

Jim Shannon
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Outer Experience

My agency within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) works very closely with the port inspectors for Customs Border Protection (CBP), a division of the new Department of Homeland Security. CBP does most of the cargo inspections, while my agency within the USDA targets specific companies who may be trying to import prohibited agricultural commodities. A while ago, USDA found out that CBP had given the “OK” for a particular importation to clear customs and enter commerce. This importation happened to contain prohibited agricultural material. USDA found out about the cargo release and was able to quickly turn the shipment around before it reached the warehouse of the intended recipient.

When my supervisor found out about the incident, he immediately notified his superiors within USDA and copied his message to their counterparts in CBP. Needless to say, the local CBP officials were furious that their mistake had been broadcast so publicly to an outside agency as well as to their superiors. As a result, the local CBP officials severely restricted USDA's access to incoming cargo, thereby limiting the ability of my colleagues and me—including my supervisor—to do our jobs. My supervisor seemed to feel proud that he had exposed a wrongdoing by another organization, yet was also angry that access to the ports had been restricted.

This scenario surprised my coworkers and me a bit. We knew that our supervisor had a fairly high opinion of himself and loved to be proved right (He had long posited that CBP often failed to adequately prevent illegal importations of agricultural commodities). However, we also

know that he took pride in building relationships between different organizations and normally conducted himself in a tactful manner. Here, though, an error in communication resulted in a restriction on our scope of work.

Reflections and generalizations of the outer experience

Communication dominates as the organizational process of this scenario, specifically the communication between groups. J.R. Gordon, in *Organizational Behavior* (1990) as presented in class, outlines six barriers to effective communication between groups. While nearly all apply in this case, aggrandizing power to emphasize one group's goals and needs, the use of threats, and one group seeking to exploit or isolate the other group are the largest barriers in this case.

When my supervisor learned of the error by CBP, he immediately tried to gain power and the upper hand by getting the attention of those of greater authority. Local CBP officials pushed back by exercising their power to restrict access of my supervisor and his subordinates to cargo; thereby exercising power over our ability to conduct normal work duties. USDA and CBP used threatening language and behaviors during the incident; and, in so doing, both groups tried to exploit the weakness of the other. USDA tried to exploit the fact that CBP did not have the proper knowledge to regulate agricultural commodities, and CBP exploited the fact that USDA did not have independent access to incoming cargo.

The presence of these barriers tells us a little about the behavior of both organizations. The USDA, as expressed through my supervisor's actions, behaves like a child that cannot have its own way. Limited in the power to conduct work independent of CBP, USDA feels inferior and frustrated. Instead of building a relationship with CBP that fosters greater trust that will allow for an eventual delegation of power, USDA attempts to build itself up by exposing the

failures of others. CBP, expressed through the actions of local officials, acts as a resentful parent punishing a snooty teenager that knows more than the parent. Instead of increasing organizational effectiveness of CBP by using USDA as an interactive tool to build up the knowledge base of the organization, CBP acts to limit participation of the USDA.

Inner Experience

When learning of our group's restricted access to cargo inspection areas, I immediately felt that an injustice had been done to us and me personally. At first I thought it had been an arbitrary decision by CBP; however, my feelings changed when I learned the role my supervisor played. I felt angry with my supervisor for making such an obvious mistake and my respect for him lessened considerably. It surprised me that he would so obviously claim the moral high ground, likely knowing that work relationships with CBP would suffer in the future. I also felt a reduced sense of importance and a greater sensation of helplessness.

Without any actions of my own, I had my ability to perform my assigned duties reduced due to poor communication skills on behalf of my supervisor. There was little to nothing I could do to resolve the situation and I resented that fact. The whole experience reinforced the notion that this job leaves me feeling restrained, bored and even slightly inadequate. Although not happy with the situation, I do not think it altered the quality of my work (but certainly my drive to conduct work). I am lucky enough to have a group of coworkers with whom I can relate to on subjects such as this. We experienced this situation together, and our shared dissatisfaction toward my supervisor and our jobs in general did a little bit to strengthen work relationships.

Reflections and generalizations of the inner experience

Like I said previously, I had always known my supervisor held a high opinion of himself and looked for opportunities to showcase it. Even so, I am surprised at the level of contempt I experienced toward him. I seem to be able to work and feel friendly toward people who might have some character traits I do not normally agree with. But when those character traits affect my ability to do my job, I find it much harder to maintain that friendly relationship. I can accept people for who they are superficially, but can come to easily dislike them as soon as their actions involve me.

I am also amused at how the experience increased the bond between me and my coworkers. We shared our misery and contempt together. I enjoy focusing a certain amount of derision on those who might deserve it and do not mind reveling in the process with coworkers. However, I need to be careful that the reveling does not get out of hand. My supervisor deserved to be secretly despised by his subordinates for a time, but he does not deserve it forever. I have to remember that he supports all of us when we make tough regulatory decisions and always provides helpful answers and guidance when requested. He made a mistake and will make similar mistakes in the future. I have to accept these facts and not let them discourage my work ethic too significantly. While having fun with my coworkers at my supervisor's expense is a guilty pleasure that builds a little bit of morale after a demoralizing incident, continuing to wallow in it will only lead to negative outcomes.