

## **A Study Abroad Site Director Tells All**

Fred Ware

Valdosta State University

---

*Based on actual events, this case presents a number of incidents associated with the administration of a five-week study abroad program in France. It is seen from the perspective of a newly-appointed (at the last minute) site director, limited by inadequate time either to grasp the seriousness of the assignment or to engage in appropriate planning. The main character had expected to teach two management courses overseas rather than teaching while sharing administrative duties with a co-site director. The case follows selected thoughts and actions of the new administrator as examples of unanticipated events and unintended consequences, including some involving potentially serious repercussions, legal and otherwise.*

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

Dr. Evan Addison had received an intriguing if not disturbing voice mail message that morning early in May, but he decided to get a cup of coffee and think about it before replying. The spring semester was just winding down at the university and his mind had been on his two upcoming study abroad courses in Paris while he drove to work. Student recruiting had begun the previous fall, course planning was over, and now he was free to look forward to another enjoyable teaching and traveling experience in Europe. He smiled, remembering the enthusiasm of the students last year in London, especially the one young man who had summed up the five-week program as being "totally awesome!"

The voice mail from the international programs director was a request that Evan act as a co-site director of the study abroad program next month rather than serve exclusively as an instructor, as originally agreed upon well over a year ago. "That responsibility was not on my mind when I agreed to teach overseas," Evan thought.

"Why did you ask me, of all people?" Evan inquired of the international programs director when he finally made the phone call. "Well, you've taught overseas plenty of times and after all you're a management professor. You should be able to handle the job," was the reply. "With all of this post 9/11 stuff we think that the appointment of another administrator, even if part-time, will strengthen the program. We

really need your help. How about it, Evan?" pleaded the director. "It's not like reinventing the wheel, you know. We have all sorts of documented experience, there's a full-time co-director, and you can count on a lot of help from your colleagues." After checking with the department chair and dean, Evan agreed to assume this added responsibility. Little did he know what would subsequently happen, nor could he have ever imagined the many new incidents that would be available as management class examples one year from now!

## **1. MISSING AT THE AIRPORT**

How could it have happened? Each student had been assigned a flight number and given the name of a faculty member who would supervise a small group of students during the trip. Faculty had their lists and were to "take roll" at the Atlanta Airport. Upon arrival at Charles de Gaulle Airport, the rolls were to be checked again. Student Lindsay McLaughlin was nowhere to be found and repeated public address system paging in French and English did not produce her. Evan and the faculty were desperate. One hundred sleep-deprived, disoriented students were getting more and more unhappy with the missing Lindsay. "A great way to begin the overseas experience!" thought Evan. The pre-arranged buses were kept waiting and pressure mounted. Fortunately, the other co-director, Dr. Betty Walker, who spoke French, albeit with a strong southern accent, had arrived two days earlier and was able to calm the bus drivers up to a point. "They kept looking at their watches and frowning in an exaggerated manner," she told Evan later, "and I was beginning to lose faith in my ability to communicate!"

The mystery was eventually solved after a flurry of overseas telephone calls and many anxious minutes that seemed like hours. The student had innocently requested to be placed on a later flight with her friends, obtained an O.K. from the travel agent that morning at the airport, and had happily gone on her way. No one thought to tell the program administrators! "A procedural problem had nearly caused another heart attack," Evan reflected later.

## **2. BAFFLED BUS DRIVER**

Evan had taught in Paris before and had learned a lot about the city. The ride from the airport to their housing site was expected to take about an hour considering the traffic. He remembered an earlier European airport-to-site experience one July when the bus air conditioning had failed. Those were some unhappy students! To top it off that time, the stop for lunch was a disaster (no place to sit down, unknown food, long lines). Evan thought of the well-known behavioral literature on how important first experiences are when someone joins an organization. He wanted everyone to have a positive first day.

As the ride progressed, Evan realized that the bus driver was lost! He also knew that the French-speaking co-site director and the several instructors who spoke French were all on other buses. Did he dare try to tell the French driver that they had just missed the Boulevard Peripherique exit for their destination? He decided to back off and, although the driver took a U-turn and an eventual circuitous route, he sat back and enjoyed the sightseeing tour of Paris. "Life is too short," he reflected, "I can't worry about everything, and the students won't likely notice the mix-up."

### **3. ORIENTATION VS. JET LAG**

Evan's colleague Betty had arranged an after-lunch orientation meeting for faculty and students on that first day. "We have to at least give them the basics," she argued when Evan suggested a one-day delay. "Suppose they head off into the middle of the city as soon as they put their luggage away?" she continued. An experienced study-abroad site director, she explained to Evan that they "always did it that way." Evan recalled his own "out of body experiences" at such orientations in the past but did not argue since, after all, someone else had planned this whole program; he was just a last minute fill-in as co-site director.

Evan noticed that many students were missing as Betty, sans jet lag and highly animated, launched into what would otherwise have been a very informative list of do's, don'ts, and helpful hints about being in Europe, France, Paris, and the particular facility where everyone was housed. As might be expected, the sleepy audience was unresponsive. It was "information overload at its finest," he thought as his mind drifted to a list of things he needed to do for his first class field trip to a Citroen automobile assembly plant west of Paris. He wondered whether or not co-site directors in programs of this size should teach classes, too.

During the orientation session the French director of the entire physical plant welcomed everyone enthusiastically. His staff distributed copies of a (surprisingly thick in Evan's opinion) 8 ½ by 11 inch manual which covered all aspects of life at the facility. "Will they actually read this?" Evan whispered to one of the faculty members next to him. "No, but now they have no excuses when they goof up!" was the retort.

A few days later, Betty and Evan had to agree that most of the questions they had been fielding from students so far had all been covered in the orientation session. "You would think that they would pay better attention to such important material even if they had a little jet lag!" Betty exclaimed. "We can't pamper them. After all, they won't get pampered in the real world," she said with a disgusted look. "I guess

you're right, Betty," Evan replied, "but maybe there's a more effective way to get them started."

#### **4. AN IMMEDIATE DISCIPLINE DILEMMA**

The students soon found the closest general merchandise store to their facility but it was not especially handy if one were transporting large containers of water, soft drinks, beer or whatever. The logical solution (to them) was to "borrow" a grocery cart. However, before the current group of American students arrived, Betty had noticed two abandoned carts in the alley so she made a special point during the first week to prohibit such use. Three fraternity brothers from Evan's institution were stopped by Betty doing exactly what she had outlawed. "We were honestly going to return the cart, Dr. Addison," explained student Eddie Cobb later. "It's just too far to carry all of this stuff." Betty was livid. "They deliberately disobeyed the rules," she exclaimed. "These guys attend your college, Evan, so you are responsible for their behavior!" Evan had not really put much thought into disciplinary issues beyond flagrant violations such as drug use. Then, to say that he was responsible for "his" students caught him off guard. "Boys will be boys, Betty," he responded. "Don't be so up tight. They were going to return the cart. They weren't stealing. Maybe your unilateral decision to outlaw the use of carts was out of line, and I don't appreciate your blaming me for the behavior of those students!" The incident made Evan wonder about the whole site director role. "Am I going to spend all of my time being a policeman?" he thought. Meanwhile, Betty was having her doubts about Evan as an administrator. "He took sides with the students," she reported to the program director by e-Mail. "How can I get him to help me handle disciplinary issues?" Evan received a terse e-Mail from the director insisting that he should consider misbehavior of students more seriously.

#### **5. STUDENT WANTS TO GO HOME IMMEDIATELY**

Evan's co-site director Betty was beside herself and it was just the second day of the program. "David King has telephoned his parents and gotten their permission to return home!" she moaned. "He doesn't like it here because 'there's not enough space to store his clothes' and the food 'tastes funny.' On top of that he claims that you told him to 'shut up' when he was on the plane!" Evan tried to recall the incident. "I do remember an especially annoying guy who did nothing but complain on the flight," he said. "As a matter of fact, none of us could get any sleep and well, I guess I did sort of lose my temper. That kid must be spoiled rotten if his parents are going to let him come home after they've spent all of that money!" he added. "You know that they won't get a penny back" Betty replied. "They are the kind who will probably sue you, me and everyone else associated with the program," she went on. "Why did I ever agree to be an administrator?" Evan thought aloud. Later that day,



Evan, courteous beyond reason, politely escorted David to the airport and sent him on his way home. He heard later that the program administrator had indeed rejected the parents' request for a refund and he wondered if and when the lawsuit would start.

## **6. SEXUAL HARASSMENT**

"May I speak to you in confidence, Dr. Addison?" asked student Barbara Thomas. "Of course, Barbara," replied Evan, putting down the map he was examining during a field trip. They were on a train en route to Tours in the Loire Valley because Evan wanted everyone to see at least one castle after touring a manufacturing plant. The exact wording of Barbara's opening greeting was not what got his attention; he just knew that she had a question and she was a student in one of his classes. "Well, you can't say a word to anyone about this," she said with a note of anxiety in her voice, "but Professor Smith is acting funny towards me. Like, he stares at me in class and says stuff about my looks. He makes me feel nervous and I think he's coming on to me." Barbara was now speaking in a low voice and looking over her shoulder to be sure that no one else could hear. The train noise was enough to insure privacy, but Evan knew that he now had a major issue on his hands; any inkling of sexual harassment should be reported up the chain of command, but this student was begging him to keep it quiet. All she wanted was his advice.

"Tell him that his behavior is offensive to you, and to back off," Evan suggested. "Maybe you can do it in a way that implies that perhaps he didn't really mean anything by his behavior but that it makes you feel uncomfortable." Barbara was obviously nervous about saying anything to the offending instructor. "But Dr. Addison," she responded, "what about my grade in his class? He is already scaring most of us by giving hard tests. If I make him mad, he might flunk me!" "That is unlikely, Barbara," Evan replied. "Dr. Smith surely has more sense than to do that." Barbara, still with a worried look, thanked Evan for his advice and moved back to her seat on the train.

Evan made what he later knew was a serious mistake by saying nothing to anyone about the incident. The offending faculty member mentioned some time later to Evan that he wondered why Barbara was acting so cold toward him and not participating in class any more. Evan bit his tongue, placing the female student's trust and sincere request for confidentiality above everything else.

## **7. THIRSTY STRANDED STUDENT**

Dr. Addison! Dr. Addison! Wake up!" came the frantic voice through Evan's door. "It's Eddie! He missed the train!" Evan opened the door to find three overwrought

students whom he recognized as the ones who had decided to travel to Spain over the weekend. It was now 3:00 a.m. on Monday. "What happened?" Evan asked, rubbing his eyes. "The train stopped for just one minute," Mary Patterson explained, "they warned us not to get off unless it was our destination. You know Eddie," she went on, "he said he could easily make it to a vending machine and back before the train pulled out, and that he was dying of thirst." "Yeah, but he didn't make it!" chimed in Lucian Henderson, "and worst of all he left his backpack, passport, and wallet on the train!" "Where were you at the time?" Evan asked the group. They named a small village in southern France. "We didn't use the high speed TGV because it wouldn't fit our weekend plans," said the fourth student, Lindsay McLaughlin. "Our train stopped at least a hundred times before we got back to Paris!" Evan told them to get some rest and not to panic. In Evan's opinion, Eddie was a very resourceful young man in spite of his propensity for mischievous behavior.

Evan waited until a more civilized hour to call Betty on her mobile phone. He pictured Eddie sitting dejectedly in the train station and wondered what he himself would do under such circumstances. On getting the news, Betty telephoned the police in the village, and sure enough Eddie was sitting tight, awaiting rescue. She made arrangements to get him back on the train somehow explaining in French about the Eurail pass. Evan was relieved to see Betty handling everything, and grateful for her language expertise. Betty told him that the student kept the Paris site emergency telephone number in his wallet which of course was left on the train. Later, he and Betty tried to come up with some kind of policy or procedure which might help students avoid this sort of problem. "We just can't think of every possibility, Betty. Life goes on; what can I say?" mused Evan.

## **EPILOGUE**

On the flight home Evan felt a great sense of relief. Despite these and many more incidents than space would allow for inclusion, he fully intended to prepare a debriefing report for the benefit of those following him in the future. "I wonder if anyone will really be interested," he thought. After all, the venture had been extremely successful, students were already raving about how much they learned and how much fun everything had been. "I guess the wheel will keep on being reinvented," he surmised to himself. "Now it's time to get back on track and get the fall semester course syllabi drawn up. I'll just have to document those lessons learned whenever there is some spare time."

### **Additional Readings**

- Adler, Nancy J., (2002) *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior*. (4th edition). Canada: South-Western Thomson Learning, 263-4.
- Brotherton, Phaedra. (2001). "Study Abroad Conference Addresses Security, Safety Issues." *Black Issues in Higher Education* 18, no 20. Nov. 22, 12-13; Scharman, J. (2002). "The Extended Campus-Safety Abroad." *New Directions for Student Services*, no 99, 69-76, Fall, ERIC #EJ653425; and The International Task Force on Safety and Responsibility in Study Abroad. (2001). "Responsible Study Abroad: Health and Safety Guidelines," *Community College Journal*, Feb/Mar, 28-29.
- Dessler, G. (2003). *Human Resource Management*. (Ninth edition). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Kreitner, R. and Kinicki, A. (2001). *Organizational Behavior*. (5th edition). New York: Irwin McGraw-Hill, 84-87 and Bauer, T., E. Morrison, and R. Callister. (1998). "Organizational Socialization: A Review and Directions for Future Research," *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, 16. Stamford, CT: JAI Press, 149-214.
- Krueger, Roberta L. (1995). "It's *Not* a Sabbatical!" *Academe*, September-October, 32-40.
- Lineberger, Patricia and Faley, Robert. (1981). "Sexual Harassment: The Employer's Legal Obligations." *Personnel* 58, November-December, 60-68.
- Nelson, T. and Ornstein, S. (2002). "Preparing for the Unexpected: Managing Low Probability, Disruptive Events in Student International Travel Courses." *Journal of Management Education* 6, no 3, 259-72
- Schermerhorn, J. and Chappell, D. (2000). *Introducing Management*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Young, Jeffrey R. (2002). "When Trips Abroad Go Bad." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 49, Issue 6, p A49, 2p, 1c, 10/4.