

Case 4: Inclusive Leadership

Cheyenne is a junior accountant at a large accounting firm called Wallia Knox Accountants. She works on a diverse team with 10 other junior accountants, along with her manager, Min. Cheyenne's team recently received a lot of praise from Wallia Knox's senior leaders, and her team tends to be given higher-profile clients. After a meeting with the senior leaders and managers, Min returns to her team and asks to speak to Cheyenne privately.

Two other junior accountants just resigned from one of the other teams at Wallia Knox. The manager of this other team isn't interested in hiring two new accountants; she'd rather hire from within the firm and is looking for any accountants who are interested in transferring to her team. Because Cheyenne has been transparent with Min about wanting to grow her career and is always up for a challenge, Min tells Cheyenne that she thinks she's ready for this new challenge and asks if she can recommend her for one of the positions.

Cheyenne is excited about this opportunity. She believes she'll be an asset to the new team and that she'll gain a lot of experience from working with different people. Two weeks later, Cheyenne is approved for the transfer and starts her new role.

On her first day, she puts her things down at her new desk and then walks over to introduce herself to her new manager, Brittany. Brittany's office door is half open. Cheyenne gently knocks, pushing the door open. Brittany is on her computer, looking at her screen intently. When Cheyenne enters, Brittany doesn't look up. Rather, she holds up her index finger to pause Cheyenne before she can even begin to speak.

Cheyenne is shocked by Brittany's rudeness but considers that perhaps Brittany is in the middle of something important. After a few awkward seconds, Brittany looks up and says, "Hi, what is it?" "Hi," Cheyenne responds. "I'm Cheyenne. I'm the new transfer from Min's team. Today is my first day and I just wanted to introduce myself." Brittany stands and says, "Hi, yes, I remember you were starting today. I'm very busy and I know you have a lot of experience, so thankfully I don't need to hold your hand throughout this onboarding process. You can start on the most urgent task. If you have any questions, just talk to Kelly—she's our team lead."

Cheyenne leaves Brittany's office feeling uneasy. That's not how she expected to be welcomed to a new team, but she reminds herself that all teams work differently. She sits at her desk and realizes that she has no idea who Kelly is. She looks around. Her new team members are a lot more subdued than the members of her previous team; nobody's talking or interacting with each another. She turns to the person beside her and asks if he knows Kelly. He points to Kelly's desk, and Cheyenne walks over to introduce herself. Kelly hands Cheyenne a client file and asks her to get started, as they're running behind.

Cheyenne puts on her headphones and gets to work. Cheyenne was diagnosed with ADHD when she was a teenager and sometimes has trouble focusing when she's overstimulated, and being in a new environment with new noises, people, and surroundings is definitely overstimulating. Listening

to classical music or white noise will make it easier for her to focus. Soon after she starts on the file, Brittany is at her desk. “We don’t allow people to listen to music here,” Brittany says. “This is a workplace.” Before Cheyenne can respond, Brittany has already walked away.

Later that day, Cheyenne approaches Brittany and asks to speak with her privately. Cheyenne tells her that she listens to classical music through her headphones to help her focus. Brittany doesn’t seem to care and reiterates that it’s inappropriate to listen to music at work. Cheyenne explains that she has a disability and it’s been recommended that she use headphones to help her get her work done. Brittany looks Cheyenne up and down. “What disability?” Brittany asks. Cheyenne has never had to disclose her ADHD before. On her previous team, Min just allowed her to work the way she needed to work. “It’s not a physical disability,” Cheyenne says, it’s a cognitive disability. If it’s ok with you, I’d rather not talk about it.” Brittany says that without a doctor’s note, she can’t help her. Stunned, Cheyenne leaves Brittany’s office.

Cheyenne doesn’t get a doctor’s note because she’s uncomfortable disclosing her diagnosis. She never thought her disability affected her work, and she doesn’t want others to make assumptions about her. She knows of other coping mechanisms, but music in headphones has always been the most helpful. After working for a week without headphones, Cheyenne has to work a lot harder to stay focused.

Not only is Cheyenne having to work a lot harder to focus, but the second junior accountant never joined the team. Cheyenne is starting to feel very overwhelmed with her workload. When she goes to see Brittany to talk about it, Brittany asks if she’s having trouble keeping up with her deadlines. “Maybe if you weren’t listening to music all the time, you could focus on your work better.” Cheyenne asks when the second junior accountant is expected to transfer to the team. Brittany looks confused. “What second junior accountant?”

Cheyenne tells Brittany that when Min told her about the transfer, she had said that two new accountants were being hired. “Well,” says Brittany, “given that we were hiring in-house, I assumed that someone with your skillset could keep up with the workload.” Brittany turns her attention to some papers on her desk. “If you can’t keep up, then I can take you off this file and put you on something else.” Cheyenne says she doesn’t want to be taken off the file and assures Brittany that she can keep up with her work.

“Also,” Cheyenne starts before leaving Brittany’s office, “I think it’s worth stating that my headphones are what help me focus. The workplace can be very overstimulating sometimes.” “You have a stimulation problem?” Brittany responds. “Is it autism?” Cheyenne isn’t sure what to say. She doesn’t like that Brittany is trying to guess her diagnosis. “No, it’s not autism. I’d rather not talk about it. But if I can’t wear headphones, then I need to find other ways to help me focus and do my job.” “Okay great,” Brittany says, “then find another solution.” Cheyenne leaves Brittany’s office feeling anxious and defeated.

Over the next few weeks, Cheyenne comes to the office early and stays late. She also works through lunch to ensure she gets everything completed on time. She tries to get the majority of her work done when the office is quiet, and less people are around. She wants to prove to Brittany that she is competent and capable.

On the day of her first deadline, Cheyenne is looking forward to hearing Brittany's feedback. She worked hard and is proud of the final product. When she asks Brittany about her work, Brittany simply says, "I'm glad that's done. We have other projects to worry about now." And then she adds, "See, I knew you didn't need those headphones."

Cheyenne can't believe it. She worked so hard and that's it? Next project? She knows she is capable without her headphones, but the headphones make her more productive. Cheyenne starts coming into the office late and she's easily distracted. If Brittany has noticed, she hasn't said anything. Cheyenne knows the quality of her work isn't what it could be and doesn't really care; nobody else on her team seems to. They're all just happy to meet their deadlines. Cheyenne now spends her free time looking for another job at another firm; her old team no longer has any openings. She feels resentful as she gets ready for work in the morning and uses any excuse to leave early. Cheyenne is unhappy and knows that something needs to change.

Questions:

- (1) How would you compare Min's management style with Brittany's? What are the benefits of Min's management style? Do you think the majority of employees would respond better to one management style over another?
- (2) How could Brittany have approached Cheyenne's headphone use in a more inclusive way? What were some of the inappropriate comments Brittany made, especially to someone with a disability?
- (3) Would Cheyenne have been treated differently by Brittany if she had a visible disability, as opposed to an invisible one?
- (4) What are some of the signs that Cheyenne is unhappy in her position? Is it Brittany's responsibility to notice Cheyenne is unhappy? What would have happened if Cheyenne began to feel this way on Min's team?
- (5) What role does Wallia Knox Accountants play in this scenario? Should the firm be held accountable for Cheyenne's unhappiness and low productivity? What could the firm have done to avoid Cheyenne wanting to resign?
- (6) Is it important to onboard new employees to a team, even if they transferred from a different department or team within the organization? What could have been included in the onboarding process to improve Cheyenne's experience?

Additional Resources for Case 4:

- How to Be an Inclusive Leader: Your Role in Creating Cultures of Belonging Where Everyone Can Thrive (book by Jennifer Brown), [here](#)
- Why inclusion starts in the C-suite (article by Penn Today), [here](#)
- The 5 Things All Inclusive Leaders Do Every Single Day (article by The Muse), [here](#)

- How To Strive For Power-Balanced Relationships At Work (article by Forbes), [here](#)
- Inclusify: The Power of Uniqueness and Belonging to Build Innovative Teams (book by Stefanie K. Johnson), [here](#)
- The Way We Lead (podcast), [here](#)

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