IMPROVING GROUP DYNAMICS:
CREATING A TEAM CHARTER

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ABSTRACT

The current article explores the rationale and details behind the first project assigned to students in a cohort-based, team-oriented MBA program – the Team Charter. The article presents the approach used to take the student through the development process. A completed Charter is presented to illustrate the outcome of the project. This written agreement highlights one team’s abilities to create a work culture to facilitate effective team performance. By having teams develop and codify the rules by which they agree to abide, norms evolve which become the framework for the decision-making process within the group and provide the underpinnings for group cohesion. The primary educational purposes of the Team Charter project are to begin the process of team skills in order for students to be more effective in dealing with their fellow students. A related aspect of the program, rotating the role of project leader, offers the potential of students developing leadership skills as well. The content of the Team Charter as well as the process for developing it consists of a structure which allows students to develop cognitive and practical skills for working in teams. These skills are developed among students with different backgrounds and different personalities, who are interdependent and share common goals within the program. In many instances these skills have positive carryover to work settings beyond the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

In our institution’s graduate business program, incoming students are organized into class cohorts. Through activities at an orientation weekend, including: the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality inventory, completion of a work history, skills inventories, and demographic profiles, students are formed into teams. The overarching goal in creating these teams is to staff each with as many different work functions as possible while also mixing gender, age groups, and other factors. This cross-functional approach is a common feature of teams (Fleming, 2004). The structure of this group organization provides a basis for learning to work in teams. It has been estimated that 50% of Fortune 500 employees are working in teams (Joinson, 1999) and experts predict growth in working in teams both for those in the managerial ranks as well as those in service operations (Thompson, 2000). While the value or functionality of work teams in business is not universally accepted, bringing a team structure to the educational setting does make sense for the
many organizations that do utilize a team structure. However, there are potential drawbacks including the "free-rider" effect. In this context, it strengthens the relevance of the program.

It is important for students to view themselves as a team, not just a group working on various tasks or projects. It is also critical, for program purposes, that the team members recognize their complementary skills, their common purpose, common goals, and mutual accountability. It is these factors that make them a team in contrast to a group (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993). This structure also serves as a vehicle to focus on issues that make the team successful. As educators, we want student teams to experience a common commitment so they feel the power of a collective unit (Katzenbach, 1995). The team orientation also provides a basis for developing greater awareness of the processes involved in managing groups of individuals when in a leadership position. Elements of leadership skills are an important part of the educational program, although situational influences contributing to team effectiveness are also recognized as significant.

Situational influences have been documented as important for team effectiveness and include variables such as: task flexibility, low task interdependence, and the need for formal performance measures. Helping behavior among team members has been viewed as the most important group norm (Dumering and Robinson, 2007). Consequently, the educational program structure provides conditions that create the potential for members of the team to develop group norms that encourage helping behavior. This helping behavior, which encourages cooperation, is more than individuals agreeing to work together. It surfaces on projects where integration of the content is critical to the team’s explanation of the substance of the issues involved in their project. One of the intended goals for the projects assigned to teams in the MBA program is to help students to understand how leadership behaviors can influence task integration. Thus, by helping the team experience the relationship of group integration, cooperation is strengthened among team members. It is important for the development of students’ leadership skills that they recognize cooperation exists when individual efforts are integrated to achieve common objectives (Simsek, et al., 2005).

ORGANIZATIONAL CITIZENSHIP BEHAVIORS

Leadership that emphasizes both business skills and the ability to influence others toward organizational goals lies at the core of our institution’s graduate business program. The approach developed at our institution attempts to inculcate attitudes that shape leaders to be motivated to exceed the ordinary expectations of the typical manager in today’s work environment. These behaviors have been called “organizational citizenship behaviors” and represent a genuine commitment to people in the organization. They are behaviors which generally exceed expectations in the workplace and include expressions of personal interest in the works of others, genuine interest in the training and development of employees, and a concern for the spirit of cooperation as well as the need for cooperation for business reasons alone (Organ, 1990). The required use (and formal evaluation) of a team leader position which rotates among team members as they carry out the
assigned projects of the program in the first semester (and encouraged thereafter) is an educational application of the concept. This approach encourages students to practice leadership skills in order to influence others with citizenship behaviors. These behaviors have been shown to be influenced more by leadership and factors in the work environment than by personality (Tepper, et al., 2004). By encouraging the application of citizenship behaviors, students develop leadership skills which are separate from personality considerations so often perceived by others as the key to leadership development.

Citizenship behaviors have also been correlated with job satisfaction, another quality the approach promotes for managers to develop. A meta-analysis including 7,100 individuals and 22 separate studies demonstrated a significant and moderately positive correlation between organizational citizenship behavior and job satisfaction (Lepine, et al, 2002). Organizational effectiveness has also been demonstrated in the relationship between organizational citizenship behavior and corporate profits (Koys, 2001).

PROJECT TEAMS

The project teams within the graduate business program emphasize the behavioral characteristics of effective work teams. Students also become more aware of the influence of the task situation on team behavior. A greater number of companies today hire individuals who already have a track record of successful experiences working with teams and who possess norms in common with effective teams (Groysberg and Robin, 2006).

Human interactions involving groups of individuals evolve a psychological contract (Rousseau, 1989). This contract represents the unwritten, implicit expectations that each individual has of others in the group, as well as their own expectations of what they can contribute and receive from the group. Group members generally (although often mistakenly) assume that everyone holds the same expectations. As long as expectations are met, no major conflicts arise. When individual expectations are not met however, conflict occurs due to the perceptions of some individuals that their interests are being opposed (Wall and Callister, 1995). Depending on the nature of the conflict, and the values and feelings the individual has concerning the differences, outcomes may range from a normal, minimal tension that remains in the background – having no serious negative effects, to a larger and more significant force that is counterproductive to the team’s effectiveness. As with all teams however, conflict is inevitable (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993).

As a learning tool and because our graduate program recognizes the importance of making explicit individual expectations, students incorporate organizational behavior concepts into team projects. This affords students the opportunity to learn and practice leadership while they are working on substantive projects. The process allows everyone to discuss and negotiate expectations openly and recognize the value of sharing those expectations. They are taught at the outset that an organization's success is related to how well conflict is resolved (Wall and Callister, 1995).
structure for managing conflict that occurs in all groups and teams is the development of a Team Charter. This assignment provides teams with an ongoing mechanism for understanding team effectiveness and leadership within the team.

The objective of the assignment is to foster discussion among team members on the complex issues that often arise in a team work setting and achieve consensus on policies and procedures for how they will handle them and function effectively. More specifically, each team develops a written agreement formalizing how the members intend to organize and manage team activities, sets out member responsibilities, and fosters productive communications and interactions. The norms agreed to in the charter provide a frame of reference for the team to operate effectively and revisit as needed as their understanding and experience grows.

THE PROGRAM APPROACH

Since leadership activities continually expose managers to conflict, learning to resolve conflict is important for leadership success. The trend toward teamwork makes skills in conflict resolution important when making decisions in teams (Karzenbach, 1995). Consequently, the approach of using multiple, team-based projects (as opposed to individual papers or examinations) was developed in our program to assist students with their understanding of and practice with preventing and managing conflict in group situations. The core elements of this approach formalize the components involved in the implicit psychological contract, and use this framework to develop team and leadership skills. The elements of the Team Charter in our program are presented here. An edited (for length) team charter written by students is presented in the appendix (Holwerk, et al., 2007). A close examination will give a detailed view of how students have executed this project and codified their responses.

Personnel

The objective of this section of the Charter is to enable team members to become acquainted quickly as well as exchange contact and other significant information. Students use this section to gain an understanding of the interests, motivations, constraints, and goals of each member. Through discussions, each team member has the opportunity to establish how they can best contribute to the overall success of the team. Equally as important, each member can communicate what he/she feels will be needed from the others to ensure mutual success in the program. Suggested topics to cover in their discussions include:
Members’ names, phone numbers (work and home), FAX numbers, and addresses
Communication preferences (to make certain that the method(s) documented are ones that all team members have access to, i.e., teleconferencing, Blackberry, e-mail, etc.)
Personal Biography (on the individual, their family, hobbies)
Present and past work experiences
Personal resources and skills (e.g. typing, writing, computer/technology, software expertise)
Strengths and weaknesses (professional and personal)
Why did you choose this graduate program?
Current academic semester schedule
Expected job projects, travels, and vacations scheduled throughout the length of the term
Family and other personal commitments that could impact meeting or team activities

Processes

The objective of this section of the Charter is to foster direct discussions regarding how to best work through issues which will typically surface as students progress through the program. This Charter will become the process map by which the team will take on tasks, decide on project direction, and resolve conflicts. Suggested areas and questions to explore include:

Purpose of the team (Mission)
Policies on meetings and frequency
Division of labor
Team Roles and tasks (e.g. team leader, secretary, meeting minutes, and schedule for revising the charter)
Decision-making (method for making decisions, i.e. consensus, majority, secret ballot, etc.)
Discipline (how this will work if discipline problems arise)
Communication and co-ordination issues
Emergencies (how will communication or responsibilities be handled if a team member has a family emergency or other event that affects their participation in team activities)
Reflection Commentary

This section of the Charter, not common to those that are developed in work environments, asks teams to reflect and comment on the process used to develop the charter. Specific questions include:

- What was the approach used to develop the document?
- How were differences of opinions resolved by the group?
- What are the items in the Charter which are most/least useful?
- Which items in the Charter were the easiest and hardest to agree upon? (and why?)
- What are the concerns of the group in applying the charter to future activities?

CONCLUSION

When fully realized, the Team Charter becomes the cognitive map for students to understand the processes that occur in all groups when interacting to achieve organizational goals. It also allows for an examination of the process in a way that integrates theory and practice, resulting in a practicing of leadership and team skills throughout the educational program. For students who are currently part of organizations who utilize teams, or will go on to employment with such organizations, these benefits may carry over to those setting and enhance their professional careers.

REFERENCES

Bamberger, P. and M. Biron (2007). Group norms and excessive absenteeism: The role of peer referent others, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 103, 2,179.


APPENDIX
(Holwerk et al, 2007)

Mission Statement: To achieve excellence throughout the completion of the MBA program and to learn from each other in an open environment.

Team Goals: The primary focus of this group is to acquire the analytical, financial, and interpersonal skills that will further develop our current skills. We all pledge to share our skills and knowledge from past and present work and life experiences. Our collective efforts will result in an end product that will include a well-versed foundation of skills that will benefit the overall team performance, thus enabling us to carry those team-building skills back to our own career endeavors.

Values: The actions, discussions, and decisions of the Team and each Team Member will be guided by the following Values:

- **Respect** – Each member brings distinct experience, knowledge, and expertise to the team. As such, each member commits to seek to understand other perspectives, to treat others with courtesy, to be fully engaged, to participate actively, to gain value in the richness of the team interaction, and to be an integral part of the learning process.

- **Honesty** – Each member of the Team will conduct themselves with the utmost integrity. All conversations, written work, and presentations will reflect the collective ideas of the Team and will be a unique product of the Team. The Team Members will interact with each other in a forthright and direct manner.

- **Unity** – Each member of the Team will work together to fully utilize the strengths of each person. Each member will support the decisions reached by the Team even though individual differences of opinion may exist. The members of the Team will function as one cohesive group and will support one another.

- **Commitment** – Each member of the Team will be individually accountable to the other members of the Team. The Team Members will meet their obligations and deadlines, be present both physically and mentally, and be prepared to contribute to the success of the Team.

- **Effort** – Each member of the Team will work hard and put forth their best in every assignment undertaken by the Team. The members will be focused and work collaboratively and productively to produce work that reflects the collective knowledge of the Team.

Roles and Task perceived by Group: Team Members will have both primary duties, duties that are required to be performed at all times, and collateral duties, duties that are assigned on a rotational basis. Each duty has corresponding responsibilities that cannot be delegated.

- **Team Member:** This is the primary duty of every member of the Team. Even though a member may be performing collateral duties, that individual is a member first and must adhere to the roles and responsibilities of a Team Member:
• Adhere to conduct commensurate with other sections in this document.
• Maintain focus on team Values.
• Voice concerns promptly at team meetings.
• Complete tasks on or before deadlines.
• Maintain communication with Team Members during any absences.
• Team Members may override a Team Leader’s decision by majority vote.
• The Team respects individual privacy and maintains that problems of a personal nature do not need to be discussed in a public forum. Team Members should, however, notify the Team as early as possible that a personal problem exists and that it may impact his/her ability to meet team deadlines and commitments. The Team will make reasonable efforts to redistribute the workload accordingly.
• Team Leader: Above all the Team Leader is focused on the welfare of the project as well as the Team. Should either begin to falter, it is the Team Leader’s responsibility to initiate dialogue with the Team to correct any problems. A rotational role, the Team Leader is charged with the following responsibilities:
  • Assign tasks in accordance with Section 4.0, the Division of Labor.
  • Ensure that tasks are completed on or before deadlines.
  • Maintain an awareness of all task progress and constraints.
  • Formulate solutions to problems before they occur and propose them at team meetings.
  • Provide follow-up on tasks as needed.
  • Propose a revision to task assignments when necessary.
  • Move to use the Weighted Decision Making Tool if the Team is deadlocked in discussion and the topic must have resolution.
Meeting Secretary: The Meeting Secretary is responsible for composing the official record of the meeting. A rotational role, the Meeting Secretary is charged with the following responsibilities:
  • Create the official meeting agenda, decided upon by the Team; distribute the agenda to all Team Members no later than the morning of the meeting; bring copies of the official meeting agenda to the meeting.
  • Review the outcomes, decisions, and open items from the previous meetings.
  • Make important notations to agenda items, such as noting Team Members who wish to assume responsibility for specific items.
  • Distribute meeting minutes to all Team Members no later than 24 hours after meeting adjournment (or other time agreed upon at the meeting) as well as post the minutes on Google™ Documents.
Meeting Chairperson: The Meeting Chairperson is charged with the timely completion of team meetings and adherence to the meeting agenda. A rotational role, the Chairperson’s specific responsibilities include:
  • Facilitate meetings.
  • Call meetings to order.
  • Allow Team Members to explore topics through dialogue but provide redirection when the discussion begins to stray too far from the agenda.
  • Ensure that no specific Team Member(s) monopolize a topic during discussion.
Engage Team Members who are not contributing to a topic during discussion.

Transition discussions in order to move the meeting along in accordance with the agenda.

If a topic cannot be resolved in a timely manner and the Team determines that the topic needs further exploration, the Chairperson will, in the interest of time, move to add the topic to an open agenda item to be revisited at the next meeting. (The Team Leader may choose to use the Decision Making Score Card to resolve the issue instead.)

Division of Labor: Throughout the MBA program, there will be a significant workload placed on each Team Member. Team Members are expected to not only complete projects on time, but to also generate work that meets team quality expectations. In recognition of this, the Team shall follow standard guidelines for the Division of Labor to ensure quality work is finished on time, efficiently and provides the maximum growth of each member.

Task Assignment

- Every effort will be made to allow Team Members to choose the tasks they would like to perform.
- Tasks will be distributed so that each member bears a similar workload. Once assigned a task, Team Members are accountable for the timely completion of the task.
- Team Members will be assigned responsibility for quality of work based on their strengths. For example: A Team Member who is skilled with data analysis in Microsoft Excel will not necessarily perform this type task; however, he or she will be responsible for ensuring that the work meets team quality expectations. This Team Member will provide the necessary coaching to ensure that the member performing the work will perform it in accordance with team quality expectations.
- If the Team cannot decide upon the task assignment, the Team Leader assigns tasks. If the Team does not agree with the Team Leader’s division of labor, the Team may overrule the Team Leader by a majority vote.
- Progress Updates – Team Members shall submit periodic progress updates for their tasks to the Team Leader. The reporting periods shall be established at the beginning of each project by the Team Leader.

Conflicts – If at any time a Team Member feels that they are not capable of performing the work assigned, for whatever reason, it is incumbent upon that Team Member to inform the Team as soon as possible so that alternative arrangements can be made. Team Members not meeting their commitments shall be subject to Section 7.0 – Discipline.

Policies on Meeting: The Team values productivity. In order to gain the most from the time spent in team meetings, it is critical that the Team outline and agree on a meeting structure. All team meetings will be conducted in a similar fashion.
Positions

• Team Members will be assigned meeting roles prior to each meeting. Team Member, Team Leader, Meeting Secretary, Meeting Chairperson.

• Agenda – As aforementioned, the Agenda is created by the Meeting Secretary prior to each meeting. Each agenda will follow a standard format.

Order of Events

• Meeting Secretary distributes the agenda.

• Meeting Chairperson calls the meeting to order.

• Meeting Secretary reviews outstanding items from the last meeting.

• Meeting Chairperson leads the Team in discussion of the agenda items.

• Meeting Secretary reviews new, open items from the meeting.

• Team Leader assigns tasks.

• Meeting Secretary distributes meeting minutes within 24 hours of the meeting.

Scheduling

• When necessary, team meetings will be held on class nights, 90 minutes prior to class beginning. If additional time is needed, the Team will schedule time on Saturday or Sunday.

• The Team will make every effort to schedule meetings when all Team Members can be present. If it is not possible for all Team Members to be physically present, a conference call will be arranged. It is acceptable to the Team that a member can call in to the meeting unless the Team is rehearsing a presentation, in which case physical presence is critical. The Team expects every member to make his best effort at attending when presentations are being rehearsed.

• If a Team Member cannot be present (physically or via phone), it is that Team Member’s responsibility to: Deliver project updates to the Meeting Secretary 24 hours prior to the meeting and Follow-up with another Team Member to discuss what occurred at the meeting.

Policies

• All meetings will start and end on time. All Team Members have outside commitments, and it is not acceptable for meetings to be substantially extended past the agreed upon time.

• Team Members are expected to come to meetings on time and be prepared.

• The Team recognizes that outside commitments may cause a Team Member to be late to meetings from time to time. If a Team Member knows he will be late to a scheduled meeting, he is expected to inform the Team in advance. If he does not know in advance, and is running more than ten minutes late, the member is expected to notify the Team via phone, if possible.

Decision Making

Decision Making Methodology

• All Team Members will be given the opportunity to fully express their opinions and ideas before a decision is made. However, the Team Leader
will assign due dates for the decisions, thereby setting the maximum time frame for discussion.

* The decisions the Team makes will be rooted in the Team’s Values. Business decisions the Team makes will, in general, be made so as to align with our business principles. These principles are: profitability, environmental awareness, shareholder value and respect for our employees. With these principles in mind, the Team will endeavor to make all of its decisions democratically. When this is not possible, the Team will employ a Weighted Decision Making Tool to assist with the decision.

**Weighted Decision Making Tools:** Weighted decision-making tools will be used for all decisions that cannot be made democratically, either for reasons of time, or for difference of opinion.

- **Narrowing Tool** – this tool will be used to narrow the field of choices down to 2-3 (See Appendix B). The criteria used in the tool will be unique to each decision but will be based on the Team’s Values and business principles. The average of the Team Members’ scores will be used for the final decision.

- **Decision Tool** – this tool will be used to decide between the choices the Team picked using the Narrowing tool. (See Appendix C). It will be used to compare a narrow range of choices and evaluate each among a specific and generally complex list of “S.M.A.R.T.” criteria (Strategic, Measurable, Achievable, Related, and Time-bound). The criteria used in the tool will be unique to each decision but will be based on the Team’s Values and business principles. The Team will establish the priority numbers, and each Team Member will then score each item. The average of the Team Members’ scores will be used for the final decision.

**Changes to Decisions**

- Team decisions are final, and all Team Members will work with the decisions made.

- A plurality of the Team can request in a team environment that a decision be revisited if they feel that changes in information or circumstances warrant.

**Discipline**

**Overview**

- No Team Member(s) shall undertake any disciplinary action unilaterally.

- Grievances with other Team Members, team policies, or decisions shall be voiced to the entire Team, and the Team be given the opportunity to respond, before seeking outside assistance with any team issues.

- If the majority of the Team agrees that a Team Member is performing at an undesirable level, the Team Member shall be evaluated and placed into one of three categories: Lack of Skill, Values Issues, and UNACCEPTABLE. Procedures for dealing with each issue are outlined below.

- Once a Team Member is evaluated, the Team is responsible for formulating a plan with clear achievement goals and dates, written and signed by all Team Members.
Lack of Skill

- If a fellow Team Member is performing work at a level that is unsatisfactory to the other Team Members, and the Team Member lacks the skills to perform the work at a satisfactory level, it is the responsibility of the Team Leader to redistribute the workload or to provide/coordinate training to overcome such obstacles.

- Ongoing performance issues of this type are a reflection of the Team’s failure and will not be held against the individual involved provided that reasonable and appropriate effort are expended by the individual to overcome these issues.

Values Issues

- If, in the judgment a majority of Team Members, an individual is not upholding the Values of the Team, the Team will discuss these issues openly with the individual in a team environment and develop a plan to overcome these issues. The plan will include but is not limited to:
  - A clear, time-bound, milestone plan for bringing the individual’s work up to a level that is acceptable to the Team.
  - Required progress updates and reports.
  - Required behavior change, and milestones, or impartial judge to evaluate change.
  - Ongoing performance issues of this type are a reflection of the Team’s failure; however, if these issues are not resolved by the end of the semester, or one month after the improvement plan is implemented whichever is longer, the Team may find these issues are UNACCEPTABLE, and may proceed according to Section 7.4 of the Team Charter.

UNACCEPTABLE: The Team may find a Team Member’s performance to be UNACCEPTABLE. Minimum criteria for this finding are:

- Team Member has been found to be UNACCEPTABLE per Section 7.3.2.
- The Team Member has missed two consecutive meetings, with no explanation or advance notification.
- The Team Member has missed one deadline, with no valid excuse and with no work product or visible effort displayed.
- The Team Member continually misses deadlines without advance notice.
- The Team may make a report on the situation in writing to the course professor, and/or MBA office. In the event that a report is submitted to the MBA office or professor, the report must be written and signed by all Team Members.
- The individual being reported has the right to include a statement expressing their views with this or separately. The Team does not have the right to edit or change this statement, but will have the opportunity to read and sign it prior to submission.

Communication and Coordination: The Team will utilize a variety of methods of communication including meetings, e-mail, and telephone/conference calls. The preferred method of communication with the team is email. If members do not respond within a reasonable amount of time, depending on the importance of the email, communication via his or her preferred phone line is the next outreach. Finally, if a member still cannot be reached, his or her home phone or work number can be called.
Commentary: The approach used to develop the Team Charter was the allocation of work. After our first meeting, we determined which group member would develop which section of the charter, as well as creating their personal bio. As each member completed their section, they would e-mail it to the group for feedback and the team leader would put the sections together to form the final charter. The final draft would then be sent to the group for comments and approval.

Fortunately, the only difference in opinion faced by our group was determining the layout of the charter. Some believed a resume format would be better, while others preferred a charter containing a mixture of charts, bullets, and paragraphs. After having a group discussion, we obtained an overall consensus to use the mixed layout. As the charter took form, we realized it was the right choice.

The most useful item in the Team Charter will be the communication plan as well as the decision-making processes. These guidelines will ultimately steer our group in the right direction as difficult issues are addressed within our group. We all are in agreement that our least useful item will be the discipline. We have complete confidence that each member will perform his/her duties by the agreed upon deadlines. This group is willing to help each other out when necessary should any personal, family, or work obligations interfere with completion of an assigned task.

While working on the team charter, the easiest item was to acknowledge our individual goals that lead us to the MBA program and ultimately this group. The team goals were made easy to recognize once we were given direction in the MBA 700 Assessment class. The hardest part was to identify our weaknesses and agree to improve upon those skills as we move forward. This class was especially helpful in identifying those flaws. After acknowledging these weaknesses, we as a group can utilize group projects as a platform to learn the required material and more importantly improve upon those individual weaknesses. This will allow us to reach our individual and team goals simultaneously.

The general concern that our group holds is the ability to all meet at an agreed upon time. Our informal meeting time before and after class seem to be acceptable to everyone however any meeting of great length outside of our scheduled classes could present a challenge. Nonetheless, we are a group that is willing to be flexible. Any reasonable accommodations will be made to meet as a group.

Overall the team charter will prove to be a useful resource to keep the team on course. Should our progress stall in any way, the team charter will lead us back in the right direction. Our agreement will ensure that everyone is fully aware of what is expected from them as a group member.