



## Power and Disempowerment: The manufacture of an accident

by Liz Rider

An Extraordinary Departmental Management Meeting had convened the week before to discuss the urgent need for a new leadership role within the smallest unit in the company. With no resources to recruit a new member of staff, the committee agreed that the role would be presented to the team as an ‘opportunity for any ambitious individual who wanted the experience of leadership. That ambitious individual was Jess.

Today, as she walked through the park to work, it seemed to Jess that the grass was greener and the sun brighter. The smell of the coffee drifting over the park railings seemed to herald a new chapter in her career. She had been hardly able to sleep the night before, imagining how she would break the news to her colleagues. She would tell them that she would ‘lead from the heart’; but be the ‘captain of a tight ship’, she would ‘work 24/7’ to make sure that the team were supported, and she would always make sure that she kept a ‘window in her busy calendar’ for ‘open door’ meetings.

She arrived into the shared office and sent meeting requests to the team. No one responded. No one congratulated her. At 5 o’clock, Barry, from admin support, put his head round the door, and sneering, he said: “so you’re the big boss now then Jessie”? She felt hurt and uncomfortable.

By the end of the week, Jess had an update meeting with Geoff, her line manager, but she hadn’t got anything to report. Geoff was kind about it: “I’m sure things will change when you have managed to speak with them all and they get used to the idea”, he said, supportively. But Jess continued to meet with resistance and productivity was poor. To make matters worse, the team had witnessed her increasing lack of confidence; and whilst she was afforded pity, she was blamed.

To Jess's humiliation, Geoff stepped in and took control of the team. She felt paralysed; she had been given responsibility, but no power to make decisions, and no authority to request anything from her colleagues. She so regretted taking this role. Management too, were regretting their decision. They realised too late that this had been an accident waiting to happen and Jess collateral damage.

Jess's unproductive little unit was eventually disbanded, departments were merged and the team re-deployed. The management team, by happy accident, were all promoted. Jess's brief sojourn into 'leadership' however, ended. In future, Jess thought as she emptied her desk, I will be careful.