

Lost in the Wilderness: Managing Staff in a Hybrid Working Environment

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Tags

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Setting

Samdel College (SC) is a private, four-year college located in a suburb outside a large eastern U.S. city, with 4,500 undergraduate students. The international programs office on campus manages study abroad opportunities including:

- a direct-enroll program for French language majors;
- a sizeable portfolio of programs offered through a provider collaboration;
- and four faculty-led programs in four academic disciplines.

The international programs office is led by a full-time director who oversees one full-time assistant and two part-time student employees. The director, Dr. Paige Anderson, has twelve years of experience in international education. The office assistant, Louis, is an entry-level professional and this position is his first full-time job after graduating with a bachelor's degree. Louis is unsure about his future professional goals. As an undergraduate, he participated in a week-long faculty-led session in Mexico. His main job responsibilities pertain to faculty-led group planning support, requiring him to interact regularly with professors and students.

The two student employees, Darius and Marta, studied abroad on semester programs in England and Costa Rica, and are helpful resources for student inquiries. They assist students with the program application and available scholarships.

The office staff interacts with services across campus. As needed, they refer students and professors to relevant campus offices including financial aid, academic advising, counseling center, and human resources (HR). The office is funded partly by the college's annual budget and partly by community donors who fund two part-time student positions and two study abroad scholarships per year.

Case

The director and assistant work in the office four days per week and their employment contract permits them to work remotely one day per week, usually Friday. The student employees work 12-15 hours per week and are present in the office according to their class schedules.

On a Thursday morning in December, an art history professor called the office seeking an update from Louis regarding a faculty-led session planned for the following March spring break in Italy. The professor said there were errors regarding the session price and dates on flyers posted around campus, and delays with the hotel reservations. The professor paid some of the estimated expenses upfront (due to lack of information from Louis) and was seeking reimbursement. Paige took the phone message and then texted Louis to tell him to contact the professor as soon as possible. Paige did not hear from Louis the rest of the day, and so the next day she called him to check on the situation. Louis did not answer his phone, texts, or emails throughout the day, although it was a remote working day (Friday). Student worker Darius emailed Paige to tell her the professor and two students stopped by the office, and were frustrated not to find Louis there. One student's parent called with concerns about lack of communication from the office. The professor and students threatened to cancel their participation. Paige texted and emailed Louis again, to no avail. Paige called the professor and reassured him the office would assist him the following week, once Paige had more information from Louis.

The following Monday, Louis requested a personal day off through the campus HR online system; he gave no additional information. Paige approved the request and texted Louis asking if he was ill or needed anything but received no response. This repeated on Tuesday.

After receiving no information from Louis, Paige made the decision to take over the planning of the March faculty-led session. She accessed the shared office files, confirmed the necessary hotel reservations for the confirmed students, asked the student workers to correct the flyers on campus, and talked with the finance office to get the professor his reimbursement. They completed this work in one day, while Louis remained unresponsive and absent from the office.

Sifting through files for faculty-led session information, Paige uncovered several negative evaluations from two previous sessions from professors and students. The professors had not reported any complaints to Paige but had submitted evaluations outlining their disappointment with the poor quality of Louis's work. On their evaluations, student participants reported a 60% approval rating for the sessions, and several noted that Louis was not helpful, while they praised the two student workers in the office for their assistance. Paige was embarrassed and disappointed that she did not know this information earlier.

Two days later, Louis showed up in the office and told Paige he had gone on an impromptu camping trip and did not have wi-fi or cell service. He did not apologize for his lack of communication and blamed the professor and students for being unreasonable when Paige explained what had happened the week before. Paige asked about the past evaluations, and Louis said he did not think they were important, so he never told Paige about them. Louis told Paige his work-provided laptop (containing sensitive student data) and office keys were

missing from his car, along with his access card to campus parking. He accused the student workers of stealing his items and harming his reputation with the art history professor and students who stopped by the office, which they denied. Louis shouted these accusations at them and stormed out of the office.

Upset by the situation, Paige met with the campus HR administrator. Together they decided that a formal letter of reprimand and a performance improvement plan would be created for Louis. When presented with the information, Louis disagreed and requested one week of sick leave, citing stress. He verbally accused Paige of harassment but did not submit a formal complaint to the college. He did not return to the office after the approved week off. As a result of his erratic behavior, ongoing absences, and lack of fulfillment of job responsibilities, Paige formally terminated Louis ten days after his leave ended. Upon hearing this news, Darius, the student employee, expressed interest in the now-vacant full-time position after his graduation later that semester.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- In this case, how might Louis' actions or inactions have affected the international education office's relations with campus offices, academic departments, colleagues, students, parents, and external donors? What actions can the office take to begin to repair those relationships?
- In this case, Paige wished she had been aware of the evaluations/issues earlier. What could she do differently in the office's procedures to prevent this situation from re-occurring?
- What strategies are most effective when managing staff who work remotely or in a hybrid work environment?
- What communication strategies and methods can be used to regularly contact staff members, especially in urgent situations? Are any methods inappropriate between work colleagues?
- What forms of training and expectation-setting are most successful with staff and student workers?
- How can a supervisor determine the appropriate amount of autonomy and responsibility to give to a specific role or staff member?