

Teaching Note

The Missed Deadline: Whose Problem Is It?

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Critical Incident Overview

This critical incident takes place in the Philippine office of an engineering design consultancy whose parent company is British. The office is managed by expat UK managers and staffed with Filipino engineers. The incident is about a missed deadline and requires a number of management decisions that need to be made in the short term as well as longer-term issues that the incident raises. Students are asked to develop ideas for short-term and long-term actions to prevent the situation from re-occurring. The incident raises issues about culture, management style and personal communication. The CI can be used as part of a course on Cross Cultural Issues and Leadership in Graduate Business Programs.

Research Methods

The critical incident was written based on interviews with the manager who experienced the situation. The names of the individuals and the company have been disguised to maintain anonymity.

Learning Outcomes

The learning outcomes for this critical incident are for students to be able to:

1. Analyze the impact of cultural differences between the manager and the workers and the effects on a manager-subordinate relationship.
2. Evaluate leadership styles appropriate to different situations.
3. Construct an immediate action plan and a long-term plan that will address the issues raised by the incident.

Discussion Questions

1. Explain David's management style in a culture where a supervisor / subordinate relationship is predicated on hierarchy and power (LO 1).
2. Describe David's leadership style and its appropriateness in this setting? (LO 2).
3. Recommend a set of actions for David to: (L O3).

- a. Respond immediately to Andrew in London
- b. Develop a long-term plan to deal with Tony's lack of appreciation of the importance of deadlines
- c. Undertake a review of the organization's policies and procedures.

Answers to Discussion Questions

1. Explain David's management style in a culture where a supervisor / subordinate relationship is predicated on hierarchy and power (LO 1).

David could have used a more authoritative style in this situation. The deadline was immediate and David needed to convey that urgency. Tony comes from a culture where the expectation is that in any organization a hierarchy exists and it is accepted that decisions are often made by the manager and carried out by the subordinate. In this situation, David *asked* Tony if the 5:00 pm deadline was achievable, David could have conveyed the urgency by *stating* that the 5:00 pm deadline was imperative and the consequences of not achieving the deadline. The management dilemma here is how much autonomy and authority should be devolved to individuals in decisions about their own work processes.

A global research impetus involved many researchers from all over the world that conducted studies in 62 different countries globally. The study lasted more than 10 years and engaged 170 researchers. Cornelius Grove, one the many researchers, summarized the GLOBE research (which is an acronym for "Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness") The GLOBE Project identified nine cultural dimensions: performance orientation, uncertainty avoidance, in-group collectivism, power distance, gender egalitarianism, humane orientation, institutional collectivism, future orientation, and assertiveness. The nine will not be elucidated here but rather focus on three that are relevant to David's critical incident quandary.

In the critical incident, David could be identified with the cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance. However, he should be mindful of the GLOBE cultural dimensions of performance orientation and assertiveness. Grove points out that in uncertainty avoidance, "deliberate measures (such as making and enforcing rules and procedures) are taken to reduce ambiguity" [based on table 19.1, p. 618]. David should be more aware of the cultural dimension of performance orientation that Grove points out as one that, "relates to the extent to which leaders set ambitious goals, communicate high expectations for their subordinates, build their subordinates' self-confidence, and intellectually challenge them [p. 277]." The cultural dimension of assertiveness is another area that David should be mindful of. Grove explains that assertiveness relates to "the degree to which individuals are assertive, confrontational, and aggressive in their relationships with others" [p. 30]. Based on these three cultural dimensions, David is already very clear in setting a clear deadline, but he needed to explain more the importance of the deadline, and be extremely assertive in expecting his subordinate to meet the deadline.

2. Describe David's leadership style and its appropriateness in this setting? (LO 2).

David's style of management seems to be one that is empowering and allows the individual to make the decisions. This style seems to have served him well in the UK where subordinates are

happy with the idea of being involved in the decision-making process and having some authority over decisions that affect them. In this case, however, David may not be aware of differences in cultural sensitivities that exist in manager / subordinate relationships.

An established typology of leadership was proposed by Goleman (2000) that includes the six styles of coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, pacesetter, and coaching. Based on the case, David's leadership style is most closely related to a combination of coaching and democratic. In the coaching style, the leader "forges consensus through participation" and in the democratic style, the leader "develops people for the future." Both styles work best when the leader attempts to get "buy-in" by soliciting input from followers, and tries to improve their followers' performance. Although there is no one single style that works best, David's current styles of leadership might need adjustment. Perhaps, he could consider applying the Goleman's "pacesetter" leadership style that requires adherence to high standards for completing tasks. Since time is of the essence as presented in the case, David could take a little more direct hands-on style to meet the deadline and to avoid future missed deadlines in the future. Goleman (2000) concludes in the seminal paper: "The business environment is continually changing, and a leader must respond in kind. Hour to hour, day to day, week to week, executives must play their leadership styles like a pro – using the right one at just the right time and in the right measure. The payoff is in the results," (p. 90).

3. Recommend a set of actions for David to: (LO 3)

a) Respond immediately to Andrew in London.

There are two directions the conversation with Andrew could go. One is that David could have been totally honest about the facts of the situation as he saw them. When he went to check on the status of the drawings, he found that Tony had gone home, the drawings had not been completed and as the deadline in the UK had been missed, he would reassign the work the following day. He could attempt to reassure Andrew that the revised deadline would be adhered to. David would also need to communicate to Andrew that he would investigate as to why the deadline was missed and take some form of corrective action. The other direction the conversation with Andrew could go would be to apologize for the missed deadline, not mention Tony's disappearance but assure Andrew that the work would be reassigned the following day and he would find out the cause of the missed deadline and take action so that it would not happen again. The difference in these two scenarios is that Tony's name is either mentioned or not mentioned. Either way, David needs to gather more information before advising Andrew of the cause and there may be a valid reason as to why Tony left before completing the drawings. One way allows Tony to save face, important in Asian culture, the other way, names and shames, slightly more acceptable in Western culture.

As the UK deadline has passed and the working day in Manila is drawing to a close, there would seem to be no point in reassigning the work to another CAD Operator in order to finish the work, so it would be better, for continuity, for David to wait for the next day when he could speak to Tony and ask him to finish the job in time for the start of the UK working day (See Exhibit 1, below)

Exhibit 1

Work Flow Timeline in Manila

9.00am	10.00am	5.00pm
Work order Received (Previous Day) in UK	Package of work received	Fixed target Completion (9.00am same day in UK)

During David's phone call to Andrew, it might be better for David, as the manager in the situation, to 'take responsibility' for the work being incomplete, to not mention Tony by name but convey to Andrew that the work would be ready for the next working day. He should also assure Andrew that he, David, will be undertaking a review of management processes in order to avoid such incidents occurring again in the future. He could also offer to speak with the client personally if Andrew felt that would be helpful. It would be better to keep Tony's name out of the picture until David had time to understand what had happened and what had prevented Tony from completing the drawings to the specified time. David should not make any decisions until he has got all the facts to hand and had had a chance to talk to Tony to find out why he left without meeting the deadline.

b) Develop a long-term plan to deal with Tony's lack of appreciation of the importance of deadlines.

Looking at the facts of the situation and faced with having to respond to the Andrew's phone call, David could have been justified in telling Andrew that the deadline had been missed due to Tony not finishing the drawings on time and had left for the day with no explanation as to why. However, if he did this it would be like he is trying to point the finger of blame towards Tony and absolve himself of any responsibility. In reality, managers are often faced with situations where subordinates fall short of expected performance. There may be several reasons why this happens and it is incumbent on the manager to take the initiative to find out the reasons. There are often deeper issues why an individual's performance falls short of requirements.

This is a fact-finding meeting and David should have treated it as such. He should have had a plan of what he wanted to achieve from the meeting together with a list of questions that would have helped to structure the conversation. He could have started the meeting with a summary of what happened and the resulting consequences, along the lines of:

"You left work last night without completing the drawings for the London project which meant we failed to meet our deadline that we agreed with London and this in turn meant that London were not able to provide the customer with the information they need to take them onto the next stage of the project. First, can I establish that you are able to complete the drawings today by 5.00pm so that we can send them to London or is there anything that is preventing you from finishing the work?"

This opening enables to David to do two things, first establish a new completion time for the work and second to find out if there are any technical issues that might be the getting in the way of completing the work. If there are no technical issues, then David should also build in some checkpoints during the day to make sure the work is on schedule. If there are technical issues,

then David can address these as appropriate.

If there were no mitigating circumstances or impeding issues and it was just a case of Tony leaving for the day, David may consider issuing a verbal warning as part of a disciplinary process.

c. Undertake a review of the organization's policies and procedures

There are three management issues that David needs to address in the longer term. One is management style, one is creating a shared understanding of the terms *commitment* and *deadlines* and the third is what type of organizational culture currently exists and is it appropriate for the way the organization operates?

David may want to reflect on his management style and consider how he can adopt a range of styles that are appropriate to a given situation. Some questions he may want to reflect on might include; how would I describe my management style? Is it effective all the time? Do I need to adapt my style in different situations and to different people? What help and support do I need from my colleagues to help me monitor and evaluate changes to my style. Taking this step in reviewing his own management style will send an important signal to his other managers and will act as a first step towards assessing the culture of the organization.

One of the central factors of the case is a missed deadline. As a result of this, David starts to question people's commitment to the job. In his view there is a relationship between a deadline, which is an agreed fixed point in time and a person's motivation to achieve an outcome. David may want to consider holding some informal team discussions about the meaning of these two words, particularly in the context of cultural norms and understanding.

On the subject of organizational culture, it might be useful to conduct a survey that assesses organizational culture to get a picture of what exists currently before deciding on what, if any changes need to be made. However, David may want to consider how to develop a culture that allows multi-nationals to work and thrive in a diverse cultural setting. He could consider asking an external facilitator to run some cultural-awareness workshops for everyone in the Manila office and if possible, invite people to join from other offices around the globe (using technology if personal involvement is not possible). This will help to surface the cultural norms and challenges and begin to establish an organizational culture that both transcends and respects local cultural norms.

Finally, David should review the company's policies and procedures, particularly the Disciplinary Procedure. This procedure should set out quite clearly what constitutes a verbal and written warning as well as dismissal. The procedure should be re-issued to everyone in the organization. This will give everyone clarity about the procedure.

Epilogue

David arranged a more formal meeting with Tony a few days later and asked for a detailed explanation about the missed deadline. Tony said that as the 5pm deadline was approaching he realized that he would not have time to finish the drawings. He was too embarrassed to tell

anyone that he had run out of time so when 5pm came he left as usual and went home. David had a long conversation with Tony and told him that this was not acceptable behavior and he could not allow this to happen again as a missed deadline caused serious consequences for colleagues and clients. David explained that he had no choice but to issue Tony with a written warning that went on to his personnel file. In dealing with Andrew in the London office, David decided not to name Tony but instead said that the person who was assigned the work had already left for the day, however the work would be reassigned and completed for the next day, which it was.

General Discussion

After reading the critical incident and responding to the questions above, the instructor may ask the students to vote on who they believe is the cause of the drawings not being completed on time, at the start of the class and then again at the end of the class. This can help to engage the students from the beginning of the discussion as they are being asked to articulate a set of assumptions they hold about the incident. Suggested Poll Question: “*Who do students believe is the cause of the drawings not being completed by the 5:00 pm deadline? David, Tony or Joe.*”

References

- Goleman, D. (2000), “Leadership that gets results,” *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 2000, Downloaded April 14, 2015
- Grove, C. (2005), “Worldwide Differences in Business Values and Practices: Overview of GLOBE research and findings;” Robert J. House et al., *Culture, Leadership and Organizations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies* (SAGE, 2014).