

Just Part of the Crop

Joann Keyton

“**S**isters. Uhhh,” she said with mocking disgust. “Once a big sis, always a big sis.”

“What are you complaining about now?” Marcus* asks Yasmin as he searches the menu for dinner. It had been almost a year since Yasmin and Marcus had graduated from college. Although they saw each other frequently at friends’ parties and weddings, they hadn’t had time to have the type of soul-searching conversations they enjoyed while in school.

“My sister and her friends graduate this spring and they’re always asking me how to look for a job . . . what do I think about this and that company . . . how much am I making . . . it just goes on and on,” Yasmin explains. “I realize they haven’t had much job experience. But every time I go home they launch into this barrage of questions.”

Description about Yasmin and Marcus’ relational history

Description about the primary communication problem presented in the case: Yasmin’s younger sister (and her friends) wants advice about looking for a job after graduation. Yasmin and Marcus reflect on their experiences in developing résumés, answering job ads, and going on interviews.

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“Well,” Marcus replies, “don’t you remember what it was like when we interviewed for our first jobs?”

“Sure, and I’m sympathetic and helpful to a degree. But at some point, they just have to develop their résumé, answer some ads, and go on some interviews. It’s just not a perfect—or a pretty—process.” Yasmin stops the conversation to peruse the menu. Finding what she wants to order, she snaps it shut. “So, what are you going to order?”

“Could you just make up your mind without surveying me?” Marcus asks with a laugh. “Sometimes you take the data collection thing too far. This is dinner, not a human resources survey.”

The waitperson arrives and asks for their order. Both Yasmin and Marcus start to talk at once, and then realize they are ordering the same thing. They laugh at themselves, like only good friends can.

It’s been like this for a long time. Yasmin and Marcus met each other when they were the only two freshmen senators to their university’s student government association (SGA). Although both had been very involved in organizations at their high schools, the university’s SGA required a different level of involvement . . . the decisions the senators made influenced university governance. In their four years representing the School of Communication, Yasmin and Marcus

Additional description about Yasmin and Marcus’ relational history, and their college and work histories.

worked to end plus/minus grading, persuaded the provost to change the final exam schedule to accommodate both full- and part-time students more effectively, raised considerable funds to support a developmentally disabled person who lived near campus, and created a separate student organization to manage the SGA's entertainment programming.

Not only were Yasmin and Marcus effective student leaders, they also worked part-time in the university's recruiting office. Yasmin enjoyed going on recruiting trips to regional high schools, whereas Marcus was particularly effective in helping to develop the office's written materials and in collecting survey data from students and parents who visited the university's campus.

Both were majors in the School of Communication. Yasmin majored in organizational communication and Marcus majored in interpersonal communication, so their part-time positions were good fits with the careers they hoped to pursue.

Waiting for their dinner to arrive, Marcus restarts the conversation. "Don't you remember what it was like for us when we were looking for our first jobs? We had some pretty strange ideas about what it meant to work. We really thought we were the cream of the

Notice how Marcus has shifted the conversation to reflections about what it means to work.

Here Yasmin identifies three initial shocks: (a) believing she would have more free time, (b) believing that doing your job well was all that was needed, and (c) the stress of being in one place for 9 hours.

Here Marcus contributes his initial shock: believing that his work group would replicate his cohesive group at the university.

crop.” He paused. “Turns out, we were just *part* of the crop.”

“Yeah,” muses Yasmin. “I thought that at five o’clock, that would be it. I could go home and I wouldn’t have anything to do once I got home. I was going to have so much more free time than I had when I was in school because when you got home, work was over.” Pausing to take a drink, Yasmin continues sarcastically. “Right. Just like if you went in and did your job well you’d be recognized. You know . . . I truly thought it was what you did and not who you knew. Oh, and the other thing . . . do you remember how long 8 to 5 really was your first week on the job? I was so exhausted. I didn’t realize how short an attention span I had until I had to sit in one space from 8 to 5. I thought I was going to die.”

Marcus responds, “Yeah, I remember thinking that once I was employed I’d be a member of a cohesive work group—like we were in SGA—and all of us in the work group would go out for five o’clock happy hours and stuff. I don’t know . . . it was some type of a ‘real-working-adult’ fantasy I had.”

The waitperson interrupted their conversation to deliver their salads. They stopped for a moment to enjoy the beginning of their meal, but within a few minutes Yasmin started once again to reflect on their first *real* jobs.

“I don’t know why I’m so annoyed with my sister and her friends for asking about my salary,” Yasmin admits. “Now that I think about it, I did the same thing she’s doing. I had no idea what a decent salary was when I was looking for a job. And I was scared that I wouldn’t make enough to do all the adult things I dreamed of . . . you know . . . getting my own apartment, buying a new, not a used, car . . . oh, and buying new corporate suits. When I asked my friends and family about salaries, everybody told me all these horror stories about how I’d start out at 21 or even lower. So when they offered me \$27,500, I remember thinking that I was really rolling in it.”

“Until you found out how much is taken out for social security, income taxes, and medical insurance,” Marcus interjects.

“Yes, now I truly understand what my parents were talking about. Before I got my first paycheck I didn’t really comprehend their criticism that they make X amount of dollars, but they don’t see it. And my mom was always complaining that the government was wasting her money. But the most painful part was paying for parking. It’s expensive to park downtown,” Yasmin emphasizes.

“Yeah, that’s one of the benefits of working out east at the office park. I don’t pay for parking. Of course,” Marcus says jok-

Yasmin recognizes that the information her sister is asking for is the same information she was seeking during her job hunt.

Here Yasmin and Marcus talk about discovering the difference between gross and net pay.

Notice how Marcus uses this same topic to introduce another new-employee discomfort: find-

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ing one's way around in an unfamiliar environment.

Marcus picks up the issue of paying for benefits and intertwines it with recognition that he did not realize how basic benefits were paid for by both the company and the employee, and how it was his job to help other employees understand basic issues he had difficulty accepting.

Notice how Yasmin returns the conversation to the discrepancy between gross and net salary.

ingly, "it's a lot easier for me to get lost. All those buildings look alike. I swear it took me the entire first week to figure out which way to walk out of the circular garage to find the right tower to enter."

Marcus continues, "What really got me was when my medical insurance kicked in. I didn't even go to the doctor these last 12 months, but I guarantee you I feel like I paid a doctor's salary in my insurance premiums." Pausing for a moment to butter a dinner roll doesn't dampen his complaint. "I hadn't paid for insurance before. I had no idea how much it cost. And this is how naive I really was . . . I was hired to work in human resources and I had no idea how benefits and stuff work. I guess, on some level, I thought that the company paid for everything, all the benefits. I didn't realize there was a premium. Looking at my paycheck, I thought, 'What does this deduction mean?' Here they were training me to interview potential new employees and I didn't have a clue about how benefits really worked."

Yasmin takes over the conversation. "What was hard for me was not knowing how to calculate the taxes so I knew what I'd be actually taking home. So when they made me the salary offer, I really felt like I was kind of gambling. I did remember from one of my business classes that we were told to calculate our take home as 70% to allow for taxes and insurance.

But one of my friends told me it would be more like a 20% deduction. Guess which one I believed?"

The conversation continues until their dinners arrive. They talk some about their jobs—hers at SentryShield and his at Omega Plus—and some about the people they went to school with. Even though they haven't seen one another for several months, not since Ridley's going-away party, Yasmin and Marcus' conversation retains its typical character—they weave in and out of topics easily, somehow managing to always return to anything left unfinished.

"Well," asks Marcus, "what *is* your sister going to do?"

"She doesn't know. She's more concerned that she's going to have trouble selling her communication degree."

"Is it in org com, like yours?"

"Yes, she's following in her sister's footsteps." She pauses. "Should I be proud, annoyed . . . or should I caution her?"

"You mean about how to defend her communication degree when she's interviewing for a job?" Marcus asks.

"Right, it was amazing to me. I was so proud of my communication degree because I had a high GPA and I could see the relevance of communication in everything I did. I just expected that others would too. But that first job interview really was an eye-opener."

Information about Yasmin and Marcus' current employers. Ridley, their friend, is introduced. Notice how a pattern or style of conversation is developing between Yasmin and Marcus. They appear to be comfortable weaving in and out of topics, underscoring their comfort and familiarity with one another.

Marcus returns to the problem of the case: Yasmin's younger sister (and her friends) wants advice about looking for a job after graduation.

Here the conversation turns the viability of a communication degree and the need to explain to potential employers the benefit of a communication degree.

Marcus ties his thread of the conversation back to his reflections on convincing his parents that a communication degree was the right degree choice.

Once again, Marcus brings the conversation back to the problem of the case.

“Right,” agrees Marcus. “I can remember after my first interview thinking, ‘That interviewer doesn’t clearly understand the value of communication.’ And he was a recruiter no less. I remember coming home dejected thinking that they’re not going to pay me much because I had to explain to the interviewer what I learned in my communication classes. But, hey, I had to explain to my parents what I was doing in communication,” Marcus adds with a grin. “But after that first job interview, I had to do a lot of rationalizing . . . you know . . . did I do the right thing getting a com degree? I’m really glad I had that experience before I interviewed with Omega Plus.”

Yasmin quickly says, “Isn’t that post-decisional regret? We studied that in our decision-making class. Remember Professor Walters? He was sooooo good. We should go back and see if he’s going to retire soon. Doesn’t he have a cabin in the woods in Montana?”

“Montana, yes. Good, yes. But so stingy with the As,” Marcus replies.

They finish their dinners and order coffee and dessert; their conversation continues.

“You never did tell me what your sister was going to do.”

“Right,” says Yasmin. “I have told her a few things.”

“For instance?”

“Well, I did finally tell her the story about the whole application process . . . remember, you’re the only one I ever confessed that to. I was too ashamed to tell anyone else.”

“Yes, your secret’s safe with me,” Marcus said in a hushed tone. “What exactly did you tell her?”

“You know, how they called me in for the interview and I did not even remember turning in an application to them. When I got to the interview, the interviewer said she was impressed with my cover letter and everything, and I didn’t even remember that I had applied. I was sending in so many applications—five a week. That was my goal. On Friday, I had to make sure that I had put five résumés in the mail.

“And you know, I always thought that I would work for someplace really fabulous, a big-name retail organization, or some huge financial institution. I never imagined working for a company that I had never heard of before. When I saw their ad, it was blind . . . you know the kind, describes the job and gives you a post office box to respond to. The job sounded interesting, so I thought, ‘I’ll just send in a résumé. I’ve got to get five out.’ I was working on pure quantity . . . hoping to increase my odds that one would pick me out of all the people applying. And so I’m waiting to hear from all these fabulous com-

Yasmin confesses her ambiguity in her initial interactions with her current employer.

Yasmin describes her job-seeking strategy.

Yasmin discloses her ignorance in identifying potential employers by limiting her job search to companies she knew about.

Yasmin describes the problems inherent in answering a blind ad (company name is concealed, a general post office box is the only address).

Yasmin describes searching for information on the company prior to the job interview. Her attempts at organizational anticipatory socialization help her avoid entry shock and decide if there is a good match between her and the potential employer's organizational culture.

This interaction indicates Yasmin's faith and trust in Marcus. She tells her sister the story, but describes the experience as happening to Marcus, not to her.

To deflect further conversation about this use of their friendship, Yasmin turns the conversation to Ridley, a mutual friend.

panies that I had applied to. And I get this call from the recruiter. When I answered the phone I know I said 'Who?' like an idiot. And she said 'SentryShield.' And I was like 'Great. Sure. Yeah. I'll come in for an interview.'

"I was immediately on the Internet, looking up SentryShield. I wanted to have some idea of what they did. I was amazed to find that it was the parent company for eight other national companies. Who would have guessed that they're one of the top three home security companies and that their national headquarters was here? How could I not know that . . . I've lived here all my life!"

"So you told her all that? Your sister, I mean," asks Marcus.

"Well, kind of. I told her most of it. But I changed the name of the company."

"Why?" Marcus asks suspiciously.

"Because I also told her it was you," as Yasmin points her finger at Marcus.

"Me?!"

"What are best friends for? Speaking of friends," Yasmin continues, "I saw Ridley last week. He was in town visiting his parents," as she tries to change the subject. "Remember when we were getting ready to graduate . . . anybody he met, he'd pimp that résumé. 'Oh, hey. Can I get you a copy of

my résumé? 'Hey, do you know Bob Jones? I'd love to get a copy of my résumé in his hands.' "

"He *is* my friend . . . but I did hate doing anything with him while he was looking for a job. He was pimping the résumé the whole time. And I was like, well, I don't want to pimp myself to these people."

Yasmin asks, "Remember Dr. Ferguson's interviewing class? I asked her if it was cocky to put my SGA activities and achievements on my résumé. She said that we needed to brag on ourselves. I can hear her saying, 'If you don't, no one else will.' I guess I have a hard time with shameless self-promotion."

"No, that's what Ridley did. There is a difference between shameless self-promotion and being proud of your accomplishments."

"I couldn't figure out where to draw the line," Yasmin replied, shaking her head.

They smiled, remembering their friend Ridley and their professor, Dr. Ferguson. They did have a great time in school. It was too bad they couldn't coordinate their schedules to see each other more often.

Marcus chimes back in, "So, are you going to tell your sister to read the parachute book?"

Notice how both Yasmin and Marcus dismiss Ridley's job-seeking strategy of zealously using personal networks to extend his job search.

Yasmin tests her analysis of Ridley's strategy by comparing it to job-seeking advice given by one of their professors.

Marcus confirms Yasmin's evaluation of Ridley's strategy.

Marcus, once again, returns the conversation to the case's initial problem: what Yasmin should tell her sister about searching for her first job.

Marcus' question to Yasmin creates a significant but related shift in their conversation.

Yasmin introduces this organizational story with the acknowledgment that she was not responsible for the new hire's uncertainty or stress, and that she would fix this apparent problem in her organization.

"You mean *What Color Is My Parachute?* I gave her my copy. She'll probably copy my answers!"

Changing the subject, Marcus asks, "So what is it really like at SentryShield?"

"Not much different than when I started a year ago. Let me tell you what happened today." Yasmin starts to laugh. "I do have to make some recommendations about first-day orientation. You won't believe what happened to this new employee.

"It was her first day. She came in really early . . . guess she wanted to impress us. And all of our outside doors were locked . . . you know, for security reasons. She finally found her way in. I think she just followed someone in when they slid their ID badge through the security checkpoint. I was there early too—but hard at work already. I didn't hear anyone and all of a sudden, 'Yasmin, it's me, Judy! It's my first day. How do I get to my desk?' I said, 'Aren't you supposed to be meeting Beth?' That's my boss—her boss, too. She said, 'Yes, she told me to meet her at her office. I don't know where her office is.' She looked really embarrassed. I promised not to tell Beth. So I took her to get an ID badge and then showed her to Beth's office. But Beth wasn't in yet. So I stood there with her for a while. Finally Jim, our vice president, came in, looked directly at Judy,

and asked, 'Are you the temp?' Judy piped up, 'No, I'm hoping I'm going to be permanent' before I could introduce her as the new HR assistant.

"Beth's phone rang, so I picked it up. It was Beth. She asked, 'Is Judy up there? Tell her to come down to the first floor, we've got orientation set up for her across the street. And I'm late.' Beth is always late. So I got to whisk Judy off to orientation. The last thing Judy said to me was, 'You know, it was like my mom dropping me off at kindergarten.' I should have told her that it was exactly like that my first day on the job. We simply must do a better job on an employee's first day.

"Later that afternoon I saw Judy wandering around the eighth floor, where our offices are. She was almost in tears. When I walked up to her she said, 'I don't quite know how to get back to my desk. All the cubicles look the same. You turn a corner, and it's just cubes.' Poor kid."

"I know how she must have felt," Marcus said empathically. "My first day was overwhelming too. The first day it's meet-and-greet this person, then meet-and-greet the next person. Each one giving me the spiel on what he or she does and what the department does. I had no idea that Omega Plus was such a complex place. I'm just listening to all this

Yasmin continues with this story. Notice how Yasmin uses Judy's first-day experiences to frame her first-day at the organization.

Yasmin concludes the story about Judy by returning to the ambiguity and uncertainty theme evident throughout their conversation.

Taking his turn, Marcus discloses his confusion and anxiety in meeting so many people and obtaining so much information on his first day on the job.

Yasmin acknowledges Marcus' disclosure by comparing the first day at a new job to sorority rush.

Marcus points out the dialectical tension in first-day introductions.

Notice here that Yasmin identifies a solution to this type of newcomer's anxiety.

stuff flying around me. I have no context for making it make sense. And by ten o'clock, I was just like . . . whoo! You know, overwhelmed. I spent my whole first day meeting people. It was insane."

Yasmin agrees. "It's amazing how draining that is. My first day . . . I felt like I had been through sorority rush again, you know, where your face just cramps because you've been smiling all day at everyone. I was trying really hard to appear interested in everything everyone said. And I thought, ohmygosh . . . all I want to do is go home and go to sleep!"

"But the freakiest part," Marcus chimes back in, "was when everyone knew my name—'cause I was the new guy—and I didn't know their names . . . hey, I had a hard time keeping their names and positions straight! I know now that they were just trying to make me feel welcome, but it just freaks you out a little bit."

"I've made it a practice . . . when somebody new comes we say 'Hello, my name is Yasmin. I work in communication, and I know you won't remember my name next time you see me, but I'll make sure to say hi to you and I'll tell you who I am again. So don't freak out about asking me.' The funny part? They always remember my name because I'm the one they didn't have to remember."

Their conversation quiets down, the way conversation can between good friends.

“So, what would you tell my sister? What advice would you give her?” Yasmin inquires.

“Oh, that’s simple. You’ve got to have tolerance for ambiguity those first few days.”

“Hmmm, that’s good. I think I’ll tell her to find that one person she can ask questions of and then make that person this deal: Let me drive you insane asking you questions and I promise you in one month I will not ask you another question. We will have a day when I ask you no questions.”

“Now that is confidence,” Marcus quips.

“Well, it worked.”

“Really?”

“Sure. On July 14th I asked no questions.” Pausing for humorous effect, Yasmin is also testing Marcus’s faith in her. And then she continues, “Now July 15th, I had like a thousand questions. But I asked no questions on the 14th.”

“Are you going to tell your sister that?”

“Sure I am. Any other suggestions, wise guy?” ♦

Now Yasmin returns to the central problem of the case: what to tell her sister about searching for her first job after college.

Marcus sums up his advice for Yasmin’s sister by stating the theme of their conversation.

Notice how addressing Yasmin’s problem of providing job-seeking advice for her sister provided these two friends with the opportunity to disclose and vent about their job-seeking experiences and the stress of being a new employee.

It should be obvious by now that Yasmin is a problem-solving-oriented person. She provides one final solution to help new employees overcome new job jitters.

* This case has been developed based on real organization(s) and real organizational experiences. Names, facts, and situations have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals and organizations.

Example Case Analysis

The following presents a case summary and contextual description, a timeline, key characters and information about their communication styles and relationship, salient issues raised in the case, symptoms and root cause, and effective elements of communication.

Marcus and Yasmin have recently completed their B.A. degrees in communication; both are in their first professional full-time jobs. Throughout their college careers, Marcus and Yasmin developed and solidified their friendship as they participated together in their university's student government association, and by being classmates in a number of classes. Now, one year later, Marcus and Yasmin meet for dinner. Yasmin complains to Marcus about her younger sister, who is pestering Yasmin for information about conducting a job search. The conversation between Marcus and Yasmin alternates between reflecting on their own job-hunting experiences and identifying helpful advice for Yasmin's sister.

As friends, Marcus and Yasmin have a comfortable conversation style allowing them to weave in and out of topics. They are comfortable joking with one another and with disclosing some of their anxieties about looking for a job and being organizational newcomers. Yasmin seems more problem-oriented than Marcus; however, Marcus seems better at keeping their conversation on track.

During the process of identifying job-seeking advice for Yasmin's sister, Marcus and Yasmin disclose and vent about their job-seeking experiences and the stress associated with being new employees. Overall, their revelations describe the uncertainty and ambiguity they encountered during the job-seeking and newcomer stages, as well as solutions they devised to confront these challenges. Their stress or anxiety would be the symptom for the root problem of being first-time job seekers and not recognizing the differences they would encounter between school and work environments. They faced uncertainty in the following ways: answering blind ads in the job-seeking stage, having difficulty distinguishing between positive and shameless self-promotion in the job-seeking stage, acknowledging the need to sell their degree, having unrealistic job expectations, and not realizing the difference between gross and net salary. Indirectly, Yasmin and Marcus revealed the anxiety and ambiguity associated with being the new employee.

Both Yasmin and Marcus were effective storytellers. The ease of their conversation was apparent, as dropped threads of conversation were easily retrieved.

Statements About the Case

1. Marcus and Yasmin are good friends. Conversation between them is comfortable and relaxed; they trust one another with disclosure.
2. Marcus is skilled at bringing the conversation back to Yasmin's original question.
3. Despite their success at school, Yasmin and Marcus both encountered ambiguity and difficult communication situations as organizational newcomers.
4. Yasmin and Marcus had difficulty adjusting from being in a school environment to being in an office environment.
5. It appears that Yasmin developed solutions for problems she encountered as an organizational newcomer, hoping to relieve the communication stress and ambiguity of other newcomers to her organization.

Questions About the Case

1. How do blind ads work? Wouldn't a person have some idea about what company placed the ad by the job description given?
2. Both Marcus and Yasmin were portrayed as successful and involved students. Why didn't their school-based experiences provide more guidance as they entered the job market?
3. What are effective strategies for searching for a first job?
4. What communication strategies should I use for increasing my personal and professional networks while looking for a job?

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5. In the job interviewing, selection, and hiring processes, when is it appropriate to ask about benefits and other issues that will affect my paycheck?
6. How should I reply when employers ask about my degree in communication?
7. How can I be well prepared for the first day of a new job?
8. When I am employed, what communication strategies can I use to ensure that new employees have good first-day experiences?
9. Is there any way to practice, or be prepared for, the ambiguity I will face on my first day at a new job?
10. What advice would I give Yasmin's sister?

Theories, Perspectives, or Research That Could Be Used to Analyze the Case

1. Uncertainty reduction.
2. Organizational assimilation.
3. Organizational anticipatory socialization.
4. Realistic job preview.
5. Selection interview.
6. Organizational entry.
7. Employee orientation.

List of Strategies for Solving Problems Illuminated by the Case

1. When searching for a job, keep a list of letters and applications sent, as well as copies of job ads.
2. Prior to a selection interview, research the organization (search the Web and business press, and ask friends and relatives about the organization).

3. Before a selection interview, develop answers to probable questions that could be difficult to answer (e.g., “Tell me more about your degree in communication.”).
4. During a selection interview, ask the interviewer to describe a typical day for someone in the position for which you’re interviewing.
5. Talk to friends and relatives who have recently made the shift from being a student to being an employee. Ask for their advice on making this transition and on being an organizational newcomer.
6. When entering a new organization, expect some level of uncertainty and ambiguity. Ask questions and observe others to reduce the uncertainty and stress of being a new employee. Each day try to learn three new things about the organization’s culture that will help you effectively communicate on your job.
7. Each day on a new job, learn and use the names of two people in your work unit.
8. After you’ve been on the job awhile, plan to help newcomers (informally or formally) through the transition. ♦

Section I

Organizational Culture

Contemplating My First Year

Joy L. Hart

Looking back on accepting the job offer, I felt like I was on top of the world. My interview at Networked Nation* went so well, and I was thrilled to be starting out with such a prestigious firm. I even remember joking with my mom that I had nowhere to go but down! Little did I know about the upcoming day-to-day realities of my new workplace.

In part, I was thrilled because I'd be building on my communication degree, but I'd also be developing new skills, which would make me even more marketable—both internally and externally. And I'd start with a job title, Information Liaison, that just sounded important! At 23, I was Casey Long, Information Liaison. I wasn't sure what the future would hold, but I could easily see myself staying at Networked Nation, or NetNat as we call it, for many years—maybe even until retirement. It really seemed like that good a place. And I knew that if I ever decided to leave, this position and the skills I'd build would look great on my résumé.

In my first interview, I met with Delia Davis. She easily impressed me. She was probably in her mid-30s, and already she was heading a major division, Analysis. Plus, she was friendly, energetic, smart, funny, and highly committed to NetNat. And if I got the position, she'd be my division head. I knew immediately that I'd like working for Delia. At the second interview, Delia introduced me to Matt MacIntosh, her vice president. Matt seemed nice enough too, although a bit distracted. At the time, I thought that maybe he was just busy and might have been

concentrating on other upcoming tasks. He did compliment me on several of my accomplishments, proving, at least, that he'd read my résumé.

Two days later Delia called to say that both she and Matt rated me as their top applicant and offered me the position. I was truly thrilled and couldn't wait to start work. I just knew I would like working in a professional environment and having access to so many experts across various fields.

I guess it's kind of laughable to me now, but then somehow I really believed that I knew what working at NetNat would be like. Some of my jobs during school, things I knew about various organizations, and my impressions of Delia and Matt just crystallized in my head, so that I actually felt confident that I already knew what sort of work environment NetNat would be. Clearly, I was more than a little naive. I pictured a professional context with experts working together, sharing information, and achieving common goals. I imagined us working as one big team, and I looked forward to being a member of the team.

Day One

I don't remember being at all scared or apprehensive that first day. I was excited about starting and fairly confident that I'd fit in and do well. I was a bit awed by the sheer amount of work produced by the various divisions of NetNat, and I was looking forward to meeting people and seeing how the whole place functioned.

Maybe the first few minutes should have been a clue. I'm a pretty friendly person, and so even though I hadn't really met anyone there, except Delia and Matt, I said things like "Hello," "Good morning," and "How are you?" to people in the hallways and on the elevator. I remember thinking that people were reserved, but at that point, I just thought that they were trying to figure out who I was or something.

When I got to our offices, Delia greeted me and stressed how pleased she was that I was joining her staff in the Analysis Division. She was friendly, just like I'd remembered, and all seemed to be going well. Next, Delia showed me to my office, walked me around, and introduced me to the 10 other division members, and made sure that I had everything I needed. Then she gave me directions to the Human Resources (HR) office, so I could complete the rest of the required introductory paperwork.

There I introduced myself to Marcus, the HR staff member who enrolled new employees. He made a weird comment. He said some-

thing like, “We’ll get your paperwork filled out, and then someone here will eventually get around to processing it.” The last part of his comment seemed unprofessional to me, but I thought that maybe he was tired or just having a bad day, though he seemed pretty disinterested and bored by the whole process of meeting me and setting up my paperwork. I try not to make snap negative judgments, but I recall thinking that if this was Marcus’ usual behavior, I wouldn’t want him in HR in my company.

After the HR setup, I went back to my office and started getting the place organized. That’s when Derek Serendi, one of my colleagues in the division, whose office was two doors down, poked his head in and asked, “So, Casey, how did the HR check-in go?” When I said something like, “The paperwork’s all complete, so I guess that I’m official now,” Derek chuckled. He then added, “Well, let’s hope so, but HR is famous for its messes, so I wouldn’t count on that just yet.” And then he turned and left without any more explanation.

Derek’s comment made me reflect back on my interaction with Marcus. Perhaps he wasn’t just having a bad day or operating with low energy—maybe his behavior indicated problems with his work, or even problems with the whole division, as Derek had indicated. I made a mental note to check back with HR in about a week to make sure that my setup materials for payroll, health insurance, and retirement had been processed.

At lunch, I took my food to the picnic tables scattered across NetNat’s lawn. It was a lovely day, and small groups of employees were seated at various tables. When I didn’t see anyone I knew, I took a seat alone at one of the tables. As I ate, I could hear parts of the conversation of the three people at the adjacent table. They were making fun of Delia, calling her “uptight,” “a taskmaster,” and a “goodie-two-shoes.” Some projects were being discussed, but I couldn’t hear the specifics. Then the same group turned to gossiping about Matt. Some of the gossip was related to work (“He’s in trouble on that Seattle project,” “James doesn’t like him”), but other aspects were strictly personal (“problems at home,” “He’s deeply in debt”).

Pretty soon, Samuel asked if he could join me. Although I’d met him just that morning, I was so relieved and pleased to have someone be friendly. And frankly, I was happy to have someone distract me from the gossip. Samuel was an analyst with our division, so in trying to make conversation I asked him a little about his job and how long he’d been there. He’d been with NetNat for five years, “longer,” he

said, “than most people last.” Samuel said that he liked working with Delia, and I said that I was impressed with her in the interview. I asked him what working with Delia on a daily basis was like.

Samuel stressed, “Delia has standards, but other divisional heads around here don’t. She’s good to work for and treats us well, but most managers here are just playing a game until they can find something better.” And I remember him saying, “We do important work, directly tied to NetNat’s goals, and Delia is proud of that. But staff elsewhere aren’t as interested in being successful. They aren’t as important to the organization.” Stressing that I should “just wait and see,” Samuel added, “We’ve got a really good group—by far the best at NetNat. Most of the other units employ pretty worthless folks really. I hate to say it, but a lot of them are just losers. They’re lost, they don’t do their work, and they’re jealous of us. Delia’s hired the best people—smart, kind, and good workers—and people elsewhere resent her successes and ours.”

Returning to work, I thought a lot about this conversation with Samuel. I appreciated his willingness to share his viewpoints, and based on what he’d said, I was even happier to be in Delia’s division. But something about his overall attitude bothered me. I wondered, “Wasn’t it possible to say at least one good thing about another unit or individual at NetNat? And how has NetNat had so much success and gotten so much recognition if the overall staff is generally so bad?”

The afternoon of my first day passed quickly and quietly. I got my office completely organized, and I was ready to begin NetNat tasks.

Week One

My first day previewed my first week. People in the lobby and hallways didn’t speak to me or to each other. Maybe I should have noticed this behavior during my job interview, but I guess I was a little nervous then, and, in reality, I really wasn’t in the hallways very long.

When I spoke first, people replied but were brief and brusque. At breaks and lunch, people either seemed to talk with one or two members of their own division or to sit alone. During lunch, I continued to overhear groups bash other divisions and organizational leaders but praise their own division. Whether the group was from a production division, such as Research, Analysis, or Printing, or a support division, like Technology, Accounting, or Human Resources, they praised themselves and questioned or condemned others. Comments like “If the technology folks could keep the systems up, then we could meet our

deadlines without so much stress. Of course, it's too much to hope that they'd know what they're doing" were frequent. Beyond questioning work output or quality, employees disparaged different divisions by picking on the division head ("With a manager like that, what can you expect!") or key division members ("Robin can slack off because she's Bill's pet").

During my first week at NetNat, most members of my division told me negative things about the staff and work climate in other divisions. I overheard many people gossip about other divisions, organizational leaders, and a number of staff across all areas. People seemed friendly enough to others within their division, but no one seemed to like or trust anyone else. There was little interaction across divisional boundaries. However, there was considerable coordination across projects, mostly handled by division heads, so I guessed that this was one way that gossip started. The interlinking projects, plus the quarterly organizational status reports, let others see who was meeting goals—and who fell short.

Month One

By the time I had been employed at NetNat for four weeks, I realized reality just wasn't going to live up to my initial expectations. What I came to realize was that what I experienced that first week was the reality!

In the midst of this, I was looking forward to the first monthly staff meeting. It seemed like a good opportunity to meet people across the whole organization. Plus, I wanted to hear the CEO talk about the various projects at NetNat and see how people responded to him.

According to Derek, one ritual of these monthly meetings was the free coffee, bagels, and fruit put out for staff half an hour before the meeting time. I noticed this half hour marked on the agenda as "Coffee and Conversation," with an encouraging note to be sure to attend this part of the monthly staff meeting. I thought, "Perhaps NetNat is just more formal than other places I've worked or maybe the gossip and dislike gets in the way of meeting people." But I also thought that functions like this one encouraged getting to know others and could help in meeting people across divisional lines.

I went to the coffee session just as it was scheduled to begin. But I was one of only a few people there. Though I rarely have difficulty starting conversations with anyone, the conversations I attempted

with the three other people just fizzled. A few more people came in, took coffee and food, and then left. It was nearly time for the meeting to begin, and I realized that I'd seen maybe only 15 out of a staff of more than 100 persons.

By the time the meeting started, only 30 people were there. People on the agenda gave their reports and the CEO spoke briefly, but no one else made comments or asked questions when invited. Near the meeting's end, each division head was asked to introduce new staff members working in their units, while the new staff stood so that "everyone could get familiar with them." I thought that this gesture was a nice one to welcome newcomers, but really no one welcomed me individually after the meeting.

In the days following the meeting, I half expected that when I saw someone from the meeting, they might say hello. They didn't. When I tried to initiate conversation, they smiled, maybe said a couple of words, let their eyes shift downward, and walked on.

It was also during this first month that I started hearing more stories about life at NetNat. Delia told me about arriving at a restaurant for a meeting with potential new clients. She found another division manager already seated at the table; rather than introduce Delia to the potential clients, he chose to ignore her—and continued to do so for the entire evening.

Samuel told me about the holiday parties given by NetNat. Along the lines of a traditional gift exchange, staff members were asked to bring a small gift suitable for another member of the organization. The previous year members of our division, Analysis, all focused their gifts on improving the skills of lazy workers. For example, they gave others calendars, memo pads to write down tasks, and plaques to overcome defeat. Although the analysts seemed to think that these gifts were very funny, members of other divisions were offended.

A similar story was told about one of the Halloween events. Each year staff members were encouraged to dress up in costume, with prizes offered for the top three costumes. One year Beth, from Accounting, decided to come as a *sloppy worker*. Despite the usual professional dress atmosphere of NetNat, she wore wrinkled blue jeans, a T-shirt with stains, and old tennis shoes. Her usually neat hair was disheveled, and she had written the words "Sloppy Worker" across the back of her T-shirt. Workers in other units were offended—they took Beth's costume selection as a criticism of their own work, assuming that she was saying that they were all sloppy.

I wondered why a place like this one—where across divisions people don't really talk or seem to respect each other—would even have holiday parties. Derek said that "these things are just always scheduled." So I wondered if maybe they linked back to a happier time in NetNat's history or if maybe, like the Coffee and Conversation time slot, they were management's attempts, however feeble, to encourage positive interaction.

I heard lots of other stories, too—stories of people being rude to each other, stories of arguments, stories of dislike and resentment, and stories with negative information about people's personal lives. Interestingly, within our division, my coworkers also told stories of their own and divisional successes, funny events, and some aspects of their personal lives. But information passed along about employees outside the division all seemed to be negative. And even when it seemed that a person didn't have enough information to really know what someone else's intent was, still the interpretations were almost always negative. And the storyteller always seemed sure that his or her interpretation of events was the correct one.

I got to know members of my own division fairly well, and I liked all of them. They took pride in their work and in the accomplishments of the unit. And they were easy to work with, except for their negative attitudes about employees in other divisions. Even then, I had reservations about completely accepting these evaluations, and I questioned how every one of the hundred plus employees, except those in this one unit, could be bad.

During my third week, Chip, who was in my division and whose office was next door to mine, resigned. He said he'd located a similar position closer to his spouse's family. Then in week four, Dale, another colleague whom I really liked a lot, submitted his letter of resignation. He had accepted a more lucrative offer elsewhere. When I asked Samuel if the organization was going to do anything to try to keep these two excellent employees, he replied, "Oh, no, you just get used to losing people around here. Gosh, our turnover rate runs nearly 40% a year."

It was a memorable month. I liked my colleagues, but despite my efforts, I'd hardly met anyone working in other areas. I'd heard my unit celebrate its successes, past and present. But I'd heard nothing good about other units or the people within them. And I'd heard about lots of negative behaviors. It seemed easy to see why people didn't want to spend time with those working in other areas.

Year One

In key ways, my first day, first week, and first month previewed my first year at NetNat. In fact, they rather accurately predicted divisional lines and associated behaviors. It seemed that everyone knew just what to do—snidely degrade others, downplay others' work and contributions, and build allegiances only inside their own division. There was a strong organizational culture, with highly shared values. But these values were to protect one's own division, to resist coordination with other divisions when possible, and to dislike those in other units.

Over the course of the year, I did get to know a handful of people working in other units. This happened largely because, due to my background in market analysis, I was briefly loaned out to the Research Division. The bulk of my time was still allocated to my usual responsibilities, but 25% of it was devoted to working on two market analysis projects. Leon, the division head of Research, was professional and treated me quite well. He was different from Delia, but he worked well with members of his unit. Although he seemed somewhat disorganized and *spacey*, I saw enough good things about him to quell the rumors I'd heard about him being nasty, impatient, and irritable. In fact, Leon seemed rather likable and funny to me.

It was also during this period that I got to know Avie and Belle, two long-term employees. While they were both heavily negative regarding most areas of NetNat, they provided me with lots of details on the organization's history, however biased these details might have been. It was from them that I learned about Trevor, a former CEO who played favorites with division heads. According to Avie and Belle, division heads worked against each other to secure favor with Trevor. Jealousy and tension developed and worsened as employees within the units worked to support their manager so that their division would be elevated. There were other such stories and many speculations, and I wondered what NetNat's culture had been like prior to Trevor being at the helm and about the degree to which his unfairness shaped the current organizational culture.

Leon liked my work a lot, and he kept kidding me about "keeping me." I didn't really think that he was serious, and this just seemed like a way for him to pass along a compliment. So I was a little surprised when, on a Friday, Leon pitched the idea of my coming to work full-time for his division. I was hugely complimented, and I told Leon so. But I also said that I liked my regular unit and wanted to return to

work there. I added that, because I'd liked the projects in Research and the people there, if Leon wanted to talk to Delia about continuing to use me on some projects, that was fine with me.

When I got to work on the following Monday, my coworkers were in an uproar. Delia had mentioned the conversation with Leon to others in the unit, and they'd labeled it "stealing." In fact, they kept saying things like they couldn't believe "that Leon would try to steal Casey away from us, especially after we'd been so kind as to loan her out for a bit." But, of course, they concluded that "In some ways, it was only natural, as we do have the best people in this division." And further, they said, "Delia saved the day by talking about all of our projects and priorities and how Casey was instrumental to them. She'd never let Leon control us."

Although I was pleased that Delia saw me as instrumental, I wished that she'd talked with me about how I'd like to spend my work time. I felt that I'd put the division and Delia first in my answer to Leon. I guess that I just really wanted Delia to put more emphasis on my wishes in this situation. And even more important, I'd been in another division and seen firsthand the good people and good work there, so I knew how arbitrary the divisional perspectives were. Also, by this time, I knew how deeply ingrained these views were and how difficult it would be to change them.

Maybe the thing that bothered me the most was that it seemed that little was being done toward positive change. Division heads were as much caught up in the rumor mill as regular employees. This culture had been in place for a long time, and the top leaders, who frequently traveled on business, seemed oblivious to the need for change. Further, despite working with good people in two divisions, I was beginning to realize that the more one heard about life at NetNat, the more stressed one became. Before, I'd always thought that close working relationships reduced stress, but in this environment I could see that being close with others meant hearing lots of negative information. This, and the expectation that I would participate in such conversations, increased my stress. I started thinking about how such stress might influence employees in the long run. Maybe employees at NetNat rumored to be lazy were really just burned out from having to deal with so much negativity and work-related stress.

I'm usually a pretty quick study and can fit in and adapt in lots of situations. To some extent, this was true at NetNat—I worked successfully enough in two divisions. But I didn't feel all that successful overall.

Sure, I was getting my tasks done and getting some degree of praise for them, but I didn't feel like I was making a real difference in this environment. And I didn't really know how a workplace culture like NetNat could change and what role I might play in that process. In large part, these factors influenced my thinking on likely leaving NetNat in the near future.

Shortly after my one-year anniversary, NetNat's CEO stepped down to pursue other business interests. Elizabeth Tinker, a well-liked and well-respected executive in a similar organization, was recruited to head NetNat. It was rumored that Elizabeth was a "people person," who placed strong emphasis on cooperation, coordination, and teamwork.

As I contemplated this first year, I asked myself if I should look for employment elsewhere. And I wondered what the new CEO might do to improve life at NetNat. ♦

* This case has been developed based on real organization(s) and real organizational experiences. Names, facts, and situations have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals and organizations.