CASE STUDY ONE
COACHING STUDENT TEAMS:
OUR TEAM MEMBER HAS A “BAD ATTITUDE”

In this case study, you will learn about the experience of Anita in coaching one of her student teams. Most of the time, teams work well but occasionally a team runs into more difficult problems. This case is designed to help you deal with such a situation. Comments are placed in the text to help you reflect on her actions. In this case, the students are responsible for two team assignments. At the end of the case there are some questions for reflection and discussion.

Anita is coaching a team of five student members – Reggie, Ian, Ella, Mathew, and Emily. While the other teams for which she is responsible are functioning well, this particular team has run into a number of problems during the course of the semester.

Student teams were required to complete two team assignments over the span of seven weeks. They were formed early in the semester through a process of self selection. In this particular case, none of the members previously knew each other and they had formed a team simply based on the fact that they happened to be sitting next to each other. Problems started when Ian had missed the weekly team meeting or had arrived late. Most importantly, he had failed to attend the meeting where the team had agreed their team contract (which stipulated the team’s “rules” related to division of labour, meetings, ways to deal with conflict etc.). This had concerned Anita since the contract is an important tool in helping the team to establish mutually agreed upon goals and codes of practice. When Anita had first heard of this problem, from the other team members, she e-mailed Ian asking about his lack of attendance. Ian wrote back that he believed that compulsory attendance should not be a requirement on the grounds that members had other study commitments and each was working to different schedules. He argued that he was committed to completing his allotted work for the assignment, but did not feel that this required him to attend every meeting.

Anita called a team meeting, during which Reggie and the other members raised the importance of everyone attending a regular weekly meeting at 10.30 on Wednesdays. After discussion, it was discovered that Ian’s reluctance to attend this meeting stemmed largely from the fact that he did not start lectures on Wednesdays until 2pm and did not want to have come in to the university so early. Anita suggested that the team consider starting the meetings at 12.00pm, which was agreed upon by all members. She then discussed alternate communication methods that could be used, and it was agree that e-mail should be the primary communication tool; and an 80% attendance rate at meetings (rather than 100%) would be acceptable. At this point, she asked the members to reaffirm that they all had the same grade expectations and goals as specified in the team contract. Ian was initially hesitant to agree to the conditions of the contract but ultimately agreed, as he was in a hurry to leave to get to his next lecture on time.

The other members remained and stated that, despite the new arrangements for
scheduling and communication, they felt that Ian had a “bad” attitude and was unwilling to commit to the team. Anita decided to use some of the theoretical concepts being taught in the lectures to discuss teams and expectations, and to show that the issue might be less to do with a “bad” attitude on the part of one team member; and more to do with different ideas among members about how the team should operate. She used the concept of the “primacy effect” to show the remaining team members how they were giving disproportionate weighting to Ian’s initial behaviour. She suggested that this was an opportunity to put a concept into practice by reshaping their initial perceptions. She also referred to Tuckman and Jensen’s model to show that conflict was a normal aspect of team development for this stage. The remaining team members said they felt more confident about the team moving forward. Before they left, Anita asked them to let her know if problems continued.

The team received a fairly low grade for their first assignment but they did pass, and Anita heard nothing more. She assumed that the early problems had been rectified. Then, with only a week before the second assignment was due, Reggie had sent Anita an e-mail stating that Ian was causing further problems: he was not turning up to meetings; and his work was not of an appropriate standard. The e-mail that Reggie sent read as follows.

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Hi Anita,

We believe that Ian has not contributed at all to the final group assignment because he has had to cut short every group meeting or not attended.

We feel that it is unfair that we should have to correct not only grammatical errors of his part of the assignment, but also structural errors. We had our final meeting today and he was defiant in attending his lectures and as a result, we were not able to adequately discuss his section at length.

We feel as though he has caused a lot of problems in coordinating and completing this assignment. He is contentious and believes that his section is correct even though as a group, we have all decided it is not answering the question. His attitude and approach to the assignment has not made us sympathetic to his work load.

Reggie.
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Conscious of the need to hear both sides, Anita asked for verification of Reggie’s claims proof. Reggie submitted the minutes that he had kept of each meeting where members who had attended signed in, which verified the issue of Ian’s non-attendance, as well as the e-mail exchange between him and Ian.

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Reggie,

Here’s my part, no time to proof read it at the moment, Ian.
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I think it’s quite rude for you to think of me as a tutor to your own English shortcomings. Yes, I have offered to proof read it to make the essay flow, but not
make your OWN section flow. My responsibility is to make sure the essay flows as a whole and that means changing tenses here and there, not having to rewrite sentences.

Please fix up your section by Wednesday, proof read it and include research as well because I'm not going spend another three hours correcting your errors like in the first assignment, Reggie.

Reggie,

As for grammatical errors, we aren't all as good as one another in English, and you have chosen to undertake the role of editing so, actually it IS your responsibility to make the essay flow using your style of writing.

Thanks, Ian.

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It became apparent to Anita that there were multiple issues within this team including conflict over role responsibilities and an interpersonal antagonism between Ian and Reggie. She wondered what to do as the other team members were requesting that Ian be removed.

Anita decided against granting this request. Instead, she proposed that she meet with Ian to improve the standard of his work and turn up to meetings. She also offered to grant the team an extension on their second assignment. Anita requested a meeting with Ian via e-mail. However, Ian wrote back to say that he was busy with three other assignments and would not have time that week.

At this point, Anita called Ian on his mobile phone and spoke directly with him about the issues that his team had raised. She asked Ian to attend a meeting with him the next day and to bring in a copy of the work that he had submitted to the team. Ian discussed his problems with Anita, stating that Reggie was a domineering leader and that, while the other members seemed to comply with him, Ian did not agree with some of the “rules” that Reggie had established. Anita reminded Ian that, had he attended the meeting when the team contract was being developed, he would have had more say in the team rules. Ian also stated that he had met the 80% team attendance quota over the course of the meetings, because he had attended most of the meetings prior to the submission of the first assignment, even though he had missed more of the meetings in relation to the second assignment. Anita explained that the rule was intended to encourage a relatively stable attendance over the duration of the team’s life. She encouraged Ian to think about the logic behind the rule, rather than taking a strict, superficial interpretation. Ian replied that he had been busy with assignments for other courses, and did not want to waste time attending meetings when he could submit his work via e-mail. Anita asked Ian to comment on why it was that the other four team members, who had a similar course load to Ian, were still able to attend meetings? Ian answered that he wanted to concentrate on getting high grades in his more quantitative courses as this would facilitate his career path. He ventured that, unlike him, the other team members were more interested in the “softer” courses like this one.

It was becoming apparent to Anita that Ian was not really listening to what she had to say. She then applied some of the principles of communication theory that had
been recently presented in the course and explained the importance of face-to-face communication in the team dynamics, as well as the idea that spending time in a face-to-face meeting with his team would actually save Ian time in his assignment write-up. Ian then stated that Reggie’s leadership style had been de-motivating, as the result of which he no longer felt motivated to contribute his best work. He also mentioned that he knew that the other students wanted to remove him from the team – he said that did not want to be removed because, as far as he was concerned, he was doing his fair share of the assignment – just not in the way that the team wanted. Anita tells him that participating in the team is part of the process, and he is failing to meet his obligations; as a result, she intends to involve the Head Tutor.

The next day the Head Tutor met with all the team members and Anita. She reaffirmed the decision that Ian was not to be removed from the team. She suggested that the best thing for all parties to do now was to co-operate and be as fully committed to producing a high quality report as they could – they only had to work with each other for another few days. She suggested that Ian correspond with Ella rather than Reggie. Ian agreed that it was in his interests to rewrite his section and to provide better quality work as it would improve the grade that the team (and hence himself) would receive.

The team submitted their final analysis. Ella submitted the assignment with a letter detailing that, despite the intervention from the Head Tutor, Ian had not lived up to his end of the deal. She submitted Ian’s final work and showed where she and Reggie had made changes to ensure the overall quality of their assignment was not compromised. Anita then compared Ian’s final work with the draft that he had shown her 4 days earlier and discovered that he had made very few changes between the two documents. It was clear that the team had substantially re-written Ian’s section of the assignment for the final submission.

Anita and the Head Tutor met with the remaining team members, where it was agreed that a differential form of marking would be employed. Ian’s work was marked according to the final draft that he submitted to the team, while the other team members were graded on the final report. As a result, Ian received a lower grade than the other team members. In addition, they debriefed the team’s experience. The members left the meeting feeling that they had been giving the opportunity to express their disappointment with Ian, and had been helped to re-frame the experience as one from which they could learn for future team assignments. Ian was informed of differential grading scheme, but did not reply. Nor did he reply to an invitation to have a similar meeting on which he could reflect on the team experience.

The following week, Anita and the Head Tutor met for a coffee to reflect on how they had handled the situation and whether they should have done anything differently. Anita was regretful that Ian, who most needed to be reflecting on his contributions and how to change this in the future, had not learned anything from his experience. The Head Tutor was more worried about Reggie – while Ian had not pulled his weight in the assignment, Reggie had been very dominant – maybe if they had worked with him, it would have been easier for Ian to engage with the team members.

At this late stage, the Head Tutor moves from managing process to managing task i.e. submitting the assignment.

By keeping the various drafts, the team can provide evidence for its case.

At this point, it becomes reasonable to ensure that the mark reflects the work done by the different team members. This is not an ideal outcome but it is a fair one and Reggie, Ella, Matthew and Emily are satisfied.

It’s not always possible to get everything right during the events and, so, a “debrief” of what you have learned from your experience is always a useful exercise.
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. After reading this, what are your initial impressions?
2. Do you agree with how Anita and the Head Tutor managed the team?
3. How might you have dealt differently with the team?
4. What is the logic or theory behind your reasoning?