



# **LESSONS LEARNED AND CASE STUDIES**

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# Safeguarding Psychological Safety in a High Performing Organization

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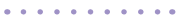


**T**he conversation of managing insider risks and organizational resilience is a timeless concept, central to leadership discussions within organizations of every type. Building awareness of such qualitative challenges as individual concerns, discomforts, and offenses enables early risk identification within an organization. Human discomfort within an organization creates a welcome environment for threat activity endangering the organization and/or its members. The discomfort that serves as a source of the risk may originate from a non-inclusive system, a broken process, or a new requirement.



**SHARI S. BOWEN**

Dr. Shari Bowen is an Assistant Professor at the United States Military Academy with over 25 years of experience in leading within organizations, to include not for profit, where leadership is voluntary. Dr. Bowen's educational areas of focus are Organizational Psychology and Organizational Leadership. Her interests lie in the effects of leadership to organizational behaviors. Dr. Bowen focuses on enhancing academia through use of case studies and quick cases to inform this generation of learners.



Early identification of such potential risk and threat vectors facilitates mitigation, however leaders may be hesitant to recognize the existence of personal discomforts among their employees. This case explores a possible source of discomfort created by an organizational leader that heightens the risk for insider threat. It further explores the human psychological processes an individual can experience as daily behaviors facilitate an environment for insider threats to thrive. While psychological safety impacts and enables dynamic environments within an organization, lack of psychological safety does the opposite, presenting risks that lead to insider threats. The following case is based on actual events, exploring how normal daily actions can present increased risk within a high functioning organization.

Professor Jackson was honored to accept a teaching position at one of the nation's most renowned universities. She cherished the opportunity to share her lifetime of knowledge and experiences to "give back" by contributing to the next generation's education. As she arrived at the new job, she was given an overview of the hierarchy and managerial structure within the organization. Management within Professor Jackson's department included the Department Chair, Department Executive Assistant (EA), Program Coordinators (PC), Program EA, and Faculty. In addition to serving as faculty, Professor Jackson had the responsibilities of serving as Program EA. Her duties and responsibilities included: program synchronization meetings, planning and resourcing, coordinating with visitors, syllabus maintenance for the program and its courses, scheduling, and managing other miscellaneous administrative functions. Professor Jackson's Program Coordinator established clear expectations and requirements.



LIDILIA AMADORGARCIA, MS

Major Lidilia AmadorGarcia is an AMEDD Captain Career Course Instructor with over 25 years of leadership experience. Major AmadorGarcia's educational areas of focus are marriage and family and leadership. Her interests lie in the effects of psychology on leadership. Major AmadorGarcia focuses on enhancing academia through mentorship, recruitment, and retention.

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After a few months on the job, things seemed to be going well. Based on informal conversations with her Program Coordinator, Professor Jackson believed the semester to be progressing as it should. The two exercised open conversation to alleviate the need for assumptions. The PC consistently made small talk and said things like, "thank you for all you do... I'm hearing great things about you." There were no complaints. The Program Coordinator led a discussion at the end of the academic semester about communication within the program and indicated that Professor Jackson was meeting expectations. Professor Jackson believed that she garnered the momentum needed to continue to excel in the next academic semester. Robbins and Judge (2019) discuss five functions of communication within an organization: management, feedback, emotional sharing, persuasion, and information exchange factors. Of the five, management serves the purpose of managing the behavior of the people involved in the communication (Robbins and Judge, 2019). Up to this point, open communication fostered transparency, feedback, and information exchange without apprehension.

One day, prior to the program synchronization meeting that Professor Jackson was to facilitate, the PC abruptly informed her in passing, that a new position had been created within the program, that it would be announced at the meeting, and the fair-



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ly new (2 months on ground) hire would facilitate the meeting. How could a new hire facilitate the meeting... “her meeting?” Her immediate feelings were confusion and rejection. Professor Jackson felt blindsided. Her immediate perception was that the new position seemed to have overlapping duties and responsibilities with her own. The value of effective communication impacts attitudes and behavior outcomes. Researchers indicate there are three major aspects to attitudes: affect, 2, 3. The affect component is most known to impact individual behaviors within an organization (Robbins and Judge, 2019). When paired with the cognitive component it leads to actions carried out in the behavioral component (Robbins and Judge, 2019). The complexity of our individual attitudes lends to a multitude of reasons why leaders within organizations should create psychological safety. It also establishes an explains how an insider threat can begin within an organization. Attitudes directly impact the level of commitment, or lack thereof (Robbins and Judge, 2019).

Rather than creating tension in the office, the professor accepted the change, despite knowing no other program had a similar position. As a Program EA, Professor Jackson felt her performance must be substandard, otherwise this new position would not have been resourced. As Professor Jackson worked to organize the experience and assign a proper perception, she openly processed her feelings. She was disappointed that her leader did not have a direct conversation with her about the gap between expectations and her performance. Professor Jackson felt professionally devalued because her leader did not discuss the advent of a new position that seemed to overlap with her published responsibilities prior to a meeting where someone else was executing her assigned tasks. Although all communication seemed to point to success, the PC’s actions seemed to indicate failure, leaving Professor Jackson confused and upset.

Professor Jackson internalized her sentiments although it bothered her. She tried to rationalize why this decision was made and assess the situation from multiple perspectives. The decision created a climate in which Professor Jackson believed she could not communicate her concerns with her supervisor. She felt isolated. Department and program supervisors had (perhaps unknowingly) created an environment where it was difficult for a valued teammate to address legitimate concerns. To not



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“rock the boat,” Professor Jackson accepted the decisions made, while considering the proper manner to address a situation that led to her own internal turmoil.

The insider threat began with communication, which started well, but was doubted once the leader actions did not align. The EA’s attitude was impacted, directly impacting her perception. This poses a problem and drives an individual to decide. Should Professor Jackson address the issue with her Program Coordinator? A decision is necessary when there is a discrepancy between the way things are and the desired end state (Robbins and Judge, 2019).

A psychologically safe environment fosters individual and holistic learning for the team (Brassey et al., 2022). Amy Edmondson introduces this idea of psychological safety, explaining psychologically safe environments make space for interpersonal risk-taking (Brassey et al., 2022). In the new environment, Professor Jackson was not comfortable she could take such risks. She now experienced anxiety about how to address the problem, ambiguity about her feelings and the truth, and apprehension to even speak about the situation. She had become conditioned to believe (based on past organizational experiences), if a boss created a new position with overlapping responsibilities, that boss does not appreciate her level of competence or performance.



Professor Jackson considered this new environment. Was the problem Professor Jackson's lack of proficiency or her boss' lack of authenticity and ability to have a difficult conversation? Angered and disappointed, she talked about the actions of work at home. She could continue accepting the climate in which she operated, or she could approach the boss with open communication.

Professor Jackson decided she needed to be courageous and work to address the uncertainties she felt. After a few weeks and hearing other leaders within the organization speak, she felt as though the department truly valued excellence. She considered the possible intentions of the PC's actions and decided it was appropriate to have a discussion. Preparing for this discussion Professor Jackson carefully considered her approach, the implications of her role in an environment where she was in the minority, and how to relate the facts as she experienced them... If this situation was not handled appropriately, or received well, it could negatively impact her job security.

Though Professor Jackson was offended by the decision to create a new position which overlapped her role, she felt she owed the organization her perspective and a true assessment. If this high performing organization truly prided themselves on cohesion and team effectiveness, as she had heard through other discussions, what was happening in this situation? There was a new teammate socialized into the new culture, who was feeling overlooked, bypassed, replaced, devalued, disrespected... Someone needed to know this.



Many high performing organizations continue to possess fertile ground for insider threats, that begin with, and can end with basic leadership skills.



Professor Jackson did not like the feelings of disgruntlement she was beginning to feel toward her leadership and even the institution, which she so highly regarded. Effective communication, active listening, clear articulation, non-emotional responses, were a few necessities to an effective conversation. Professor Jackson called for the meeting. She was relieved to know her PC's intent was not to make a change disregarding impact to the EA. The PC agreed, she could have used a better method and more effective communication to get the desired results. The important lesson was communicated. The truth Professor Jackson came to terms with, was that the intent of the leader did not alleviate the feelings she was experiencing. Though she was a little more at ease after hearing the intent of the PC yet found it important to reinforce the perception given from micro aggressive behavior. Microaggressions, took insider threat to another level. Based on Professor Jackson's demographics, there were considerations about race she thought of, that added a layer to her attribution, impacting the way she perceived the situation (Robbins and Judge, 2019). She shared the importance of awareness between leader and subordinate. She spoke about the impacts of the power dynamic in a supervisor - follower relationship, and difficulty to speak up in a new environment. The conversation was fruitful and strengthened the program. The lessons learned from the experience assisted with modifying the decision-making process immediately, strengthening the psychological safety within the department (Brassey et al., 2022).

Upton and Creese (2014) discuss organizations that have a probability of experiencing insider threats tend to minimize the impact of the threats, assuming the members of the organization are safe from internal threats and channel resources to protect from external threats (Upton et al., 2014). Extending that idea, a prevailing notion is that individuals within the organization are "teammates" and cannot or would not be harmed by each other. This case offers the opportunity to read and apply proper decision-making to an act which occurs more often than we realize daily in high performing organizations.

Human discomfort provides a risk for insider threat within an organization. The insider threat is further exacerbated when there is a lack of psychological safety, whether actual or perceived. Professor Jackson found the courage to speak up. There are individuals whose discomfort is never addressed. This case allows us to understand leaders must develop an appetite for the well-being of employees and the necessity for difficult conversations which have great bearing on these uneasy feelings. Effective communication can be difficult. Social anxiety, and cross-cultural barriers give cause for adding layers of difficulty to communication (Robbins and Judge, 2019). Effective communication and difficult conversations help promote an environment of psychological safety and open a door for employees to facilitate improved group dynamics, build effective teams, improve work motivation, and address needed changes.

Professor Jackson was in a situation where individual negative feelings about the organization could have festered and manifested in further negative behaviors. Many high performing organizations continue to possess fertile ground for insider threats, that begin with, and can end with basic leadership skills. Training leaders to increase awareness prevents employees from toiling with the attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors alone. In summary, there is a way to create an environment that decreases probability of insider threat by applying basic leadership skills. Based on the lived experience of Professor Jackson, a method that enhanced psychological safety in an already high performing organization consisted of the behaviors below. It increased the divide between insider threats and organizations:

- Leader authenticity
- Alignment of speech and actions
- Setting clear expectations
- Informal confidence checks
- Formal quarterly reviews
- A climate of open communication
- A climate that welcomes and facilitates difficult conversations with no retaliation,
- Supervisor active listening engagements with employees. ✓

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