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## **MISCONDUCT MISFORTUNES**

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Deepak Chopra was somewhat concerned. For once he did not know what decision to take. Normally, he was quick on the uptake and fast and accurate in his perceptions about his Sales Officers and knew when to take corrective action and in what manner. But this problem was of an unusual nature and something he was quite unprepared for.

Deepak had joined OXY Limited as a Sales Officer at Shillong almost twelve years ago. Being a good performer and smart thinker, he had got promoted to the position of Territory Manager four years ago, along with a promotion to Gauhati district. He was certainly on the fast track in the organization and had received excellent ratings in his appraisals.

Six months ago, the company had recruited fresh Sales Officers and Pradeep Guha was one of the two new Sales Officers assigned to his territory, along with Bharat Dasgupta. The entire set of trainees recruited by OXY Limited, had to undergo training for 12 months. They would be given a permanent letter, only after the authorities were convinced that the trainees were capable and dedicated to achieving the company's objectives.

The two newcomers shared the same bachelors quarters at Shillong where they were based and seemed to get along quite well although there seemed to be some healthy competition between them. In one of the monthly meetings where the Regional Business Manager was present, Bharat was seen to be constantly interrupting Pradeep and not giving him a chance to express himself. Pradeep was visibly irritated at this but let it pass. After the meeting was over, both were seen sharing a quiet moment together, exchanging notes. Both were good performers and showed the potential for becoming good Sales Officers that could project the image that the multinational pharmaceutical company OXY Limited would like to have in the market.

Deepak's impression during the training was that Bharat was a decent fellow but an opportunist. He would not mind slinging some mud at a contemporary if it meant that he would be lauded for it. In the room, he was nice to Pradeep and always treated him with respect indicating that he genuinely liked Pradeep. Pradeep too enjoyed his company and they got along fine.

During the training, all the trainees were asked to perform a number of exercises and a couple of tests were conducted every week. Every individual's hard work was assessed on the basis of the marks scored in these tests. Pradeep Guha was a good performer in most of his tests. The seniors noticed him because of his hard work and his willingness to learn. Pradeep soon became the envy of his colleagues. The superiors showed their preference to Pradeep quite publicly and this made him proud and egged him on to perform even better.

This morning, Bharat had called in from the field to the Gauhati office to share some successes for the week and to seek some decisions from Deepak about supplies to the area. In passing, Deepak had asked “How is Pradeep? I haven’t heard from him in the last ten days or so. I hope all is going well with him.”

“Pradeep is okay, but I think sir, he is going through a bad patch.” said Bharat.

“What is the matter?” asked Deepak, curious about what was happening.

“Well, nothing really, it’s just something personal. I don’t really want to spread the gossip around.” Bharat was hesitant and did not want to go any further.

After much cajoling and convincing, he was reluctant. “I don’t know sir; he is very withdrawn these days. There are some rumours floating around. I have nothing specific to say, and I don’t wish to repeat the rumours.”

“What is the rumour Bharat?” asked Deepak, more impatient than before.

“Well, the landlady was saying something to me a couple of days ago. It seems that there is a maidservant in the bungalow where we have rented the top floor. She comes in to clean our flat everyday, and she had complained to the landlady about Pradeep misbehaving with her when he was alone with her. Apparently she had complained about Pradeep trying to molest her.”

“Last week the landlady had a talk with Pradeep and told him to behave himself. She said that she had taken the two of us as tenants because we work for a good company like OXY and she did not expect this kind of behavior from the Sales Officers of this company. There was quite a showdown, with Pradeep denying the whole affair, and the maidservant screaming in quite an ugly manner.”

“The whole neighborhood came out on the road to watch the whole show. The maidservant said her reputation was tarnished and Pradeep is responsible for it. Sir, it was a really nasty scene and now the whole area is buzzing with the gossip. You know what happens in a small town, sir. Pradeep will have fingers pointing at him wherever he goes.”

Deepak was glad that he got the whole picture from Bharat. This was something that he had never tackled before. He weighed the options as to what to do. On the one hand, this was apparently a private issue about Pradeep’s personal life and had nothing to do with OXY Limited. What he did outside his work was not a concern for the company. But on the other hand, Pradeep represented the company as an officer and his conduct needed to be respectable.

A couple of days later, Deepak was filling in the six-monthly appraisal form for Pradeep and decided not to put this matter on record. After all, it was Pradeep's private matter. However, while discussing the appraisal report with the RBM, he mentioned it in passing that this kind of an incident had come to his notice and that he did not put it on record because it was a personal matter.

The RBM, however, did not respond immediately to this but also mentioned it over the phone to Sohail Khan who was the All India Sales Manager based in Mumbai. Sohail advised him to take the matter a little more seriously. After all, small town gossip spreads like wildfire and there are a few doctors in the area that might be conservative and wonder what kind of Sales Officers a reputed firm like OXY was hiring. This did not speak well of the organization and had to be taken note of.

Sohail was personally of the opinion that the whole person comes to the job and not just a pair of hands. He felt that when a Sales Officer makes a Doctor Call, he should not only be well dressed, but his character is also important. He picked up the phone and called Deepak to get more details, but all that Deepak had to give him was the gossip he had got from Bharat.

Sohail was concerned. The time was nearing for them to take a decision on confirmation of the new batch of Sales Officers and something like this might go unnoticed as it was not a part of the targets and learning goals of new Sales officers. Confirming Pradeep at this time might lead into unknown problems arising in the future, if his character was basically not good. Not confirming him would be difficult to explain, because Pradeep had met most of his goals and was performing better than most Sales Officers.

Caught in this dilemma and not wanting to take a premature decision, Sohail thought he would make a small detour on his upcoming visit to Calcutta and go to Gauhati where he planned to call Pradeep for a discussion. When he reached his hotel at Gauhati, where he had called Pradeep for a meeting, he sat on the sofa and called him in.

"Oh! Come in Pradeep. Have a seat. What will you have to drink? Tea, coffee?" said Sohail.  
"Nothing, sir. Thank You!" said a beaming Pradeep.

"How is the training going on? Are you enjoying it and at the same time learning from the training sessions?" asked Sohail, a little uncomfortable with what he was about to discuss. In his mind he was caught with how to broach the issue with Pradeep

Pradeep was a little confused now, he was uncomfortable at the way Sohail was asking him these questions. Although, they seemed routine, the tone with which Pradeep was asked these questions was laden with an undercurrent.

Pradeep answered carefully, "Fine, sir. Everything is fine."

Sohail Khan continued, “Are you clear about the rules and regulations that you have to follow as a OXY Limited employee?”

Pradeep nodded solemnly completely baffled by then at where this was going.

“Why is it then that we are receiving complaints against you over a somewhat unrelated issue, Pradeep? I hope that this is not true and it is all a rumour. I want you to tell me the truth” said Sohail, finally coming to the point.

Pradeep appeared to be a little tensed now as his hands were clenched and he had a really non-communicative expression on his face.

He replied” But Sir, if you would be kind enough to explain the matter out to me. What is the complaint about? I am perfect at my work. I am doing my job to the best of my abilities. Sir, I really have no idea about what and why someone is complaining about me.” Pradeep was on the defence.

“Pradeep we have received a complaint against you about having molested the maidservant who cleans the room you are staying in.” said Sohail, in a soft voice.

Pradeep Guha was shocked. His face had turned pale, with no expression. It took him a while to register what had just been said. Sohail was sympathetic to Pradeep and took a pause in the conversation. He could sense that Pradeep needed some time to regain his composure. After a while, he said “Pradeep I called you here as you are an employee that OXY Limited would not like to part with. You have showed tremendous potential so far. However, this is the first time such a complaint has come in and we will have to take some action to ensure that the image of the company is not compromised in any way. So I want you to take care that all of this is stopped immediately. You have to exhibit conduct that is appropriate to an officer of the company”

Pradeep, who was calm by then, retaliated “Sir, there is nothing going on. How can you believe such a ridiculous rumor? Who complained to you about this? I want to question him on his source of information. Sir, believe me there is no truth to this disgraceful piece of rumour” said a visibly agitated Pradeep. He had an inner feeling that this information must be provided to Sohail Khan by his roommate. He was furious to know that his own roommate had gone against him to show him in bad light and to further his career.

Pradeep looked for a way out of this mess, “But what proof do you have that all of what the maidservant has said is true. You cannot blame me for a rumor like this without having authentic proof first.”

Sohail said calmly and judging his words carefully, “No, you are right; we cannot say anything without any proof. But the whole neighbourhood has witnessed the scene that was created outside your house. Such kind of public washing of dirty linen is not a good reflection of our

image. It is your word against the word of the maidservant and we may never be able to prove anything, but society will always talk, and there is no smoke without fire. So, there must be some truth in the matter.”

Pradeep was a little embarrassed now and was searching for the right words. His face had paled even more. He said desperately, “But Sir, that does not prove anything. She was in the room, as she needed some money urgently. I did not ask her for a reason. This is what I get for helping someone in trouble? Was helping her wrong? Does that prove that we are having an illicit relationship, Sir?”

Sohail Khan replied, “Yes we do know that it does not prove anything. Nevertheless, as a trainee you are responsible that even such gossip is not spread. News like this should not reach the authorities, don’t you think? This could affect your promotion and your image. The company’s reputation is at stake. The people in town are going to think that ‘here is an OXY Limited man upto no good.’ The company cannot afford to have such an image. Therefore, we just wanted you to know about this, as you could be more careful in future.

The meeting ended with Pradeep denying the whole thing and asking for proof. He claimed to have been unjustly treated and pleaded that his probation not be extended. He kept bringing Sohail’s attention to his excellent track record and saying that he should be judged on the basis of his performance and not just some rumours floating around.

Sohail put the whole issue in the back of his mind and continued on his tour of the region. On the flight back to Mumbai from Calcutta, the incident with Pradeep came flooding back. Reflecting on the whole thing, he asked himself whether he had treated Pradeep unfairly. There was no proof of his having molested the maidservant, but there was the showdown that had happened on the street. The whole town of Shillong believed in the maidservant’s version and held Pradeep responsible for what had happened. Sohail felt that even if it could be proven that Pradeep was not guilty, the fact still remained that the reputation of the company had been tarnished forever. Either way, the town people would still feel that the OXY Limited employed people of dubious character.

In the meantime, Pradeep felt that the accusations about the misconduct with the maidservant were baseless and could never be proven. Feeling that he had a good case, he wrote to the Head Office HRD Manager, Jayant, asking for a fair decision on the part of the organization. In his letter, he did not deny any of the allegations, but kept asking for proof of what was being alleged. He claimed that it was the malicious intent of Bharat to spoil his reputation and that he had been set up for this event just before the six-monthly review was due and that Bharat wanted him out of the way so that he could appear to have better ratings than him. He also appealed that his probation should not be extended and that he should be treated on par with his performance ratings. The letter was received by Jayant, who immediately walked over to Sohail’s office and had a chat with him.

“So Sohail, what do you think?” said Jayant after the preliminary discussion was over. “Is Pradeep guilty or not?”

“I cannot say for sure, Jayant. There is a niggling doubt in my mind because Pradeep never denied the allegations. He only asked for proof of what I was saying, knowing fully well that I did not have any proof. All we have on record is the showdown incident where the fight between the landlady and Pradeep was held in the open street with many witnesses. I also phoned the landlady on my visit to Gauhati, and she was still full of accusations for Pradeep. I feel that there is no smoke without fire, and there must be something to her accusations. But I can’t prove anything.” Sohail said trying to think through the whole issue.

“Also, I feel that this boy, Pradeep is a good performer and we just need to rein him in and see that he does not go wild. After all, he is only human. It could be possible that his basic nature is wild and he could turn out to be a womanizer. If he understands that this kind of behaviour is not acceptable at OXY and mends his ways, I think we will have retained a high performer.”

After lengthy discussions between Sohail and Jayant, it was decided that Pradeep should be transferred to a new location (Gauhati) and be given a fresh start. It was also decided to withhold all his incentive payments and to extend his probation by six months. At the end of this period, his behaviour would be reviewed and he would be confirmed if there were no further untoward incidents and provided his performance was as per expectations.

Pradeep was informed about his transfer to Gauhati over the phone, and agreed although a bit reluctantly. He still said that the company should judge him based on his performance and not on the basis of some allegations that could not be proven.

After probation of 6 months he had actually proved his capabilities to the seniors. There were no more complaints about his misconduct. This was known as they had given him his letter confirming him as a permanent employee of OXY Limited. His incentives were also given to him. The seniors were then really happy with the decision they had taken. They all, after a few days, had forgotten about Pradeep’s past history and were interested in his performance. Even Pradeep had forgotten and left all his past frustrations behind and was enjoying his work. He had proved himself as a good OXY Limited employee.

### **Questions**

1. Do you think OXY Limited did the right thing by transferring Pradeep out of Shillong?
2. Should Pradeep have cleared his name by bringing the issue out in the open?
3. Did Bharat have vested interests in spoiling Pradeep’s reputation?
4. Can OXY Limited safely assume that Pradeep will never make such a mistake again?
5. How would you have reacted if you were in Pradeep’s shoes?
6. Would you have done anything differently if you were Sohail?
7. Should concerned managers get involved in the personal affairs of an employee?

