SAVING PRIVATE GONG

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Top Solution Data provided Information Technology (IT) support to global companies. The Chester Chemical support department had several full-time employees and a few contract-to-hires. Those contract employees were brought on board through a temporary agency. Chris Peterson and Brian Chang were full-time employees, and Gong Lee was a contract employee for the night shift. Gong was a valuable employee for the team, but Gong seemed to be quite distracted one night. Even when Chris and Brian asked him about his problem, Gong refused to talk about it. With further questions, Chris found out Gong's problem and tried to help him.

"Hey! What's wrong?" Chris Peterson[4] asked a question to his coworker, Gong Lee, from his depressed look on his face. It was early fall in 2015, and the night shift was pretty quiet at that time.

"Uh. I am ok." Gong replied shortly.

With that serious look on Gong's face, Chris sensed something went wrong. Chris sent a quick short message to Brian Chang, another coworker covering the night shift. "Hey, have you talked to Gong? What's going on?"

Brian replied, "Yeah, I asked him, but he didn't answer much."

Chris asked Gong again, "Hey, Gong! It's ok! It's just us. Tell us what's going on?"

Brian added, "Yes, We want to help." Gong refused to talk about it, but he could not focus on his work.

Chris decided to give him some space but sent a note to Gong for assurance. "Hey, Gong. If you don't want to share it, that is fine. Just tell Brian or me if there is anything we can do, ok?"

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[4] All names of people and companies have been disguised.

Next week, Gong finally shared his concerns with Chris and Brian. Gong said, "I don't have enough money to pay the rent for this month." Chris and Brian were surprised by his answer. Gong did not show any elaborate consumption, so it seemed odd that he didn't have enough money for his rent. Chris and Brian thought that they need to ask more questions to Gong about what was really the issue.

THE CHESTER CHEMICAL SUPPORT DEPARTMENT

Top Solution Data offered technical support and provided Information Technology (IT) services for industrial networking products and applications to mid-size to global companies around the world. Top Solution Data created a new department to support Chester Chemical and its global branches. Chester Chemical was a chemical engineering company, headquartered in Texas, and focused on industry-grade chemicals for construction and pharmaceutical industries. Chester Chemical had over 5,000 employees in eight branches in the U.S. and around 500 employees in four branches located in Asia and Europe.

Full-time employees were hired through the Top Solution Data recruiting team with a special hiring process, and the contract hires were brought on board through a temporary agency as needed. To provide 24/7 technical and remote support, the Chester Chemical support department started with 70 employees divided into two teams for a day shift and one team for a night shift. The day shift supported U.S. branches, and the night shift supported global branches in Asia and Europe. There was an extended hiring process for managers and team leads. Thus, the Chester Chemical support department had eight supervisors, two managers, and one director.

THE NIGHT SHIFT AND MANAGEMENT.

Due to the large call volume and demands from the Chester Chemical U.S. branches, the majority of employees were working the day shift. The night shift team had seven full-time employees, and two contract-to-hires working in the office. As most employees were working for the day shift, most supervisors and managers worked for normal business hours. As a matter of fact, it was rather challenging to find and maintain a manager for the night shift because of the shift hours from 7 pm to 7 am.

The night shift also had a manager at the beginning, but a manager would not stay more than three consecutive months. The first manager was fired due to overpaying someone who had a relationship with him. The second manager worked for two weeks and went back to Microsoft. The third manager had medical issues, so he could not work at night. The fourth manager just left without any reason. However, during this on and off manager period, the night shift employees could take care of most issues without intervention. They did not have the call volume or major issues

like the day shift had. Indeed, management did not see hiring a manager at night as a huge priority.

In the night shift team, six employees covered the Chester Chemical global branches in Europe in the English queue, and three employees covered the Asia support line in the Chinese queue. There were six to seven employees who worked during the weekdays, but only two to three employees worked during the weekends. All employees should have worked in the office, but telecommuting was also allowed for some occasions (e.g., bad weather). Top Solution Data emphasized "teamwork" and "team-building" ever since the Chester Chemical support department had started. Thus, when there was any problem or issue, anyone could ask questions to other team members for support. If the issue was not critical, the night shift team members could resolve most issues by themselves. It was a very rare occasion to get help from management. Thus, the night shift mostly worked with a day shift supervisor, Steve Lowry. There was not much direct interaction with the management, but the night shift employees communicated with Steve through emails to report when any issue came along.

GONG IS IN TROUBLE

It was Friday when the night shift tends to go slow. There were only three employees covering the night shift: Chris, Brian, and Gong. Chris was covering the English queue for global branches in Europe, and Brian and Gong were covering the Chinese queue for Asian branches.

Chris Peterson was one of the initial members of the night shift team with six other full-time employees. He had a wide range of knowledge and experience in the field for over ten years. Thus, when there was an issue or problem, the night shift team members would ask him for assistance, and he also enjoyed helping his coworkers. When the night shift team would finish and leave the office, the day shift employees would start coming to the office. Chris would stay a little longer and meet the day shift manager or supervisor. He would have some face time for casual conversations. At the same time, Chris would work as an advocate for the night shift, and relay any issues that the night shift team had for the night, or request things that needed attention. Chris was very good at recognizing other people's feelings. He was sensitive to other's feelings, and he could understand and be empathetic to others.

Brian Chang was also one of the initial members of the night shift team. He was born in China, but came over to the U.S. when he was five years old. He spoke fluent both English and Mandarin. He had a college degree in IT and had been working in the field for over eight years. Top Solution Data was his second job after

working at another IT company for six years. He had four children at home, so they kept him busy, but he would be willing to support and help his coworkers with many issues. Especially, Brian and Gong had a similar work schedule, and they had been covering the Chinese queue together for a while. When it was not too busy, they would talk to each other in Mandarin from time to time.

Gong Lee was one of the contract-to-hire employees and worked in the Chinese queue in the night shift. He was born in China and moved to the U.S. during his high school year. He was a Mandarin native speaker and also spoke advanced level English. He was in his early 20's, and the contract-to-hire job at Top Solution Data was his first job. Gong did not have much experience in the field, but to build up his expertise, he was studying for a Bachelor's degree in Information Technology at the same time. Gong would ask questions related to his task from time to time, but he was a fast learner. He was very attentive in details for his job, and very well organized. In general, he was pretty quiet, but he got along well with everyone on the shift.

Both Chris and Brian worked closely with Gong. As they worked more hours together, they became good colleagues and friends with each other. Thus, on that Friday night, it was not difficult to sense something went wrong with Gong. Gong would not share his personal problem with others or talk about his emotions in detail. However, it was pretty obvious something was really bothering him. Chris could sense that from his look, and had to ask him what the issue was. Chris waited until both queues were quiet, and checked on him. Brian spoke to him in Mandarin to encourage him, but Gong refused to talk, and his distressed look stayed through the whole night.

On the next week Friday, when there were only Chris, Brian, and Gong were working again, Gong finally opened his mouth and shared his concern. It was related to the financial situation that he didn't have enough money to pay rent for the month. Gong felt ashamed to share his personal problem, but he really needed help. "I can't pay for this month's rent. I don't have enough savings." Gong's concern made Chris and Brian surprised quite a bit. They would not imagine Gong would have spent his bi-weekly salary unwisely and suffer to paying a monthly rent. Since Gong shared his problem, Chris and Brian decided to ask a few more questions.

THAT NUMBER DOESN'T SOUND RIGHT

"So, how much do you need?" Chris and Brian asked. Gong answered hesitantly, "$400. I am short just about that amount. I had to buy textbooks for three courses for this fall semester. I will try to save my lunch money for this month and pay it back to you, but the rent is due in a few days. Please help." Chris and Brian thought they could help Gong that much. They thought that it should not be too difficult to pay them back. At the same time, they wondered why Gong would be stressed out over that amount of money.

Chris remembered the conversation with the IT operations director Jensen Varga the other day. The dayshift would get paid $19 per hour, but the night shift paid more for the shift differential. All full-time employees for the night were paid $23 per hour with full benefits (e.g., time off, medical benefits) from Top Solution Data. On the other hand, contract employees got paid through the temporary agency. Jensen told Chris that Top Solution Data paid $28 per hour to the temporary agency, then the agency would pay to the contract to hires about $18 to $20 per hour, which was not including the night shift premium. When Chris heard $18 to $20 per hour for the contract employees, he thought it makes sense because the contract employees do not get the full benefits like full-time employees. That amount Jensen mentioned did not include the night shift differential, so Chris assumed that Gong would get paid at least $22 to $24 per hour.

Chris asked, "Do you mind if I ask you how much you get paid per hour?"

Gong answered, "I get paid $14 per hour." Chris and Brian looked at each other in surprise. They got shocked to find he was paid only a small amount for what he did for the job.

Chris said to Gong, "Is it really true? This doesn't sound right. I will talk to Jensen next week when I see him. Would that be ok?" Gong nodded with a concerned look.

Chris was angry at the temporary agency. It was because the temporary agency did not follow the policy, and he also felt like the agency was stealing money from Gong. He was also displeased with Top Solution Data for not making sure that their payments to the temporary agency were properly sent to the contract employees. Chris considered Gong was a good coworker, a friend, and a valuable teammate.

IT IS TIME TO SAVE GONG!
After a night shift on Monday morning, Chris went to talk to the IT operation director, Jensen Varga. Jensen had the highest rank in his division, so he was in charge of managing temporary agencies. Jensen also had an open-door policy so

that employees could bring up any issues. Chris was somewhat nervous to talk to the highest rank director, but he believed Jensen would be the person who can resolve this type of problem.

"Hey, Chris! What's up?"

"Good morning, Sir! How are you? Did you have a good weekend? Did you play any golf this past weekend?"

"Sure, it was pretty good. I have a friendly tournament with friends of mine from out of town. Did the night shift go well for the weekend? What's up?"

"Actually, that is what I came to your office to talk about. There seems to be an issue with Gong's pay. I was wondering if you could look into it."

"What seems to be the trouble?"

"Gong said he was only getting 14 dollars an hour. I was under the impression that contractors made more than we did because they do not have any benefits. Since you have oversight for the contract-to-hire agency, could you look into the issue and see if they are paying him correctly?"

"Ok. I will call them and see what's going on today. You can come back tomorrow morning."

Chris visited Jensen's office the next morning again. "Good morning, Sir? Any update from the agency?"

"Hey, good morning! Yes, I called the agency yesterday. Basically, they said that never happened. They denied the low pay."

Jensen shrugged his shoulders and continued, "Well, there is not much I can do at this point. Sorry about that."

Chris was disappointed and still got angry but had to leave Jensen's office. He was somewhat embarrassed, but he had a strong feeling that something was wrong. On his way home, Chris was thinking about what he should do next.