Question:

*Write a critical reflection that examines one leadership challenge you encountered whilst working on the group project. Focus on what you now bring to the situation in terms of leadership development using new insights gained through the module to analyse and evaluate your challenge and specify what actions you will take going forward.*

Essay sample:

This reflective paper focuses on my perspective of my current leadership challenge before and after the module. Overall, using the tools and materials provided in the module and the constructive conversations with my learning set, I was able to connect my challenge to specific issues relating to the stakeholder network and identify specific skills and personal strategic leadership skills that I need to work on. The module transformed my problem framing from an inter-cultural and interdisciplinary communication challenge within the context of management under uncertainty and without formal authority.

My initial leadership challenge when I started the module was around cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary communication. Members in my group were from different locations that have not worked together before were struggling to communicate. In one specific incident, one team member requested a 1-1 meeting with another team member to discuss the group project, but this was declined. This resulted in a confrontation in the group meeting and exchanges over ideas became hostile. Furthermore, it damaged group relations and trust since both members avoided further interactions.

My personal challenge was to rebuild the trust without taking sides and get the project finished. The conflict has cascaded through the team and while it has not been expressed in an open way, one member involved in the dispute has started to question my leadership of the group and repeatedly challenges my own creative ideas. This specific member has begun to form their own collaboration with selected team members without communicating to the wider group. I have refrained from challenging this lack of communication directly; however, my inaction is risking showing other team members that this type of tactic is acceptable. This action has also led me to question if people trust my ability to lead the group and I am feeling less confident.

This personal leadership challenge matters to me because I am tackling a new type of leadership challenge (an international team without prior working relationships) and unfamiliar ways of working. Furthermore, I enjoy the opportunity to create a team culture that is flat and respectful and it was a disappointment that this incident has resulted in limited project progress or collaboration. This new type of leadership also aligns with a new management paradigm in my thinking, and as such I feel that I need to master it in order to succeed. This leadership setting is difficult because it has no formal authority, in line with what described by Johnson.

Prior to the module, my perspective was mainly informed by my personal experience having studied and worked in various countries. From my perspective, the conflict that occurred in the group has arisen due to the cultural difference in giving and receiving feedback, especially in a group setting and without time to build rapport. I also recognise that the problem might be a symptom of a deeper problem because we have not achieved a clear workflow and some members that have started to feel frustrated with the lack of progress made by the rest of the team. Therefore, my personal challenges are: 1) inspire group members toward a shared goal, 2) devise a workflow plan that complements group members’ skills and strengths so that the team feels assured about delivery and progress expectations; 3) lead by example and improve my confidence so I provide the leadership needed by the group.

The leadership module has given me various tools and materials to reflect on these challenges. Within the lecture sessions, I came across tools that provide multiple angles and concepts to frame my issue. Perrewé et al. (2000) laid out an analysis of group dynamics under the lens of political skills. The analysis from Perrewé et al. (2000) aligned with my observation of successful leaders being able to disclose their human side to build trust. However, I will need to embrace the uncertainty, characterised by the term VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) (Horney et al., 2010; Mack et al., 2015). Furthermore, relevant articles on leading without authority (Turner et al., 2013) and boundary spanning leadership (CCL, 2016) confirm the challenge of lateral leadership and the dilemma of long-term relationship building versus pressures to provide quick progress.

Additionally, the module provided me with new frameworks for problem solving and the highlighted the value of stakeholders and shared value mapping. These tools and frameworks helped me review and reshape the framing of my personal leadership challenge. On the personal level, it pinpointed a core issue in my attempts to “overfit” to the group dynamic and be over-reliant on the coalition approach, leading to the lack of steady leadership in the group. Toegel and Barsoux (2019) mentioned the challenge of the unsaid subject, and while I have tried to address the issues in the team by communicating my openness and willingness to receive constructive feedback, if asked for too often this can weaken authority.

In conclusion, my personal leadership challenge framing has transformed from a general unease with individual incidents to a coherent mapping of causes and effects, and with regards to individuals’ diversity regarding team culture and personal working preference. Overall, the module provided a wider context to organise my thoughts, take action, get feedback and discover alternative perspectives. I plan to improve my soft skills and seek an authentic communication style that is true to my identity and leadership aim of becoming a harmonious leader. Specifically, my actions will be to open up the communication within the group via discussing the undiscussable (Toegel & Barsoux, 2019) and creating a growth-culture to encourage the team to grow beyond their comfort zone (Schwartz, 2018).