

Supermarket from Hell

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Introduction

This paper gives a personal account of being a misfit in an organisation as told by Kris. It happened many years ago yet it is totally fresh in her mind. Here Kris relates what happened when she graduated and entered the world of work. The names of those involved have been changed.

My story

I graduated in 1990 with a degree in Business Studies, a couple of years' work experience and no real clear idea of where to go next. I had moved to the North West of England and my first priority was to find a job. I applied for several graduate jobs including one as a sales rep with a large confectionery manufacturer. I must admit that I was attracted by the company car, the generous salary and the perks that accompanied the job rather than any overwhelming desire to work in the confectionery sector or to be a sales rep. I went for an interview and only 24 hours later, found a letter on the doormat informing me that I had been rejected but that I was welcome to 'phone for some feedback. When I spoke to the interviewer, he told me in no uncertain terms that I was completely wrong for the job. Had I thought about spending my days alone in my (swanky, new) company car, travelling from one retailer to the next? Actually... no. How would I feel checking into hotels at night and having only my laptop and room service for company? Mmmm, not good. He didn't need to go on. I hadn't thought the job through at all and had only considered the peripheral benefits rather than the job itself.

Another job application that I had submitted was for 'The Supermarket', a large supermarket chain who were looking for management trainees. I was invited for interview here too and duly went along in my navy interview suit with my notes and questions neatly prepared. From the start, the interview was somewhat strange. The first thing I was asked was whether I preferred to be called by my first name or by my middle name and I said that I preferred my first name, Kristine or Kris. "OK Kate" said Caroline, the Regional HR Director, "let's start the interview". I was distracted: had I inadvertently said Kate or perhaps the interviewer was hard of hearing and had misheard my name? The other odd thing was that I had difficulty getting a word in edgeways. The two interviewers chatted away, telling me about the company and also that they had a new specialism in their management training scheme. As well as general management trainees, they were now also looking for people who would be interested in being HR specialists who would, in addition to the management training programme have the opportunity to gain additional skills. I think that I must have vaguely nodded at this point as within a day or two I had been offered a job.

I was asked to come to one of The Supermarket's big stores on my first day where, I was assured, I would meet the other new management trainees in the North West.

Sure enough, once I was in the canteen of the shop, I met several other young, new graduates, a couple of whom, Alison and Constance, had also been taken on as HR management trainees. The three of us were immediately segregated from the other trainees and taken to a windowless office where a woman with a nasty crimplene suit covered in dog hairs and a name badge professing to be an HR Manager, looked us over and told us that we needn't think that we were clever just because we had degrees. She asked us for our dress sizes as we too would be given nasty crimplene suits and 'blouses' with cravats. "Oh, and by the way, you need to wear American tan tights. It's part of the uniform." The thought of that uniform, its A-line skirt, too-short sleeves and the hideous cravat still fills me with dread. It soon became clear that the other management trainees were not required to wear the uniform. Instead they were allowed to wear navy blue suits, bought in proper shops that normal people frequent. It also became clear that the three HR management trainees were following a completely different training programme and that we were in fact expected to be the next generation of HR Managers. In the past, HR Managers had generally been till staff who had shown a bit of gumption, intelligence and initiative and were promoted, after years of hard work and apprenticeship, to the dizzy heights of the store's management team.

The work was hard: the long hours, demanding customers, weekend working and night shifts soon took their toll. On top of that, we had to learn the language and business of food retailing attend training courses and work with outdated systems. For example, all the store employees' wages were calculated manually so that every Friday, I would sit hunched over reams of paper, poring over figures to calculate how many hours each of the various 300 full and part time staff had worked. Not easy when absence rates are high and shift patterns change daily. We were also heavily involved in new store opening projects, interviewing and training hundreds of people.

I worked hard and managed to get to grips with the job but I wasn't happy. The Supermarket expected me, Alison and Constance to work hard without question, perhaps as HR Managers had done in the past. We were different. We were young and had degrees. We had been taught to question 'the way things are done around here' and had found much to be wanting. We wanted to inject our ideas, to make an impact. We didn't want to wear American tan tights (who would?).

In short, there were many reasons why I did not feel that I belonged at The Supermarket: the unsociable hours, the uniform, the lack of input, the lack of status as compared to other management trainees and the fact that the existing group of HR Managers were clearly worried about losing their jobs. When we spent 9 weeks together running a new store opening recruitment campaign in Newcastle upon Tyne, Alison, Constance and I spent many evenings moaning and wondering how we'd managed to get ourselves into this mess.

Constance was in fact so fed up with the whole situation that she made no attempt to cover up her feelings. She was a trained counsellor and gave feedback to the Regional Director to say how her skills and knowledge weren't being used. She voiced her opinion in meetings, hoping to change the status quo. She used best practice in her HR practice rather than necessarily following company procedures. In short, Constance saw herself as an HR professional and she was going to act accordingly.

Alison and I took a rather different approach. Although we were happy to moan in private, we had dealt with enough disciplinaries over the months to realise that speaking out about the way in which business was done tended to land people in deep trouble. We soon figured out that keeping your head down and delivering good work on time was the best way through. The regional HR Director, an odious woman called Caroline, was so impressed with my work that she regularly claimed it as her own. However, with the lack of computerisation, much of it was handwritten and a couple of store managers who had worked with me told me that this was happening, otherwise I would have been none the wiser.

The beginning of the end came one day when Constance, Alison and I were at a meeting with the Regional Director, the Regional HR Director and other high powered execs from The Supermarket. During the meeting, Constance made a comment about the lack of computerisation. At the coffee break, Caroline took Constance to another room for a private chat. That was the last we saw of her at work. No mention was made of her when we returned to the meeting and we daren't asked what had happened. When Alison and I went to her house later, Constance told us that she had been told to leave and that if she didn't, Caroline would find evidence of gross misconduct and that she would be fired. Constance obviously did not want to risk having a blot on her record and left of her own accord.

I knew that I also had to go. I was desperately unhappy. It took months, but I finally saw a job advertised which looked ideal. It was at a University and would use all of my skills. I applied and was offered an interview. However, at The Supermarket we were starting another new store opening project and we weren't allowed to take any leave, so I had to think of a way of getting to the interview. I eventually came up with the idea of 'breaking my arm', enlisting the help of a friend who worked in a hospital to bring home plaster of Paris bandages so that we could create a cast. I 'phoned up Caroline, telling her how I had fallen and had ended up in hospital, that I couldn't drive and that I would therefore have to have the day off. I was terrified that she would somehow know what I was up to. I went to the University interview in the city centre. I was convinced that someone would see me. The interview was in two parts: a presentation and the interview itself with a long gap in between. I sat in a coffee shop, hiding behind a newspaper. The interview nerves and the fear of being caught combined to make me feel sick. Luckily I wasn't caught and I was offered the job, so I was finally able to escape.

The last thing I did at The Supermarket was an exit interview. Caroline was on holiday so another regional HR Director was flown in because they wanted to know why on earth their trainees would want to leave. She asked why I wanted to go and I reeled off a list of the more objective reasons that I had. I then added that my home life was suffering – I wasn't seeing much of my partner or my friends because of all of the time away from home, the long hours and the weekend working that the job involved. "Well" she said "my husband said to me, 'it's The Supermarket or me' and I chose The Supermarket!" It wasn't a choice that I was prepared to make.

I learned much from the experience at The Supermarket. I not only got a whole range of HR skills, I also learned that I need certain things in a job: respect, autonomy, the chance to be creative, belonging to a group and also the chance to get away from it and have time with my friends and family. I also realised that not all interviewers are

clear what they are looking for. The interviewer from the confectionery company had been clear that he was looking for people with certain personality traits and the ability to spend time alone. I had naively thought that other interviewers would be able to accurately assess whether or not I was right for their job. I was wrong!

Questions for Discussion

Kris' story will no doubt be familiar to many people. One interesting aspect of this story is that it seems that Kris managed to hide her feelings of misfit. We get clues that The Supermarket was happy with her work, so much so that the HR Director claimed Kris' work as her own! The organisation therefore does not see Kris as a misfit: they see a hardworking individual who is keeping her head down and who is not being difficult, unlike Constance. Misfit is therefore not always two sided. It is not always obvious.

- Kris felt like a misfit at work, but which factors contributed to this?
- How did Kris choose to deal with her feelings of misfit?
- What other courses of action could Kris have taken?
- What could The Supermarket have done to try and lessen the chances of recruiting a misfit?