regularly engaged her teams in conversations about business successes, failures, and related opportunities and challenges. Doing so made them stronger as a group and optimized their performance as a unit. As a leader, she maintained that they won or lost as a team, and believed in the benefits of recognizing, promoting, and rewarding efforts and achievements along the way.

Thorn did not want to deny who she was. She had a business to run, and this included meeting clients to assess their needs. Her executive coach reinforced a need to be less self-deprecating and stay true to herself. She was committed to not allowing conservative views about her identity to damage her performance and stellar track record. As such, she decided to accompany members of her team to visits with key clients.

## THE PERFORMANCE INCIDENT

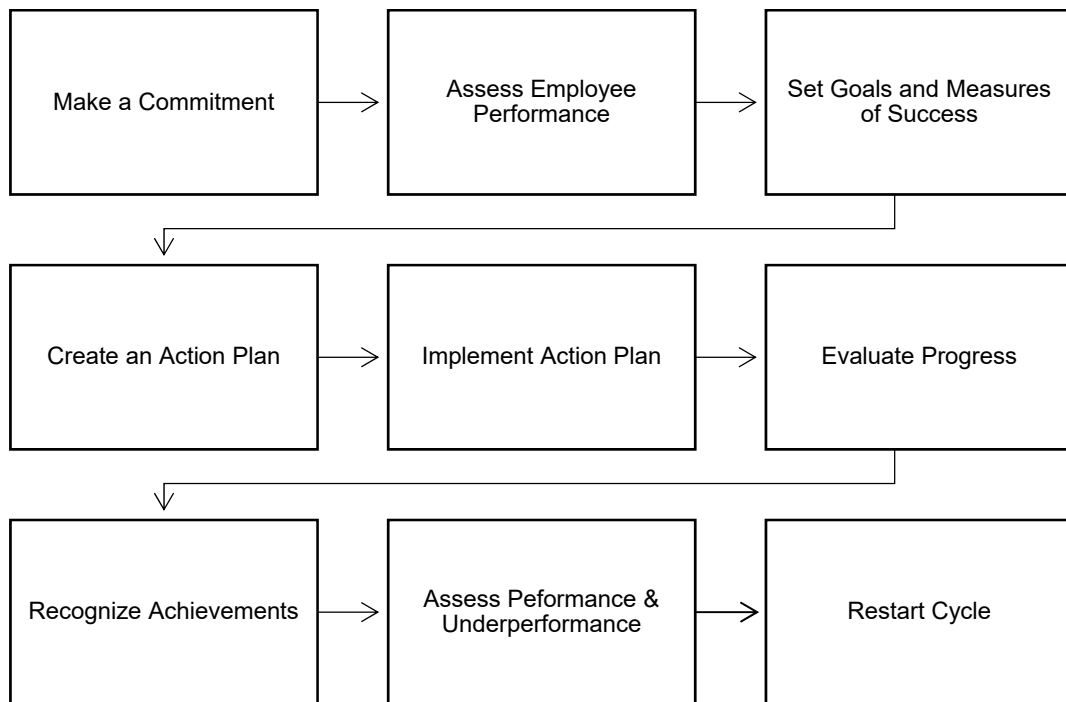
Tina Smith was an employee whose performance Thorn had been monitoring as part of an improvement plan she had developed with HR. The plan identified skills and competencies that warranted improvement, with metrics aligned with performance objectives for Smith's role. These were intended to guide improvements aligned with standard performance monitoring and management employment practices (see Exhibit 1). Thorn was aware that Smith's performance improvement efforts were hindered by her lack of commitment to the improvement effort.

Thorn assessed that Smith's progress was impacted by a lack of awareness of her underperformance in the business and on reaching the team's collective targets. As a result, Thorn had extended Smith's performance plan timelines and enlisted the support of a business coach to work with the employee on a one-to-one basis. Having evidenced the positive impact that mentors could have on employee growth and performance, and being vested in her team's success, Thorn enabled linkages to mentors based on areas of interest and identified career goals.

Thorn led by example and modelled desired behaviours to benefit the teams she helped develop. Smith, however, felt that Thorn's openness about her sexual orientation posed a risk to relationships with the traditional farmers in this southwest region of Ontario and suggested that her leader not accompany her to the meetings with these clients. Despite this, Thorn decided to join her for client visits, including one to a rural physician who was a new client. During the meeting, Thorn witnessed behaviour that she felt was not aligned with the code of conduct's expectations of the company's employees. Smith's jokes and reference to "swingers in small towns" were inappropriate for a client meeting. Smith interpreted the physician's laughter as a positive sign. However, on the drive back to the office, Thorn explained that the interaction was far from positive or appropriate, and that it had made the new client uncomfortable. Smith maintained her position, stating "You have to know your market; if you put a Black person in some markets, you will lose clients." Of concern to Thorn was Smith's continued lack of awareness of her biases and how they impacted her work.

Thorn was disturbed by the both the incident and debriefing discussion. Upon returning to her office, she contacted her HR business partner to report the incident and seek guidance. She felt that this was another issue to integrate into the performance improvement action plan that was already on Smith's file. However, rather than support Thorn's perspective, the HR partner indicated that employees are entitled to their views, and that HR did not share Thorn's determination that Smith had demonstrated a lack of professionalism during the client meeting. This position was uncharacteristic of Thorn's previous experience with HR. She considered her next steps. As a values-based leader aligned with the organization's commitment to diversity and inclusion, she felt further action was warranted. She needed to carefully assess her options and consider the pros and cons of each decision.

The Ivey Business School gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the Bank of Montreal in the development of this case.

**EXHIBIT 1: PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT PLAN PROCESS OVERVIEW**

Source: Created by authors based on company information.