

Managing groups in a multicultural setup

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Surviving and succeeding in today's global competitive business environment is obviously difficult. Cross-cultural working, managing changes, technological advantages give the much needed edge to set organizations apart. Our progress and approach strategies clearly defines our success. Developments in recent years have reinforced the view that we are moving from a world in which we determined our destination to one in which we must learn to navigate a path between myriad future possibilities (Stickland, 1998).

I had been assigned to a study group, which I was to work with, during the first semester. The group members met each other for the first time in the lecture theatre and decided to meet after class. The meeting was informal and we all introduced ourselves, exchanged e-mail addresses and phone numbers. All five team members talked about their backgrounds and I seemed to like the team from the beginning.

Everyone seemed humble. As we kept on talking, it became apparent that some team members were more talkative than others. Team members, A and B were very talkative and kept asking questions while C and D were more quiet. I was more like an average participant, but in the end I too talked less. A and B looked at each other and me but not at C and D; C and D were thus not included in the conversations. I noticed this, but decided to ignore it for the time being. I thought I need to only change it later.

The five members came from different countries across four continents. A was from India and from experience I knew that Indians would talk a lot and have strong opinions. B was from Honduras whom I thought would be talkative and easy going like my friends from Nicaragua and other Central

American countries. While C was from Georgia, a country I did not know much about, D was from the US whom I thought would be a hard working, self-centered and confrontationist.

The team was truly diverse. Having lived in Asia, North America and Europe, working with several multicultural teams for over a decade; I knew from the beginning that I had to learn more about their cultures and backgrounds. This was perhaps the only way I could interpret their behavior and adapt to them, while they could adapt to me too. I believed that judging people even before you get to know them was wrong, while at the same time I was sure that my assumptions about certain cultures and the norms within these cultures, were mostly right.

We were assigned the first group task in managementscience. I walked into the assignment with a positive attitude and everyone else in the group did, too. After all, the first get-to-know meeting had been positive. Once we had gathered, we decided on where to work. We sat down and focused on the task that had been given to us. We read the assignment and were ready to discuss the task.

Here things started to go wrong. As group members are not much familiar with each other, there is a certain amount of uncertainty and suspicion, when interpreting each other's conduct and action. Lack of positive relationship carries opportunities for development of serious conflicts. These may not only be difficult to resolve, but also decrease team performance, particularly when a relationship conflict is not differentiated from task disagreements. (Pamela and Sara 2002)

As we had not established a hierarchy structure, there was no leader. It was an equal platform for all to put forth their contributions, at an identical level. I come from a consensus driven society and thought that it was the right approach. I believed that everyone knew how dynamics in a consensus driven group works. However, I was proven wrong. People were not listening to each other! People would not let each other talk. Instead they interrupted each other!

I could not overcome the feeling that some people wanted to prove that they were intelligent and knowledgeable. We did not have a dialogue. The task's problems and scope were not discussed. We did not talk about how to solve the task at hand. Instead people presented their solutions!. The team found it hard to keep up the schedules, and inefficient communication was taking its toll.

I have worked as a management and strategy consultant in many countries and even founded companies in cultures foreign to me and I had never seen such chaos and unstructured behavior. In fact, gradually the team structure itself broke down and began functioning like two divided teams working on separate agenda. Did this have to do with some people's inexperience?! Or was this peculiar only to me?.

I went along with what was happening in the group, always trying to pull people back to discuss the task's scope. The group agreed that we needed to look at the scope and understand it. However, people continued to argue their causes defending their ideas. We were not getting anywhere. Time was running out and I knew that we did not have a good solution. This was confirmed when we saw what other groups presented. Now, I wondered

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whether the other people in the group saw it the same way? But I never asked them. We had talked to each other in the first assignment but not with each other now. We were not communicating well.

Several days later, the second assignment was given to us. We went back to the same room we had used earlier. We read the task and, to my surprise, nobody's approach had changed. Everyone was talking and no one listening. D who had been quiet in the first meeting tried to explain his idea which I thought was good. I wanted people to listen to D and they did after I specifically asked them to. D has only studied English for four years and he had a hard time expressing his thoughts, lacking the necessary vocabulary.

Everyone else in the group speaks English fluently. I believed this might be the reason why no one listened to him. Anyway, after D had talked, they resumed their unconstructive debating, ignoring D's ideas. After I initiated a second attempt to get D back into the discussion without any success I must admit that emotions replaced my otherwise logical and rather rational thinking. The other group members' ignorance upset me. I decided not to participate anymore. Instead, I decided to observe what was going on in the team, making mental notes and checking my initial assumptions about each others' attitudes.

I then realized that initiating a groupwork successfully is very important and difficult. Perhaps the task or objectives at hand need to correspond to an initiation level too. Not much has been said or written on tasks, which are more suitable for groupwork, particularly at the initiation level. But it has been widely accepted that group work must be established in defined stages or steps, so that there is a better sense of direction and focus at the early

stages. It would also be more beneficial if the topics and activities are initially focused at a simpler, straightforward and interesting agenda, gradually moving on to complicating issues. (Elisabeth 1990)

Once again, we ran out of time without having completed the task, we returned to the lecture theatre only to find that our solution was substandard. At this point, I thought we have had enough and decided that we need to have a team discussion to analyze why we were under performing and how can we improve?. I sent out an e-mail to the group on this and to my surprise the team agreed with me, and we met the next day. During the subsequent meeting everyone admitted that we have been under performing.

We also agreed that an important problem was that we were not letting everyone speak up and that some members dominated the discussions. We had to change this. This is when we created a “ Group Work Guidebook” and work structure guidelines. We established guidelines on courtesy, respect, conduct and criticism, which are to be exhibited by all, in the course of our groupwork. We also took certain strategic initiatives like sharing our strengths and weaknesses and setting up a roadmap for achieving our objectives.

Even though we did not have specific roles I soon became the facilitator, with many suggesting that I take over as a secretary. I made sure to empower others in the group as we went along but also made sure that discussion went smoothly without getting stuck in details. When emotions started to come up in discussions I tried to intervene usually with humor. I had to skip a meeting as I was sick; however it gave me an opportunity to understand how

the team performed in my absence. I was surprised to note that the team was indeed more receptive to each other than before. Meetings were however becoming more hectic due to time constraints caused unnecessarily by professors, and at times we felt like we were slipping off as before.

What made me uncomfortable at times was that some group members started to see me as the leader, which I did not like. Group members would look at me when there was an argument or when they had questions. I felt like a judge! I did not want this because I felt that it would hold the group back from having open and productive discussions. I believed that we could have “ new leaders” every time depending on what we talked about. The leader would naturally emerge and it would obviously be the one who knew the most about the matter at hand. When I received for example questions, and people looked at me.

I would give my opinion but then make sure that I asked everyone else what they thought. It was a time consuming process and ate into our efficiency but it was worth it. We ended up with good results and everyone felt involved. However, not everyone felt that they had been involved every time we met. C had never worked in a multi-cultural team before and likes task-focused approaches. C took over the role of coordinator without us noticing.

A says that she comes from a passive culture and thinks she is helping us which isn't. . In the session, A mentioned that she was not feeling that everyone understood her and she had a hard time expressing her feelings in the group. I spoke to A about it, who needed more reassurance when she worked in groups. She had a tendency to talk a lot and many group members found it distracting and I sensed that she was being kept outside the team a

little bit. We had agreed on some guidelines but, especially A and C wanted to work the way they were used to, unwilling to accept others' ways of working. We started to prepare slides so that we could hit the ground running and it took a long time before we felt comfortable with dividing tasks. The initial phase helped us to bond. As we went along, the group worked harmoniously with some few interruptions. The group bonded more and more as we went along. Mostly, because we now understood each other's needs and how everyone liked to work. Our team outing also contributed to this bonding, giving us an opportunity to talk on something personal. Also, we started to split tasks and worked in small groups. The objectives and approaches were discussed with the team.

Then tasks were delegated. We were able to work faster this way. This also satisfied C who wanted a more task oriented approach. However, we did not exaggerate the task focus. A admitted that she in general has problems to express feelings, and we as a team assured her that everyone does have it, but that it is better to talk to us, so that we can support her as we work together almost every day. We were here to learn, try new things and have fun. In the "group therapy" session, the team agreed that efficiency was an issue although, it had improved over the past weeks. The question now was how quickly we could improve our efficiency and how?. We decided, especially during our project, to pick up the pace and set more deadlines.

As we continued to progress well, it was becoming obvious that some team members missed a hierarchical structure. The more experienced members however, were fine with not having one, while the less experienced ones looked for guidance and at some time even thought that they had turned

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into leaders as they tried to enforce a hierarchy or assigned themselves tasks such as structuring meetings, etc. I believe this helps them tackle their insecurity.

The younger members showed that they could not handle stress very well. When we had client meetings C would get nervous and start bossing people around. I laughed at it initially, but pointed it out to him. Even other group members pointed it out to him and he improved. As we entered the final phase of the project I discovered that the younger members liked to talk in the “ I” form more and more. When I had put together a model with A or C they would still say “ I created XYZ” in the group. B picked up on this and it irritated her as well as me. I explained to them the importance of teamwork and made it clear that it should always be ‘ We’ and not ‘ I’.

The study group bonded more and more. Even C who in the beginning thought that dinners were simply a waste of time now started to enjoy them and even initiates them. He felt comfortable with the team and the team in general spoke openly about everything. Today, we are still improving our organizational skills and efficiency. However, we are very comfortable with each other, joking and laughing more than we work at times. This slows down work, but we still achieve good results and most importantly we discuss things outside the assignment, which is also a way of developing.

The project presentation went very well. C talks and jokes more than he has ever done before – not just with the group. D has found a humorous side as well and has been very calm throughout the process. B is very involved sometimes at a level that is too detailed but she keeps everyone positive. A is motivated again after the Management Science debacle when we scored

lower than we had expected. I am more structured in my approach and communicate much clearer (harder) than before pulling the teams back to the essential problems, when needed. And, yes, I still spend much time talking to group members outside the group, helping in any way that I possibly can. Did it require much energy and time? Yes! But it was worth it.

I look forward to working with this group again, because we are now working well together, learning more and faster; being adapted to each other's working style and body language. There are people in the MBA with whom I do not want to work with. These are people who do not understand integrity, honesty and respect. Selfishness does not go well with me. I have understood and realized this only in the past few weeks, more than ever before. I continue to believe that my passive leadership style in which I try to make people discover their flaws themselves is good. Sometimes I have to be more direct, or there will be misunderstandings leading to potential conflicts.

Creating a group and implementing a working plan or road map is a difficult and time-consuming task. The planning stage is very crucial for the effective working of the group, however it is also essential that we do not hold on completely to the plan. The group and leader must react to situations impulsively. (Linda 1997). I see myself more of a transformational type leader who set goals and inculcate awareness on the setting and achieving of goals by others to pull them from unworthy preoccupations.

Transformational leadership elevates levels of morality and motivation among others and are more effective, It has not been possible to relate their leadership with demographic, social or personal characteristics (Linda et al). I

have indeed been benefited by this groupwork experience, a benefit that will remain with me, contributing to whatever I would be involved in.

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