

Individual Reflection by Joseph Newman

In this report I will talk through my experiences during the group exercises which have been a part of the Leading people and organisations in different contexts course. Whilst doing so I'll also aim to tie in these observations to relevant theory and literature which have been discussed throughout the course and see how this experience compares to theory.

Following the first exercise- where we each presented ourselves using a coat of arms drawing, illustrating various aspects of our personal and public lives- we were advised to observe one another for the purposes of writing this report and tracking group progression. Several members of the group were a little shy or tentative but everyone did a great job presenting aspects of their personal and public lives. Immediately after this first meeting we were informed that we needed to put together a social contract for the purposes of working together. Having time pressure balancing this course with another, I was keen to be time effective and so took the initiative to suggest we meet immediately afterwards to get the necessary work done. Very efficiently- by the time we had finished the first call we already had a group GoogleDrive document to work on and a messenger chatroom to communicate with one another throughout the course. Already at this early stage, various roles in the group/team were forming. I believe my role was regularly one as an initiative taker and leader/influencer within the group. It can be both a strength and a weakness, but I generally don't like to passively sit in silence in these types of circumstances and instead lean towards leading or facilitating getting things done. More on this subject later as I'll look at roles in the group and team development.

Though it can at the time feel a little trivial, having to write a social contract together at the beginning of the course was a really helpful task. Observing the definitions of groups vs teams from the literature I would suggest it helped take us from one to the other. To begin with we were a group of individuals, interacting and aware that we had been assigned to a working group together thus perceiving ourselves as such. This changed. Writing the contract where we talked about methods of communication, some do's and don'ts as well as the goals of our work together. This helped develop us into a team with a clear understanding of the objectives we would work on together (and the rewards/ sanctions upon success/failure), it also helped establish mutual respect and cooperation. Furthermore, it gave us an opportunity to work together without supervision and pressure and to gel together and again even in early days began to reveal the different skills and member types within the group(now team!).

In a sense whilst not so structured or of central importance as can be in the corporate world, the social contract also operated in a sense as a type of psychological contract. It established as mentioned above a clear set of expectations and obligations between all members of the team and it helped ensure that all of us had not just assumptions but a clear picture of how, when and what we needed to contribute as well as having a clear, defined finish. Again, though in this setting it can feel trivial and unnecessary, it was a nice practice to do this and it ensured smooth teamwork throughout the course and perhaps more importantly gave us a first opportunity to work together and begin forming as a team.

To round off my experience of the first (and second) exercise, I took 2 key things from it. Firstly- it is rare to sit down and reflect over the various aspects of one's own character- such as strengths and weaknesses. Nor do we regularly get an overview of all we value and draw motivation from in life. Preparing for this presentation and drawing the various illustrations as instructed was quite an eye opener and helped me to see things about myself I wouldn't otherwise take time for- especially not often. Another interesting result was seeing that, especially when it came to weaknesses, -personal or public- we all had several things in common. Themes such as procrastination, time management and organization were regularly mentioned and if nothing else it was encouraging to be reminded that many of our struggles are universal and that it's ok to have them!

Moving on to the next meeting we had as a group/team, our 3rd task was to handle a plane crash scenario in which we were to make a number of decisions to rank a list of items by their importance to us. The goal was surviving the described circumstances. Whilst the task was trivial and fun, the time pressure to make concrete decisions, and the need for clear and quick flowing communication made it difficult. According to Vroom (2000) selecting an appropriate method in making quality decisions depends on two key factors: time and development. Where development of individuals in a group and the group itself is the primary or of large importance, then group freedom, and making decisions on a democratic basis is preferable. However where time is a limiting factor and decisions must be made rapidly, then generally a more autocratic, leader led process is more effective, largely due to the time consuming nature of group communication. I found this interesting, having not read the theory beforehand, because during the exercise I fairly quickly observed that we were chit-chatting in an ineffective manner to start with and with a short and strict time limit in place we were not on course to succeed.

Noticing this and being an initiative taker I suggested 2 things: 1- that we select a leader to help facilitate our decisions and ensure we make them time effectively. 2- that we choose a strategy to work with rather than simply discussing which things were generally interesting. I realised we'd have a lot more clarity to complete the task if we'd decided the plan for survival was to stay put and wait to be found, or to try to get ourselves to the nearest town. As a leader in this situation I was really pleased with my contribution. Again it was an application of my strength in taking initiatives and also-linking it to the theory of contributions made by team members- was an example of acting as a coordinator/facilitator. In instances such as this I don't feel that I must be the chosen leader and am happy to operate as a team-worker listening to others just as much as to bring input, however I'd like to say that I have some understanding of when leadership of a more autocratic nature is required to ensure objectives are met. As Vroom (2000) points out- even in democratic settings when allowing group freedom it can be most effective when a leader makes the trivial decisions autocratically ensuring focus can be kept on valuable issues rather than time wasting. In situations like these, having a mediator/ facilitator in a team/group can be really helpful/ necessary. Some key techniques which can be used to ensure productive communication and work/ decisions being made are: asking direct questions, requiring a concrete answer- for example: do you agree with this statement or not?- recognising that purely a subjective, balanced opinion may not be helpful to decisions being made. It can also be important to give quality listening and validation to input from members- summarizing and repeating back what's been said or to say "so you mean this..." to make sure there is understanding.

Often, and it is difficult, especially when under time pressure, it's also important to carefully assess the information at hand before racing into problem solving. In this, as well as later exercises, this was challenging, but I'm pleased with my input, and the feedback received about it in helping us as a team to be strategic and not just busy without direction.

In the 4th exercise we were to work together processing which films to produce on a given budget. This required handling a large amount of information again in a short timeframe and again it proved difficult. Being a group of only 3 people it seemed unnecessary to have a dedicated leader and working in an equal, democratic way worked fine. The decisions we made were fairly good and I'm happy with our final result. If I were to do the same exercise again I believe I'd do most things similarly. Most of the difficulty was in the time pressure and the enormous amount of information which needed processing to make decisions. Whilst we had our time cut as a result of being a smaller group, this may have actually been a hindrance since we never really finished creating spreadsheets to analyse the data given us when we were forced to make decisions as time ran out. However, we may have been better off to choose a strategy early on to either invest in lots of small movies or put all budget on one instead of the hybrid approach which we ended up taking by being a little reserved and cautious. During the task we all worked with a few roles- I'd like to think I operated in some senses as an influential leader, but really we all worked as resource investigators, teamworkers and finishers in a mutual manner throughout. In many ways we more naturally assumed these roles in this instance which I think tends to be the case when working in 2/3/4 people and I was fine to work in this way. You could call this a functional team, where several people of the same competencies work together in a largely homogenous group. And in this case it certainly helped ensure everyone's engagement and development as well as providing us with an opportunity to observe group work and leadership in action.

Our next exercise was the Interview of an industry leader. Isabelle and I had the privilege of speaking to a friend of mine working as a top level manager at Holmen. As someone who aspires to work as a leader in the future I found this task really interesting and took a lot from it. We discussed issues ranging from how the company had handled the recent covid-19 situation, virtual vs physical places of work as well as leadership styles and advice. I found it a really enjoyable experience. Whilst in general, with responsibility- comes inherent stress and difficulty, I find the nature of problems and solutions in leadership really interesting. The course literature's emphasis on aiming to be well rounded managers has helped give a really good framework to base future development upon especially given the hugely complex and fluid role that management can be in such a spectrum of different situations. One key thing which I took away from the interview was the advice "be yourself but with skills"- not to try and be a robotic copy of someone else or try to rigidly follow a model but to be the best version of ourselves, use our strengths, develop self awareness and to work on other controllable aspects and weaknesses. In many ways this tied in very well with the book's concept of well roundedness. The other important advice was perhaps more a moral issue rather than management theory, he stressed the importance of being able to stand for the decisions we make both professionally and personally, to treat people as people and not just resources in a machine. Discussing this with Isabelle after we both found this to be a really solid foundation to build into our future values as leaders.

The final exercise we went through as a group was giving and receiving feedback to one another based on our observations during our time together on the course. Giving feedback to others was tricky largely because we had relatively little interaction with one another during the course, so finding negative things to say about others was difficult. It was interesting to see however, that despite this there was a high correlation between the things everyone in the group said to each given individual which points to some degree of accuracy and consistency in observations and in how we each found working with one another. The feedback I received was largely centred on being confident, social, initiative taking and being a natural leader whilst being balanced with how I can work on including others more, giving time to listen and think more rather than rushing decisions/initiatives. I feel this was fair, expected and I agree with it in general and am fairly self aware of these aspects of my character. Moving forwards, being increasingly aware of this is really helpful in leadership situations. Being conscious of it ensures I can work that bit extra to generate inclusion, speak a little less and aim to listen effectively/ give time for others to speak. At the same time I feel I acted fairly intentionally in this setting, where, as a new group, with these tasks, having an initiative taker can as mentioned help facilitate effective work and a positive environment. I'm also very happy to take a backseat and let someone else take that role which is why during certain exercises I simply identified the need for a leader rather than trying to be it myself.

To close I'll summarize a few key subjects, touching on theory and this experience. Starting with my role in the team: Belbin (2015 cited in Martin & Siebert 2016, p. 295) describes 9 key roles or ways of contributing within a team of which a person can be one or more. I would identify primarily with being a coordinator(or facilitator)- confident, identifying talent and facilitating productive work- , and secondarily possibly a plant- who generates ideas- or possibly a resource investigator-assessing what needs to be done and how to allocate resources to tasks-. In smaller group/team settings like this, and with no dedicated leader there tends to be lots of overlap in roles and general work together as well. Importantly there was a good level of engagement and participation from everyone in the group and I feel my initiatives, especially in the early stage of the group helped generate this and contribute towards it throughout.

Looking at our group's decision making processes in relation to Vroom's (2000) model we had a very democratic/participative approach. At the beginning of exercises our group instructor/leader passed on relevant instructions, then let us decide how to work and in what order entirely ourselves. At the opposite end of the spectrum from autocratically deciding, this put us in a fully delegated position- as Vroom (2000) labels- maximum freedom for the group, with minimum influence of the leader. The benefits of this balance is laid out as cost vs group development and in this experience it ensured we were forced to work together on solving any and all problems which arose. This process, which was almost strange at first compared to how many group activities are handled during similar courses, I feel led to both group and individual development and forced us to quickly into communicating and working effectively as a team.

Our group's team dynamics are interesting when compared to both Wheelan and Tuckman's models of team development (Kaulio 2021). Both of these, largely compatible models, begin with a simple formation step, where there is dependency on a leader and members wish to feel included whilst relatively insecure. It's fair to say that

during the first exercise, this dynamic could be seen with most of us quite reserved and trying to do what we perceived was expected/required. Being forced subsequently, to work together (without a group leader), on a social contract and develop some plan for how we would work together, rapidly changed this as previously mentioned and accelerated the team maturity process. As mentioned, having a social contract helped change us from being a group into a team with goals, mutual trust and more in place. In my observation, we entirely skipped the second phase of both models where typically, friction arises between members and the leader's authority is challenged. I believe we moved directly to a combination of the 3rd and 4th stages - norming & performing (Tuckman's model)/trust and secure & work (Wheelan's model). While still gelling together there was a great degree of engagement, inclusion and everyone seemed secure in the way contributions to work were made. Whilst I don't feel we had the opportunity in time or task type, to truly be defined as a high performing team, I would suggest 2 reasons which may have led to this speedy development: either, the particular mix of individual skills and roles in the group were unusually balanced (which is possible given common interest in a leadership course contrary to many other types of working group) or alternatively, that we fall into the category of a functional team or a specialist team (Kaulio 2021). In these instances it is a recognised phenomenon that teams can perform effectively virtually instantly. This is in contrast to cross functional teams and other types where mixed competencies merge/ roles are not clearly defined. Instead here, a shared competency or the clearly defined understanding of what is needed, expected and how to do it can lead to this outcome of performance. In our instance, all being students with experience of similar work, all being busy and wanting to work effectively, things worked out very seamlessly and efficiently. Having barely gotten to know one another there were no adjourning/ group dissolving issues at the close.

The Johari window matrix (Ricciardi 2021) is an interesting concept for both individual and group analysis which was presented early on in the course. Defined by aspects we are aware/unaware of and that others can/ cannot see, this produces 4 areas- The arena (aware of and seen), The blind spot (unaware of but seen), Hidden (aware of but unseen) and the unknown (unaware of and unseen). Given self awareness is of great importance to leaders in order to maintain respect and influence others, it is a great tool to utilise. Personally I was aware of most of the personality/character traits which were mentioned when receiving feedback but it was great to have these underlined/confirmed whether positive to keep doing or things to work on. No new items were mentioned which I'd consider as- in my blind spot. When it comes to hiding things, like most of us do, when feeling nervous prior to presenting for the first time or bringing feedback to others it's natural to minimize these feelings where possible and try to seem confident. Besides that, I don't feel I 'hid' much during our time working together. However in terms of observing us as a group/team throughout this time, I became aware of several things having previously not seen them. Starting the course with no understanding of theory on team and group developmental stages and the factors that affect these I was oblivious to how group dynamics were unfolding to begin with. It was a really interesting process as we learned about the theory and proceeded to develop as a team to see things unfolding in relation to what we'd been learning about and even to see why we were doing the various tasks we performed. In this respect several Hidden things were revealed and moved into the arena of self awareness.

To conclude, I feel it's been a really helpful learning experience doing these exercises and that I've learned a lot, especially theory related to group/team development and the roles within them, self awareness and the different types of decision making. In relation to Kolb's model on learning (Serhat 2020) it feels like we have experienced a full loop, integrating abstract theory, experimenting actively, experiencing how things feel during and to reflect over them and make observations afterwards. From this perspective it's really helped to cement the learning of new concepts and I hope and believe this will prove helpful in the future when leadership opportunities arise.

References

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