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Case Study: A Gentle Revolt of Major General Equivalent

This case introduces a conflict episode between a brigadier general (cannon expert) and his subordinate lieutenant (management expert), a public relations (PR) director, in a military unit. Students have to pay attention to the lieutenant's reasoning and actions and then find implications for public management (e.g., leadership, authority, rule of laws, motivation/morale, conflict management, and professional ethics) from this case.

Scene 1: Prologue

May in the middle of the 1990s

The lieutenant gets off an old-fashioned and noisy bus at a small country town surrounded by high mountains. He is a special staff member of a battalion of an army brigade, and the recently promoted brigadier ordered him to serve as his special PR officer at headquarters, approximately 150 km north of his battalion. The lieutenant is expected to replace temporarily a senior major who was recently promoted to lieutenant colonel and thus left for another military unit weeks ago. The lieutenant feels uncomfortable due to the bad living conditions in the isolated mountainous area. Moreover, the brigadier's order is against a directive of the corps commander (lieutenant general) that prohibits the arbitrary transfer of labor forces from subunits without formal written documents.

Scene 2: Brigadier's Excessive Pride in His Authority

The brigadier was extremely proud of his recent promotion. He wanted his staff members to place him on a pedestal, although such old-fashioned honorable treatment was prohibited because it lacked legal grounds. After obtaining a one-star rank, the brigadier often complained of being treated in a way he did not expect. One day, the brigadier became upset about his garden, which had been left unweeded for a long time. He ordered his staff members, from the chief of staff (colonel) to staff sergeant, to fall in line in front of his office. In very magisterial tones, the brigadier gave a long sermon about how staff members should elevate him. After the surprising marshaling, the chief of staff and other senior officers had to weed the garden themselves. Watching that miserable scene, the lieutenant whispered in regret, "What a shame!"

Scene 3: Cannon Expert versus Management Expert

One day, some soldiers of a subunit returned late from their stay-over. The brigadier became angry and decided not to allow stay-overs or leaves, which provided the "only oasis" for enlisted soldiers. In addition, he ordered all officers and staff members to stay in their units without going home for two months. Several weeks later, the lieutenant, as the special staff

officer in charge of morale and PR, surveyed the subunits and found that most officers and soldiers were suffering from punishing stress—their morale had fallen to a dangerously low level. He brought this issue to the brigadier and then suggested reinstating stay-overs and leaves to boost morale.

In response to the lieutenant's professional suggestion based on his expertise, the brigadier replied in anger, "Lieutenant, do you know what the army is? Do you know what a cannon is?" Believing the situation was terribly bad, the lieutenant again made the same suggestion to the brigadier at a regular staff meeting. The brigadier stared fiercely at him and yelled at the brave officer, "Lieutenant, stop it!" However, at another meeting, the lieutenant again repeated his suggestion. The brigadier shouted at the stubborn officer, "Lieutenant, shut up!" Even the lieutenant's immediate boss (lieutenant colonel) warned him, "Hey boy, stop here. I agree with you, but the brigadier already made his decision. That's it!"

Scene 4: Tragic Consequences of Poor Management

A week later, the lieutenant and the lieutenant colonel were on night duty. An emergency call from a subunit came around 1:00 a.m. A soldier had committed suicide at a battery. After hanging up, the lieutenant was lost for words for a while. "Oh... my..." His boss, the lieutenant colonel, was speechless too. Two hours later there was another emergency call. The same subunit reported another suicide case. The lieutenant received both reports but could not understand them. How could these incidents happen in the same subunit at almost the same time?

The brigadier was shocked by the news. He stayed in his office, groaning and moaning from time to time. His boss, the corps commander, concluded that the prohibition of stay-overs and leaves caused the tragedies and thus overruled the brigadier's decision immediately. Ironically, the brigadier became the only officer in the unit who could not go home for weeks. The lieutenant believed that the brigadier's poor management skills killed two innocent soldiers. He felt sorry for the soldiers and even guilty. The brigadier may have been a cannon expert, the lieutenant thought, but he was not a good manager.

Scene 5: Photography versus "Working to Rule"

The brigadier had an obsession with photography. Since personal photography was not an official duty of the brigade, neither a camera nor photographer was officially assigned to the unit. Nevertheless, the brigadier usually ordered the lieutenant to take pictures of himself and other officers. Private A, despite his master of specialty (M.O.S.) in telecommunication, was unofficially assigned to the PR department largely because he had an expensive professional single-lens reflex (SLR) camera. A cheap compact camera was never acceptable to the obsessive general.

Unfortunately, Private A suffered from serious arthritis in his back and a doctor strongly recommended his immediate hospitalization. Concerned about the private's post-discharge future, the lieutenant asked the brigadier to send Private A to a hospital for surgery. The brigadier approved the suggestion initially but later changed his mind. He wanted to take the photographer to a party in his hometown to celebrate his promotion. Later realizing this fact, the lieutenant became furious at the brigadier's egoistic decision to take advantage of Private A and his SLR camera. The lieutenant repeated the same request couple of times, but the brigadier always rebuffed him nervously without explaining why. Frustrated and upset, the

lieutenant resolutely ordered Private A to leave his SLR camera at home, which was very close to the brigadier's hometown, on the way back to the unit after the party. The private understood what the lieutenant meant and returned to the headquarters without his SLR camera.

Scene 6: Lieutenant Park's "Gentle Revolt"

Weeks later, the brigadier called the lieutenant and ordered photography for an annual meeting, attended by all subunit officers, at which a major would receive an Army Chief of Staff award. The lieutenant intuitively realized that the right moment approached. He was confident that the brigadier, although often cranky, was not a brutal dictator devoid of ethics and that "working to rule" was the right answer to such a peevish person.

The lieutenant pretended to prepare for the annual meeting by asking each officer whether he had a good SLR camera; accordingly, all officers acknowledged that the lieutenant was trying his best to undertake the mission that the brigadier had ordered. On the day of the meeting, the lieutenant ordered Private B with his M.O.S. in PR to wear clean military clothing, combat boots, and a photography armband because Private A was sick in bed with backache. Then the lieutenant had Private B wait on standby at the door of the meeting room without a camera. Imagine a cameraman without a camera! All PR officers and soldiers, who knew well the lieutenant's generosity and integrity, realized a horrible storm was brewing up and became disturbed.

In the meeting room, the lieutenant sat at the last chair of the main table (only major or higher officers were seated there) and Private B stood restlessly behind the lieutenant. All the officers found their seats and stood at attention. The brigadier entered the meeting room. As expected, he initially checked the photographer and, right before taking his seat, realized that the "well-suited" cameraman was idly standing in a panic without a camera. The brigadier immediately stared at the lieutenant, shivering with anger. All the officers were frozen in a dreadful silence for a minute. Yes, it appeared to be the "longest minute" of their lives.

Scene 7: Power of Major General Equivalent

The lieutenant calmly broke the choking silence, pushing himself out of his seat and placing his hip at the tip of his chair. He moved mechanically as an automaton bird appeared out of a cuckoo clock. Without turning to the brigadier, he said with a straight face, as though he were reading from a textbook, that photography was not his official duty; therefore, photography equipment (i.e., a SLR camera) was not assigned to the unit. The lieutenant added that he had tried his best to complete the mission given by the brigadier, but he could not find a suitable SLR camera. As a result, he could only prepare a well-arranged photographer. After finishing his "textbook reading," the lieutenant quietly pushed himself back into his seat and looked straight ahead. The brigadier burst with rage and roared,

"You bastard! You wanna die?"

All of sudden, the brigadier drew out his gun, shuddering and grinding his teeth with anger and shame. No one dared move at that moment. Private B confessed after the meeting that he had shut his eyes firmly and thought, "I'm done for here!" Even after sitting down, the brigadier could not suppress his anger and he fixed his gaze on his stubborn enemy, the lieutenant. A large portion of the brigadier's comments constituted furious preaching about

obligation and sincerity toward one's boss, meaning, the brigadier himself. However, the lieutenant kept his calm countenance "on purpose" during the entire meeting. The brigadier was defeated and openly disgraced by the lieutenant's "textbook reading," "zero-emotion," and "working to rules" tactics.

After the meeting, the lieutenant stood outside, relaxing and enjoying a gentle breeze. A major in charge of logistics approached him. The lieutenant turned around and looked at him. The major gave a "thumbs up" with a full smile on his face. He added,

"You won! Now, you become two-star major general equivalent!"

The lieutenant smiled back and then simply, but with gravity, said,

"Thanks, major."

The major ludicrously saluted the honorable major general equivalent (MGE),

"Yes, sir!"

Almost all of the officers in the headquarters and subunits were supportive of what the lieutenant had done in the meeting because they felt badly about the brigadier's authoritative management style. One lieutenant colonel later chuckled at the memory of the annual meeting and joked,

"Hey lieutenant, don't be so harsh with the old man! Take it easy and give him a break. Ha-ha-ha..."

Scene 8: Brigadier's Clumsy Retaliation

Not surprisingly, the brigadier was angry about being dishonored publicly by the lieutenant. The brigadier appeared to seek a chance to retaliate against the lieutenant. He invited all lieutenants and second lieutenants in the headquarters to his official residence on a holiday. However, the lieutenant planned to go hiking in a nearby mountain on that day. The brigadier said, "Come to my residence unless you have an appointment or something to do." The lieutenant intentionally interpreted the invitation literally and said to himself, "Sorry, I have a prior plan for that day." After reporting to an officer on night duty, he went hiking as scheduled.

The brigadier was enraged by the lieutenant's purposive failure to attend his party. Unfortunately, the brigadier's assistant, a second lieutenant who was under the lieutenant's control, happened to go without permission to his home to spend time with his family members on that holiday. Doing so was against military law and made the brigadier angry again.

At last, the brigadier found a good chance for retaliation against the lieutenant. He announced at a meeting that he would have the two "profane" officers punished under military criminal law. When the lieutenant visited his office to report after the holiday, the brigadier neither turned around nor maintained eye contact, but just listened without saying a word. He became pickier and scolded staff members even for trivial issues at the meeting for days, exerting implicit "huffing and puffing" pressure on the lieutenant.

Scene 9: Art of MGE's Laid-Back Negotiation

However, the lieutenant neither excused himself nor made any apology. He knew what the brigadier really wanted. The brigadier did not, however, realize that military criminal law could not be applied to an MGE case (i.e., hiking nearby instead of attending a personal party on a holiday). Most military prosecutors and judges in the unit were quite friendly to the lieutenant. Instead, the lieutenant was concerned about his responsibility for the careless second lieutenant who violated the law. He also was concerned about other innocent officers who became more stressed at the daily meeting. Of course, these worries were intended to force the lieutenant's apology.

Although the brigadier officially announced severe punishment for the lieutenant, his human resource management staff officer could not find any legal clause or sentence to apply to the lieutenant's case. By contrast, the lieutenant already knew this fact because he checked with his friend, an expert in military law, before starting the "gentle revolt." Realizing the impossibility of punishing his "enemy," the brigadier appeared to ask the chief of staff (colonel) to wrap this self-esteem battle up quickly. The brigadier knew that he could not get anything (e.g., punishment and apology) from the "obstinate and invincible" lieutenant. The chief of staff faced a dilemma of a one-star brigadier at odds with the "major general equivalent."

Days later, the chief of staff offered a suggestion to the lieutenant, emphasizing the early termination of destructive conflicts. He suggested writing a daily apology letter to the brigadier and full-armed walking around the parade ground for a week, reflecting on what the brigadier wanted. These penalties were the cost for humiliating the brigadier. The chief of staff talked to the lieutenant directly, "Lieutenant, save his face, ... Please!" Understanding the weak negotiating position of the brigadier and the chief of staff, the lieutenant was eager to accept the offer but made counter-offers politely.

"Sir, I completely understand what you mean. I will accept, of course. But, ... did you say a week?"

The chief of staff smiled but unwillingly replied after several seconds of hesitation.

"Hummm... Three days!"

The lieutenant smiled back to him and answered, "O.K." He then asked,

"And did you mean three hours of walking?"

The chief of staff replied immediately,

"No, two hours. Is that O.K. for you?"

The lieutenant answered contentedly.

"(Call!) All right. Much better, Sir."

The chief of staff replied with a sigh of relief.

“Thanks!”

Scene 10: “Do You Know What Authority Is?”

An apology letter often contains expressions such as “I am sorry for ...,” “I regret ...,” and “... will never happen again...” However, the first sentence in the lieutenant’s letter was “What is authority?” He wanted to reply to the brigadier’s “Do you know what a cannon is?” The letter stated that authority is not given automatically according to position but must be built and managed by the person. His second apology letter was meant to teach the brigadier that managing a unit is completely different from shooting a cannon. He implicitly asked, “Hey, my junior general, do you know what management is?” The chief of staff read through the “preaching” (as opposed to apology) letters, moaning and clicking his tongue. He dared not forward these letters to the brigadier.

Scene 11: Surprise Pass in Royal Soccer

Soon after returning to his battalion, the lieutenant was scheduled to leave the unit. Several days before the lieutenant’s moving out, the brigadier made a surprise visit to the battalion and pretended to do business. He wanted to play soccer with the officers and the soldiers in the afternoon. In so-called “royal soccer,” subordinates are expected to pass a ball very gently to their boss, who is usually waiting in front of the goalposts, so that he can kick the ball in easily.

The lieutenant was playing around the center circle to support the brigadier ahead. When the battalion commander (lieutenant colonel) passed the ball to the brigadier, everyone thought that the brigadier would kick the ball into the goalposts. However, the brigadier suddenly turned around and passed the ball back to the lieutenant “politely,” yelling at him, “Lieutenant, shoot it!” Embarrassed by such an unexpected pass, the lieutenant kicked the ball out of urgency. All the other officers and soldiers were surprised at the odd scene. A senior officer said later, “I have never seen in my life a brigadier pass a ball to a lieutenant, even in such a gentle manner. You must have something special!”

After the soccer game, the brigadier hosted a dinner party for officers and other staff members. He spent most of the time talking to the battalion commander and majors nearby, although the lieutenant intentionally seated himself opposite the brigadier. After the party, the brigadier was standing at the entrance door to shake hands with each officer. Each officer was expected to salute and then state his rank and name when the brigadier shook his hand. When the lieutenant was about to salute in his turn, the brigadier abruptly hugged him for a few seconds and then clapped him on the cheek slightly, murmuring something unclear. Nevertheless, the lieutenant could understand what the one-star general wanted to convey (mixed feelings of anger, regret, appreciation, etc.).

Scene 12: Epilogue

One day at a bus terminal, the lieutenant came across Private A (he had risen to corporal by that time), who was sent to a hospital after the “gentle revolt.” The lieutenant was glad, but the corporal seemed surprised rather than pleased. Corporal A, as he was now known, said he was doing fine after the surgery, smiled an awkward smile to his gracious former boss, and then left quickly. Corporal A appeared to feel a great distance between the two-star general

(MGE) and himself. Although feeling a little regret, the lieutenant was happy to see his boy walking in good health. However, he was so sorry for the suicide of two soldiers.

End of case.