

Organizational Autoethnography: Red Apple Cafe

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Abstract

This study observes how unprofessional communication and verbal aggression between management and employees affects the staff, the lack of support and protection for staff members identifying with minority groups, and the use of metaphors in the workplace that create an unclear and interpretive message between management and staff. Based on the autoethnographic study of a local restaurant called, “Red Apple Cafe”, I investigate the core values that are meant to be instilled within the business and how those expectations were met from my own personal experience working there. This study divulges into the negative experiences and situations that directly affect Red Apple Cafe’s ability to keep employees and how their definition of family influences staff member’s job satisfaction, productivity, relationships with other staff members, and work attitudes.

Keywords: job satisfaction, verbal aggression, minority groups

Organizational Autoethnography: Red Apple Cafe

The organizational culture studied in this article is the small business in Muncie, IN, Red Apple Cafe. Red Apple Cafe has been open in Muncie, IN for 4 years and the past 3 years under the current ownership of Valbona and Milsim. The owners, a heterosexual couple emmigrated from Macedonia, have owned and run the small business since 2019. Red Apple Cafe has a steady demographic of white, heterosexual, conservative customers mostly ages 35-70. The business uses minimal technology if any at all. The business includes a very intimate and ever-changing staff with a total of 23 workers including hosts, servers, cooks, and dishwashers. Specifically, my role at Red Apple Cafe the past year has been a hostess and server. During my time at Red Apple Cafe I experienced first hand the effects and implications of lack of updated technology, unprofessionalism regarding communication between management and employees, definitions of families in the workplace that did not align with the owner's and staff's views, and lack of support and protection for staff members identifying with minority groups. By identifying and investigating my experience within this organization, it is important to to call attention to organizational culture and dynamic within small businesses as well as stress aspects involving staff members that belong to minority groups and how these staff members may feel isolated, silenced, uncomfortable, or even fearful.

Literature Review

Smith (1987) discusses how the use of metaphors between management and employees can encourage unity however it can also instill uncertainty. She states in her journal that “managers and employees use metaphors strategically to facilitate a sense of cohesiveness and at the same time allow a variety of individual interpretations” (Smith, 1987, p. 369). Smith's study investigates the metaphors of “family” and “drama” and how these two metaphors were used and

interpreted among Disneyland employees and staff. This directly relates to my research and experience as Red Apple Cafe attempts to instill that our staff is like a “family” in which we must work together to achieve business goals. Smith also identifies how Disney management’s definition of “family” differs from how their employees may define it, causing a lack of employee satisfaction.

Madlock and Dillow (2012) investigate how communication within the workplace can directly affect staff retention and job satisfaction among employees. In the article it is stated that ineffective communication such as verbal aggression can cause businesses to lose benefits from employee retention. According to the authors, verbal aggression is defined as “communication that attacks another person’s self concept and is considered to be an expression of hostility” (Madlock & Dillow, 2012, p.595). Additionally, the authors define verbal aggression as “verbal aggressive messages including character attacks, competence attacks, physical appearance attacks, malediction, teasing, ridicule, threats, and swearing” (Madlock & Dillow, 2012, p.595). This article relates to my narrative due to me witnessing and experiencing verbal aggression from both my manager and owners. Madlock and Dillow’s definition and examples of verbal aggression directly align with what I have experienced at Red Apple Cafe.

Holman (2018) discusses the struggles of LGBTQIA+ employees in the workplace. In the article, Holman addresses how employees belonging to this minority group experience minority stress that directly influences their mental health, job satisfaction, and job performance (Holman, 2018). Holman addresses how the majority of those who identify with this specific minority face discrimination within the workplace that prevents these employees from receiving respect, safety, promotional advances, and empathy (Holman, 2018). The article addresses discrimination, minority stress theory, and outcomes related to minority stress. This relates to my

narrative due to me identifying with the LGBTQIA+ community and dealing with constant microaggression and uncomfortability.

Berdahl and Moore (2006) discuss the dynamic surrounding women identifying with minority groups in the workplace. Women of color in the workplace experience the most discrimination and harassment compared to majority men, majority women, and minority men (Berdahl & Moore, 2006, p. 426). Women of color experience the most sexual harassment and ethnic harassment in the workplace (Berdahl & Moore, 2006, p. 426). This relates to my narrative due to me being a woman of color working in a predominantly white and male environment. The experiences that are addressed in the article are also experiences that I have faced in the workplace.

Elliot and Smith (2004) discuss workplace power among employees and staff in organizations. Specifically, the authors address employees that are women minorities and how the workplace power dynamic differs compared to white men employees. Their research identifies that the majority of all groups, excluding white men, face inequality in the workplace (Elliot & Smith, 2004). Elliot and Smith's work relates to my narrative in that I have experienced inequality and unfairness from my male boss. My boss, being a male, relates even more due to him treating his female employees less than compared to male employees.

Archival Data

Red Apple Cafe consistently attempts to sell the idea that their restaurant is a welcoming and family oriented environment. According to their website, they state that "We offer a family friendly atmosphere for breakfast and lunch options." (*Red Apple Cafe*, n.d.) On the website they also have pictures posted of their staff in which none of the staff members pictured work there any longer. The employees in the photo all quit abruptly or were fired during a shift. Red Apple

Cafe is attempting to use imagery to showcase a “family friendly” environment by showing the staff all together appearing happy when in actuality the employees pictured were miserable.

Based on the text and imagery presented on the website, Red Apple Cafe is trying to tell their audience that they value a welcoming and family oriented atmosphere.

Narrative

After working for a large franchise for over five years, I decided that I wanted a break from the corporate world as I did not agree with some corporate rules and expectations. Coming from a very popular restaurant, Texas Roadhouse, I did not agree with their work system, values, expectations, and management. Due to this, I decided to look into working at a smaller or locally owned business. I applied to four breakfast restaurants in Muncie all being small businesses. Before accepting my job position at Red Apple Cafe, I had no idea what the work dynamic would entail and consist of due to my lack of experience working for a small business.

When I first arrived at Red Apple Cafe to apply, the hostess did not have any formal applications. In fact, the hostess proceeded to give me a blank piece of paper and informed me to write down my availability, past work experience, and contact information and she would give it to the owner. This caught me completely off guard because I had never applied for a job before on a blank piece of paper. The manager approached me while I was filling out my application in one of the booths and asked if I wanted to interview. Again, I was completely thrown off by the casualness and hastiness of the application process. The manager did not ask many questions during the interview and offered me a position as a hostess immediately. She offered me a start date without a uniform, information of the company, expectations, or company values. I left my interview feeling very anxious and unorganized.

I learned quickly that Red Apple Cafe was very disorganized and thrived on casualness. My first day on the job was during the busiest day of the week in which all of the employees were frantically running around. No one had time to formally train me and I did not have time to meet any of my new coworkers. I basically had to train myself by observing and attentively studying the actions of all of the other employees. This made me feel like a complete outcast and gave me extreme anxiety and stress. It was even harder for me to learn and catch on due to them only having outdated technology. I came from a business where all the technology was updated and I was working closely with computer systems. It was hard for me to adjust to classic registers, hand written food checks, punch cards, and calculating tickets on my own. I was realizing very quickly that this new job would be significantly different from my past work experience.

After a month on the job, I began to understand the company's principles, goals, and overall work dynamic. Red Apple Cafe's entire atmosphere is unprofessional, disorganized, antiquated, and devoid of support and understanding for its employees. Valbona and Milsim, the proprietors, were always bickering in front of the staff, making everyone feel very uncomfortable. When speaking with personnel, Milsim, the spouse, is consistently unprofessional. He publicly humiliates Valbona and other colleagues, as well as flirting with some of the younger female employees. Milsim screamed at Valbona so loudly one busy Saturday morning that everyone in the kitchen had to halt what they were doing. "You foolish bitch!" he shouted. You're never able to get anything correct!" I wouldn't be surprised if guests had heard this as well. He called her names and cussed at her frequently, implementing a very awkward environment for everyone else working. When I first started working there, he did not properly introduce himself until I pulled down my mask so that he could "have a good look at

me.” We had a discussion about me being on the dance team at one point. I was delighted to tell him about my passion for dance, but he diverted our conversation in another direction. He responded with, “Can you come over to my place later tonight and give me a private dance lesson?” This comment caught me off guard, and I had no idea what to say. I just laughed it off and went about my business. I rapidly realized I could not trust him.

Milsim and Valbona's disrespectful and hostile dialogue creates a dynamic that keeps the workers on their toes and apprehensive throughout each shift. Milsim, on the other hand, is not the only one who contributes to this aggressive communication and lack of professionalism. Valbona also contributes to this when attempting to correct the staff. She regularly will send long, nasty text messages to our group chat about tasks she wants implemented or fixed. According to one of her texts she stated, “Everyone must charge guests for extra condiments. I am sick and tired of all of you guys being completely lazy and not caring about my business. The next time I find a check without the added charges, you will be suspended or fired!” Valbona’s abusive text messages calling me names and threatening to fire me are the last thing I want to see on my days off. Furthermore, these text messages are completely unprofessional, and I would imagine that instead of sending hateful text messages, managers would want to have a private conversation or maybe a staff meeting to resolve issues. Red Apple Cafe's owners and leadership have a history of engaging in disrespectful and confrontational communication that makes staff feel uneasy and disregarded.

Milsim and Valbona always approach the staff later after communicating angrily with them, attempting to soothe us by stressing that we are all a family and that families may become frustrated with one another. However, I could not feel less like a family. In my family, we do not aggressively yell at one another in stressful environments or confrontational situations. I feel as

if Milsim uses the metaphor of a “family” to excuse his aggressive and unprofessional behavior. In fact, I get the impression that Milsim is almost manipulating the staff into thinking that verbal and nonverbal aggressive communication is acceptable behavior. Milsim once screamed at me for not running food fast enough and subsequently called me into his office to tell me not to be upset with him because he considers me a daughter. This statement and explanation felt disingenuous and unapologetic. This did not make me feel better; rather, it perplexed me because I had never considered myself and Milsim to have a father-daughter relationship. My father would never talk to me or treat me like Milsim does in the workplace. Despite the fact that no one treats me like a family member, Milsim and Valbona are always attempting to instill the idea that the workforce is like a “family.” The idea of family is up for interpretation. To me, a family consists of a group of people that constantly support one another, genuinely care for one another, have healthy communication, and love one another. Although some of these points may be valid at times, the majority of them are not shared by the personnel and management. Overall, I am completely uncomfortable with the metaphor of a “family” that Valbona and Milsim attempt to instill within the staff. I feel as if management uses the metaphor to manipulate us into thinking that the treatment is acceptable and attempts to influence us to work better together. However, this metaphor does not influence the staff to work better together, but administers an unhealthy work environment and overall view of the staff at large.

The final and perhaps the worst aspect I had to endure while working, related to me being the only woman of color employed or even present in the whole restaurant. Not only am I a woman of color but also identify with the LGBTQIA+ community and have a very liberal political stance. This could not be further from the demographic of the restaurant. Majority of Red Apple Cafe’s employees and staff are white, heterosexual, conservative, and older. The

amount of times guests have asked me why I am wearing a mask was overwhelming. Besides that, there was a particular group of men that came every morning right when we opened. At this time, I was opening the store every morning and had to serve them. One of the guys, Bill, was always completely shallow, vulgar, and inappropriate. He continuously gave me a hard time while I served them. He would ask every shift when I was going to get a boyfriend or a rich man to take care of me. He once said, "Girl, when are you gonna let me take you out of this town and show you the world? You don't need to go to college. You need a rich man like me to take care of you!" I could not disagree more and at the time I was dating a woman which enhanced my discomfort. I never informed him I was dating a woman, and now that I think about it, I wish I had. I was honestly afraid of his reaction at the time, and all I wanted him to do was tip me and leave.

There were many incidents with Bill and his gang of friends. Another incident that I remember very clearly involved me talking about my future plans after college. I told them that I wanted to move out of Indiana and to a more diverse and inclusive area. Bill responded, "It is diverse in Indiana! What do you mean? You will have the same opportunities here as anyone else!" I again could not disagree more. He went on to add that because Indiana desires more diversity, I would have more opportunities than white individuals. He then expressed his dissatisfaction with the Black Lives Matter movement and expressed his want for black people to cease playing the victim. The worst part of the scenario was that Valbona was seated across from him at the table when he said it. She did not even respond or consider defending me. This was the most I had ever said anything about my values and perspectives, and his reaction taught me that I would not do it again. I instantly replied that I disagreed with him and went back to work. These experiences taught me to not speak up in the workplace about my personal viewpoints or

beliefs. The most frustrating aspect was that I did not feel comfortable discussing these concerns with my superiors. I had the impression that they would not understand, would only pretend to listen, and would take no steps to protect me or make me feel comfortable.

Discussion

Overall from all of these experiences I have discussed, I feel as if supervisors and management hold grave power in setting the tone for a workplace. A key principle of leadership is effective communication, which my management completely lacks. To me, verbal aggression in the workplace can be interpreted as blatant disrespect and completely unprofessional. I would never want to be talked to in the way that Milsim and Valbona talk to one another and the entire staff. It is important to not let emotion or frustration impact the way you speak to your employees or coworkers. In addition, I learned that businesses must try to create safer working environments for employees who are members of minority groups. When I was younger and working with a more diverse workforce and setting, I had not given this issue much thought. However, now that I am in an atmosphere that is anything but diverse, my viewpoint has completely shifted. As a manager, it is critical to make every employee feel safe and comfortable confiding in you about any problems or issues they are having at work. Your employees and employers are more than that at the end of the day. They are individuals who deserve to be treated with respect and to feel safe at work.

All of the situations and incidents addressed were all of my personal experiences and told from my perspective. Although all of my experiences represent my personal truth, this may not be the case for my coworkers and managers. My personal experience is coming from a woman of color that has completely different political views than the majority of the workplace. It is important to note that my coworkers' experiences and managers' experiences were not included

or addressed (i.e., Milsim, Valbona, and Bill). It would be useful to study this small business further in order to gather more research on verbal aggression, metaphors, and protecting minorities in the workplace. In order to draw any strong conclusions about Red Apple Cafe, more research on this particular organization is required. To confirm my findings, future researchers may conduct interviews or surveys with a representative sample of servers and management.

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