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Context Matters

"Without context, words and actions have no meaning at all." - Gregory Bateson

When Sam applied for the Pastry Chef position, Chef Antonio knew she'd be a great fit. Sam brought a lot of experience, having won several awards over the years, including being named ACS Pastry Chef of the Year Award in 2019. While Sam had to relocate to Barrington, North Carolina, Antonio knew she'd fit right in as the area has an up-and-coming foodie scene.

The pay for this position wasn't great, but Sam had ambitions of being an Executive Chef and Antonio knew his Sous Chef was a few years from retirement. The club also had plans to expand outdoor dining as a result of the pandemic. Sam would have plenty of opportunity to grow and could one day be running her own kitchen here in the Seafood Capital of the World.

Sam was living in Manhattan Beach, California, when she applied for this position, having been furloughed at the start of the pandemic. When she saw this position online, she applied, thinking relocating wouldn't be a big deal. She was ready for the challenge if offered the job. After a few phone interviews, and an interview via Zoom with Chef Antonio, James, the club's General Manager, and Robert, the Board President, she was offered the position. After taking a few days to consider, she happily accepted and started packing. She was nervous, but excited for the opportunity.

By the time Sam got to North Carolina, the club was starting to get busy. The weather was warming up and golf rounds were through the roof. Upon arrival, Sam was given a full tour of the property, including all 3 dining rooms. At a private club, especially in the South, a lot of local restaurants would place a mint or perhaps a chocolate chip cookie on the table when presenting the bill at the end of a meal. At Arlington Golf & Country Club, the chef took a complimentary cookie to the next level, offering a Dark Chocolate Ganache Tart. Sure, this comes at a price, but food and beverage at Arlington is subsidized by dues, so the cost has never been an issue. It was always about the experience at Arlington Golf & CC.

After Sam hit the ground in Barrington, her landlord informed her the air conditioner was broken and he would need to call in a repairman to fix the issue. This made things tough on her having moved to North Carolina at the beginning of the summer along with her dog Rover. Without AC, Rover would need to be walked several times a day and Sam needed to make sure he had food and water, especially on those days Sam was working late. In private clubs, the staff goes home when the last member goes home.

Because of this, Sam had to take a lot of extra breaks throughout the day. She lived close to the club, but there were times where a member would stop her and talk or she would get stuck in traffic and not be back in a timely manner. This all started to wear on Chef Antonio. Sam had just moved to North Carolina. Why did she need to take so many breaks?

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Sam also had trouble making friends when she moved. She didn't know anyone in Barrington, spent most of her free time at the library trying to hone her craft, and worked 60+ hours every week trying to make an impact on her new boss. She was a good chef, but felt like she was hitting a wall when she tried to experiment with the recipes that Chef Antonio had given her to implement. There wasn't much room for error. One night, when preparing the complimentary tart for Mr. and Mrs. Byerly, Sam decided to make a white chocolate ganache tart, not the traditional dark chocolate. "What could be the harm?" she thought.

When Antonio found out about this, he felt disrespected. He approached Sam, "What in the world are you doing? White Chocolate? We don't serve that in MY kitchen. You can take the rest of the night off and don't you ever mess with the recipes you've been trained to make in my kitchen ever again. Do you understand me?" Sam was in tears as she took off her chef coat and went home.

A few weeks went by and the Byerly party was back in for dinner. At the end of the meal, the waitress presented the check and 2 freshly baked Dark Chocolate Ganache Tarts. Mr. Byerly pushed the tart aside, smiled, and said, "Thank you, ma'am, but can you have Sam whip up a White Chocolate tart for me, please?" The waitress went back to the kitchen and informed Antonio of the member's request.

Sam was in the corner of the kitchen kneading dough when she overheard the exchange. She kept her head down, smiled and knew in her heart that even though Chef Antonio was upset with her decision to "break the rules" and offer up something a little different, she was confident in her cooking skills and was glad to know the members not only liked her dessert, but were now requesting it.

After her shift, Chef Antonio pulled her aside and apologized for how he had reacted a few weeks prior. He decided to use Sam's recipe for the White Chocolate tart and now offer members and guests the choice at the end of each meal. Sam went home smiling ear-to-ear that night.

When Sam got home, she was surprised the AC was working again! There was a note on the kitchen counter from her landlord, "The repairman had a last minute cancellation and was able to get your AC fixed. Hope it is cool enough for you and your puppy!"

Sam took a risk when she went against Chef's recipe. But it worked out. Now that the AC was fixed, Sam wouldn't need to leave the club throughout the day. She will use this extra time asking questions and learning more from Chef Antonio. Sam also scheduled a weekly meeting with Chef and began sharing more of her personal life with him so he didn't look up and wonder where she was. Sam had never worked for a chef like this before, but over time, she was able to learn more about what he expected. She wasn't going anywhere, as she had plans of being an executive chef. And Chef Antonio helped get her there.

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Hopefully this story teaches you about communication, specifically having empathy for your fellow co-workers. Had Chef Antonio known that Sam's AC was broken, he might not get mad when he looks up and she's not in the kitchen. But Sam could have also shared more about what was going on at home with her boss. Had Chef known that Sam and the Byerly family had a great relationship and Mr. Byerly had mentioned his love for white chocolate many months ago, he might not have reacted the way he did when Sam "went against his recipe" that evening.

The Chef was out of line for yelling at her like he did, and he knows that. This is just one example of how not having context can produce added stress for the associate and the management. Hopefully this story will encourage you and your team to spend more time together, more time communicating with each other and be more willing to share the good and the bad with each other.

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