

We are not “like a family” at work

AFIA IBNAT

Many organisations these days boast about treating their employees like family. At first, this seems like a fruitful practice that encourages a close knit bond between employees and employers.

Since we spend a major part of our lives around our co-workers, it's only natural that we come to build close relationships with them. However, the line between professional and personal lives can often get blurry. If we casually compare our co-workers and bosses to family, our brains start associating certain familial traits with them that should not be normal in a transactional professional environment.

When we think about family, we envision selfless sacrifices, unshakeable loyalty, and meeting the needs of our family members while putting our own ones aside. As you can imagine, these familial notions can subconsciously bleed into the workplace if the prevalent language includes phrases such as “We're all family here.” You may unwittingly start viewing your boss as a familial authority figure in your life rather than a professional mentor.

Why is this detrimental? It is much easier to rebel against traditional authority, yet significantly more difficult when the authority is your “family”. You'll have a harder time advocating for yourself and become more likely to put up with unrea-



sonable expectations from your employer, while inadvertently making yourself more vulnerable to burnout, exploitation and job dissatisfaction. You may even start overlooking certain things that bother you in the workplace and have trouble standing up for yourself.

The problem is not limited to just formal companies either. With the rise of youth organisations and clubs, many

school and university students end up volunteering their time, energy and effort to them. While this can be a great opportunity for portfolio building, it also opens up the sinister gates of exploitation to people who have not yet learned to identify subtle yet damaging norms that create an environment of pressure and coercion.

You may be asked to work unreasonable hours and take on more than you

can handle on your plate, all under the guise of a family culture where putting the organisation's needs above your own is the status quo. What's more is that it will seem counterintuitive to protest when the narrative is set in a familial context – you yourself will try to justify your own exploitation.

Does this mean that employers should draw lines in the sand and start being rude to their employees? Not at all. However, it is important to acknowledge that our relationship with our work is transactional no matter how passionate we are about our jobs.

We are improving our portfolios, getting monetary compensation, or both, in return for our efforts. Our workplaces should be respectful communities centred on shared values, rather than a pseudo-family that expects us to conform to a culture that asks us to give more than we signed up for.

Afia Ibnat thinks it's a tragedy that she eats dragon fruits, yet still remains a human. Tell her about more tragedies at afiaibnat09@gmail.com

What not to tell someone who just quit their job

SHIMIN MUSHSHARAT

Quitting my previous job was a tough decision. The questions and comments I received for this were harrowing, to say the least. While they may have come from a place of concern, the good intention did nothing to lessen my apprehension. It only added to the pressure I felt after making such a big decision.

Here's a list of things better left unsaid to someone who just quit their job. Truth be told, if they wanted to talk about it, they would have told you already.

WHAT HAPPENED? WHY DID YOU QUIT?

There can be multitudes of reasons for leaving (e.g. workload, remuneration, and environment). It is also possible that the person had different goals in mind that would not align with the pathway this workplace had to offer. If we assume that something unfavourable did happen, they are probably not ready to speak about it at this time. Additionally, it is an impolite question to ask.

WHERE ARE YOU JOINING? GOOD LUCK WITH YOUR NEW JOB!

Do not assume that they have been offered a different, (even worse: better) job. The idea of constantly pushing forward, doing something bigger and better sounds appealing in theory. In reality, it is not sustainable. It can eat away your productivity, lead to a burnout and affect your physical and mental health. As for the answer, maybe they have not decided yet.

ARE YOU MOVING BACK TO YOUR HOMETOWN?

Whatever the answer, this question is just plain rude. It's condescending, pointless, and distressing to respond to. Say nothing instead. That is much better.



WOULD YOU BE INTERESTED IN CREATING FREE CONTENT FOR MY START-UP?

No, the answer is always no. It often comes from new startups. It is disrespectful to ask someone to offer their time, energy and creativity for free. If you cannot pay for a service, try to do it yourself or keep it aside for the moment.

ANYTHING RELATED TO MONEY

I will never not find this one shocking. I was sometimes asked about money while I was working. The questions came from acquaintances and strangers and even from a doctor, once. Money is a sensitive topic for most people. Asking someone about their personal finances is not a good idea and it is an even worse idea when they just quit.

These questions are inappropriate in various degrees. They make people feel discouraged and result in residual resentment.

Allow me to give you a guide to the things you can say to them instead.

“HOW ARE YOU DOING NOW?”

“Would you like to talk about it? I am here to listen.”

“You did a great job there. I'm sure you will do amazing in the future as well.”

The rule of thumb here is to be kind and hold space for them to share what they want.

Shimin reads everything she can find, talks to cats, and writes a lot of letters. Send her a book at shim.mush@gmail.com

Taking a Second Chance at Education

RAYA MEHNAZ

“The pandemic started just days before my HSC. It was hard for me to decide whether I should study for the HSC or the admission test,” reflects Samira Mortuza*, a medical college aspirant studying for the second-time admission tests this year, on her first admission cycle.

She explains, “Despite everything, I never expected to not get the chance to go to medical college. I thought I almost made it because I gave my best effort. Perhaps there was something lacking, perhaps it was luck.”

Samira's story is one of many. Every year, students from all over the country join the grueling battle to get admitted into their desired institutions for their undergraduate studies. In Bangladesh, there's very limited infrastructure to accommodate so many students. In this cutthroat environment, dreams get shattered for momentary mistakes, especially considering the fact that for many institutions, students can only sit for the admissions test only once.

In most public universities, admission candidates are made of students who passed the HSC and equivalent examination of that past year. However, most public universities until 2015 allowed HSC and equivalent graduates from two years prior, creating opportunities for students to appear in the exam for a second time. The group of second-time admission candidates are made of those who did not get admitted to a university or those who got into the university but not into their desired subject – who want to compete once more for a seat with the first-time candidates.

There are good reasons why most public universities, most notably the University of Dhaka (DU), have stopped providing second-time opportunities. Reasons range from administrative complications to the ensuing seat vacuum that follows when previously admitted students leave their institutions after getting admitted to a desired university or a desired subject. These reasons all contribute to seat mismanagement in universities that already had very limited seats, which is why most public universities have stopped offering this opportunity.

However, despite the stigma, the lack of second chances in admissions has its own dire implications. After all, aren't admissions hard enough as it is without us putting these hypothetical no-take-back signs on a student's academic future?

Salma Anika, a second-time candidate who got admitted to DU's Department of Applied Chemistry in 2015, shares, “There

are certain expectations people have about a student. When you cannot avail that, and you try for the second time, you feel this pressure on you. Everybody wants to know that you got a second chance in your struggle, but nobody wants to understand why it didn't happen the first time.”

Now finishing her Master's in Applied Chemistry at DU, Salma recalls her admission woes from the first time around, “My father passed away two weeks before my HSC results. I was so traumatised that, for a while, I could neither study nor prepare for the admission. Understandably, I couldn't succeed.

When you have a mental breakdown the way I had, you cannot participate in that exhausting race anymore, because everyone

when it comes to higher education. Public universities, with their low-cost and often high-quality educational facilities, act as oases for these students. The fact that they have increasingly stopped allowing second-time candidates makes things doubly difficult for these already struggling students.

“I remember once for my second-time admission, I didn't have enough money to fill out admission test forms, nor could I get admitted to coaching centres. My father fell sick before my first admission cycle and our family was understandably struggling during those times. I could finally start my preparation after my friends and high school teachers came forward to help,” recalls Faiyaz Mahi, a third-year Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP) student who got into on his second try in 2020, about navigating the financial constraints.

“In fact, I lived alone in Bogura when preparing for my second-time admissions, as my father was receiving medical treatment in Dhaka. When I visited my father in hospital, I used to study in front of his dialysis room because I had to make use of the opportunity. I had to be resilient

hind my back. These things end up being unbelievably hurtful,” she shares.

But Samira believes that it's important to study for something we're passionate about, “I know what it feels like to not get what you want. I know how much passion matters. So, there is absolutely no shame in trying again.”

Similarly, Taskin Tanha reflects on her second-time admission test. She had enrolled in Khulna University's (KU) Department of Sociology in 2019 after the first admission test. Taskin says, “I got a chance to study Sociology, but I couldn't relate with the subject. I felt I wouldn't be able to do anything career-wise in it. I was also living outside of Dhaka, where I grew up, in an environment I couldn't cope in. I remember crying every day because it got so incredibly hard for me.”

Taskin studies International Relations at BUP now, something she always wanted to study. She says, “I used to feel guilty thinking I wasted a seat in my previous university. In a way, didn't I break someone else's dream?”

However, she clarifies how important it is to study what we're passionate about, “Our education system is – university first, subject later. But now I know that choice of subject matters so much more.”

When asked if the second admission test gave her any unfair advantages as most of the discourse on is centred on this issue, she vehemently disagrees. “No-body studies the entire year. Even if there's any extra advantages, it gets lost in social and familial pressures. You constantly feel lost and unsure of your place and your worth,” she defends.

Likewise, Ibrahim Medical College student Parsha Saiyara Ankita, says there are no extra advantages. Speaking from her own experience, she explains, “There's advantage in knowing the environment and experiencing the exam beforehand, but otherwise, you can't predict questions or succeed in the exams. Medical admissions also deduct 5 marks for appearing in the exams for the second time, so the advantages that you get from time, gets neutralised.”

When considering these perspectives, it stands to reason why second chances, or lack thereof, are vital in our admissions struggle. In a system where one mistake makes or breaks a student's entire future, it seems almost too cruel to take away the option to even try again. Our human potential cannot be distinguished in 2 hours of examination, nor can it be understood.

As said best by Faiyaz, “There can be people who were unlucky like me, or those who had a misfortune on the day of the exam. When making the decision to take away a second chance, what are we subjecting those people to?”

This is a question universities around the country need to contemplate.

*Names have been changed for privacy

Find Raya at fb.com/raya.mehnaz



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