

# Leadership and teamwork in action



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BUSTER**

When reflecting on the practical team event, based in the Llandysul Paddlers and Canoe centre on the first and second of November, many examples of teamwork and leadership were shown by the group members.

When faced with some of the tasks and problems that the occurred during the event, different members of the team displayed various characteristics that showed them to be team workers or team leaders, and sometimes even both.

The following report reflects on some points raised during the event, and aims to show examples of leadership and teamwork in action. The report also discusses various topics which include, but are not limited to, how the team developed over the weekend, what leadership skills and strategies were covered by the event and how leadership skills were developed and influenced by the event. Other topics which are relevant to the subject matter will also be discussed and critically analysed.

## 2. 0 Methodology

The research methodology used for the basis of this report is mainly first hand account of a weekend attended by myself and the other people in my lecture group. I will use first hand experiences from this weekend, along with academic theory and relevant examples.

## 3. 0 Main Body

Colin Powell once stated that “ leadership is the art of accomplishing more than the science of management says is possible”. This statement reflects on the fact that good leadership is a skill that you are not born with, but

something that needs to be developed. To become a good leader, your skills must be developed through a process of training, education and experience.

The practical team event on the 1st and 2nd of November was an experience which proved to be a valuable insight into the roles of a person in a position of leadership, and showed many examples of teamwork in action.

From the outset of the weekend, it was clear by the way in which it was proposed, that it would be a very team orientated event. Our group met on the morning of the 1st of November, and we were gathered onto busses and taken to the Llandysul Paddlers and Canoe Centre, Carmarthenshire. When we entered the centre, we were greeted by all the centre staff, and introduced to them all.

This appeared to be done in a very informal way, though it served a purpose. Not only to introduce the team leaders to all of the group members, but also to re-enforce the sense of team atmosphere in the centre. The leader of the staff team, and the manager of the centre Gareth Bryant, first introduced himself, then the other staff members. It was also done to address the question of who was the leader of the staff team.

It was only after introducing everyone that our teams were selected. To encourage people to integrate with people outside of their friendship circles, and to make new friends, it was not left to the team members to choose which team they would like to be in. As expected, when everyone entered the centre, and took a seat, people sat in their friendship groups with people that they knew and trusted. In an attempt to break this barrier of friendship, Gareth selected the groups at random. This ensured that the teams were

well mixed with a wide variety of team members of various sex and backgrounds.

To encourage team dynamics, after our teams had been chosen for us, we were shown to our sleeping quarters, and it was implied that each team should stick together over the course of the weekend very closely.

In this environment, where dangerous activities are taking place, it is more important than ever to have a fully functioning and well selected team. Teams can achieve brilliant things if they are well functioning and work well together. This is mainly because of the team sense of purpose, where everyone is aiming to achieve one single outcome.

According to the work of Dr. Meredith Belbin (Management Teams – Why they succeed and fail, 1981) members of a group or team can have many roles associated with each of them that allows for a smooth running group that works well. Belbin defines a team role as “ A tendency to behave, contribute and interrelate with others in a particular way”. These behavioural tendencies facilitate the progress of a team, because of the way people with different roles work with each other. The members of a team know their place in the team, and can benefit the team as a whole by helping to work towards the objectives set. Belbin’s research concluded that there are nine team roles, within a well functioning team, and each of these roles must be played by at least one team member. This does of course not mean that each member is limited to one role, or that a team should have nine members to work well. It simply means that if each of these roles is present within a team, the team will work to a much higher standard overall.

After working through some team exercises with some of my team members, it was clear to me that some of what Belbin's research suggested was indeed the case. It soon became apparent to some extent that members of the team were showing characteristics in line with those suggested by the research.

Some members of the team were happy to just be a team worker, and simply do what is needed of them. Other team members were constantly coming up with new ideas, and new ways to tackle problems. These are known as "Planters" because they are creative and imaginative and keep arriving at ideas to face problems. During many of the exercises, I was quite disappointed to find that I displayed a lot of the characteristics of a "monitor evaluator". Although this, as all the other roles, is an important one, it did mean that I simply got on with the job in hand, and lacked the drive to inspire others. This is probably due to my lack of confidence with my own ideas, as sometimes I do not raise ideas as I think that other people will not agree with them. I did notice this lack of confidence becoming much less of a problem as the event progressed, however. I did occasionally get given the opportunity to become a co-ordinator, when I was given leadership roles, but I will discuss that in more detail later on.

The way in which the teams were selected for this exercise also meant that friends were placed in opposite teams that would occasionally have the chance to compete with each other. Competition is very important for teams to work well because a lot of people thrive on the thrill of competition, and generally love to compete. At the very least, this is due to the fact that people love to take part in an activity with a purpose, but more often than

not, people compete for the thrill of winning. Admittedly, a lot of people stick to the ideal that “ it’s not the winning, but the taking part that counts”.

In this case, there are many examples of competition to help progress the teams. One such example occurred in the form of a race.

The team building exercise showed many different examples of competition, but the biggest one was the “ plank walking exercise”. The team was split into two groups by the instructor, and each team was given two planks of wood with pieces of rope attached. It was the job of each team to stand on the wood, whilst holding the rope and attempt to collectively walk the wood to the finish line. This task sounded simple, but was unfortunately full of difficulties. Our team was one of the worst performing in this task, not only because of a flawed system, but also because of bad communication within the team. Jennifer, one of our team members, elected herself immediately as the leader of our team, and started trying to devise a system as to how we could complete the task. Unfortunately, going back to Belbin’s theory, we had two other “ plant” members of the team, each with different ideas. In the end, our system became too complicated, and while we were still discussing how we were going to attempt the task, the other team was completing its trial run.

Katzenbach and Smith commented on teams in their book (The Wisdom of Teams, 1998) stating that a team is “ a small numbers of people with complimentary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals and common approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable”. Teams are designed to maximise output, and encourage

continuous improvement. In our example, this was certainly not the case. Due to conflicting personalities and ideas in the team, it took us far too long to bring what ideas we had into practice, and we were left behind in the race. This was partially due to the fact that the other team members may not have wanted to elect Jennifer as the leader and they disliked the fact that she took an otherwise positive step in using her own initiative to elect herself as one.

I also believe that this exercise was a good example of the “ Ringlemann Effect” in action. This is because moving the wood was a joint effort, but it became increasingly more and more difficult to move as time went on. I suggest that this was because people were slacking and “ loafing” and not putting their full effort in.

The stages of our group development were in fact closely matched to Tuckman’s four stages of group development model. The forming stage was short lived, our group like all the others was formed early in the exercise at the centre. During this stage, there were few problems or conflicts within the group, as everyone was in high spirits. The first exercise that our group embarked upon was the Kayaking, which although we were in high spirits, people argued over equipment and small items very quickly. These arguments could most likely be attributed to the cold and wet weather.

By our final exercise, the rock climbing, we seemed to have reached the third stage of the Tuckman model of norming. Our group was more established by this point and responsibilities were clear and well formed.

Everyone was more open to suggestion and less likely to criticise. People were also less resistant to new ideas.

The rock climbing was a good example personally of how peer pressure in groups works. I had been rock climbing before and had not enjoyed the experience. On this attempt, when it was my turn to face the rock, I had started to climb when a rock moved as I grabbed it, which knocked my confidence. I had decided to climb down from the rock by this point. When I saw everyone else scaling the same rock face later on, I felt that I should not have been so quick to give up. When it was my turn to attempt the abseiling, I attempted it with no fuss or problems at all. I even found myself encouraging other group members and comforting Simon by telling him how strong the ropes actually are.

I feel personally that the rock climbing was the best experience for me, even if it was not the most successful in terms of results. I feel that I did well to overcome my initial fears in attempting it again. This was, in part, due to the advice and support of other team members, and of course group peer pressure.

As I mentioned previously, teamwork is extremely important in tasks like this teambuilding weekend. This is not just due to reasons of morale, but also because of synergy. This basically means “ the interaction of two or more agents, so that their combined effect is greater than the sum of their individual effect”. Simply put  $1 + 1 = 3$ , because the effect on teamwork on a task improves output and efficiency greatly and in a very positive way.



The leader of a team is described as a person who influences others so that they may accomplish an objective. This is quite a broad definition, though it applies just as well to most examples of teams in a team working environment or situation. If someone elects themselves as the head of a team, or their superior elects them as the leader, this does not automatically make them a leader. It simply makes them the person who is in charge. To be effective leaders you must make people want to achieve the goals that you set them, not because they are forced to accomplish or complete them.

Bass' (1989) theory of leadership explains that there are three ways to define how people become leaders or develop into a leadership role.

In the case of examples of leadership from the team building exercise, it was always the case that there was a leader involved, simply because of the dangerous nature of the activities that we were doing. The instructor of each activity was normally the leader, as they had been told to do so by their manager, and it was their job. However, sometimes as the tasks involved allowed, the instructor stepped down and elected a different leader for the task.

For the kayaking task, after we had some basic training on the water, the instructor stepped down to allow a different activity to take place. In this example, it was myself that was elected as the leader of the group. It was my task to transport a member of the group, who was pretending to be injured, across the lake. The severity of the situation was important and very high, because I was told that the injured party had hyperthermia setting in, and their condition would deteriorate rapidly if help was not found. As Bass

describes in his transformational leadership theory, awareness of the importance of the task motivates people. This was certainly true in this case, because if there was no time limit, people would not be rushed to complete the task. Bass describes charisma as an important factor in leadership as charisma evokes strong emotions with the leader's followers. Being elected as the leader of the kayak task was not easy. The instructor advised me as to what equipment I was allowed to use and that everyone must reach the other side of the lake quickly and safely. When you are elected as a leader, especially in a crisis, it is often hard to decide which tasks to approach first. Bass talks about this in his "Great events theory" where he mentions that sometimes a crisis or event can cause someone to be elected as a leader, which was exactly what occurred in this situation.

In my situation as leader for this task, I initially found it very difficult to effectively allocate resources, as I initially found myself focussing too much on certain aspects. The instructor was quick to step in and point out on a couple of occasions that I had team members who were sitting around, doing nothing. It was only later in the process that I began to effectively keep everyone in the team informed of the situation and to use the full capabilities of the group.

One of the other important principles of leadership was that I needed to follow was to ensure that all tasks were understood and supervised until they were completed. This is important because some of the members of the group were not well informed at all times, so they simply sat around while others attempted to do the task around them.

During this task, I definitely found that there was a communication barrier between myself and some of the Chinese speaking group members. This was usually just a language barrier. This was soon avoided when I managed to convince them of the severity of the task, and the speed needed to complete it.

Trust was also an important factor in the exercise. The injured party was not allowed to move at all, or help her team mates in any way. Because of this, the injured team member had to be carried into a kayak and across the lake while being completely immobile. This must have been a hard task because putting all of your trust in the hands of people you hardly know, especially when there is water involved, is no small accomplishment.

Communication is one of the key aspects of leadership. As I have previously mentioned, language can be a barrier, but communication of all aspects is important. Especially during the exercise when I found myself in a leadership role, I realised it was very important for your team as a whole to keep them informed of developments and even simply what you require them to do. It is often easy, especially when discussing ways to complete a task for team members to either not give any input at all, or to simply go along with the general consensus and not say anything. I feel that if I have learned anything about communication in this leadership weekend, it would be that is important to raise your own views, and to listen to the views of others, and take their comments and criticisms on board.

## **4. 0 Conclusions**

Leadership is the art of influencing people accomplish tasks and objectives.

Leadership is not something that you are born with, however you are born with certain traits which make some people more suitable for leadership roles than others. Leadership skills must be developed through time.

Teamwork can be a very important tool that helps develop and accomplish tasks. There are many different types of people who make up a team, but too many people with new ideas can make the situation become argumentative.

Over the course of the management weekend, some people showed themselves to be more suited to leadership than others, or more suited to teamwork than others.

However, the duration of the weekend was short. Some suggested that it should have been over a longer period, even as long as a week. This would have given us more chance to develop theory associated with teamwork and leadership, however, time and financial concerns would limit this greatly.

Overall the weekend was an excellent opportunity to see management, leadership and teamwork in action, and was a very valuable experience overall.