

THE Dreaded Team Assignment:

Developing Essential Leadership Skills

By Eileen F. Schiffer

Leadership skills are essential for team and organizational success in any industry. Leaders, whether in formal leadership positions or not, facilitate attainment of team and company goals. Students in business classes explicitly study leadership principles and strategies; but students in every field can—and should be—offered opportunities to better understand the qualities and actions that contribute to leadership success. Team assignments are an integral component of many academic programs. Though often dreaded by students, team assignments, if well-designed and facilitated by instructors, can provide terrific opportunities for students to experience and practice essential leadership skills.

Undoubtedly, there are other skills and qualities that are important contributors to leadership success in organizations. The ones noted below are essential *and* are fortuitously aligned with potential outcomes of academic team assignments. Let's consider some of the ways that academic team assignments are ideally suited to help students develop each of these essential leadership skills with the assistance of an instructor.



Emotional Intelligence

Self-awareness and the ability to honestly recognize and act on opportunities for growth are key predictors of leadership success (George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer, 2007; Campbell, Dardis, & Campbell, 2003). Leaders need to be self-aware—of their preferences, strengths, “blinders” and “filters;” their typical approaches to leadership (passive, integrative, domineering); and the impact of their

behaviors on others with similar and/or different ways of thinking, learning, communicating and behaving. Team assignments offer students fantastic opportunities to develop their emotional intelligence.

Suggestions for Instructors

Incorporate self-analysis, reflection and personal goal-setting elements. Before students engage in their teams, ask them to answer some targeted questions, such as:

- What am I good at?
- How will I contribute?
- What might be opportunities for improvement?
- How will I use this team assignment to target self-analysis, reflection and personal goal-setting?

Students should then re-assess their performance after the team has submitted the assignment:



points to the discussion, award full points for contributing or no points for absence. Ask students to brainstorm some typical team assignment challenges and some strategies for overcoming them online or in a face-to-face discussion:

- What would they like all their teammates to do?
- What will they each commit to do?
- Might an important strategy be to note all team commitments a day ahead of due dates on personal calendars so they meet all deadlines?
- Should they prioritize the team assignment, reducing other commitments?
- Would it be a challenge for them to back off a bit and avoid taking control?
- How do they feel when teammates do not communicate regularly?

Reinforce accountability. Utilize feedback tools that require each student to evaluate each member of the team. Require that the feedback identifies *both* positive contributions *and* opportunities for each member's improvement.

Communication

Leaders must communicate; effective communication is predictive of goal attainment, employee satisfaction and organizational success (Mikkelsen, York, & Arritola, 2015). Communication, of course, flows in multiple directions. Not only must leaders be proficient in persuasively sharing their message with others, they also need to be effective listeners. Active listening is central to effective communication, regardless of the channel; but the processes differ.

For example, in face-to-face teams, listeners can make eye contact, which is only possible in virtual teams if they utilize video-communication tools such as Skype. Students should be encouraged to become comfortable with those prevalent technologies, as well as with communication channels that are missing body-language cues (such as e-mails and text messages), and should self-reflect on the opportunities and challenges of each of those. Some communication strategies apply to any channel, and students can be mindful of these and their importance

for leaders when communicating with their teams.

Suggestions for Instructors

Post an announcement that reinforces communication etiquette, and offers explicit recommendations, such as:

- Attend to each other—don't multi-task.
- Turn off—or at least ignore—your cell-phone.
- Repeat and confirm sent and received messages (orally and/or in writing).
- Respond promptly.

Provide a list of acceptable communication channels, including links to available tools (Skype, Google Hangouts, Zoom, etc.). Make it as easy as possible for students to focus on the process, rather than the logistics of communication.

Goal Attainment

Leaders need to clearly identify goals, carefully consider paths to those goals and motivate team members to collaborate toward attainment of those goals (Locke & Latham, 2006). Team assignments give students the opportunity to create both individual and shared goals. Leaders in organizations have personal goals that directly correspond to the goals of most students, such as: the drive to succeed and receive recognition and reward, and the need to balance team commitments with other priorities (home, work, school).

As is true in an organization, the attainment of those personal goals is dependent on the effectiveness of the team in meeting *its* outcome goals. If students want to earn a desired grade, they must learn to mobilize and successfully collaborate with their team members; this emphasizes paths to individual goals through attainment of mutual goals (Kotter, 2001).

Conflict Management

Leaders need to recognize the challenges—and the value—of conflict, and must learn to facilitate productive conflict to stimulate critical thinking and generate goal-advancing ideas. Their ability to do so is determined, in part, by the self-awareness that was noted

- Did I meet my goals for this assignment?
- What lessons learned might I apply?

Instructors can require submission of pre and post self-assessments, which can account for a clearly identified portion of each student's grade for the team assignment.

Include a class-wide full/no points brainstorming discussion. To encourage participation, attach a small number of

earlier, which is fundamental to leadership success; each leader's approach to conflict is influenced by and impacts the conflict-management culture within the organization (Gelfand, Leslie, Keller, & de Dreu, 2012).

Academic team assignments almost inevitably result in some form of conflict. That conflict is the primary reason that team assignments are dreaded; but it's that very conflict that offers the most significant opportunities for development of essential leadership skills.

Suggestions for Instructors

Encourage (or require) the creation of a team charter that allows each student to actively listen to other team members, value the unique skills and goals they each bring to the task and practice delineating clear goals and action steps. Charters serve to clarify group etiquette, communication channels and expectations, decision-making agreements, roles, schedules and conflict resolution steps. Instructors can provide sample charter templates, require submission of completed charters for review before teams actively engage in assignment tasks and offer suggestions for inclusion of agreements that have proven to be helpful to students in previous terms.

Provide easy-to-digest, student-friendly resources that offer tools and guidance to navigate the challenges of team processes. Team assignments can help students understand and develop goal-attainment and conflict management skills—but only if students receive explicit education about those challenges and strategies. Do not assume they'll "work it out."

Include grading criteria for the assignment that award points for individual contributions to the team deliverable. If only the outcome is measured, then divide-and-conquer, "do-it-all-myself" and "slacking" behaviors, rather than collaborative goal-setting ones, are reinforced. If a portion of each student's grade reflects his or her unique value-added participation and peers' evaluations, then he or she is more likely to devote attention to development of team collaboration and conflict management skills as paths to attainment of the shared goal.

Relationship-building

Leaders need to be collaborators. They need to build relationships that empower others (George, et al, 2007; Kotter, 2001). Academic team assignments, in which there is often no "formal" leader, can enable students to recognize the benefits and risks of different approaches to leadership in any team setting. The most effective leaders are not those who depend on formal bases of power, but those who empower others—in effect, sharing power.

Negotiating power and sharing leadership are fundamental tasks of academic teams. Relationships are key to getting work done. Recognizing those truths and learning to foster relationships that contribute to success for all participants are academic team-assignment necessities that build critical leadership skills.

Appreciation for Diversity

Leaders need to embrace diversity—in all its forms. Today's workforce is becoming increasingly more diverse in race, ethnicity, gender and inclusion of those with disabilities (Burns, Barton, & Kerby, 2012). Those categories only scratch the surface of the range of variability that is represented throughout the working population—and our classrooms. Leadership is "... a collegial endeavor. It requires participants to analyze problems from multiple viewpoints, to think imaginatively and tease out the complexities of the problem" (Ahn, Adamson, & Dornbusch, 2004, p. 121). Leaders, and students on teams, need to recognize and respect differences in perspectives, norms, goals and cultural filters, while encouraging and nurturing individuals' strengths—not an inconsequential task!

Suggestions for Instructors

Instructors must be intentional in assignment design. Determine whether or not a team assignment is likely to be productive in helping students meet intended learning outcomes (Fredrick, 2008); then, focus on more global outcomes, such as developing the ability to foster relationships and resolve conflicts with diverse peers, and consider ways that team assignments can target both those overarching goals and course-specific objectives.

Questions to consider when designing a team assignment include:

- Do the team tasks promote true collaboration?
- Is the time allotted to the team assignment sufficient to enable relationship development?
- Or, as written, is the assignment just a divide-and-conquer exercise, in which students are likely to simply distribute individual tasks to quickly piece together a finished product?

That divide-and-conquer approach is typical, primarily because it is quicker, easier and more comfortable; but it largely negates the value of team assignments. Instructors should explicitly include and assess elements (such as the reflections, brainstorming discussions and peer-reviews, suggested above) that require students to go beyond divvying up tasks. The assignment time frame should be generous enough to allow students to experience the full range of role negotiations, communication challenges and relationship-building opportunities that team processes can provide.

Win-Win-Win

The goals of students, learning institutions and businesses align when team assignments are recognized and effectively employed as opportunities for developing leadership skills. Students develop vital skills that will contribute to their career success; educational institutions produce graduates with marketable skills who land jobs; and businesses have a pool of qualified leaders who can facilitate teams and drive their organizations to success. **Tech**

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