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# YOUNG, SUCCESSFUL, AND IN THE WRONG JOB?

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*What happens when you land a job that puts you years ahead of your peers but suspect you may have made a career mistake?*

At 27 years of age, **David Lee**'s career was in hyperdrive. Lee had just been appointed the Singapore Country Manager of NZ Foods, a family-run flour mill based in Christchurch, New Zealand. Lee would be in overall charge of the Singapore office which generated US\$8 million dollars in sales in the last financial year.

For someone who started from the bottom of the FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) industry as a merchandiser, Lee had a simple recipe for success: "Look sharp, work hard". "You must have the look of a leader, the confident aura – and then you should work harder than anyone else," Lee adds recounting how his frequent market visits to check on stores had given him the opportunity to grow his contacts and increase his visibility.

## DAY 1: ONWARDS AND UPWARDS...OR NOT

Lee had been hired to replace 60-year-old Charles Lai, who was retiring. Lai's tenure would be up in a month but was scheduled to for a two-week vacation, leaving Lee just two weeks to get up to speed with his new job and the four staff under his charge: Accounts specialist Ginny, sales admin specialist Mindy, Marketing communications specialist James, and logistics manager Bobby.

On his first day at work, Lai, instead of showing Lee the ins and outs of the business, showed him a pile of files and told the younger man that all he needed to know was in them. He then left for an off-site meeting. Ginny and Mindy were occupied while James was out for an appointment. Bobby was on medical leave. Lee read through the files and understood what the documents were about but needed an explanation on the who's and what's. After repeated failed attempts to reach Lai he decided to visit NZ Foods's distributor, SYF.

Upon arriving at SYF's warehouse, Lee saw very few cartons of goods belonging to NZ Foods, and those he did see were either returned or spoilt. He confronted SYF's sales manager about what he saw and was promised an answer into the condition of NZ Foods's stock.

## **DAYS 2 AND 3: HAVE I MADE A MISTAKE?**

The next morning, just as Lee was stepping into the office, he bumped into Lai rushing out. Lee was about to ask Lai about the work processes when Lai excused himself to attend another meeting. The rest of the morning at the office was fruitless once again. Everyone was busy and Bobby was still on medical leave. He called SYF to follow up on the previous day's conversation but was met with a request for more time. Lee gave the distributor one more day to get back to him. The rest of the day, Lee spent visiting supermarkets to check on their products. Lai could not be reached once again.

The third morning saw Lai absent from the office. It seemed that he called in to say that he was unwell. Bobby was still absent. He called SYF as the deadline had expired, but the sales manager could not be reached on his mobile phone or the office phone.

Lee sank into his chair. He had many questions but no answers. In frustration, Lee banged his fist on the table, startling everyone in the office.

Ginny walked over and asked him if he was all right. Lee took this opportunity to explain all the roadblocks he faced in the past few days. Ginny listened intently, as if she was digesting every bit of complaint that had presented to her. As she turned to leave, Ginny spoke gently, "David, drinking coffee is very important. So very important." And without another word, she went back to her desk.

Lee ruffled his fingers through his hair. What does drinking coffee have to do with his problems? Why the cryptic message? Why was everything going so wrong? Was he in the right job? Perhaps he should just give up and go back to his previous company. He was certain that his former boss would welcome him back with open arms. After all, he had hardly started work with NZ Foods. His reputation would still be salvageable if he cut his losses early on.