



## Suicide or Work-related Accident?

### Let there be no Ceremony between Us!

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A car burned. It was parked near a French manufacturing plant owned by a European head-quartered multi-national corporation. Inside the car was a former plant employee, Mr P.<sup>1</sup> He just couldn't cope any more. He had completely lost faith. He no longer had the will to keep going. For a split second, he might have hesitated. He may even have wondered whether he should take his own life, or go into the office and shoot the person responsible for the mess he had ultimately found himself in. He ended up flicking the lighter. Before long, both he and the car were engulfed by flames.

The Assistant Human Resources Manager at the plant was Kamel Amad. He had excelled in his studies at one of France's best-known universities and gone on to a career at the heart of this particular multinational corporation's French operations.

Some years into Kamel's time with the company, it had acquired a competitor of around the same size. The 'merger' which had been presented to the staff of the two companies in a very positive light, was, as is often the case, not really a coming-together of two equal parties. Problems and tensions mounted as efforts were made to 'integrate' the two companies.

As time passed, the company stance changed – along with the market conditions. The indicators were no longer so positive for product sales in the sector served by the combined entity. The board of directors decreed that cuts must be made in the company's operating budgets. Moreover, there was talk that some company businesses, or even some individual plants, could be sold off. At the very least, they were to be assessed and some made ready for possible sale.

The restructuring and cutback efforts affected all employees. Senior personnel visited the different company sites in each region. On the basis of their on-site analyses, they made recommendations about local staffing which were generally retransmitted as orders from company headquarters.

It was within this context, after the sudden departure of the former Assistant Human Resources Manager at the French plant, that Kamel was promoted to the position. He found himself in charge of staff development with some challenging cases in front of him. He had also been given particular duties relating to planned staff redundancies. To reduce costs, the business needed to become leaner, and some employees would have to be let go. Kamel had earlier met with Mr P to inform him of his dismissal.

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed to maintain confidentiality and preserve anonymity.

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**Kamel:** “Good morning, Mr De Saint-Just.”

**Mr De Saint-Just:** “Ah. Good morning, Kamel. Take a seat. You’ve worked out the reason for our meeting, I imagine?”

**Kamel:** “Yes, I believe so. It’s about Mr P, I presume?”

**Mr De Saint-Just:** “Yes, you’re right. It is about our former employee who you met with on Friday afternoon. It’s a terrible tragedy. How could we have known? The whole thing is a really sad story that should never have happened. It is dreadful – and right by our premises, too! It will cause people to gossip. Tell me, it is important that I know. The interview you had with Mr P before he left the company – it was carried out completely by the book, I suppose? There is nothing in particular that I should know about it?”

**Kamel:** “No sir, not that I know of.”

**Mr De Saint-Just:** “I didn’t think there would be. You do such good work, and especially with these difficult cases. Tell me, Kamel, you are happy with the responsibilities that we have given you? You have moved up the career ladder well lately. Our organisation likes to trust people, and we want you to trust us and feel good about the organisation as well.”

**Kamel:** “Of course, that’s natural.”

**Mr De Saint-Just:** “You know, this suicide could bring people out against our company - even though, of course, we are not responsible for it. A company occasionally has to do things that the majority of the staff just do not understand - or which are not easily understood by everybody at the time. Our work involves a kind of forward-thinking: we have to anticipate, and plan for the future. We operate in a tight market and it’s our job, sometimes, to implement difficult decisions which are handed down to us. It’s not something we enjoy - having to let good and loyal colleagues go. However, let us be quite clear, we cannot be held responsible for the psychological fragility of all of our staff. It may sound harsh, but that’s how it is.”

“I would like you to contact the family of the deceased to find out when and where the funeral ceremony will take place. It is important that the company is represented. I’m counting on you being very diplomatic in the circumstances, of course. You’ll need to meet with the public relations people to ensure the facts get relayed to the media in an appropriate manner. The press won’t be slow to try and find some juicy titbit in this story - that could appeal to certain people. Start work straight away on a proposal outlining how we can communicate this information and work with staff inside the organisation, so we maintain control of the situation. I’ll also let you have a file on this very sensitive subject.”

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Later on, Kamel went to the restroom. While he was inside the cubicle, he heard the main restroom door open, and then, after a short while, two men speaking.

-----“You know what happened yesterday. Everybody knew that guy was at the end of the road and couldn’t take any more. It’s totally disgusting to have gone on and pushed him over the edge. In my opinion, it’s not a case of suicide. It’s a workplace accident.”

----- “Do you think management will do anything now?”

----- “Oh yeah. You’ll see how well they put up a smokescreen. They will never tackle the problem head on. Management will deny responsibility. Denial’s one of the HR Director’s favourite management tools. You’ve seen De Saint-Just. He surrounds himself with young ‘yes men’. They know how the system works around here. What is worse, I doubt De Saint-Just realises how it really is for the staff. One day, a guy will have had an absolute gutsful and he’ll let rip with a gun. You’ll see, it will happen some time. They do it in the US. Why not here?”

The main door from the washroom to the corridor closed again. After a few seconds, Kamel came out of his cubicle, looked furtively at himself in the mirror and began to vigorously scrub his hands. He pushed the button, but the soap dispenser was empty.

That same evening, Kamel stayed a later at the office than he had expected. Mr De Saint-Just was also still there. He had been in meetings most of the day. Mr De Saint-Just passed by Kamel’s desk to say goodnight and to drop off the promised file, telling him to familiarise himself with its contents. Mr De Saint Just offered to talk over any related matters the next day.

After his boss left, Kamel looked over the contents of the large file. Apparently, this was not the first suicide – or attempted suicide - by a company employee. There had been other similar occurrences. There was also a letter from his predecessor about the problem. Mr P’s personal file was actually quite full. There were a good number of copies of officially-registered letters sent by the company to Mr P’s home address over the last few years.

Sometime thereafter, the company itself received an officially-registered letter. It came from the office of the attorney representing the deceased employee’s family. The letter advised that the client planned to lay formal charges against the company, which, in the client’s view, had an obligation to ensure the safety of salaried employees and protect their physical and mental health. The client claimed that the company had not carried out this basic duty of care.

Kamel anguished over whether or not he should still attend the funeral ceremony. If he did, what should he say? Could the company be held responsible for Mr P’s final decision?