# Cases for Small Group Discussion

**Case 10–1. Jumping to Conclusions**

Julie D’Souza was a recent hire of Mantle Data, Inc. She was distressed as she walked toward the office of her supervisor. She had experienced some strange interactions with one of her male coworkers and felt compelled to say something about it.

Dana Kilpatrick, her supervisor, had an open-door policy. Julie knocked on her door and said, “Do you have a few minutes?”

“Sure, Julie. Come on in,” said Dana. “What’s on your mind?”

“I think one of my coworkers is hitting on me, or something. It’s Rick—when I pass him in the hallway he says, ‘Whoo!,’ and he turns his head and looks at my backside. Oh, and the other day, he growled at me in the lounge. And he clicks his tongue . . .” Julie added.

“OK, that is strange,” Dana agreed. “Have you told him it makes you uncomfortable?”

“Well no, I was hoping you could give me some advice about how to handle this. I've never had a guy act like this towards me before.” Julie said.

“Let me talk to the divisional manager,” replied Dana. “He knows Rick, and I think he hired him years ago. I’ll see what he says.”

“OK, thank you,” Julie said as she left the office.

About two hours later, Dana met with the divisional manager, Rob Watkins. Rob cleared things up rather succinctly; he explained that Rick had a very mild form of Asperger’s syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder that is characterized by significant difficulties in social interaction and nonverbal communication, as well as restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior. Although Rick was categorized as high functioning (able to carry out typical requirements of living), he did retain some quirky behavioral traits, such as involuntary movements or sounds, and awkward social interactions. But Rick was also a very talented and efficient programmer and a valuable employee of the firm.

Rob was certain that Rick was not hitting on Julie but that perhaps he did like her, and seeing her might trigger some behavior that may appear to be flirty, but it was more likely a by-product of the Asperger’s.

**Case 10-1 Questions**

1. *Do nonverbal communication principles apply in this case?*

Definitely. This case illustrates several principles. First, it is apparent that we interpret nonverbals in meaningful ways. Second, we grant the nonverbals more importance than the verbal messages that accompany them, so when there is a contradiction between what we hear and what we see, we believe what we see. Third, and probably most important, is that the meaning of a nonverbal cue is defined by the audience, and that meanings differ from situation to situation. Cultural factors, gender, the environment, and expectations all impact our interpretation of nonverbal signals. The takeaway is that we should not assume without checking.

1. *The US federal laws governing physical or mental impairments would apply in this case, since a medical diagnosis was present. What should Rick’s coworkers and managers know about his condition and how to interact with him?*

The company’s human resources department should be able to offer training on ADA compliance. Briefly, the federal laws protect people in certain classes from discrimination. Among the protected classes are people with disabilities. Once diagnosed, Rick is a member of this protected class.

1. *What would you recommend to Julie if you were in Dana’s position?*

Again, the human resources director should be helpful. Among the rights of people who are in protected classes is the right to privacy. Julie does not have the right to know about Rick’s disability or illness. Dana should simply indicate to Julie that there is a possibility that she is misinterpreting Rick’s behavior. She should suggest to Julie that she talk to Rick about her reaction to his behavior. It is possible that Rick himself will disclose his condition, although he is not compelled to. If the behavior continues, she should accept and ignore it.

**Case 10-2. Facing a Series of Interviews**

Hanna Jenson recently applied for a position that involves supervising the work activities of a large comprehensive insurance company. She has just received a letter notifying her to report for an interview for this position in four days. The letter indicates Jenson will be required to attend a series of interviews as follows:

9:00 a.m. Rodney Custer, personnel manager

10:00 a.m. Ahmad Syed, department chief

11:00 a.m. Bobbie Kent, medical claims supervisor

If Jenson gets the job, she will receive a substantial raise in salary as well as her first opportunity to gain supervisory experience. Therefore, she wants the job very badly and is concerned about how to prepare for each of the interviews.

Although she has never worked in this particular department, Jenson has worked for the company several years. She knows Custer and Syed on a casual basis, but she has never met Kent. Custer is 38 years old, meticulous in dress, and obviously very proud of the managerial accomplishments he has made since he became personnel manager two years ago. Jenson’s friends in the department believe Custer is sexist and tends to hire men in supervisory positions if possible.

Syed is an elderly, rotund gentleman who will be eligible for retirement in two years. He is somewhat unkempt in appearance, but his knowledge of policy and regulations has earned him the respect of managers throughout the company.

Jenson is especially concerned about the interview with Kent. If she gets the job, she will be working directly under Kent, yet she knows nothing about her.

#### **Case 10-2 Questions**

1. *What positive and negative suggestions would you give Jenson about her choice of dress for this interview?*

Jensen should dress conservatively and in clothing that states that she has confidence in her abilities and conveys her managerial abilities. She should also consider the dress and appearance expectations of the environment in which she wants to work.

1. *What effective nonverbal signals would you suggest Jenson send during the interview given the profiles of the two individuals Jenson is to meet?*

Since Custer is rumored to favor men over women in his promotion practices, Jenson needs to send signals to him that she is a strong and competent woman. A firm handshake, good eye contact, and a body posture that shows her strength will all aid in her chances for the promotion.

Syed is less likely to use these nonverbal cues in assessing Jenson because his interests lie more with policy and regulations. Therefore, a very straight forward approach of showing Syed her knowledge of policy and regulations should work well with him. Since he appears to be less formal than Custer, a more relaxed body posture will be appropriate with Syed.

1. *How could Jenson’s strategy differ in each interview situation?*

As stated earlier, a more formal approach should be used with Custer, while Syed is more likely to accept a relaxed approach.

# Case 10-3. What is Going on Here?

Art Margulis is the 45-year-old director of marketing research for a Fortune 500 consumer products company. He joined the firm 19 years ago after he received his MBA with a marketing emphasis. Because of this technical expertise, management skills, and outgoing personality, he was made director of this 50-person group four years ago. Six people report directly to him, but the management style is informal, so he frequently interacts with everyone in the department.

Two years ago, Margulis extensively recruited Maria Lopez who had just completed her PhD. in applied statistics. Margulis had a difficult time persuading her to join the company because she had many attractive offers. Although she was only 34 years old, she had outstanding experience in marketing research and a unique educational background. Lopez came in and quickly made a number of significant contributions to the department. As manager of statistical analysis, she reports directly to Margulis but has nobody reporting to her. Soon after joining the company, Lopez and her husband divorced. Many employees in the department believe her personal problems are why she has not been more sociable with other employees.

Lopez and Margulis have always gotten along well and often have lunch together to discuss various projects. They seem to have much in common as they both understand the advanced statistics used in the research. Recently, the conversations have turned more personal as Margulis went through a divorce and seems to be seeking more social support. In particular, he seems to miss his two teenage daughters and needs someone to talk to about it.

But Lopez sees a problem developing, and she recently talked to a human resource manager about it. She explained that she has a lot of respect for Margulis and enjoys visiting with him. But she notices a definite change in his behavior around her. The eye contact is more prolonged and the personal physical space between them is reduced. Lopez feels uneasy about it and has tried to subtly change the trend. However, this only intensified what Lopez saw as “pressure” to spend more time with Margulis. Today, Margulis asked Lopez to have dinner with him so they could talk over a project. It seems they haven’t had time to cover the project during working hours.

**Case 10-3 Questions**

*Discuss this case in terms of nonverbal behavior and other topics presented in this chapter. What are the implications of this situation?*

It appears that Margulis has feelings toward Lopez that she does not share and which are quite unacceptable in the business setting. Margulis has begun frequently entering the close personal space of Lopez, including increased eye contact usually reserved for someone at a more intimate level. Lopez has become uncomfortable with this invasion of her space. Neither will be able to perform their jobs to the best of their abilities if this activity continues.

It appears as if Lopez is not handling the situation in the best way possible by going first to a human resource administrator. Her first line of defense is to approach Margulis with how she is feeling, clarifying the messages both are receiving from nonverbal cues. Resolution to this situation should stay between Margulis and Lopez until she feels that her feelings and warnings are unheeded. Then, bringing in a third party is appropriate. The HR administrator will help her follow the policies and procedures of the organization, assuring that Lopez is not the victim of sexual harassment and, further, that Lopez is not punished for filing a harassment claim against her boss.

**Bonus Case and Questions**

*(The following case and questions do not appear in the textbook. They were composed by Dr. Robert Stretcher, Professor of Finance at Sam Houston State University. The author gratefully acknowledges his contribution.)*

**Case: Professionalism in Action**

Ashley acted, to say the least, provocatively. It couldn't be said that her wardrobe was unprofessional; quite the contrary—she always wore navy blue or black, trimmed in white and modestly embellished with color here and there. She always wore hose, was never bare-legged, and her shoes could not be described as unprofessional, although she always wore high heels. Somehow, though, Ashley's seemingly flirtatious demeanor, sashaying walk, and suggestive gestures sent, mistakenly or not, a rather alluring message.

The firm had just been through a round of sensitivity training and a seminar on sexual harassment, and these had created an air of cautiousness among all of the firm's employees. Ashley, though, seemed unfazed. Although her coworkers were paranoid about saying anything to her, or even reporting her for . . . really, nothing identifiable . . . everyone seemed to recognize the "elephant in the room."

Sam Benedict, Ashley's supervisor, was especially sensitive to her unspoken language. His office was at the end of a hallway not used unless someone was heading to his office. The remoteness made him nervous when Ashley would come to his office, usually a few times a day. He was especially concerned that someone might come to his office when Ashley was there and misinterpret her body language as, to put it nicely, intimate. He was unsure whether Ashley was intentionally flirty and suggestive or she was clueless as to how she came across to others. Even one of Ashley's female coworkers had mentioned that she thought perhaps Ashley was "hitting on her" but she couldn't be sure, because her words were entirely professional.

Sam couldn't conclude that the work environment was unpleasant; the reaction to Ashley's demeanor varied from person to person. He thought some of the employees actually enjoyed Ashley's unspoken attention!

**Case Questions**

1. *What factors might be behind Ashley’s nonverbal behavior? Include intentional and unintentional potential causes.*
2. *Sam’s reaction to Ashley’s manner is ambiguous, despite the fact that at least one of her coworkers has complained. What, if anything, should he say to Ashley ? Who else should he speak to about her?*