

## TENSION WITH SITE SUPERVISORS

**SUMMARY:** Navigating and responding to tension in a working relationship with a supervisor.

**CASE TYPE:** Practical

Practical cases offer procedures and strategies for handling situations that one might encounter in community engaged work. These cases have answers that would be considered appropriate and others that would be ill advised.

FOCUS AREAS	LEARNING OBJECTIVES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conflict Resolution</li><li>• Interpersonal Tensions</li><li>• Power Dynamics</li></ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Navigate interpersonal tensions where power dynamics and professional roles are in play</li><li>2. Navigate uncertainty within the context of professional relationships</li><li>3. Explore constructive conflict resolution and communication strategies</li><li>4. Explore the dynamic nature of professional and supervisory relationships</li></ol>

### SCENARIO

Regina and Joseph are rising seniors studying global affairs. They have both been accepted for a prestigious summer internship working with a community peace building project in Colombia. They will be helping to implement workshops and dialogue sessions based on a peace building process their university helped develop with local Colombian partners. Upon arrival, they are thrown right into an intensive training process, led by their supervisor, Maria.

Right away, Joseph and Regina can tell that the organization, and especially Maria, take this work incredibly seriously. The training process is intensive, but after a week, they feel ready to start their work and are glad for the rigorous preparation. Joseph and Maria lead three workshops their first week, with another colleague, Camilo, sitting in to assist as needed. Camilo gives them positive feedback throughout. Maria and Joseph, inspired by this feedback, start to adjust parts of the training in response to challenges and opportunities for further dialogue they have encountered during the workshop process.

The next week, Maria sits in on one of their sessions. After it concludes, she calls them into a meeting the next morning. She opens, "I need you both to recognize that what we are doing here is extremely delicate and important. It's completely unacceptable for you to be changing the structure of our work, especially when you don't understand the full context yet. You need to stick to the script and trust the process. I don't want to have to have this conversation again." Joseph and Regina are mortified, and spend the whole day revisiting each part of the workshop process to make sure it matches the guidelines. More importantly, they are not sure how to interpret the intensity of Maria's response, and how to manage their relationship with her going forward. They felt they were on the right track, until suddenly they weren't. They feel like they're walking on eggshells. Is this the way they will receive all her feedback? Will she trust them again?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever been in a situation like this (in immersive programs, professional settings, projects, teams)? How did it feel? If not, how do you imagine Regina and Joseph are feeling?
2. Think through the various perspectives:
  - a. Why might Maria have responded the way she did?
  - b. What might Regina and Joseph be thinking/feeling after their meeting with Maria?
3. It appears that Maria might not trust Regina and Joseph to do the work. If you were in their shoes, what do you think would best help to regain her trust:
  - a. In the immediate future?
  - b. For the rest of the summer experience?
  - c. If they were to continue working together into the future?
4. After Maria's rebuke, Joseph and Regina don't fully understand what went wrong or what the "full context" is that they're missing. What are their options for gaining that clarity, and what are the risks and benefits of each approach?
5. What practical next steps would you suggest Regina and Joseph take?
  - a. What structures might you suggest that would make this working relationship more effective and meaningful?
  - b. Professional and supervisory relationships are dynamic, and like all relationships, there is no single approach to optimizing them. There is always a possibility that Maria, or other supervisors, will not have an interest in forming healthier working relationships.
6. Camilo provided positive feedback that encouraged their adaptations. How should one weigh feedback from different levels of an organization, and what does this situation reveal about the risks of doing so?
7. Looking back, was the interns' decision to adapt the workshops wrong, understandable, or somewhere in between?
  - a. What factors shape your answer, and how does your answer inform how they should move forward?

## FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- **IMAGINE PERSPECTIVES.** Encourage students to imagine themselves in each role—even if it's uncomfortable or new.
- **PROVIDE PRACTICAL GUIDANCE.** For many students, a tense professional relationship might be an entirely new situation. They will need practical guidance about communication, next steps, and expectations. Feel free to provide more guidance than what might be typical in a case study setting, once you feel out their background knowledge.
- **ACKNOWLEDGE UNCERTAINTY.** Students need to know that relationships are always going to look slightly different based on context and the people involved. We can provide practical guidance and best practices, but the outcomes will depend as well on the people involved in the scenario. This uncertainty, and the ability to adapt your response based on context, is essential to building and maintaining effective working relationships.

## CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing you learned or thought about differently during this discussion?
- What do you know about your own working styles and preferences that might be important to consider before you are in a supervisory relationship in your next immersive experience? What might this imply about the structures or practices that would be important to implement or discuss with your supervisor?