

Crossing the Line at Work¹

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Fernanda is a public servant pursuing a career as a Specialist in Public Policy and Government Management (EPPGG) and a project manager in the Executive Department of the Anti-Corruption Ministry. She held a position in the DAS 101.4 commission. After three years in management, she requested a paid leave to start her doctoral studies at Harvard University, and she received great deal of support from her superiors. The content of the program and research activities to be developed were consistent with her abilities, which generated great expectations among the team. Her experience abroad was expected to bring innovative ideas to the Ministry. Fernanda was very dedicated to her studies, and her doctoral thesis was awarded the best research study by any college students that year. Her work was internationally recognized by other universities and research centers. Although she liked studying abroad and the invitations to stay in the United States as a doctorate professor, she was eager to return to Brazil and be able to apply her new knowledge to projects developed by the Ministry. When Fernanda returned to work, she was surprised by the changes in her work place. The chiefs of the Anti-Corruption Ministry had been replaced, including the executive secretary, her immediate superior. Despite these changes, she was reappointed to her former position and soon began to map out the areas in which she could implement the innovative projects with which she had contact during her training period.

The area in which Fernanda found the best chance of improvement was the Division Against Overbilling of Public Work (Desop). She intended to implement a unified system that would provide a quick and non-bureaucratic exchange of information between the Ministry and

the Federal Court of Accounts (TCU), which would greatly facilitate attending to cases. However, her boss showed a systematic and unjustified opposition to her ideas. He even mocked her on several occasions in front of colleagues and subordinates. When she presented the cooperation project with TCU, she received the following reply: “This girl thinks that the TCU will collaborate. You need much more than a course abroad to be a boss around here.”

Despite this, Fernanda tried not to be shaken and decided to focus her attention on another project. However, there were no signs of improvement. Obstacles were created as a justification for not implementing her projects. Fernanda felt helpless because she could not control the variables that compromised the achievement of the results set for her management. Her duties were gradually withdrawn, resulting in the loss of her position. Fernanda had always seen work as a central part of her life. She felt that her knowledge threatened the leadership of her immediate boss and that the fact that she was a woman bothered him even more. Work lost its meaning for her, which also affected other parts of her life. She became depressed, and it worsened over the months. She was reluctant to leave home for her job, but made a great effort to not be absent and give more reasons for the boss to scold her again. Her work team decided to adopt a pact of silence, despite the suffering of their colleague. The prevailing thought of the team was: “It is not my problem and I also do not want to get involved to avoid problems.” Fernanda then decided to publish a letter denouncing her situation on the intranet and accusing the executive secretary of moral harassment. This letter wasn’t very well received by most servants and nobody expressed any opinion, because everyone was afraid of retaliation.

The human resources department was aware of the problem, but decided to leave the “wound” to be dealt with at another time, and kept its focus on other internal affairs.

The situation was reported to the Ethics Committee of the Ministry, which did not take the complaint further, understanding that the claim had no motive. Fernanda was desperate. She forwarded the letter to the regional agency for women’s protection, which, due to bureaucratic delays or not giving much attention to the demands, took too long to reply.

One year later, Fernanda could not stand that situation anymore and committed suicide in her workroom.

Questions for debate:

- What is moral harassment? What are its main characteristics?
- How does the process of moral harassment occur? What tactics does the harasser use?
 - What is the profile of harassers and victims?
 - What are the consequences of moral harassment?
 - What is the role of organizations in cases of harassment to their employees?
 - How do government agencies deal with moral harassment? Which areas should get involved on this subject in government institutions? Are they sufficiently prepared to forward or solve this problem?
- If you were in Fernanda's shoes, what would you do?

Notes

- 1 The case was initially developed during the 3rd Workshop on Case Study Methodology, carried out by the National School of Public Administration (ENAP) in October of 2011. It is based on a true event.
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