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Midterm Paper

<u>Team Assumptions</u>

Wrong, Wrong, and Wrong Again

At the beginning of this class I had a very well-defined image in my mind of what a team was. In just seven weeks that image has been blown up, broken apart, and crushed to reveal a more true and real image of what a team is. Walking into the first class I had a definition of a team that I quickly learned was far from correct. First, I assumed that teams were most effective when each member had their own distinct responsibilities and that the team's success depended on each member's individual contributions. Second, I assumed that a team worked best when there was a clear leader to set the direction and control the actions and goals of the team. Third, I assumed that it was best to put like minded people on a team to avoid having to deal with differences. Each of these three, along with several others, have been proven wrong either in the readings, class discussions, or through my own interactions with my team.

I. Working as siloed individuals is more productive than being interdependent.

The first and most wide-ranging assumption that I made was about how a team organized its work. I worked on a team that planned the Information Technology side of the start of school. We were the startup task force. In the end we were successful, and I assumed that that had to do with having siloed members. We had the Director of the Database Group, the Director of Application Development, the Director of Technology Services, the Director of Quality

Engineering, and the Director of Infrastructure Support Services as members of the team. Each brought their own expertise to the table, and each was responsible for being the representative of their area. So, the Director of the Database Group was responsible for all database tasks, the Director of Technology Services was responsible for anything relating to operational services, and so on. I assumed that because our team was successful in coordinating 194 tasks for a flawless start of school, we were a perfect example of what a team should be. However, upon learning more about what a team should be, how it should be constructed, and how it should act, I learned that my assumption was false. Yes, we were successful, but just like good teams can fail, bad teams can still succeed.

Each team member was independent of the other. The point of the team was to bring everyone to the table, but since we each represented our own interests and group, there was very little cohesion. It was every man for himself. "Highly dependent members come up with solutions faster, complete more tasks, and perform better than teams whose members are not highly dependent on one another." (Thompson 76) While we were able to complete our objective, I can see several areas where greater interdependence could have helped. We struggled as a team to understand dependencies of various tasks. For example, if I make a certain change to the back end of an application, how will it affect the database feed that comes out of the application every night to feed anything from access to the application, to reporting? If we had been more interdependent, the Director of the Database Group and the Director of Application Development would have been on the same page about this task and could have collaborated on a solution that reduced the potential negative side-effects of any changes.

Additionally, each member of our team only took responsibility for their own area. "Every individual at work can be far more productive if they take complete responsibility for the quality and productivity of each team or relationship of which they are a part." (Avery 10) Again, we were

successful in our endeavor to have a flawless start of school. However, if each of us had kept in mind the goal of overall success of the start of school in all areas, instead of just our own, we may have been able to avoid minor careless errors along the way. For example, after the failure of one of our major applications nearly impacted the reveal of a critical website to new students, some team members said they had identified the issue prior to it rearing its ugly head. But, they didn't say anything because they didn't want to step on anyone's toes. Had those who had identified the issue recognized the impact on the *team effort* and the value of *team success*, they would have risked stepping on toes to prevent a near-colossal disaster for the overall result of the team. We should have each taken responsibility for the *team* instead of just our individual role within the team.

II. A clear and defined leader of a team is the best and only way to achieve success.

The second assumption that I had was in relation to the leadership structure of a team. Coming from a background where teams had a "Chairperson" or "President/Vice-President" structure, I assumed that was the only way to run a team. My rationale was that a team needed a strong, charismatic, and wise leader to guide the team. While this is not necessarily a bad way to construct a team, it certainly is not the only effective way. In fact, I find that self-managing teams, in theory and in practice, can be just as, if not more, effective than manager-led teams. "In self-managing or self-regulating teams, a manager or leader determines the overall purpose or goal of the team, but the team is at liberty to manage the methods by which to achieve that goal." (Thompson 8) This definition of a self-managing team most closely depicts the team I am working with in this class as we observe and analyze another team. We were chosen by "management" and given no direction or clear guidance as to a leader, or who was specifically in

charge. Instead, we were simply given an objective and some general guidance as to what we should achieve.

As a result of this rather unusual genesis for me, I immediately gravitated towards the theory behind it, and become increasingly attracted to the idea of self-managing teams. Our team of four is responsible for researching, analyzing, and providing potential solutions for another team of our choice. As a self-managing team we have been able to do several things that a manager-led team wouldn't necessarily allow for. First, we are able to conduct meetings and delegate work collaboratively instead of at the discretion of a single person. Second, we have the ability to chart our own course with equal input from each member. No one person has greater say and therefore more control. And third, working as part of a self-managing team, we have the opportunity to each buy in to the project equally instead of being told what our level of input should be, and how much we should contribute.

Perhaps my assumption comes from working on few teams with truly effective leaders who put the team's objectives before their own, or who consider success to be the team's instead of just their own. But either way, being part of a self-managing team has proven to be very effective. When we meet there is no one person who set the agenda. Instead we each contribute items to the potential discussion topics and vote on which items are the highest priority, pushing the lower priority items to the next meeting. Also, we don't have a single person dictating who speaks when, and about what. We each feel we are able to speak freely and openly in order to convey our point. Lastly, there is no one person delegating work. Therefore, we are each able to select what we want to do according to our strengths. For example, one of my strengths is presentation skills so I will be putting the visual for the presentation together. My teammates will submit their talking points and I will collect them into one cohesive and consistent PowerPoint presentation.

It is worth noting that manager-led teams can be just as successful as self-directing teams under the right circumstances. Alternatively, self-directing teams can be disastrous, uncoordinated, and lack clear direction if they are not constructed properly. I had assumed that self-directing teams were far inferior to manager-led teams for several reasons. One being that I thought a leader was the most critical piece of the team puzzle. I thought that without a leader the team could not achieve anything, and would be very disjointed and uncoordinated. However throughout this class, through my experience with my own self-directed team, I have learned that it is possible to achieve success, and in fact thrive, without a leader.

III. Diversity in a team is not effective

My third assumption wasn't challenged until a few weeks into the semester. I had assumed that the best way to form a team was to put the most like minded, similar, and closely-related people together. The first time I thought seriously about this being incorrect was when I read that, "the higher the educational level of the team members is, the more challenging collaboration appears to be for them." (Gratton & Erickson 102) Essentially, if you put several smart people in the room, their intelligence cancels each other out and they don't get very far. I suppose the opposite is true, and slightly more obvious. If you create a team of unintelligent people they will perform equally as bad. So the key is to create teams with varying levels of intelligence.

But intelligence isn't the only quality that should be diversified on a team. Qualities like background, experience, and specialty areas are also more beneficial when in diversified. In order to build a solid and long-lasting house, you don't want five carpenters planning it. You would want an architect, a carpenter, a plumber, an electrician, and so on. However, it is

important to avoid the mistake that I made in my first assumption. Bringing in diverse interests can also break up the unity of the group. Therefore, "Newly formed teams are forced to invest significant time and effort in building trusting relationships." (Gratton & Erickson 107) The carpenter needs to be able to trust the plumber. Therefore, the carpenter needs to know and be confident in what expertise the plumber has. This is where it becomes important to share information.

In the same way, it's important to share what each team member does and does not know. In other words, it's important to discuss just how much diversity exists. "Team members often overestimate the commonality of information they share with others. Consequently the messages they send became less clear" (Thompson 100) Team members tend to think they are alike until differences are revealed. The plumber may assume that the carpenter has fifteen years of experience because they are both the same age. But in reality, the carpenter only has five years of experience because he didn't get into the trade until later in his life. The plumber may have information to share that will help the carpenter, and the two would never know without having the discussion about their backgrounds.

In effect, diversity is important because it brings many different perspectives to the table. However, it needs to be dealt with openly and effectively. "By pooling their different backgrounds, training, and experience, team members have the potential to work in a more informed fashion." (Thompson 104) Just like my previous two assumptions, it is possible for diversity to be a non-factor in the success of a team, as a lack of diversity eliminates differing points of view, and could cut down on the arguments and disagreements. However, it is through those disagreements and discussions that new, better, and more informed ideas appear.

Ultimately, there is no one formula that can be used to construct a team that will

guarantee its success. "In some ways, a team is like the human body; No one really knows an exact regimen for staying healthy over time. However, we have some very good information about the benefits of a lean diet, exercise, stress reduction, wellness maintenance, and early detection of disease." (Thompson 20) Similarly, in constructing and participating in a team, one can ensure interdependence, choose the right management style to fit the goals of the team, and increase the diversity of its members to foster greater discovery and productivity.

<div align="center">Works Cited</div>

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