**Discrimination, Exclusion, and Loss of Human Capital: What Went Wrong at *Bon Appetit*?**

**Abstract**

This session will introduce the 2020 controversy of discrimination at *Bon Appetit* and Conde Nast Entertainment that eventually resulted in firing at least 2 executives and at least 7 staff members’ quitting. We’ll discuss how this case can be used in courses to examine diversity, discrimination, culture, loss of human capital, and other topics. I will discuss how I use this case in Human Resource Management, but we will discuss how it might fit into Organizational Behavior or other management courses as well.

*Keywords*: Diversity, Discrimination, Case study

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**Introduction**

In this session, I will introduce attendees to the 2020 *Bon Appetit* case. The controversy actually began with a statement of solidarity with Black Lives Matter movements, but soon resulted in cries of hypocrisy from employees. Past insensitive social media posts from *BA* executives surfaced, and employees began to speak out about what they perceived as disparate treatment, including compensation differences between white and BIPOC stars of the magazine’s related YouTube channel. These revelation resulted in the months-long shutdown of the YouTube channel as stars refused to film while their colleagues were in contract negotiations. Ultimately, some executives resigned or were fired, and seven video stars (along with other staff) permanently left the channel when they could not resolve their contracts satisfactorily. Later reports on BA indicate that a lack of inclusion was a years-long problem, predating the YouTube channel (Vogt & Goldman, 2021). As a recent and relevant case, BA is a prime example for discussing discrimination and related topics in HR and other management courses.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

In line with the idea that “The creation of inclusive organizations can start in management education with lessons and exercises for current and aspiring managers” (Schmidt-Wilk, 2020, p. 288), the *Bon Appetit* case can be used to illustrate the dangers of ignoring inclusivity in a diverse workplace. A case study “makes knowledge concrete through practical studies” of real incidents (Rendtorff, 2015, p. 37). Scholars have argued that case studies can be successfully employed to build “ethical consciousness” (Rendtorff, 2015, p. 52) rather than just solving a business problem to maximize profits. (Though a focus on human capital in this case can also highlight potential damage to the bottom line through discriminatory behavior.) In addition, the *Bon Appetit* case essentially went viral, spreading across social media and the popular press as employees who had suffered in silence were finally fed up. As some researchers indicate that the technical natives of Gen Z appreciate being taught through digital, technological, and social media (e.g., Cilliers, 2017), the many sources on the case (see Appendix A) offer different modalities to explore the case and can open up a discussion of the trustworthiness or bias of various sources.

Discrimination and inclusion can be emotional topics in the classroom (Kirkham, 1989), and grounding the topic in a true, but third-party (and thus distanced from the students) case can open up dialogue in the classroom about illegal and unethical behavior in the workplace, negative workplace cultures, and possibly students’ own experiences of prejudice and discrimination. From an HR lens, one of the problems with employees’ quitting is the loss of human capital. The popularity of the BA YouTube channel was due to the quirky editing but also the chemistry between the test kitchen “stars.” Losing seven employees at once is no small blow to an organization, especially when those employees worked together as a team. Thus, this case can illustrate the strategic costs of a lack of inclusion as well as highlighting ethical implications and legal ones. No EEOC cases were filed, but whether the behaviors at BA were illegal can still be a point of discussion in the classroom.

**Learning Objectives**

Attendees will:

* Learn how to use a real-world example to discuss discrimination
* Apply a human capital framework to the problem of mistreating employees
* Learn how to adapt what happened at *Bon Appetit* to several class activities depending on time available and which type of class (HR, OB, etc.)
  + Related topics: compensation, pay secrecy, ethics, organizational communication, social media policies

Students should be able to:

* Apply EEOC laws
* Understand how “messy” discrimination can be
* Think critically about why discrimination occurs and the implications for organizations
* Make recommendations for *Bon Appetit* for more inclusive practices
* Analyze BA’s new hires and how that might change the culture (or not)

**Exercise**

Following a lecture on EEOC laws, diversity, discrimination, and inclusion, students are presented with the BA case. I will show how this can be assigned as a written case or presented in the classroom through social media posts and podcast clips. After introducing the controversy, students are split into teams or breakout groups and asked to predict what will happen at BA. Following that discussion, the resolution is revealed, including the staff changes at BA. In an HR class, further discussion of loss of human capital, the consequences of discrimination, and building a culture of inclusion follows. Additional topics that can be explored include ethical issues, communication (including social media policies), compensation/pay secrecy, and leadership and the effect on culture.

**Session Description**

In this 60 minute session, I will explain how to use the case of *Bon Appetit* to illustrate workplace discrimination and adapt it to several different exercises depending upon the scope of the class and the time available. The same case can be used as a quick in-class discussion and activity or a case assignment for out of class reading/writing. In addition, it can be used to illustrate diversity issues and discrimination, bring up ethical issues, discuss loss of human capital, and even discuss communication in the social media age. I will provide a written case with suggested questions and follow-up. In Appendix A, I have provided more resources, including articles, podcast episodes, and YouTube videos. The session will progress approximately as follows:

* Introduction: I will introduce myself, see if participants are already familiar with the case, and introduce the topic. (5 mins)
* In-Class presentation: I will demonstrate to attendees the presentation I use to start the discussion in my HR class and engage the attendees as students in analyzing what happened at BA. (15-20 mins)
* Alternative Written Case presentation: I will discuss how to use the case as a written assignment for an HR or OB class. (10-15 mins)
* Alternative topics & Q&A: We will discuss how to use the same case to discuss business ethics and communication, how the “Me Too” or BLM movements affect business, or other topics in various courses. (15-20 mins)

References

Cilliers, E. J. (2017). The challenge of teaching generation Z. PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences, 3(1), 188-198.

Kirkham, K. (1989). Teaching about diversity: Navigating the emotional undercurrents. *Organizational Behavior Teaching Review*, *13*(4), 48-55.

Rendtorff, J. D. (2015). Case studies, ethics, philosophy, and liberal learning for the management profession. *Journal of Management Education*, *39*(1), 36-55.

Schmidt-Wilk, J. (2020). Teaching Toward Inclusive Organizations. *Management Teaching Review*, 5(4), 288-289. [https://doi.org/10.1177/2379298120964301](https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2379298120964301)

Vogt, P. J., & Goldman, A. (Hosts). (2021, February 4). The test kitchen: Chapter 1 (No. 172) [Audio podcast episode]. In *Reply all*. Gimlet. <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/reply-all/dvhzkdo/172-the-test-kitchen-chapter-1>

**Appendix A**

**Bon Appetit Resources**

Podcast Episodes

<http://www.sporkful.com/a-reckoning-at-bon-appetit/>

<http://www.sporkful.com/inside-the-turmoil-at-bon-appetit/>

<https://gimletmedia.com/shows/reply-all/dvhzkdo/172-the-test-kitchen-chapter-1>

<https://gimletmedia.com/shows/reply-all/awheda3/173-the-test-kitchen-chapter-2>

Episodes of the YouTube Channel pre-controversy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqWXteVXo-A>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMEVC5hGw0c>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n01H5fjeaL8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7i9dTJgsdI>

Current YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/BonAppetitDotCom>

Episodes/ventures from the employees no longer at BA:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPciNE7Qs8w>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODFho7KaDbY>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDEsyKzdYk0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ecLOK-b-1s>

<https://www.youtube.com/c/ClaireSaffitzxDessertPerson>

<https://www.patreon.com/carlalallimusic>

<https://www.patreon.com/mollybaz>

Articles

<https://www.insider.com/bon-apptit-timeline-allegations-drama-culture-race-andy-alex-sohla-2020-6>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/voraciously/wp/2020/08/06/three-bon-appetit-video-stars-leave-the-test-kitchen-series-due-to-alleged-racial-discrimination/>

<https://www.businessinsider.com/bon-appetit-test-kitchen-stars-who-left-2020-8>

<https://variety.com/2020/digital/news/bon-appetit-conde-nast-video-hosts-diversity-protest-resignations-1234802407/>

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/30/media/bon-appetit-eic-dawn-davis-risk-takers/index.html>

<https://www.npr.org/2020/06/09/872697289/chief-editor-at-bon-app-tit-resigns-after-racially-offensive-photo-surfaces>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/13/business/media/conde-nast-racial.html>

Instagram posts

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CDy0qJcHPF7/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CB39ANigmvW/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CGBVFtQDwa_/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CD3ut00D0zR/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CDjeZpFjkZE/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CDhFxi1DXSX/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CDb9vy_jiL-/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link>