

**W16165**

**SOMEBODY STOP THE RADIO STAR: JIAN GHOMESHI AT THE CBC**[**1**](#_bookmark0)

*Karen MacMillan and Meredith Woodwark wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.*

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A burning heat wave had been hammering much of North America in July of 2012, but it was not the sun that was making two particular managers feel the heat in a meeting room at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in downtown Toronto. Six employees of the radio show *Q* had requested a meeting with Arif Noorani, executive producer, and Linda Groen, the director of network talk radio, to discuss their unhappiness with their work situation. The employees had prepared for this session by holding a series of secret meetings[2](#_bookmark1) at a restaurant far from their workplace so they could document their concerns about working on the CBC arts and culture radio show *Q*, a broadcast that had become almost synonymous with its 45-year-old on-air host, Jian Ghomeshi. The clandestine meetings to document their complaints and plan how to present them to management had been code-named “Red Sky,” a dab of dark humour that riffed on another type of CBC meeting in which participants were asked to engage in “blue- sky thinking,” by generating big ideas and offering their free-flowing opinions. *Q* staffers characterized the sky as red when they built this presentation because they intended to tackle the problem of how stifled and difficult the *Q* work environment had become. They were finally going to let people know that in this workplace, the sky was anything but blue.[3](#_bookmark2)

**THE CBC**

The CBC was Canada’s national public broadcaster, responsible for delivering radio and television services, including news and entertainment programming across the country in both official languages, and through its website.[4](#_bookmark3) According to CBC’s president and chief executive officer, Hubert Lacroix, the CBC’s mission was “to express Canadian culture and enrich the democratic life of [the] country” and to be a “socially minded organization” in all its activities.[5](#_bookmark4) The CBC projected a strong, positive reputation,

1 This case has been written on the basis of published sources only. Consequently, the interpretation and perspectives presented in this case are not necessarily those of the CBC or any of its employees.

2 James Bradshaw and Greg McArthur, “Ghomeshi’s Staff Complained About ‘Culture of Fear’,” *The Globe and Mail*, November 6, 2014, accessed May 17, 2015, [www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/ghomeshis-staff-complained-about-](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/ghomeshis-staff-complained-about-) culture-of-fear/article21473254/.

3 Ibid.

4 CBC/Radio-Canada, “Mandate,” accessed February 26, 2016, [www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/en/explore/mandate/.](http://www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/en/explore/mandate/) 5 CBC/Radio-Canada, “Social Responsibility and Public Value at CBC/Radio-Canada,” accessed August 1, 2015, [www.public-value.cbc.radio-canada.ca/.](http://www.public-value.cbc.radio-canada.ca/)

and few outsiders would have predicted that its employees would characterize any part of the CBC work environment as being toxic. On paper, the CBC seemed to be “a model of employer enlightenment.”[6](#_bookmark5) Posters were everywhere in the CBC building, offering stressed-out employees the phone numbers for dedicated helplines run by people who were available to offer support. The CBC had training programs and formal policies and procedures in place to ensure employees felt safe. As one example, every employee was required to take an annual 90-minute online course that focused on instilling respect in the workplace. And the training seemed to be working — not one formal sexual harassment complaint had been lodged in 10 years.[7](#_bookmark6) The CBC was, by most accounts, an exceptionally progressive workplace.

**THE HIT RADIO SHOW *Q***[***8***](#_bookmark7)

The CBC department that produced the hit show *Q* seemed like it should have been a particularly enjoyable place to work. The radio show, which aired twice daily across Canada and through 160 American stations, featured interviews with well-known entertainment figures and cultural celebrities. In contrast to some of the stodgy programming that had been traditionally associated with the public broadcaster, *Q* epitomized the CBC’s efforts to become more “hip” and to appeal to a younger audience. It was the show that CBC leaders were using to change the organization’s brand to one that was more popular and accessible to mainstream audiences. With Ghomeshi as host, *Q* had achieved incredible ratings. As the show gained popularity, Ghomeshi began to be promoted and was soon accepted as the face of CBC radio. Due to its popularity, the show even expanded beyond radio to a TV-like broadcast on the CBC website (*Q TV*) and a dedicated YouTube channel, making Ghomeshi’s name and image even more recognizable.

**JIAN GHOMESHI**[9](#_bookmark8)

A singer and drummer from the 1990s’ moderately successful folk-pop band [Moxy Früvous,](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moxy_Fr%C3%BCvous) Ghomeshi had made the move to broadcasting when, in 2002, he auditioned to host the late-night arts and culture show *Play*. Although he had no education or experience as a journalist, and initially did not even know how to read a script, he won over CBC brass with his charm, personality, and dark good looks. From 2002 on, Ghomeshi was involved with several CBC programs, but his star really took off in 2007, when he helped create and then host the radio show *Q*. His soothing velvet baritone voice underscored his persona of a warm, enlightened, and impossibly sensitive modern man. His lapel always sported the right ribbons, and he seemed a personification of the CBC platform of equal rights, multiculturalism, and respect. He had a way about him that led both his celebrity guests and his audience to feel comfortable and welcomed within his orbit. Most *Q* guests seemed to open up to him, leading to compelling interviews that found an audience even outside of Canada. Ghomeshi was the consummate performer and was frequently invited to host prominent arts and culture award shows. The CBC had made Ghomeshi a Canadian arts and culture star.

6 Anne Kingston, “Busted: The Toxic CBC Environment That Abetted Jian Ghomeshi,” *Maclean’s*, December 10, 2014, accessed May 7, 2015, [www.macleans.ca/news/canada/busted-the-toxic-cbc-environment-that-abetted-jian-ghomeshi/.](http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/busted-the-toxic-cbc-environment-that-abetted-jian-ghomeshi/)

7 Ibid.

8 Anne Kingston, “Jian Ghomeshi: How He Got Away with It,” *Maclean’s*, November 6, 2014, accessed May 10, 2015, [www.macleans.ca/news/canada/jian-ghomeshi-how-he-got-away-with-it/.](http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/jian-ghomeshi-how-he-got-away-with-it/)

9 The information in this paragraph is based on Anne Kingston, “Jian Ghomeshi: How He Got Away with It,” op. cit.

**TROUBLE AT *Q***

Most of the dozen or so predominantly young and female staff on Ghomeshi’s show saw a very different side of him. Although he was not officially the boss of *Q* staffers, because he was “the talent,” he treated the show as his “fiefdom.”[10](#_bookmark9) While he could be friendly one moment, staff alleged he would turn hostile at the smallest provocation. If a staffer disagreed with him or criticized him, he reportedly would play “mind games,” freezing them out for days or weeks by not answering emails or not returning calls, making it impossible for them to do their jobs.[11](#_bookmark10) Employees alleged that those who fell out of favour would be yelled at, berated, humiliated, and have their work picked apart.[12](#_bookmark11) Staff reported that calls from Ghomeshi came at all hours,[13](#_bookmark12) that he readily took credit for others’ work,[14](#_bookmark13) and that his mood swings and tirades would regularly leave staffers in tears.[15](#_bookmark14) Ghomeshi was chronically late, and staff members said that everyone’s schedule had to move to fit his whims.[16](#_bookmark15) He was perceived as flirting widely in the workplace, and made some staff members uncomfortable by sharing unsolicited personal details about his sexual preferences and activities.[17](#_bookmark16)

Finally, the six *Q* staffers decided to speak up about their perceptions so they could fight for a better work environment. They met, off-site and in secret, for weeks to plan their “Red Sky” presentation. They wanted to show Noorani and Groen that the working conditions at *Q* were poor, and that Ghomeshi’s mistreatment of staff was widespread. With respect to Ghomeshi, the “Red Sky” document made two specific complaints. Firstly, it stated, “decisions are often made in the interest of the host, without regard to the team’s opinions and feelings.”[18](#_bookmark17) Secondly, it stated, “Staff members are often held at the whim of the host. If we don’t do what he says, we will be punished in some way.”[19](#_bookmark18) No single employee dared to take on the role of spokesperson; instead, the employees decided ahead of time that they would take turns presenting in groups of two as a sign of solidarity.[20](#_bookmark19) They hoped that by speaking together, their voices would be loud enough to make the leaders see the real Ghomeshi, and not just the on-air persona he presented.

**A PREVIOUS COMPLAINT**[21](#_bookmark20)

What the presenters of the “Red Sky” document may not have known was that at least one other woman had tried previously to speak up about poor treatment from Ghomeshi, but she did not get very far. In 2010, Kathryn Borel, a twenty-something *Q* producer, spoke to Noorani several times about problems she experienced while working with Ghomeshi. According to her, Ghomeshi subjected her to uninvited back massages, grabbed her behind, and even thrust his pelvis up against her. Sometimes he would stare at her while she worked, slowly unbuttoning the top buttons of his shirt and grinning. But that was not all. She

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 James Bradshaw and Greg McArthur, op. cit.

*14* Janice Rubin and Parisa Nikfarjam, “CBC Workplace Investigation Regarding Jian Ghomeshi,” April 13, 2015, accessed May 12, 2015, [www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/\_files/cbcrc/documents/press/report-april-2015-en.pdf](http://www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/_files/cbcrc/documents/press/report-april-2015-en.pdf)

15 Ibid.

16 Anne Kingston, “Jian Ghomeshi: How He Got Away with It,” op. cit.

17 Janice Rubin and Parisa Nikfarjam, op. cit.

18 The Globe and Mail, “Q + Work Culture,” 1, accessed May 5, 2015, [www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/article21473769.ece/BINARY/Read+the+Red+Sky+document.](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/article21473769.ece/BINARY/Read%2Bthe%2BRed%2BSky%2Bdocument) 19 Ibid., 2.

20 James Bradshaw and Greg McArthur, op. cit.

21 The information in this section is based on Kathryn Borel, “Jian Ghomeshi Harassed Me on the Job: Why Did Our Radio Station Look the Other Way?” *The Guardian*, December 2, 2014, accessed May 12, 2015, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/02/-sp-jian-ghomeshi-sexual-harassment-cbc-ignored.](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/02/-sp-jian-ghomeshi-sexual-harassment-cbc-ignored)

said, “There was emotional abuse, too: gaslighting[22](#_bookmark21) and psychological games that undermined my intelligence, security, and sense of self. Sometimes that hit harder than the physical trespassing.” Borel found Ghomeshi’s treatment of her to be personally debilitating. Over time, as a reaction to the stress of the situation, she found herself binge drinking on the weekends, gaining weight, and suffering from depression so severe that she would sometimes miss work just to lie in bed all day.

Although she found the workplace to be toxic, Borel did not register a formal complaint outside of her department because, as she later stated, “I feared for my job and my career: getting asked to be part of the original production team behind *Q* was the biggest break I’d ever had.” After several years and the repeated urging of a friend, Borel finally resolved to bring her concerns to a representative from her union. She recalls, “I had no intention to sue, or to get him fired, or even to have him reprimanded. I just needed him to stop.” She sat down with the union rep, and for about 30 minutes carefully detailed her experiences with Ghomeshi. The union rep listened, but took no notes. After she finished her monologue, he had one key question: Was she interested in filing a formal complaint with the union? The idea of confronting Ghomeshi directly was terrifying to Borel. She knew who would win if it came to a clash between the high-profile talent of the show and an easily replaceable producer like herself. Like the other *Q* staffers, she worked on a renewable year-to-year contract. Thus, her job security was always low, even without a messy conflict associated with her name. It was very easy for the company to get rid of her. Not prepared for the ramifications of an open confrontation, Borel declined to file a formal complaint. Instead, she agreed with the union representative’s suggestion that he meet informally with her boss, Noorani, to inform him about what was happening. However, she had little hope that this plan would accomplish much, because she had already complained about Ghomeshi to Noorani several times, and nothing had changed. But no other choice was offered.

Within a day or two, the union representative did speak to her boss, and afterward Noorani asked Borel to come to his office to chat with him privately about the situation. As she had expected, the executive producer had no new solution to offer her. All she heard was that Ghomeshi was not going to change, and that she was the one who had to adapt and learn how to cope with him. She came out of the meeting beaten and with a sense of futility.[23](#_bookmark22) For three years, from 2007 to 2010, she had put up with a work environment she had considered to be toxic, and she did not know if she could do it anymore. Shortly afterward, she decided to take a leave of absence from the show, and ultimately resolved to build a career elsewhere. She submitted her resignation to the CBC and moved on.

Although the results were clearly disappointing for Borel, it may be that Noorani had few options himself. As executive producer of the show, he had a title that signified authority over both Ghomeshi and the staffers; however, the actual power he held over Ghomeshi was, in practice, likely quite modest. Ghomeshi had the backing of CBC executives, including his mentor, Chris Boyce, who was the executive director of CBC Radio and boss of both Noorani and Groen. Boyce was leading the efforts to attract a younger demographic to the CBC, and the *Q* show was intricately connected to this purpose. Boyce’s considerable clout meant that the show and its star host were to be protected. Thus, if Noorani wanted to be considered good at his job, he was under pressure to keep Ghomeshi happy, rather than in line. In fact, Noorani had landed his job by replacing a person who had been fired for not meeting Ghomeshi’s demands. As stated by one *Q* staffer, “You get along with Jian, or Jian would get you fired.” Lines of authority were also blurred because Noorani was a member of the same union as Ghomeshi *and* the *Q*

22 The term *gaslighting* refers to mental abuse, whereby information is twisted to favour the abuser with the intent of having victims doubt their perceptions and memory.

23 James Bradshaw and Greg McArthur, op. cit.

staffers. Thus, the union representatives that were ostensibly there to protect the staffers were also charged with protecting both Noorani and Ghomeshi.[24](#_bookmark23)

As Borel later commented:

[The] system that obsessively propped up Jian Ghomeshi needs to change. He is one disgusting man — but our public broadcaster, demoralized over long-running budget cuts and criticisms that it was out of touch with the public and its younger listeners, latched on to him as their savior and clearly didn’t want to let go. The CBC allowed a two-tier workplace to emerge, in which Ghomeshi didn’t have to comply with either the law or workplace norms as long as he kept pulling in listeners, and workers like me only had job security so long as we accepted his abuses of authority.[25](#_bookmark24)

**A CALL TO “STIR THE BEAST”**

After Borel’s departure, Ghomeshi’s problematic behaviour apparently continued, prompting six of the remaining employees to eventually bond together to take a stand. As the presenters of the “Red Sky” document outlined their issues, they called for Noorani and Groen to dare to “stir the beast” and rein Ghomeshi in.[26](#_bookmark25) As they saw it, something had to happen to correct an “unsustainable” workplace culture that was driven by an ongoing and pervasive fear of being punished for not satisfying Ghomeshi in every way.[27](#_bookmark26) They wanted the leaders to serve as intermediaries between themselves and Ghomeshi, and to hold him accountable when he punished staff or acted inappropriately.[28](#_bookmark27)

As the last of the six staffers finished their portion of the “Red Sky” presentation and sat down, a hush came over the meeting room. Everything was finally out on the table. All of the presenters knew that they had taken a risk in speaking up, but they had found the courage and the deed was done. Now it was time to see how Groen and Noorani would respond.

Knowing they faced some difficult choices, the two managers contemplated their options. Groen and Noorani shifted in their seats as the employees waited expectantly to hear their response.

24 The information in this paragraph is based on Anne Kingston, “Busted: The Toxic CBC Environment That Abetted Jian Ghomeshi,” op. cit.

25 Kathryn Borel, op. cit.

26 The Globe and Mail, “Q + Work Culture,” op. cit., 2.

27 Anne Kingston, “Busted: The Toxic CBC Environment That Abetted Jian Ghomeshi,” op. cit.

28 The Globe and Mail, “Q + Work Culture,” op. cit., 2.