



CASE STUDY 3 · BUSINESS C1

Nightshift at Ardent

Integrated case study · reading, analysis, negotiation and writing

BRIEFING

Marta Vidal & Ardent Precision

8 min

Company. Ardent Precision — a 640-person precision-engineering firm in northern Portugal, supplying machined components to European aerospace and medical-device OEMs. Revenue €140m, EBITDA margin 12%, family-owned, three generations. CEO: Marta Vidal (46), the founder's granddaughter, in the seat for 22 months.

The event. Six weeks ago, Ardent shipped a delivery of 12,400 hydraulic couplings to Lindberg AG — the German aerospace customer that represents 18% of Ardent's revenue and roughly 90% of its brand — with a batch of 340 units that failed a downstream QA test at the customer's plant. The batch was quarantined on arrival; no aircraft component was affected. But the incident triggered a formal supplier review, and Lindberg's procurement director sent Marta a letter that used the word "credibility" three times and the word "future" once, in a sentence Marta re-reads twice a day.

What Marta knows. The proximate cause was operator error on the night shift — a calibration step skipped under time pressure. The distal causes are more uncomfortable: a change to the QA schedule six months ago that removed a redundant check; a hiring freeze that left the night shift under-supervised; and a runbook that had not been updated since the QA schedule change. Marta signed off on two of the three.

What Marta wants. A post-mortem that is honest enough to prevent the next incident, and un-crushing enough that the operator involved — a fifteen-year employee — is still at Ardent in twelve months. And a Q3 memo to the board that neither over-claims (the CFO's draft) nor under-claims (the COO's draft).

COMPLICATION

Two drafts on Marta's desk

8 min

Draft A — the CFO's memo (over-claimed). "The incident was isolated and non-systemic. Root cause: operator error, remediated. Reinforced controls are in place. Lindberg relationship is intact. Q3 guidance reaffirmed."

Marta's private read of Draft A: it is the memo the board would prefer to receive, and the memo that will break the moment Q4 numbers don't arrive as promised. It uses the phrase root cause in a way Allspaw would object to; it uses the word isolated in a way that is not, on the evidence, defensible; and it contains no falsifier at all.

Draft B — the COO's memo (under-claimed). "Investigation ongoing. Multiple contributing factors identified. Corrective actions being scoped. Impact on Q3 uncertain. Further update to follow."

Marta's private read of Draft B: it is technically accurate and communicates nothing. The board will conclude, uncharitably but reasonably, that she does not have a read.

The register the moment requires. Neither draft is what Lesson 3B named as decisive uncertainty. Marta has to write the version that names the distal causes without collapsing, sets a specific operational change, and prices Q3 with a visible confidence interval. In parallel, she has to design a post-mortem that Amy Edmondson would recognise — blameless in Allspaw's sense, and structured to protect the fifteen-year operator without absolving the leadership above him.

DATA ROOM

Facts, contested and uncontested

6 min

Uncontested:

- 340 of 12,400 couplings failed the downstream QA at Lindberg's plant.
- No aircraft component was affected; no safety event.
- Proximate cause: a calibration step skipped on the night shift of 04–05 September.
- QA schedule was revised six months ago, removing one redundant check; the runbook was not updated.
- The hiring freeze from Q1 left the night shift with one supervisor rather than two.
- Marta signed off on the QA schedule revision and the hiring freeze.

Contested (Marta's read vs the CFO's):

- Isolation. CFO: 'isolated incident'. Marta: 'the same three distal conditions still exist in the machining and assembly lines'.
- Q3 impact. CFO: reaffirm guidance. Marta: on balance, Lindberg volumes will hold in Q3; the risk is on Q4.
- Lindberg relationship. CFO: 'intact'. Marta: 'on probation, held lightly, will be re-tested by two future incidents that haven't happened yet'.

TEXT EXTRACT

From the procurement director's letter

4 min

"Arden has been, for eleven years, a supplier whose credibility we have trusted, unusually, without second-sourcing. The incident of 05 September is not, in and of itself, disqualifying. What we would like to understand, in your response, is whether your leadership team has the appetite for the kind of honesty about distal causes that would make a repeat unlikely — and, secondly, whether the credibility we have extended to Arden for eleven years remains, on your side, worth defending. We would prefer to hear from you in the language of specifics rather than reassurance. The future of the relationship is a matter, at this point, of the register in which you answer."

This is a C1 letter. It is a test — of the register in which Marta will reply.

YOUR TASK

Two documents, one register

30 min

You are Marta. Draft both:

Document 1 — The blameless post-mortem summary (180–220 words).

- Structured as: Decision · Information available at the time · Outcome · What we would have needed to see to have made the other call · Operational change.
- Use at least four modal perfects (should/might/could/ought to have).
- Names no individual. Names the three distal causes and the leadership decisions that enabled them (yours).
- Ends with a sentence that Amy Edmondson would recognise as candour under pressure.

Document 2 — The Q3 board memo (180–220 words) — in reply to Drafts A and B.

- Commit-and-hedge scaffold: direction in the first two sentences; confidence interval named in language; falsifier before the close.
- At least five hedges from the C1 palette (Lesson 3B).
- Zero appearances of: root cause, isolated, non-systemic, reaffirmed.
- One sentence that answers the Lindberg letter, in a register the procurement director would recognise as worth defending.

Teacher notes

Success criteria (teacher-facing): Document 1 passes if the writer owns a leadership miss without the operator becoming an implied villain. Document 2 passes if a reader can, in under 60 seconds, identify the direction, the confidence interval, and the falsifier — and if it reads as a document a Lindberg-scale customer would find defensible.

SOLO WORK

Two rewrites, in your own hand

20 min

Before you draft the two Marta documents, spend 10 minutes rewriting each of the CFO's and COO's memos into the register Lesson 3B named.

- Rewrite Draft A by adding the four hedges its author refused to include, without softening the direction.
- Rewrite Draft B by removing the passive/tentative constructions and forcing a direction into the first two sentences, without over-claiming.
- Then read your two rewrites side by side and ask: which one sounds more like Marta?

This is a private diagnostic. The point isn't to publish either — it is to expose which failure mode you personally drift toward under pressure.

Did you read carefully?

5 min

- The central operational event at Ardent is:
 - (a) a data breach
 - (b) a botched delivery to Ardent's largest reference customer
 - (c) a labour dispute
 - (d) an M&A leak

Answer key: (b) a botched delivery to Ardent's largest reference customer
- Marta's central leadership problem is:
 - (a) whether to fire someone
 - (b) how to run a post-mortem that is honest without being crushing
 - (c) how to raise funds
 - (d) how to hire

Answer key: (b) how to run a post-mortem that is honest without being crushing

- The chief risk of the CFO's proposed memo is that it:
 - (a) is too short
 - (b) over-claims by removing all hedges — and will break the moment Q4 numbers don't arrive as promised
 - (c) is too honest
 - (d) is too technical

Answer key: (b) over-claims by removing all hedges — and will break the moment Q4 numbers don't arrive as promised

- The board's real test of Marta is:
 - (a) the P&L
 - (b) whether she can speak, publicly, in the register of decisive uncertainty
 - (c) cost cutting
 - (d) product launches

Answer key: (b) whether she can speak, publicly, in the register of decisive uncertainty

WRAP-UP

From Ardent back to your desk

6 min

Answer, in a note to yourself:

- Which failure mode is more yours under pressure — the CFO's over-claim or the COO's under-claim? What's the evidence in your last three memos?
- Name a leadership miss in your last twelve months that a properly written modal perfect ('we ought to have...') would own — without collapsing the team's confidence in you.
- What is the 'Lindberg letter' equivalent in your own working life — the letter that tests the register in which you will reply?

Take-away:

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