

Chapter 12

Leadership Attunement

“I quit!”, Robert bellowed, as he threw his ID-badge onto Jeffrey’s desk. “No, you’re fired!”, Jeffrey shouted back. “Robert, you are impossible! You don’t listen to what I tell you. You show no respect...you didn’t even knock, you just barged in!” After a short moment of silence, Robert drew a deep breath and said in a slightly calmer voice: “Look Jeffrey, that’s the way people work around here. This isn’t Singapore. If you can’t deal with me, good luck finding another German operations manager you will be able to get along with. I’m not impossible, I just don’t like being commanded by someone who doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

As Robert stormed out the door, Jeffrey sank back in his chair fuming. He had been in Hamburg now for more than a year, setting up the new assembly plant that was going to serve the entire European market. Progress had been slow and it had frustrated Jeffrey greatly. And now this. How was he going to explain this new set back to the company directors in Singapore? Not only he was going to lose face, but so would the people who had supported his nomination as head of European operations. As only son of the company’s founder, few had been willing to question his appointment, but many would delight in his failure. Especially his retired father and uncle had carefully pushed for Jeffrey to be given this opportunity to shake off his image of spoiled playboy and gain essential foreign business experience. It was facing his father that Jeffrey dreaded most.

The project had started well a year back. After the decision had been made to move assembly activities from Malaysia to Europe, the harbor of Hamburg had been selected as plant location because of the excellent connections over water to Singapore and over rail and road to the European hinterland. Moreover, plenty of highly qualified engineers and production workers would be available as employees, it was believed. Jeffrey had identified approximately twenty experienced hands from the Malaysian site to come with him to Hamburg, to ensure that vital knowledge and skills would be transferred to the new facility. In accordance with company policy, Jeffrey was also accompanied by a seasoned company finance director, Elizabeth, and a number of Singaporean employees for the control function.

Jeffrey’s first priority after hitting the ground in Germany was to hire a local HR manager, with whom he could start recruiting people for other key posts. Claus had been responsible for HR in China for a German company earlier in his career, so had been an enthusiastic pick to join Jeffrey in bridging the cultural differences between Asia and Europe as fresh head of HR. Once in place, Claus had helped to sign up the other three members of the management team: Robert as operations manager, Ingrid to run IT and Helmut to head logistics. With this core team of six set, attention subsequently passed to taking on the next layer of personnel and getting the project started.

But irritations soon surfaced. Jeffrey set tight deadlines, was very disciplined and worked long hours, and expected the same of others, sometimes demanding evening and weekend meetings. Being slightly perfectionist, he was adamant that high quality standards should be upheld and he complained bitterly if he felt that anyone was not meeting performance norms, often showing his displeasure in public. He was distanced and direct, almost blunt, towards others, displaying a touch of arrogance, but was easily insulted if he felt that others didn’t treat him with the respect he believed he deserved. But what irked Ingrid and Robert most was that he insisted on making the final decision on even the smallest of issues. Although Jeffrey lacked any experience in building and running an assembly plant, he wanted to call all the shots himself, leaving others no decision-making authority.

Both Ingrid and Robert had tried to give him feedback, but he had shown little interest in their grievances, so Robert had elected to occasionally ignore Jeffrey and make some necessary minor decisions himself. That ‘insubordination’ had led Jeffrey to call Robert to his office, resulting in their quarrel and Robert’s dramatic exit.

As Jeffrey sat reflecting on what had just happened, Claus came in, drawn by the racket. “Jeffrey, if you want to lead these people, you’re going to have to adjust your style,” Claus ventured. “Maybe,” Jeffrey responded, “but I am who I am. And don’t forget that our Singaporean staff are also watching me, so I have to be consistent. We just need to find a new operations manager that fits with

me.” Jeffrey watched Claus’s face. “You don’t agree with me, do you?”, Jeffrey surmised. “OK Claus, so what would be your advice?”