The Challenge of Leading Work Teams:
Creating a Case Study to Enhance Learning

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Abstract

The competitive success of organizations is heavily dependent on the quality of leadership within those organizations. Among the growing list of skills required for effective leadership is the need for leaders to promote the deployment of effective teams in the workplace. There are numerous strategies and methods that have been utilized to prepare future leaders to meet the challenge of developing and promoting high performance teams in the workplace. This idea brief summarizes one approach developed by faculty for a new course in a graduate management/leadership program titled, "Leading and Developing High Performance Teams." The approach summarized in this article includes a hypothetical/fictional mini-case that was developed specifically for the purpose of meeting course objectives related to the identification of issues/challenges related to virtual teams, as well as diversity in teams. The mini-case is followed by some proposed questions that will accompany the case. A sample of acceptable responses is also provided.

Introduction

Quality initiatives for colleges of business require continuously improving academic programs and curricula to better align with the needs of stakeholders. With this in mind, a group of our faculty recently recommended the development and addition of a course on leading and developing high performance teams to one of our graduate programs. Most organizations currently use teams of some form (Goldberg, 2014), so it is important that future leaders are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to manage teams in the workplace. This need is intensified, as well as complicated, by the fact that organizations are becoming more global, often requiring the use of virtual teams that are diverse, as well as being separated by place and time.

The graduate program that will offer this new course is an applied program that places heavy emphasis on preparing students to be effective leaders/managers. At the time this case was written, the course was still under development.

A Brief Note on the Importance of Teams in the Workplace. Teams are widely used in organizations, with a variety of consequent benefits, including increased productivity (Glassop, 2002). As a result, the aptitude and skills to successfully function in, as well as lead work-teams is recognized as highly coveted in today's business environment (Laszlo, Laszlo, & Johnsen, 2009). Importantly, the need for flexibility is contributing to the increased use of virtual teams, comprised of individuals who are geographically separated (Potter, Cooke, & Balthazard, 2000), and are not likely to interact face-to-face (Brandt, England, & Ward, 2011).

When it comes to the success of teams, training that includes exposure to the interpersonal dynamics within groups is invaluable (Collins, 1995). Therefore, there appears to be value in exposing business students to the realities of working in teams and helping them learn about practical issues faced by teams. The case exercise described in this paper was our attempt to develop a learning experience for our students that would provide this type of exposure.

Proposed Course Description. *An in-depth study of the key factors necessary to develop, support and lead high performance teams. Key factors such as interpersonal dynamics, organizational culture, decision-making, and communication are examined. By reading and discussing assignments in cases, theories and models, team leadership and management are examined. Leadership of various types of work teams in face to face and virtual settings are applied to enhance effective performance and team member satisfaction.*

A variety of methodologies will be undertaken to guide students in meeting the learning outcomes for the course including: 1) the coverage of content in the required course textbook, 2) associated exams, 3) discussion questions/extension exercises, and 4) writing assignments. In designing the course, we were cognizant of Bennis and O'Toole's (2005) sentiment that effective business programs should combine the attainment of knowledge, with opportunities for students to apply or practice that knowledge. Thus, it was determined by faculty that one way to address learning outcomes related to global differences and choosing appropriate options to enhance team performance was the use of a case. Cases are regarded as a valuable and popular learning tool in higher education (Ross & Wright, 2000), giving students opportunities to apply their knowledge in more of a real world context. Further, active learning is recognized as an effective learning method for adults (Mancuso, 2001) and valuable element in the development of high-performance teams (Laszlo et al., 2009). Since cases represent an active form of learning, there appeared to be merit in using a case as a component of the course since it would give us an opportunity to emulate some of the conditions requisite in high-performance teams. There are numerous resources that provide business cases to faculty and students. However, we did not want our students to have the additional cost of purchasing a case, nor did we want students to be encumbered by a voluminous case containing details that were not germane to the specific learning objectives of the course. Consequently, we developed a hypothetical/fictional mini-case. While there is no formal distinction between a standard case and a mini-case, for our purposes, we classified the current case as a mini-case since it was considerably shorter than most "standard" cases. In regard to using a hypothetical/fictional case, one of the benefits for us is that it could be tailored to the specific needs of our learning context (Ross & Wright, 2000). Coers, Lorensen, and Anderson (2009) also mention the use of hypothetical cases, and emphasize the importance of delivering educational programs that meet the needs of active

learning. In addition to noting benefits of hypothetical cases, Schraeder (2011) also suggests that mini-cases can be effective since students can review the case more quickly, and possibly spend more time applying knowledge from the course in responding to the case.

The following sections include the hypothetical case we developed, as well as learning objectives, proposed case questions, and an overview/examples of acceptable student responses.

D/M Training Solutions Mini-Case

(Note: This is a hypothetical case using fictitious company names, employee names, and events. Any likeness or similarity to other companies or individuals is purely coincidental and not intended. D/M in the fictional company name are simply the first letters of each of the authors' first names.)

Learning Objectives for the Case.
1. Select and describe the major challenges associated with the team in this case.
2. Identify/classify the major types of diversity present in a team.
3. Describe advantages and possible challenges associated with each type of diversity.
4. Recommend two approaches to conflict resolution with supporting rationale.

The learning objectives for this specific case were developed to support Student Learning Outcomes for the course.

Introduction. D/M Training Solutions is a growing company that provides on-line management/leadership training for small/medium sized companies that are not large enough to have their own training programs. The training programs developed by D/M are turn-key, and relate to a variety of topics intended to improve leadership/management effectiveness, particularly in a multinational/global environment. The company's headquarters are located in Portland, Oregon. Small field offices, responsible for marketing, product translation, and customer service, are located in Dublin, Ireland; Seoul, South Korea; Stuttgart, Germany; and Barcelona, Spain.

After completing your graduate degree in management from a progressive university, you were recruited by D/M to work in their Product Development and Enhancement Division. You have only been employed by D/M for three months, but the director of your division has already gained respect for you, noting that you are an excellent communicator, exceptional critical thinker, and supportive member of the Product Development and Enhancement Division.

To date, D/M has developed and marketed on-line training programs for corporations. However, the top level leaders of D/M have expressed an interest in expanding the scope of training solutions to include colleges and universities. The intent with this expansion would be to develop short (10-15 minute) on-line training modules with an intense focus on specific topics, concepts, and theories related to leadership and management in global organizations. D/M leadership believes that colleges and universities might be willing to purchase these modules and incorporate them into their existing programs to supplement current program content. However, they realize that the cost/affordability, appropriate topic choice, and the

availability of training modules in a variety of languages will be essential to the success of this expansion.

The director of your division has asked you to be the team leader for a new team that will be formed to make specific recommendations regarding this proposed expansion. Specifically, the team will have six months to recommend a portfolio of on-line training modules that can be offered/marketed to select colleges and universities throughout the world. Further, the team will be tasked with making recommendations that meet the essential elements of success (i.e., affordability, appropriate topics, and language options) identified by top level leaders.

Your team will be comprised of the following individuals who were selected, jointly, by your director, as well as the field office supervisors for their respective locations.

Name	Department or Area of Expertise	Home Country	Years of Service with D/M
Min-Jun (32 year old-male)	Translation	South Korea	5-South Korea field office
Elise (24 year old-female)	Marketing	Germany	2-Germany field office
Alice (47 year old-female)	Technical support and Customer service	Italy	8-Spain field office
Andre (29 year old-male)	Translation and Technical support	France	3-Ireland field office
Christopher (54 year old-male)	Marketing and Technical support	Canada	7-South Korea field office
Hannah (59 year old-female)	Product development	USA	18-Company headquarters

Based on the overview and task that has been assigned to the team, please respond to the following questions.

Case Questions.
1. Evaluate and describe 5-7 major challenges associated with the team in this case. In your response, be very specific in describing each challenge and why you think it will be a challenge. Your response should reflect an understanding and application of related concepts that have been covered in this course.
2. Identify/classify 5-7 major types of diversity present in this D/M team. In your response, also specifically analyze the pros and cons of at least 3 of the possible cross-cultural issues identified by Hofstede (1980) (i.e. collectivism vs. individualism; power distance, masculinity vs. femininity, etc.).
3. Briefly describe the following five conflict management approaches related to conflict (competing, avoiding, compromising, collaborative, accommodating). Next, identify which of these strategies may be most appropriate for addressing each of the challenges

listed above and why it might be the most appropriate approach to address any conflict that might be related to the challenges.

General Recommendations and Anticipated Outcomes.

General Recommendations:

1. The recommended student team size is 3 to 5 participants. Students should not divide the assignment among the team members; instead, it is strongly recommended to have each student complete a draft of the entire assignment so each has an understanding of the overall approach as opposed to knowledge of specific items only. Next, the team should be encouraged to collaborate on how to best synthesize each of the students' ideas into a consolidated response.
2. Supplemental reading is strongly recommended. Suggested topics for this supplemental reading include, but are not limited to articles related to cohesion in teams, team conflict, Cultural Dimensions (Hofstede), team composition, the multiple areas of diversity including but not limited to personalities, work cultures, conflict in teams, gender, and virtual teams. Other factors and challenges should be included such as trust, clarification of roles and responsibilities, clear communication, an understanding of shared mission and goals, empowerment and challenges in virtual teams.
3. The deliverable from the student team should focus on critical thinking skills, effective approaches and recommendations, not an exhaustive list of possibilities based on the reading.

Anticipated Outcomes:

1. Students should recognize that there are a variety of potential challenges associated with this case. In particular, they should note that virtual team members will be challenged because they are separated by time and distance, national cultures, work styles, age, personality differences, gender differences, personal/individual expectations, project constraints and timeline; the team also needs to develop trust, cohesion and a collaborative work relationship. The team is very diverse, creating the potential for misunderstandings and conflict. Perceptions of the other team members about you because of your limited time with the organization; others have more experience and they have been with the company much longer.
2. At a minimum, student responses should include the following types of diversity: Gender; age; Hofstede's dimensions such as masculinity/femininity, power distance, individualism versus collectivism; ethnic diversity in nationality and country of origin; language differences; diversity in professional backgrounds and areas of expertise.
3. Students should provide a basic description of the five conflict management approaches listed earlier (competing, avoiding, compromising, collaborative, accommodating). Avoiding and competing would be the least appropriate because they rely on unassertive and assertive methods that are not usually productive in teams. Accommodating has limits but may be a solution depending on the situation; compromising may also be a solution but this includes wins and losses; collaboration, in this case, would be the preferred choice.

Conclusion

This idea brief described a hypothetical/fictional mini-case on teams that a group of faculty developed for a new graduate course on leading and developing high performance teams. The case was developed with the intent of providing students with an opportunity to apply/practice knowledge gleaned from the course in a practical context. The context was a hypothetical/fictional mini-case that including a virtual team, with a high level of diversity. Students will be required to evaluate the case and offer preferred responses to questions that address issues/challenges related to diversity, challenges related to virtual teams, and development of appropriate strategies to promote high performance within this team. Outcomes related to this assignment, as well as student input, will be evaluated to determine the effectiveness of the assignment in meeting desiring learning objectives. In addressing the learning objectives for the case, this exercise is intended to provide students with practice in developing a deeper understanding of the types of challenges they might face as members/leaders of future teams in the workplace, as well as developing insights regarding strategies that might prove effective in addressing these challenges.

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