



CASE STUDY

Give Your Colleague the Rating He Deserves—or the One He Wants?

by Anthony J. Mayo, Joshua D. Margolis, and Amy Gallo

HBR's fictionalized case studies present problems faced by leaders in real companies and offer solutions from experts. This one is based on the HBS case study "Ramesh Patel at Aragon Entertainment Limited" (case no. 412042-PDF-ENG), by Anthony J. Mayo and Joshua D. Margolis, which is available at [HBR.org](https://hbr.org).

THE KICKOFF

"You're always reliable," Nisha Nayad said to her colleague Mark Cruz as she entered the meeting room.

"I got here a minute ago," Mark replied, smiling as he opened his lunch. They both looked at the clock on the wall and laughed.

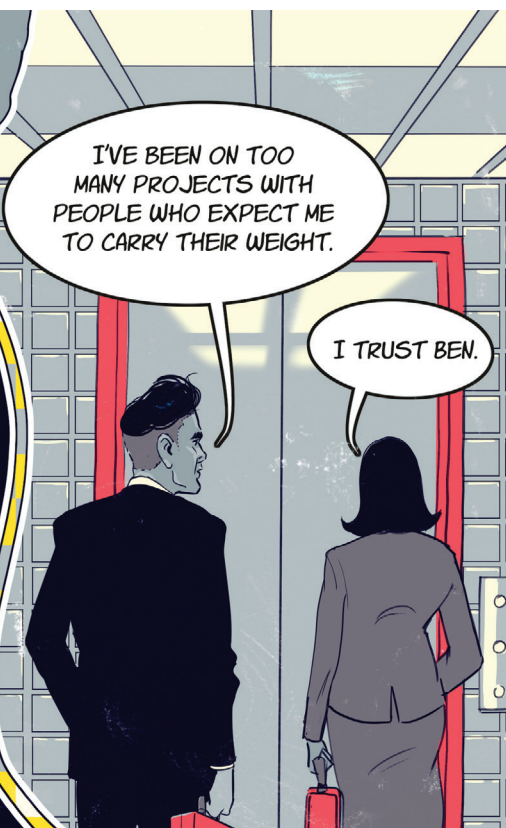
"I think we're the only two people at Ness who show up early," Nisha said. "Glad you're on this team."

Punctuality wasn't a big part of the culture at the gaming company Ness Entertainment,¹ so it didn't bother Nisha that her coworker Ben Lassner still hadn't arrived by a few minutes past noon. The three of them didn't typically work together, but they were about to. As members of Ness's Innovation Board, a group

selected from across the company to work directly with the executive committee on developing recommendations for line extensions and new titles, they'd been given a new, highly visible assignment—one that Nisha, a business development associate director, was excited about.

She, Mark, and Ben had huddled quickly a week earlier to lay out a work plan for analyzing customer data and the competitive market for one of Ness's hottest games, Sokontia, so that they could choose an appropriate follow-up story line and the timing for a sequel.

Nisha was happy with both her teammates.² Mark, an associate director of marketing, had an excellent reputation. And Ben, a quality control engineer, had been a friend since they'd met



during new-employee orientation. They still got together for lunch every few months, and because they were at the same level in different functions, they often traded notes and advice about their work at Ness.

At 12:10 Ben walked into the room, apologizing. “It’s already been a day. A week, really. We’ve been doing QC on Knight Days,” he said, referring to one of Ness’s older products, which was about to release a new version. “And I forgot we were doing lunch. Let me go grab my food. Feel free to start without me.”

When he returned, Nisha began sharing what she’d found in her initial review of the customer data on Sokontia. “It’s clearly filling a void,” she said. “The story line is a hit, and although the graphics get some mixed reviews,

I think there’s potential for an early extension.”

“I agree,” Mark chimed in. Because he was in marketing, he had taken on the initial task of reading through user reviews from influencers. “A few reviewers are already talking about what a 2.0 might look like. Did you see the PDF I sent with the highlights?”

He turned his laptop toward them to show the file. Nisha had read it carefully the night before.

“When did you send this?” Ben asked, squinting at the screen.

“Wednesday,” Mark replied.

“Oh, right,” Ben said, taking a bite of his sandwich. “We just need to see how this all overlays with the usage statistics.”

“Exactly,” Mark said. He nodded expectantly, but Ben kept eating. Nisha was confused. They had agreed that Ben would do the initial analysis on those statistics.

“You didn’t look at usage?” Mark asked, a slight edge to his voice. “Or read through anything either of us sent?”

“Not yet,” Ben admitted.

“I guess let’s get you up to speed then,” Mark said tersely.

Nisha was annoyed too, and she wondered whether she should say something. Ness’s HR department was big on peer feedback. At the urging of the CEO, Martine Skoll, the company had rolled out two initiatives aimed at getting people to be more honest and direct with one another: first difficult-conversations training,

and then an app that allowed employees to submit ratings and short snippets of feedback directly to teammates on their performance.

Toward the end of the meeting Nisha gave herself a mental pep talk and asked Ben, as calmly as she could, “Why didn’t you do what you said you’d do?”

He flinched a little, but he’d been through the training too, so he probably knew he was supposed to engage without getting his hackles up.

“I dropped the ball. My bad. The day after I found out about this project, I was put in charge of the QC push for Knight Days. It’s consumed me and my team. We’ve been understaffed since May. I won’t show up this unprepared again. Promise.”

Ben left, and Nisha walked with Mark to the elevator. “I’ve been on too many projects with people who expect me to carry their weight,” he said. “We’re not letting that happen here.”³

Nisha agreed with Mark but also knew that Ben was probably in a tough spot. His boss had a reputation for holding her team to an extremely high standard. And didn’t everyone miss deadlines occasionally? Ben had never been unreliable when they’d worked on small projects together in the past. So she wasn’t worried—not really.

“I trust him,” she reassured Mark. “He’ll keep his word.”

“He’d better,” Mark warned.



Case Study Classroom Notes

1. The global video game industry had revenues of more than \$130 billion in 2018, with mobile games being the fastest-growing and largest segment.

2. What are the benefits—or the downsides—of being on an ad hoc team, in which members often have no prior agreement on how to collaborate?

3. “Social loafing,” when a team member disengages from the group’s process and fails to contribute to its work, is a common phenomenon.

Experience



4. What might Nisha have texted to Ben at this point, rather than silencing her concern?

5. Many peer feedback systems, such as JetBlue's Lift program and Hershey's Smiles program, favor positive recognition over constructive criticism.

6. Experts recommend including three things when giving feedback: a concrete description of the behavior, its impact, and who was affected.

NO SURPRISES

Three weeks later Nisha was on the train with her laptop open. During her 45-minute commute home, she always tackled a single task. Today it was the presentation for the executive committee. She, Mark, and Ben had met three more times and had put together what Nisha felt was a strong analysis and an aggressive recommendation. When the Innovation Board met with the executive committee the following Monday, the team was going to suggest launching an extension of Sokontia as soon as possible, on a faster timeline than the company had ever previously managed.

She had agreed to pull the presentation together for the team by the next day. She was just waiting for Ben to send his last two slides.

She refreshed her email at 5:40 PM, and seeing nothing from him, texted, "Any update?"

He'd promised to send his slides by end of day. He texted back immediately: "So sorry. If I send you the rough data, can you produce the slides?"

Nisha took a deep breath. She really had thought he would come through. She typed, "No, I can't. Can u stop being an idiot?" But then she deleted it. She didn't want to do anything to jeopardize her chances of impressing the executive committee. Even though Ben deserved a lashing for how much he'd slacked off on this project, she couldn't get into a fight with him now. And her slides would be better anyway.

She texted, "Sure. Send it."⁴

"I owe you one," he replied.

You sure do, she thought.

Nisha's thoughts quickly turned to the new peer feedback app. At the previous month's Innovation Board meeting, HR had announced that everyone was expected to use it after the next

round of projects. So Nisha would have to rate both Ben's and Mark's performance soon—on a scale of 0 to 5—and she'd be rated by them.⁵ It hadn't come up in their meetings, but it was on her mind—and probably theirs, too.

On the train now, she fantasized about pressing the 0 next to Ben's name, but then she felt guilty. He was her friend. And HR had said that there should be no surprises in the ratings, meaning that teammates should share feedback along the way so that people could either improve or know what numbers to expect.⁶

She texted Ben again: "Can we talk for a minute? I'm going to call you when I get to my stop."

When he answered the phone, he was apologetic. She interrupted him: "It's OK. I mean, it's not OK, but I wanted you to know that I'm frustrated, and I feel like I've been covering for you—"

"It's just that my other work—"



“You’ve said that several times.” Nisha was intentionally being short. She didn’t want to sugarcoat her feelings about this.

Ben was quiet for a minute. Then he said, “I’m really appreciative of everything. And I hope you know I’d do the same for you.”

I doubt that, Nisha thought. And even if you would, I’d never ask you to.

That night she sent a quick note to her mentor from her last job, Dennis Hodges: “Can we meet tomorrow? I need your advice.”

TO BE HONEST

The next morning Nisha met with Dennis at a diner near his office and explained what had happened during the project.

“It’s not like I did all of his work,” she said, “but when he got in trouble with deadlines, I definitely finished some of what

he’d started. The other team member, Mark, has been annoyed too, but he hasn’t picked up Ben’s slack as much as I have.⁷ That’s on me. I didn’t have to do any of it, but I want this assignment to go well. And it will. I’m confident we’re going to knock it out of the park on Monday. We’ve done the analysis, we’ve got the data, and our recommendation is bold.”

Dennis smiled. “I have no doubts. So what are you thinking?”

“I’m most nervous about this peer-rating system. If I were being honest, I’d probably give him a 2.”⁸

“What’s holding you back?” Dennis asked.

Nisha had to think about that for a second. “It doesn’t feel like it’s entirely his fault. He’s had a lot of other commitments and a ton of pressure from his boss. And we’ve known each other since I started at Ness.

So I’m worried about putting a low rating on his permanent record—especially since Mark told me he’s giving him a 3. Ben’s tough and would probably recover. But he might also hold a grudge.”

“Have you spoken directly with Ben about this already?”

“Yes, several times.”

“So,” Dennis said, “I would give him the rating he deserves.”

JUST ONCE

On the morning of the presentation, Ben asked Nisha to meet him at the café down the street. She assumed he wanted to go over his slides, since she knew them better than he did at this point.

“I just wanted to thank you again for everything,” he said. “I’ll admit that I almost feel bad about my name being on there.”

Nisha knew that the polite thing would be to protest, but she



7. Why might men and women respond differently to teammates who aren’t doing their share?

8. Does Nisha know what her purpose is in giving this feedback? Experts say that having clear intentions improves the quality of feedback, the openness of the recipient, the durability of the relationship, and the value of subsequent discussion and learning.

Experience

bit her tongue. They sat there awkwardly for a moment.

"It's really been a tough few weeks," Ben said, trying to break the tension. Nisha nodded.

"I would understand if you rated me poorly on the feedback thing, but I hope you won't," he continued. Nisha suddenly realized why he'd asked for this meeting—and paid for her coffee.


"If you were in my shoes, I'd have your back and give you a 5, or at least a 4," Ben said.

"I haven't decided what I'm going to do," she answered truthfully.

"Everyone has bad days."

"We've been working on this for *weeks*," she said, realizing that her tone was getting sharp.

Ben's voice got testier too. "You know what I mean. My boss will freak if I get bad ratings. And I know Mark's giving me a 3. If you give me a 5, it'll balance out. I know I don't deserve it, but I'm hoping you can do this for me, as a friend. Just once."

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What rating should Nisha give Ben, and what should she tell him? THE EXPERTS RESPOND



DAN GOLDENBERG is an executive at Activision Blizzard and leads the *Call of Duty Endowment*.

In the gaming industry, cross-functional, short-term ad hoc teams are common.

In that environment you have to collaborate with new colleagues quickly and easily. This won't be the last time Nisha faces a group dynamic like this, so she needs to figure it out now.

She has various tools at her disposal; the peer feedback app isn't the first one she should use. She needs to begin by talking to Ben—much more candidly than she has before.

I'm a military veteran. In the service we sardonically call tools like this app "peer spears," because they often hurt colleagues and don't necessarily improve their performance. Nisha might need to use it eventually—for example, if Ben won't listen to her perspective and commit to preventing similar problems in the future. But especially because this is the first time he's let her down, she should have an in-depth conversation with him before giving him a low rating.

During that talk Nisha needs to take on the role of peer mentor. A tactic I like to use with colleagues is the Five Whys, an iterative technique that helps get to the root of a problem. For example, Nisha might ask Ben, “Why weren’t you able to meet your commitments?” (“Because I’m too busy with my job.”) “Why are you too busy with your job?” (“Because my team is understaffed.”) “Why are you understaffed?” (“Because my boss hasn’t prioritized hiring.”) “Why hasn’t your boss prioritized hiring?” And so on. Ultimately she would arrive at an action item for Ben—such as talking to his boss about getting more resources—that doesn’t involve her, their project, or the rating but boosts performance, for both of them and for Ness.

Another option is to include Mark in the conversation with Ben. Although that might feel more confrontational, there is strength in numbers, with both Mark and Nisha emphasizing that a high-performing environment like Ness (or like Activision Blizzard, where I work) has no room for people who don’t pull their weight. By backing each other up, they might deter Ben from dismissing his part in this problem.

At a previous company, I managed two people like Ben and Nisha. I was starting a new business unit and had a lean team with very aggressive deadlines. I noticed that one of my analysts was working extremely hard and was exhausted. When I talked with him about it, I learned that he was disproportionally picking up a colleague’s load. Ultimately, after several frank counseling sessions, I let the slacker go, because it was clear that he’d expected a less-demanding job.

I don’t recommend that Nisha go to her manager now. I think problems should always be solved at the lowest possible level in an organization. She can retain it as an option down the road, but for now she should go the more direct route. The rating system is meant to encourage candor, and you can’t have high performance without that.



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I agree with Nisha’s mentor.

Nisha shouldn’t give Ben a rating he doesn’t deserve. He knew from the outset that he would be strapped for time, yet he stayed involved and didn’t carry his weight. Now he’s trying to manipulate her into giving him a score that he didn’t earn. She needs to stand her ground.

Sometimes we give people a pass: for a death in the family, a challenge with a child, or an ongoing divorce. But this doesn’t seem to be the case with Ben. He isn’t the only one with a heavy workload, and he should have bowed out if he thought he couldn’t follow through on his commitments. The fact that he and Nisha are friends doesn’t mean she has to go easy on him.

Of course, it wouldn’t be fair to give him a low rating without providing context. As a coach, I don’t like to use 360 evaluations that ask for numbers only. I prefer to do stakeholder interviews in which I ask everyone who works closely with a leader for examples, stories, and nuance behind the feedback. Nisha should be direct with Ben: “I’m giving you a 3 because...” and then list the things he failed to do.

She may fantasize about giving him a 0 (and he may deserve it), but I would advise against anything less than a 3, because Nisha played a role in enabling his behavior. She should have set clearer boundaries and expectations up front and emphasized the impact that his contribution (or lack thereof) would have on his rating. For example, during that first meeting she could have said, “This is going to take a lot of time, and we’re going to be rating one another on our performance. Are you sure you have

the capacity to do this?” That would have clarified her thinking on the peer feedback system and might have preempted his later asking for the “favor” of a soft rating.

That wasn’t the only time Nisha failed to speak up. In several instances she considered telling Ben what she was thinking but didn’t. Next time she should trust her instincts. She doesn’t have to be harsh, but she should have the confidence to be more direct, especially with a colleague who is a friend.

Now Nisha should point out that what Ben has asked for isn’t right. She might say, “Do you think this is fair to me?” He should realize what an uncomfortable position he’s putting her in.

As someone who specializes in diversity and inclusion, I note that Mark doesn’t seem to worry about his low rating of Ben. Research shows that women are often expected to be nurturers, which makes many of us hesitant to anger others or potentially damage relationships. Nisha should resist this mindset. She’ll perpetuate the stereotype and possibly carry resentment, neither of which helps her.

Throughout my education and career I’ve encountered many people who just don’t contribute as others do on projects. It isn’t always easy to say something about it, but I’m usually pretty forthcoming. And although I’ve gotten blowback on occasion, I know things would be worse if I didn’t speak up.

Nisha wants to support Ben because he’s a friend. But if he felt comfortable asking his colleague to cover for him and complete his work, he lacks judgment and self-awareness. So, as his friend, Nisha should point this out rather than enable his shortcomings. If he can’t respect her holding her ground, she should also question whether this friendship has any value. ☹

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