

Case Study #1: Team Oriented Work

The Challenge

A major global information company had recently re-structured its global branding and marketing team bringing together resources from various regions, business units, and divisions in order to coordinate branding and marketing activity across the enterprise. The team of fifteen individuals comprised advertising, brand management, market insight, intellectual property management, and special events. Team members had previously reported to individual business units and were not used to having an “enterprise hat” on. At first, team members experienced a fair amount of overlap in responsibilities and where perceived gaps in responsibilities existed, they rushed in and took responsibility whether or not that was appropriate.

In addition, the consolidation of the function meant many new and exciting opportunities for team members. That was a good thing. But in order to impress their new leader, Sharon, they often involved themselves in areas that were not their responsibility. For example, an opportunity arose to clarify the company’s branding in India and offer one face to the external market. Team members descended on the opportunity like a swarm of hornet, each trying to outshine and outdo the other before Sharon could get her arms around the task and clearly assign responsibilities. When she eventually did clarify, she ended up hurting certain team members and disillusioning others. This had unfortunate consequences. Sharon was getting frustrated as the perceived overlapping of responsibilities and the varying styles on the team was starting to result in an inability to have any discussion without conflict. And this was starting to confuse both internal customers and external vendors as there were always multiple hands touching almost every transaction.

Before things got worse, Sharon had to figure out a way to bring the team together and devise a “reset” to put roles, responsibilities, and style back on a positive track.

The Solution

Sharon and her HR business partner worked with Jay Spach Consulting (JSC) to design a 2-day offsite to which she brought her entire team. The session had two desired outcomes: clarify roles and responsibilities (1) and begin to give the team an understanding of their varying styles so that they could better manage conflict in the future (2).

The first day of the session focused on roles and responsibilities. Instead of trotting out the usual RACI diagram and process, JSC used a simplified framework for role clarity built around the concepts of ownership, consultation and awareness. For pre-work, participants were tasked with identifying the major activities of their area of responsibility as they saw it. They then were to classify each activity according to whether they believed they “owned” the activity (needed no one else’s approvals and were accountable for success), needed to be “consulted” on it (expected to have the opportunity to provide input on major aspects of the activity), or simply needed to be “aware” of it (copied on progress reports, updates, and completion deliverables without consultation). Sharon had a before the fact review opportunity of all of the collected activities to assure there were none missing.

The second day focused on team member styles. The tool JSC used was the Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI) which assessment team member’s motivations and behaviors both in normal situations and

in conflict. The SDI tool goes beyond other style assessments (like MBTI) as it provides style mappings for the group both in BAU and in conflict. The toll provides a clear and deep understanding of how the team operates in the different stages of conflict and helps derive insights into how to prevent (not avoid) some causes of conflict and how to better engage in constructive conflict when necessary.

The Result

The session went extremely well and exceeded Sharon's and her teams' expectations. JSC was able to create a learning environment in which people were able to challenge each other about perceived ownership of activities and accountability for results. They were able to be open about misperceptions about roles and responsibilities. Each team member came away with a clear, agreed-upon set of accountabilities with a clear understanding of which team members needed to be consulted along the way and informed of progress. For certain activities, ownership was challenged, debated, and ultimately either agreed upon or, in some cases, decided by Sharon in an open atmosphere in which all sides could be heard but in which all sides understood the ultimate decision.

Role clarification is a key component of helping a team manages conflict because a major percentage of conflictual situations arise from misperceptions about roles and accountabilities. Matrix structures increase the level of misperception, as they are by nature less clear and more open to overlaps and gaps in responsibilities. One could work on styles and attitudes for weeks and never overcome the conflict that arises from unclear roles.

For Sharon's team, clarifying the roles on the first day cleared the air for deep insights into individual styles. In team relationships, awareness of others' motivations is absolutely essential to managing conflict because, after role uncertainty, misperceptions of motivation and intent are the second greatest cause of team dysfunction. Normally it takes months if not years of interaction and trial and error to clarify motivations and styles in a relationship. SDI collapses that time to days. For the second day, JSC had team members, including Sharon, complete a 20-minute online assessment of behavior choices, strengths and weaknesses. Through a structured process on the second day, JSC led the team through a deep understanding of their motivational styles and behaviors, why they get into conflict, how individual members behave in conflict, how evident it is that individuals are actually in conflict, etc. Since there are no "right" or "wrong" motivations, JSC was able keep the discussion on an even keel and keep participants open to understanding why others react and act the way they do, and use humor to help participants understand how to better use conflict to get the best team decisions and ensure implementation.

Immediate feedback at the end of the two days was extraordinary. Team members were surprised that issues around roles that they thought would be insurmountable were clarified and decided in real time. They unanimously said that the two days were like taking a decongestant when they had a cold in that their "team head" had cleared. Checking back with Sharon six months later confirmed that the team had taken their learnings and put them to good use. When role uncertainty arose, the team consistently either went back to the decisions made at the session or applied the tools from the session to new activities or accountabilities. Externally, brand awareness has continued to rise in annual brand awareness studies and internal businesses find the team much more integrated and easier to work with. Finally, Sharon characterizes the time spent with JSC to be the best team improvement experience she can remember and looks forward to future "tune-ups".