Leaning Into Discomfort:
How a small step improved our efficiency massively

Product Management Studio (19676)
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SITUATION

In the second class of PM Studio, we were all assigned our teams to work on the semester-long group project. It was then that I found out that I was in the team with both the permanently remote participants that were taking the classes from China, a country on the other side of the world. This meant that our team would be facing additional problems apart from the ones faced by all the other teams: that of communicating across different time zones and cultures. I was confused about whether this was a good thing or bad, and even though we found out during our time together working on this project that it was a great opportunity where we were able to stand out due to our diverse opinions and backgrounds, in the short term we did struggle a little bit. We did not recognize this as discomfort that leads to a new opportunity to grow and excel but saw it as a challenge.

I genuinely enjoyed the fact that we were working with partners located outside of the US. This helped us come up with a variety of ideas during brainstorming sessions. This made it an enjoyable experience even when we had more time constraints while setting up meeting times outside of class.

We were off to a great start, as all of us were experienced and two of the members of our team were even working part-time along with taking this course. This led to a maturity in the group that helped build trust and professionalism.

CHALLENGE

It was then that we stumbled upon a potential problem. One of the members, we'll call him Sam to maintain anonymity, was slacking heavily in the tasks assigned as homework that we needed to complete before class workshops. This led to him not being a willing participant during sharing of ideas, and generally gave irrelevant input as he had not done the homework that was supposed to give us the context for the workshops. It started in the week when we were to conduct a Problem Discovery Interview. It came to a point that I had to schedule the interview for Sam as we weren't getting any response from him out of class, and we weren't sure if he was going to be sending the mail to his interviewee regarding details like timings and agenda.

This attitude continued from Sam sporadically, and since I had not read the book even till then, I wasn't aware this situation was alarming and that Leaning into Discomfort and talking to him about it would have helped us out way sooner than it actually did. The solution I did attempt at that time was based on my best judgement, which was to try to improve our friendship outside class, which would lead to more empathy in the classroom; leading Sam to understand that he had equal accountability towards the group project and that his attitude was leading to inconsistency of the timeliness and quality of our work.

This approach didn't work as well as I would have hoped, as I was still not communicating the actual problem and the message didn't get across to him. Hence, even as we enjoyed a better personal and professional relationship, we were still struggling with the same problem.

APPROACH

It was in the fifth week (when we had our first crit studio session and recitation) that I actually got to read the book, Opening Doors to Teamwork and Collaboration. It immediately struck me that the key that would definitely apply here would be Leaning into Discomfort. Only by facing the discomfort of actually communicating that we were not able to perform at our 100% and talking about the reason for it would we be able to establish more trust and address the roadblock that was hindering our performance.
It took me time to implement it as I did read the theory in the book along with the relevant case studies but facing the uncomfortable idea of talking to a colleague about how his attitude was stopping us from performing quality work was extremely difficult. It was only in the seventh week (during a workshop on market differentiation that I decided to gather the courage to actually do it.

ACTIONS

After having learnt about how to Lean Into Discomfort, I tried to push myself into making the bold move to talk to Sam in the sixth week, during our workshop on Customer Value Interviews. However, that was the week in which Sam had done good work in the workshop and I felt bringing up this topic might be demotivating.
It was in the seventh week, when we had to share our work in the workshop (like showing our respective versions Positioning Map) and Sam didn't have work to show us, I decided to Lean Into Discomfort and told the group in general that I felt that we were not able to get inputs from everybody and asked if I could help fix that. This led to a fruitful discussion where Sam discussed with us why he was not able to contribute: His office had been extremely hectic over the last many weeks, and he was not being able to put in many hours towards the course. This was helpful to know as we could now try to solve the problems as allies as even Sam trusted us with the reason for why he wasn't able to contribute as much as he was committing.

RESULTS

The moment in which I shared my concerns with the group was quite a struggle as I was trying to change the status quo by highlighting how we were currently not able to reach our potential as a group in terms of submitting quality work. However, when I actually did say it and was able to see the results, I regretted not having had the discussion earlier.

After our discussion, we decided to ensure that we would set expectations before meetings as to how much each of us would do by the next time we meet. This made our meetings way more productive, as even if Sam was having a busy week, we could just delegate some of his tasks among the rest of us so Sam could work on the quality of what he was going to submit instead of struggling to even finish his assigned tasks. As a result, the trust among us increased as Sam was clear about whether he would have time to accomplish his part of the work or not. The byproduct of this was also that many times when Sam had a free-er workweek, he would even volunteer to take extra work to balance out the workload over the long run.

Even though we aren't done with the course and there's a lot that still needs to be done (like the final presentation), I am convinced that we are clear in how much we can accomplish as a team and that we will manage to do a good job, as a major reason for why we we weren't able to provide quality work has been well addressed.

LESSONS LEARNED

It was a fantastic experience to see the first key (Leaning Into Discomfort: Opening the Door to Trust) in action and how it helped us to a great extent in addressing a big issue that could have proved to be a major obstacle. Just voicing my concerns with empathy and sensitivity was enough to bring about a big change.

One thing I also learned was that you need to consistently look for when a change is needed in how you're working. It is comfortable to get used to the current way of doing things, and in our aversion to experiencing discomfort we forget that change is needed when the current way of doing things is no longer working.

The next time, I hope to be quicker in Leaning Into Discomfort and stating my concerns the moment I feel that they're valid. I would also want to incorporate the terms stated in the book as it will help me to model how I Leaned Into Discomfort.

I would also hope to keep an eye out for applying one of these four keys whenever applicable to make sure that I continue to work in teams with positive dynamics and high efficiency.