

Chapter 8

Under Pressure: The Role of the External Context in Creating Internal Tensions – A Case Study of a Palestinian University

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this case is to explore the influence of the external context on the internal setting in a Palestinian academic institution. Specifically, the case examines the role of context on the development of human resource policies and practices, the consequence of differing leadership and management styles, and the resultant interpersonal conflict that occurs. Informed by the empirical literature examining the Middle Eastern context, workplace envy, and interpersonal conflict, the case highlights the consequences of these issues. This includes the perceived abuse of power on the part of the manager and highlights the importance of quality human resource policies and practices in supporting the delivery of quality education. Among the recommendations is the implementation of a cultural change program to support management development and the empowerment of minority groups. In addition, the value of employee support programs, alternative mediation and disputes resolution processes are addressed.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The organization and events discussed in this case have been created from an amalgam of incidents in order to ensure total anonymity. The issues discussed in the case are highly sensitive; consequently, the authors' argue that in order to provide a full and frank discussion it is important that individuals and organizations are protected to the fullest extent. The incidents contained within the case are drawn from the authors' on-going research program focusing on leadership and management development in the Middle East.

As Metcalfe (2009) argues, the Middle East, specifically the Arab region, is growing in importance to the world economy. Increasingly, the region is being seen as a lucrative market for multinational companies. Consequently, there is a growing requirement for Arab businesses to expand into new markets in order to become part of the international economy (Metcalfe, 2009). In order for this to occur, and more importantly, for Arab businesses to be successful, there has been an increased priority placed on the provision of higher education. Thus, there has been an almost exponential increase in the establishment of higher education institutions in the Middle East (Abu Lughod, 2000). However, these higher-education institutions have confronted numerous challenges in their attempts to deliver high-quality programs. Challenges, that have arisen, primarily from, the on-going internal conflict, war, and sectarian violence, that besets the region. Therefore, a major test facing these institutions is to overcome these challenges while at the same time ensuring that their academic reputations continue to grow.

The National Public University (NPU) is situated in what could be considered one of the more high-conflict zones in the Middle East – Palestine. As with all other universities within Palestine, NPU has been established under the most trying social, political, and economic circumstances (Abu Lughod, 2000) and initially offered two year associate degrees in Arts and Sciences. The establishment of additional academic departments followed, with the Faculty of Business being established in the late 1970's. In the mid 1990's the Faculty of Graduate Studies was established. The University has grown to include Faculties of Law and Public Administration, Information Technology, Nursing and Allied Health Sciences. In addition, to the seven current faculties, NPU has eleven institutes and research centres that focus primarily on community development and research.

The University is governed by a Board of Trustees comprising prominent community, business and political leaders. This feature is a source of pride for the University as many of the country's leaders and prominent business people are graduates of the University. This willingness to contribute is common in the region, as alumni recognize that they have received a unique opportunity under somewhat trying circumstances, to contribute to the economic wellbeing of the Palestinian people.

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