



# Case Study 3 Succeed or Succumb?

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**Abstract:** The case study primarily deals with the analysis of two different, rather opposing styles of leadership and their resultant effects on the personality, attitude and performance of the subordinate employees. This case details the characteristics of a bossy, authoritative, prejudiced, close-minded, and destructive critical leader whose approach to dealing with subordinate staff lowers an employee's morale, leads to lower productivity and even forces one to quit the job; whereas on the other hand, it shows a participative, open-minded, supportive, amicable, and friendly leader who is able to boost employee morale and enhance motivation to work harder, while being committed to the organisation. This case study also provides an illustration of the fact that sometimes, in order to succeed and get promoted in an organisation, we may have to put aside our personal relationships in the workplace, or even walk over them to climb the ladder of success.

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## PROLOGUE

It was already 11pm and Fatihah still could not sleep thinking about what her boss had conveyed to her that morning which was still lingering on in her mind. Janet said "Fatihah, I know all this while I've been yelling and condemning your work but I want you to know that I'm observing my staff too. I need identify and groom a potential successor. You are someone who is walking the talk, and who will accept whatever tasks assigned by me without saying no. You just grin and bear it. Yes, no doubt I still have to amend your work but they were not substantial amendments. Normally, when you pass your work to me for comments, it is like 85% ready to be released. So, I'm requesting you to see me because I want you to know that I'm

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going to promote you as a manager. You will need to do some write up about yourself and your achievements so that I can write a memo to the Management on this. Once everything is complete and approved, you have the option of whether you want to accept it or not. However, once you accept the offer, please bear in mind that my expectation from you will be higher and that you will have to make a commitment that won't make the promotion as your stepping stone to jump to another company. I also need to warn you that there will be repercussions on your promotion as some of your colleagues have been working in this company for quite some time but they have not got their promotions yet." Fatihah was puzzled, anxious, stunned and didn't quite understand her own feelings about this great news and how to react to her boss. One thing she noted was that she was supposed to feel happy, but it didn't turn out the way it should be.

Fatihah, a Malay lady, aged 30, had joined ABC Co, henceforth "Company" on 1 October 2009 as the Senior Executive and was stationed at the Legal Department of the Company. She has a Degree in Law (Hons.) from Universiti Teknologi Mara and was registered as advocate and solicitor by the High Court of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, in 2007. She had been working with AmanahRaya Berhad as Senior Executive and was tasked to manage estate and trust administration for the deceased, prior to joining the Company. She had loved working in AmanahRaya Berhad, but she couldn't afford to lose the offer made by the Company as it was a far cry from the salary that she had been drawing at AmanahRaya. So Fatihah, drawn by the attractive salary, made a decision to join the Company. In the Company, she was assigned an overall and dedicated role in rendering legal advice, reviewing and drafting various legal documents and providing legal counsel to ensure compliance and governance of relevant laws and regulations, in order to safeguard Company interests and mitigate legal risks and exposures (focused, but not limited, on ensuring legal and regulatory compliance of MSC Malaysia status, litigation and legal matters of the Company's subsidiaries). Fatihah was a very consistent and persistent person. She was an avid, eager and hard-working learner. She was good at time management, and her work took precedence over everything. But behind these characteristics, she was actually a very sensitive and introvert kind of person. She had a colleague by the name of Sofia, who worked with her in the same unit. Both of them reported to Sarah who was their performance manager.

Sarah, a Malay lady, aged 37, had joined the Company in 2001 and held the position of Senior Manager. She had tendered her resignation in 2011. She was a graduate from the University of Oxford and was responsible as well as accountable for the conduct and actions of Fatihah and Sofia in delivering their work. She was a very diplomatic, energetic, open to discussion and "*attention to details*" type of boss. Fatihah used to enjoy being her staff as Sarah practised open communication and discussion. She always encouraged her staff to not allow anybody lower their self-esteem and self-confidence. Because of her charisma, the Management of the Company came to rely on her and sought her assistance on any legal issue, rather than consulting

the Head of the Legal Department. She tendered her resignation after she realised that working in the Company was not helping her career advancement.

Sofia, a Malay lady, aged 33, had joined the Company in 2007 as an Executive and was later promoted as Senior Executive in 2008. The legal matters under her charge were different from those of Fatihah. She had been a very good friend, colleague and sister to Fatihah. Both of them shared a very close interpersonal relationship. Nevertheless, Fatihah noted that Sarah often gave Sofia's work to Fatihah, giving the reason that Sofia was tied up with other work. But that was not the case, as Fatihah discovered later. Sofia often was busy with work not related to the office; she appeared to be utilising her office time to do 'other' work.

Janet, a Chinese lady, age 45, was the head of the Legal Department who had joined the Company in the year 2000. Janet was well known as the 'Iron Lady'; close-minded, stereotyping kind of boss with prejudiced views and opinions. She liked to admonish people regardless of who they were. Perhaps being one of the pioneer members of the Company had made her arrogant and haughty of her position and power. Sarah was her blue-eyed lady as she knew that she would do everything for her, and she just wanted Sarah to report to her. Janet would personally handle a matter only if it involved some major issue. Sarah's resignation had given Janet a difficult time as she now needed to take over everything that had been previously handled by Sarah. Janet had been depressed for a few months as a result of Sarah's resignation.

## **THE COMPANY**

The Company had been established by the Malaysian government for the purpose of spearheading the development and implementation of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) and was mandated to coordinate, promote and develop the information and communications technology (ICT) industry and selected services. It was the Company's vision to be world-leading ICT hub by being a well mandated, value-based, highly effective organisation. Its aim was to attract and nurture leading-edge and world-class companies that would facilitate knowledge transfer and wealth creation. It was the Company's mission to establish Malaysia as a global hub and preferred location for ICT and multimedia innovations, services and operations. In achieving the Company's vision and mission, the Legal Department in which Fatihah was working and which consisted of 12 team members, including the Head of Department, was responsible for ensuring that the Company's interests were always safeguarded. The legal department was also responsible for mitigating the Company's potential risks and exposure by providing quality legal advice or legal documents to the relevant department or party.

## **THE EVENT**

During her earlier tenure with the Company, Fatihah had never felt satisfied and happy about her work, and she never knew that the decision she made to leave AmanahRaya

Berhad was one of the decisions that she would remember as not sound because she was just driven by monetary incentives.. Driven by the excitement of getting a better salary, she never bothered to seek an opinion from others or to find someone who could have given her relevant information about the Company. On her first day in the Company, she was greeted by Sarah as her performance manager, who explained Fatihah's job scope and what was expected of her. Fatihah had quietly told herself, "Erm... I think I can learn a lot from her... She seems to be a very good teacher".

It had been three months since Fatihah had started working in the Company and everything had been going well until one day Sarah asked her "Hey Fatihah, do you want to go to New York? Well, Janet asked me to go with her to meet our US lawyer but I don't think I should go because CEO and COO might want to seek legal advice at any time. If Janet and I go, it will not look good on our department". Fatihah replied "What would be my job scope if I were to go?" Sarah responded "You just have to do whatever Janet asks you to do. I think you will be responsible for preparing a report on the trip." Fatihah agreed and went to New York with Janet in early 2010. It was not a pleasant experience for her as immediately on her return Janet scolded her in front of the CFO of the Company for the report that she had prepared. Janet was tired as she had not been able to sleep due to jet lag and was therefore unable to go through the report before it was submitted to the CFO. It all seemed very unfair to Fatihah. But she just grinned and bore it!

Months passed by and she realised that Janet didn't like her. Fatihah noted that Sofia received a different treatment from Janet, as she had never been scolded by Janet. This observation puzzled Fatihah, as Sarah had once told her that Janet was dissatisfied with Sofia's work, particularly in terms of delivering the work on time. But then why did Sofia receive better treatment from Janet if she had an issue with her? Janet would always pin point Fatihah's faults, be it in department meetings or during discussions. Janet would always scold Fatihah even for the smallest of her mistakes. Sarah noticed changes in Fatihah, as Fatihah seemed to look afraid and uncomfortable whenever Janet requested to see her. During performance appraisal at the end of the year 2010, Sarah asked Fatihah of her experience working in the Company thus far, and that was where Fatihah voiced her frustration towards Janet. No matter how good or how hard she tried to please Janet, Janet would never trust her, only because she was unable to speak English fluently, although she was very good in her writing skills. She mused perhaps that was not sufficient for Janet. Sarah understood and explained that it was not surprising for Sarah to hear all those complaints about Janet as she was well known for her characteristic attitude. Even the Management would refuse to deal with Janet when there were any legal issues involved. Sarah told Fatihah that Janet would not change but Fatihah needed to demonstrate that she was a competent employee though she may not be very proficient in the English language.

Surviving in the Legal Department with help from Sarah and Sofia, Fatihah managed to stay focused and would deliver her work on time and of the required quality. However, most of her colleagues who had joined with her had left the Company's

Legal Department, leaving only her and Sofia as seniors. In November 2011, Sarah tendered her resignation on the basis of the reason that she wanted to advance in her career and as she could not see any chances of doing so in the Company. This news saddened Fatihah and Sofia. As a result of Sarah's resignation, Fatihah had to report directly to Janet. This was when the nightmares started. Everyday Fatihah would go to work with a heavy heart and wonder what fault of hers that Janet would pinpoint on that day. Janet's attitude had lowered Fatihah's self-esteem and self-confidence immensely. She was no longer someone who dared to voice her ideas and arguments and started becoming very rigid as Janet had always been a 'by the book' boss. With this attitude, Janet had restricted her staff from being creative and innovative. These feelings of Fatihah continued to haunt her until the day Janet called her to her room and informed Fatihah of her intention to promote her as a manager. Janet reminded Fatihah not to tell anybody about her intention as she didn't want any negative repercussions for as long promotion procedures were not completed. Fatihah was puzzled as she didn't know how sincere Janet was at that point in time. Further, she felt that Sofia would be sad as she had been working there for the past 5 years, but still it was Fatihah who had been chosen by Janet for the promotion.

Things weren't happening as planned, because one day accidentally Sofia got to know about Janet's decision of promoting Fatihah as a manager. This news was leaked to her by the department's secretary. The department's secretary knew about the promotion from Janet's calendar. The secretary had a blocked few hours of Janet's time to interview Fatihah on her readiness for the manager's position. As expected, Sofia was depressed and saddened by the news. She felt betrayed as she claimed that the right approach was for Janet to tell the whole department that she was promoting Fatihah to a higher position. It was her right to promote her staff and there was no need to do it discreetly. Her act of concealing Fatihah's promotion from other staff members was construed as Janet not wanting to hurt Sofia. As a result, Sofia could not even bring herself to talk to Fatihah in her usual manner for a week. Fatihah confronted Sofia on this matter and Sofia admitted that it was not Fatihah's fault, but Janet's doing. Sofia said that she needed time to accept it. Fatihah was caught in the middle as she did not intend to conceal the news from Sofia but Janet had asked her to do so. The feelings of guilt, sadness, uneasiness etc. lingered and Fatihah realised that something had to be done regarding the promotion, and at the same time, she had to take care not to further sour her friendship with Sofia.

From that day, Fatihah tried to act as normal as possible so that the relationship between her and Sofia would not be awkward. Suddenly, Johan, aged 37, who had taken over Sarah's position, tendered his resignation as he could not take the bullying by Janet. Fatihah got to know that Janet had asked Sofia to apply for Johan's position. Sofia did whatever Janet asked her to do, but did not tell Fatihah at all about the matter. Now it was Fatihah's turn to be hurt as she felt that it was pay back time for Sofia. Fatihah did not want to prolong the issue, so again she just grinned and bore it! It had been Fatihah's intention to leave the Company since the day she joined, for her

personal peace of mind and for her own career enhancement. This was because she realised that the longer she stayed in the Company, the lower her self-esteem and self-confidence would become. She didn't want to be that kind of a person. When she had made up her mind to leave she began actively job hunting

## **EPILOGUE**

In December 2011, Fatihah accepted the promotion as a Manager because she knew she deserved it. She knew how much of effort she had put in over the last 2 years, and she could not afford to allow her friendship with Sofia to be the barrier for a well deserved promotion. Sofia also got her promotion as a Manager in January 2012. This put a stop to the sour relationship between Sofia and Fatihah. As for Janet, she acted as if nothing had happened, as at the end of the day, both her subordinates were promoted as managers and there was no issue to squabble out. Sarah, on the other hand, was currently working as a partner in one of the established legal firms in the town. She was looking forward to working with Fatihah again and had told her that she would discreetly help her find a new job. As managers, Fatihah and Sofia knew that they had to carry bigger responsibilities now, and be accountable for whatever they did, including the conduct of their staff. Looking back, Fatihah realised that Janet had not changed at all. So all she could do was to adapt and compromise with Janet's attitude. Her promotion had not stopped her from continuing the search for a better opportunity to work with some other company, although she knew that if one day she tendered her resignation, Janet would definitely raise the promotion issue, a strategy that had used with Fatihah's ex-colleagues. Fatihah told herself "If the Company wants to lose talented people just because they are not willing to do anything against Janet, so be it. But I will not allow myself to be at a loss, because the longer I stay here, the more I lose my own self!" Hence, the search for the new job continued.

It had come to Fatihah's knowledge that whenever there was an exit interview, most of her ex-colleagues never failed to highlight to the HR department about the leadership style of Janet, but to everybody's surprise, nothing had been done to resolve that issue. The Legal Department of the Company continued to have a very high turnover rate. But everybody knew was that it was very hard for Janet to get promoted as some of the Senior Management officials had objected twice to Janet's promotion, when presented for approval. Unfortunately, that didnot resolve the issue as Janet felt even more furious when she got to know that her promotion was rejected, thus resulting in her channelling her anger to her subordinates. As a result of the dissatisfaction amongst the team member towards Janet's leadership, the score of the Employee Engagement survey for the Legal department was found to be the lowest within the Corporate Services Division. Again, Fatihah knew that it was now up to her on what she wanted to do next.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What management issues can be identified in this case?
2. If you were the CEO of this company, what would you do to correct the problem?