

Kindness or harassment: conflicts of gender and race in work relationships¹

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With Teaching Note

Fernando is the head of the Budget, Finance and Accounting sector of the Department of Projects for the Ministry of Strategic Policies. After several medical examinations, his doctor informed him that his health condition requires surgical intervention with a long postoperative period. Fernando is reluctant to schedule surgery because he thinks that it's not a good time to be away from the Ministry, as his sector is being modernized. A new database has been recently installed. He is especially concerned about the monthly reports, which cannot be delayed, because other sectors depend on them. However, as his own doctor said, his health cannot wait.

The only reason Fernando is not even more worried is because the team he heads is close-knit. Even Ricardo, the last to join the group, is already at ease with his colleagues. Moreover, Fernando trusts a lot in Carla, the civil servant who will take the lead in his absence. Although she had never headed a team for such an extensive period, she has demonstrated technical competence and ability to manage possible problems on several occasions.

Carla is the oldest employee of the sector and the only person who has, beyond graduation, a course in Specialization in Judicial Expertise

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of Labor Calculation, pros that allowed her to take over as deputy head. Along with the position, Carla takes on the challenge of keeping the sector's activities up to date, especially the closing reports of the month - not an easy task, due to the slowing of the sector's output after changing the database. During this phase of adaptation, there have been some operational questions and technical configuration issues.

The newest member of the team is also the most outgoing and playful. Ricardo is considered the "promoter" of the Budget sector, informally elected to organize internal and external social events for the sector. Among other things, he has a habit of telling jokes and nicknaming colleagues. He was the one who nicknamed Carla "mulata exportação" (export-type mulatta). After analyzing the progress of the service and time left for its completion, Carla calls a meeting with the sector and sets out the need to extend working hours. She raises the possibility of a rotating schedule among employees to speed up the completion of the reports. Ricardo, who uses IT tools with ease and has been extremely helpful in solving some of the new system's problems, offers to stay with Carla after hours to complete the work for the month. He said he had no important appointments for this period, thus avoiding a shift with other employees.

After office hours, Ricardo and Carla remained at work. Ricardo has always paid a lot of attention to her comments on the things she likes. He starts to bring candies and snacks followed by glances and compliments. After talking to some of his colleagues on the team, Ricardo records a CD with Carla's favorite songs to give her. On Friday, Ricardo shows up with tickets to a jazz concert at a private place. Carla refuses the invitation, despite the insistence of her coworker. The following week, the glances and compliments continue, even during working hours. Increasingly embarrassed and uncomfortable with the situation, Carla starts to avoid any relaxed conversation in which Ricardo is present, speaking to him only when professionally unavoidable.

On the night of closure of the reports, Ricardo starts hitting on her again. When Ricardo sees no reciprocity from Carla, he loses control and pulls the boss's arm, kissing her against her will. Carla takes a few seconds to react and push Ricardo away. He holds her by force, immobilizing her in his arms. When he finally lets her go, she is very angry and begins to argue with Ricardo, who acts insulted and states that she wanted the kiss. He then makes up a story, saying that even the other employees in the sector had noticed that Carla was flirting with him. Still stunned by the whole situation and not knowing how to proceed, Carla opts for discretion and doesn't say anything the next day. Annoyed at the repeated rejections, Ricardo starts to disparage her among colleagues from the same sector and even from other sectors, given his extensive relationship

network. After work, in informal gatherings among colleagues of the Ministry, he started to spread that Carla is not competent to take on the leadership position and that she successfully completed the reports due to his commitment, saying he would have done almost everything himself. He states that her credentials do not justify her position as a deputy head and suggests the possibility that Carla and Fernando are having an affair, alleging this would be the real reason for her career rise. After all, in his words: “Swinging the hips is what that kind of mulatta knows how to do well.” Every time Ricardo makes this comment, he starts humming a samba and illustrates the scene swinging his hips.

Carla feels increasingly distant from the team she temporarily heads; she is no longer invited to the informal outside events and realizes that conversation between colleagues changes subject or ends with her arrival. Coincidentally or not, some of the colleagues who used to have lunch with her changed their schedules. Her discomfort in Ricardo’s presence only added to the lack of openness from most colleagues, causing Carla to avoid relaxed moments with the team and spend all of her time in her office, only leaving to deal with essential matters. The distance between Carla and her team has been reaffirmed over the days, and some even say that the leadership went to her head. Gradually, her disgust with the work environment is reflected in her home and Carla starts to have crying fits and discouragement for her everyday activities. Maria, Carla’s closest colleague in the sector, had been noticing changes in her behavior and mood since the end of the first month. Maria tried to talk to her, but Carla always claimed personal reasons.

Shortly before the return of Fernando, during her visible crisis, Maria offers to help. Carla could not take it anymore and requested to keep it a secret. She explains about Ricardo hitting on her and the subsequent defamation. When Fernando returns to work, he finds a very unpleasant environment and notices an unfriendly atmosphere between Carla and most of the group, and a completely destabilized team. Gradually, he becomes aware of the facts through the rumors.