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Creating and Leading Team Dynamics

Companions on the Journey:

The Peaks and Valleys of Team A

This project was not about the team we studied. That was a means to an end. The focus of this project was my team. Team A as we called ourselves. Taking a step back from the whole experience of meeting three people for the first time, throwing aside any preconceived notions, and collaborating to come up with a finished product, I have been able to identify two particular poles. Coincidentally those poles came at the very beginning and the very end. While there were some deep valleys to trudge through during the course of the project, and some very high peaks that we all reached as a team, there were two very personal poles that struck me on this journey. The lowest low was when I met my team for the first time. I was stuck with a 40-something loudmouth single woman from South Boston, a lesbian, and an Asian who didn't speak English very well. The highest high, by contrast, was the night of the presentation, when we all spoke about what made our team so successful while working together all semester.

Trudging Through the Valley

When I walked away from my very first meeting with Deb, Emily, and Stein, I was distraught. I knew the project would be hard, as I'm very judgmental and don't work well with strangers. All I thought as I walked to the bus, rode the bus to my car, and drove home was that I was *stuck* with a 40-something loudmouth single woman from South Boston, a lesbian, and an Asian who didn't speak English very well.

What's wrong with a 40-something loudmouth single woman from South Boston? In new and uncomfortable situations, like working with strangers on a group project, I'm rely heavily on

first impressions to determine whether to accept someone or not. Well, in my mind, from what I had experienced thus far in class, Deb was someone who spoke her mind, got in your face, and thrust her opinion on you any chance she got. Therefore, that must be who she is, right?

What's wrong with a lesbian? I was brought up a practicing Catholic in a very conservative parish, went to a Catholic university, and had never been exposed much to anyone in the gay community. My judgments of Emily from the first time I heard her say "my wife" were that she was some crazy lesbian who couldn't possibly have anything of value to contribute to our group. She was immediately cast off as unimportant and as less of a human being than me. If that's my first impression, it must be true, right?

What's wrong with an Asian? For starters, my cousin in fourth grade speaks English better than him (at least in the five minutes that we spoke that night), he's just an educated know-it-all who thinks he's better than us, and we will probably have to speak really slowly for him to understand, not to mention what it's going to take to have him write a coherent paper or presentation. All Asians fit that stereotype, right?

Wrong. Wrong. And wrong again! What I came to realize over time is that my judgments very nearly got in the way of our team's success. I was exemplifying the concept of Solo Status that Thompson talked about in Chapter 4 of Building the Team. He says, "Individuals experience solo status when they are the only member of their social category present in the group. As a general principle, the smaller number of other group members present, the more negative the experience for the individual." (Thompson 83) While I was one of three white people, and one of two males, I was the only white male. I had my own superiority complex that made me think I was better than the other members in my group. So according to Thompson I was doomed to fail from the beginning.

Throughout the first meeting that we had, I tried hard to remember Harold's advice from

the first few classes. I firmly believed his comment that building trust was going to be key to the success of our group. (Langlois) The first lecture was about trust. Trust had to exist without conditions or else it wasn't really trust. (Langlois) I needed to forget everything I thought I knew about these people and ignore the stereotypes and trust them. I couldn't think about how we should tread lightly around Deb or she might erupt in a fit of South Boston rage at any moment. I couldn't think about the fact that in the back of my mind I finished everything Emily said with, "Yeah but she's a lesbian, so that's irrelevant." I couldn't think about my thought that because Stein talked with an accent he was uneducated and dumb and therefore had nothing of value to contribute. I needed to stop judging these people and trust them.

After doing some of the reading, and learning more about diversity on teams, I began to think a little differently about my team, and approach the project with a different perspective. "Another reason that high functional diversity doesn't translate into increased innovativeness is that team members often hold deep rooted functional allegiances that can compromise their ability to identify with a new team." (Sethi, Smith, Park 73) So was the reason for my stubborn and intensely prejudicial judgments that I had individual biases against those demographics, or was it just that they were different from me, and those I normally associate with? This quote suggests that I was predisposed to not connecting with my team because they were different from me, and different from other teams I had worked with. I was beginning to uncover the root of my prejudices and therefore approaching the ability to change them.

After spending some time with my group, and concentrating on removing my stereotypes from my judgments, I realized that the 40-something loudmouth single woman from South Boston was Deb, an incredibly thoughtful, honest, and dedicated woman with a great sense of humor. The lesbian was Emily, a funny, open, and kind woman who, like Deb was very committed to the success of our group. And the Asian was Stein, a very bright and

well-educated man with a lot to offer our group with his Academic background. These stereotypes were becoming *people*. Suddenly I found myself climbing out of the valley that I had put myself in at the beginning of the project and well on my way to really enjoying my time with these people.

It occurred to me on numerous occasions that I should have addressed my concerns and prejudices with the group. We had all talked about wanting to be honest with each other, and addressing any issues head on. I decided not to tell the group, and hide my feelings so as not to create any enemies early on. In the words of Druskat and Wolff in Building the Emotional Intelligence of Groups, "When a member is not on the same emotional wavelength as the rest, a team needs to be emotionally intelligent vis-a-vis that individual. In part, that simply means being aware of the problem." (Druskat and Wolff 82) Having my team members unaware of my biases was probably a mistake. I should have addressed it with them very early on and gotten the feelings out of the way. This would have developed trust much sooner and contributed to a smoother experience for all. That's not to say that I *created* conflict by not telling them, but in hindsight I should have told my teammates and we could have had a discussion about it, and could have all gotten on the same emotional wavelength.

Reaching the Peak

Fast-forward to December 4th and we had created the best team I had ever been a part of. The high point of this project was finishing the presentation and being asked to tell the class about our team. We simply gushed like a middle-school girl about her new crush. It became very clear that despite how I had started out, we had done a number of things right along the way. First, we started out by identifying our strengths and weaknesses and playing to those throughout the entire project. Second, we clearly defined roles along the way. Third, we really explored many different ideas, listened to each other, as well as input from people outside of our

group. And lastly, we had several gauges that kept us on track and let us know that we were in the right, or sometimes the wrong, place.

At our very first meeting, while my prejudices were stewing, we spent time essentially ignoring the assignment at hand and getting to know each other. As was suggested in our reading, “To avoid these problems, one experienced consulting partner has each team member create a contribution scorecard at the outset of a new project to outline every person’s potential input on the basis of his or her specific expertise.” (Gardner 90) Though we did not create an actual scorecard, we did use this concept to get ourselves off on the right foot. By verbally sharing our strengths and weaknesses, we were able to identify what each of us would be good at, and what areas of individual weakness the rest of us could fill in.

This was enormously helpful throughout the process of developing our project. For example, one of my strengths was technology. So, therefore, I maintained the Google Docs area, and made sure that we were all working on the right documents and that everyone was familiar with what was going on. At one point it became clear that Deb was not as technologically savvy as the rest of us, so each of us was able to help her fill her knowledge gap and get on track with the technology that we were using. Additionally, Stein, being an academic, was very helpful in finding academic resources such as papers and studies, outside of the readings that helped shape our findings. It was absolutely essential to our success that we identified strengths and weaknesses at the outset.

Once we knew each others’ strengths and weaknesses, we were able to define roles very easily. Throughout this project each of us was explicitly clear on what our role was both for the overall project, and for discrete pieces of the project. “Collaboration improves when the roles of individual team members are clearly defined and well understood – when individuals feel that they can do a significant portion of their work independently.” (Gratton and Erikson 108) At first

the decision was that our group would meet twice a week and maybe even more towards the end to make the presentation and paper. This was because we were under the belief that we would need to get a lot done together rather than on our own. What we found was that because each of us understood our roles, like Gratton and Erikson point out, we were able to get a lot more done individually outside of the group, and at our meetings simply put the puzzle pieces together. Collaboration became much smoother and much simpler once we had defined activities and assignments for each team member.

There were several points where this was key. When it came time to put the survey together to survey our team, we were also in the midst of a crisis. Our first team was looking like a lost cause, and we were having trouble finding a replacement. And we also needed to get the survey questions written and the survey as a whole designed and organized. So we split the roles up and it made all of the difference. Emily and Deb focused on getting a team. Stein and I focused on the survey. Stein and I wrote out the questions, edited the questions, and focused on finalizing it. At the same time, Emily and Deb focused on getting a good team together, and making the initial contact so that we could send them the survey and start analyzing them. Each meeting time during this period was simply spent catching each other up on statuses rather than getting our work done. We were able to do everything offline, and simply come together to get on the same page and confirm each others' work. Additionally for the presentation we each had sections that we were going to write. So, we met once to decide the sections, and then went off and wrote the slides and content for those sections, then came together with what was basically the whole presentation. It underwent some revisions as a group, but it was largely created independently and then we collaborated together to create the final product.

As a group we agreed early on that we wanted to get everyone's input at all times. We didn't want any member of the group to hold back. And so, each of us was responsible for

creating a creative and open atmosphere. As we read, “The best team players also connect their teammates with one another and spread ideas around. And they are appropriately exploratory, seeking ideas from outside the group but not at the expense of group engagement.” (Pentland 70) So in order to be successful we needed to really explore all ideas, and be unafraid of sharing any new ideas and thoughts.

This is how technology came to be a big part of our project. At our first meeting I suggested that we try using Google Docs to keep everything in one place and collaborate on our project. Coincidentally everyone had a Google account which made this much easier. Had I not suggested this idea, we would have had a lot more trouble with collaborating and sharing information. This ended up being key to our success. In addition to sharing our own ideas with one another, we sought the input from outside sources on a few occasions. One important example was our survey. We created the survey amongst significant confusion about our study group, and therefore really wanted reassurance that we were capturing the right data. So we sent the survey to Kate and she was able to give us some really important feedback about the way we were asking some questions, and how we structured the response options. The version we sent to Kate came after a lot of debate and work from each team member, and Kate still had a lot to say. This is an important indication of how important it was to seek the input from an outside source.

We had several mechanisms in place to measure our progress and our success along the way. These were set up at our first meeting and at several points along the way. We realized early on that, “Ideally, a measurement system designed to support a team-based organization should help teams overcome two major obstacles to their effectiveness: getting functions to provide expertise to teams when they need it and getting people from different functions on a team to speak a common language.” (Meyer 95) So both elements became important in

developing the measurements and gauges.

We had a schedule of what we would discuss at each meeting, as well as deliverables that needed to be finished by the end of the meeting. Once we finally identified our final team, we realized the need to modify our milestones. We were pretty far behind where we needed to be, so it was important that we identify more realistic milestones and measurements instead of rushing to catch up with our initial measurements. The identification of measurements also allowed us to speak the same language in the sense that we all had an idea of urgency. It wasn't necessary to spend time prefacing statements with how urgent the survey was, or how important it was to get our interviews done early. We all spoke the language of the measurements we set forth, and so it was clear what we needed to do and by when we needed to do it.

Coming Down From the Mountain

After several months of the "A Team" working together, we were incredibly successful in presenting our data, and will be very successful with compiling and writing our paper. In the end, the 40-something loudmouth single woman from South Boston, the lesbian, the Asian, and the white guy became friends. I have gone from not even paying attention to their names, to not even paying attention to their stereotypes. They are Deb, Emily, and Stein. I know that I will certainly walk away from this experience with a new outlook on my own prejudices and how important it is to look past them. Building a team simply cannot happen when one member refuses to put aside their own stereotypes and embrace each member of the team as a human being, not just a label.

We employed many tactics from the readings to achieve the success that we did. This project was really about our own team building, and not so much about studying the group at ECOG. We were able to learn from the lectures, the class readings, and our own experiences to

become the best team we could be.

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