



SANDRA J. SUCHER

RACHEL GORDON

Differences at Work: Sameer (A)

After my first year of business school, I spent the summer working for a boutique firm that specialized in direct marketing. I had several job opportunities and chose this firm because it had an excellent track record, an outstanding reputation, and a good, experienced team.

It was a 15-member company founded by three former HBS classmates. About half of the staff had been there for almost a decade, and the whole place had a very tight-knit, almost family-like feeling that made for a casual atmosphere where it was okay to wear shorts and flip flops.

My wife and I were Indian Muslims, so it was important to me that prayer service be understood and accepted. During my interview, it was clear that the organization was comfortable, even eager, for me to join, and everyone was extremely open and supportive about my religious needs.

However, in the middle of the summer, when the Palestinian group Hamas claimed responsibility for a double suicide attack in the Israeli city of Beersheba, it got tense at the office. I had always liked that we sat in one big room with connected desks—it had felt very intimate—but as the day progressed and we heard more about the bombing casualties on TVs located throughout the office, our differences surfaced. As people began to editorialize, I became somewhat uncomfortable. Then, after an earthquake was reported in another part of the world, someone said, “Why can’t we get one of those in the Gaza Strip?” To me, this was over the top as the comment implied, “Wipe out people in the Middle East.” The situation worsened when one of the founders later sent out a company-wide email with an offensive Arab joke.

I had kept quiet up to the point of the joke, but this email stunned me. Did my colleagues think that because I was a Muslim from India rather than from the Middle East I wouldn’t be insulted by their behavior? Normally I said what was on my mind, but it was near the end of the summer, and I hoped for a job offer after graduation. The industry was really small—everyone knew everyone—so it mattered what people at the firm thought about me. I really didn’t know what to do or even how to think about the people I had liked so much before.

Senior Lecturer Sandra J. Sucher and Research Associate Rachel Gordon, Global Research Group, prepared this case. The authors are grateful for the contributions of Professor Robin J. Ely and Robin Cherry Glass (MBA 2007). Some information has been disguised. HBS cases are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

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