

Confessions by Telephone

The semi-annual external financial audit was due. At the same time, we had to deliver a semi-annual report to the donor. Into this emerging stress, Taufiq, the accountant, explained that his doctor had ordered him to take a quarter off immediately. Taufiq showed no signs of burnout. Another ailment that would have required such a spontaneous and long-term recovery did not yield to our imagination. But whatever the doctor had said, such a vacation was out of the question. For OFARIN, the accountant Taufiq was now indispensable. A substitute was not available. We sent Asmat, a woman, and Harun, a man, to do the bookkeeping. Taufiq was to train the two of them. Before Asmat and Harun knew their way around, there was no thought of taking a vacation.

When Taufiq was alone with me, he admitted that he had made a terrible mistake – his marriage. He had married a good year ago. Now, he said, his wife was having trouble bearing children. She always loses the fruit early. He called a gynecologist in Peshawar. This one told him that he could not assess the case over the phone. His wife would have to come to Pakistan and he would have to come with her. There she would have to rest before anything else. In the worst case, the woman would have to remain under medical supervision for three months. Aha, so that was how it was.

After a good two weeks, we considered Asmat and Harun to be settled enough for Taufiq and his wife to travel. Two weeks later, he was already back. His wife had to keep quiet and lie down a lot, he reported. So, it was not all that bad. We left Asmat and Harun in the accounting department. Taufiq was now working as a trainer.

Half a year later, one weekend, Harun came to the office and showed me some books. They were from the time when Taufiq was an accountant. Why was Harun taking care of what his predecessor had done? It had come to this: There were rumors among the staff that notebooks had been bought for our students at an overpriced price. We looked into the matter and asked Ferusa, the storekeeper, when notebooks had been bought recently and at what prices. This year, notebooks had been bought only once, and twice the year before. In order to avoid mistakes, Ferusa asked Harun to check whether there had been other purchases of booklets in the past. Therefore, Harun searched through documents from the time of Taufiq's responsibility.

In the process, he had come across the booklets that he now showed me. 180 blackboards and 180 blackboard stands had been purchased, 200,000 pieces of blackboard chalk and some more, all spread over four entries. The total value of the purchases equaled about €10,000. Harun had asked Ferusa if she had included these items in the stock. She had not. 180 blackboards would never have fit in our storerooms either. The purchase was dated two days after Anne Marie and I left for home leave. Akbari, Ferusa's brother, signed as the responsible buyer.

Every month, I receive a duplicate electronic version of the journal, which lists all financially relevant events. The original journal is handwritten. The electronic list no longer contains some information that is still in the original. For example, the numbers of school boards and chalk pieces were not there. When one goes through the list of purchases at home on vacation, such reduced information does not necessarily cause offence. But now the bills with all the numbers were in front of me. I was no longer indifferent to the incident.

This was a case of fraud. The purchase had never taken place. The papers were forged. Either Akbari had cheated or Taufiq had. It could not have been anyone else. We asked Taufiq why he had not asked Akbari for the details of such an expensive purchase. Actually, it is not the accountant's job to check the prices of purchases. But with such magnitudes, he has to ask. Taufiq claimed that Akbari wanted to buy a plot of land at the time and was therefore under stress. One could not have talked to him. He would only have reacted snottily. So, he preferred not to ask.

Of course, Akbari also denied any blame. The other colleagues, Anne Marie and I - no one knew what to do. But did we have to find the truth at all? Am I the lead investigator of OFARIN? No, I have to keep our organization free of bad guys. That task was accomplished when I dismissed Akbari and Taufiq.

More fruitless questioning followed. I actually decided to dismiss Akbari and Taufiq. As we parted, I explained to them that one of them would be dismissed without blame, while the other was not only guilty of stealing from our organization and ultimately from Afghan schoolchildren. He was also to blame for the fact that the other colleague was now unemployed. The one who is burdened with this double guilt should talk about it with his family or his mullah. I would be very happy if one called me after a few days and told the truth.

Two days later it called: "I am Akbari. I wanted to admit that it was me. I forged the papers." I was overjoyed and praised him for taking this step. He offered to work for OFARIN without pay until his debt was paid off. I was not prepared for this proposal. It seemed impudent to me. I vehemently refused. Later I saw everything more calmly. Akbari deserved a concession after his confession. The staff would keep an eye on him. He could not afford any more fraud. And it was no disadvantage for OFARIN to have someone working for free for over two years.

Two days later, I called Akbari and invited him to come to the office that weekend. He agreed.

A good hour after that, Akbari phoned again. He had a problem. He was under a lot of pressure from his sister – Ferusa, our storekeeper – and his mother. Akbari's father was no longer alive. His mother and sister blamed him heavily. He should never have admitted the fraud. You don't do things like that. It was nonsense to work for free for more than two years. He had enough of the looted money left to go to Germany and seek his fortune there. The pressure from his mother and sister is very strong. He did not know if he would be able to repeat the confession.

I calmed him down and reminded him of the appointment for next Friday. There we could talk undisturbed.



When he came on Friday, I again expressed my appreciation to him for coming to the guilty plea.

"To what confession of guilt? I have nothing to confess." – I told him that he had called me, after all, and admitted that he had falsified the receipts. – He said, he hadn't. – I showed him the telephone number from which he had called. – He did not know it.

Now it was enough. He had caved in to his mother and sister. I told him to leave. He didn't have to come back. And he should tell his sister that she could stay home, too. We would call her later.

Over the next few days, I didn't feel any better. I wandered around the office and talked to various colleagues. Our female colleagues were also concerned about the story. When I mentioned to them that Akbari had probably bought a plot of land with the money, the women clarified that this was not the case. The question of buying the land had already been settled half a year before the fraud. Akbari's family had refrained from buying a plot of land at that time. They were living in rented accommodation. Akbari had therefore no motive for a fraud.

Now Taufiq also phoned and claimed that Akbari had called him. Akbari had admitted to him that he had committed the fraud together with his sister. That was implausible. Why would Akbari admit anything to his opponent, of all people?

I took a deep breath and went through the whole story again. Suppose Akbari had committed the fraud! Then he must have presented the falsified receipts to Taufiq, the accountant, for expenses of around €10,000. Wait a minute! Where did Akbari get all that money for the purchase? Normally, larger purchases are discussed within the team. Then those who are to make the purchase go to the accounting department and ask for an advance. There is then also a receipt for this advance. In this case, there was none. Akbari would have had to advance the money himself. He certainly couldn't do that. So it was Taufiq who had produced the vouchers with Akbari's signature. He had someone call me and claim that he was Akbari and wanted to make a confession.

Another colleague explained, "Yes, that's what people learn in the Indian and Turkish TV series. People call under false names all the time."