CASE STUDY TWO
COACHING STUDENT TEAMS: UNDERSTANDING INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN TEAMWORK

In this case study, you will learn about the experience of John in coaching one of his 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 his actions. In this case, the students are responsible for one team assignment. At the end of the case there are some questions for reflection and discussion.

John had just been e-mailed by one of his students, Catherine, informing him that her student team was having a problem with one of the members – Kenny. Students were required to submit one team assignment over a 7-week period. While most were operating successfully, John had now dealt with two teams with problems and Kenny was the common element.

The problems had started early. Students formed teams through a process of self selection early in the semester; and Kenny had formed a team with four other female students. However, he did not turn up to the team’s first meeting or provide advance notice that he would not be attending. The other team members immediately asked John if Kenny could be removed from their team since they worried about the delay in starting the assignments. They also reported that Kenny had stated that he would rather spend the time working on his individual assignment than attending a meeting whose aim was primarily “socialisation”. The team members also stated that they felt Kenny did not share the same grade expectation as them. Separately, Kenny had e-mailed John and asked to be removed from the group, citing similar reasons. Kenny complained that he had not received any communication from his team members regarding the time and location of the meeting. Although the two stories did not match up exactly, it was clear to John that there was a problem. As a result, he agreed to remove Kenny from the team at this early stage on the grounds that he perceived there was a three-versus-one dynamic that would be difficult to break, and that it was less damaging to remove Kenny at this early stage and relocate him to another group.

John then approached another team that only had three members – Catherine, Gen and Lora – and asked if Kenny could join them. He explained that he was trying to create teams of four members and, given that the three existing members were all international students, it might be useful to have one local student, Kenny, in the team. John suggested they meet with Kenny first before making their decision. The three members met with Kenny who described himself to them as “hard working” and they agreed to accept him into their team. John then met with the team. Although Kenny had not been a member of the team when they had written up their team contract (which stipulated the team’s “rules” related to division of labour, meetings, ways to deal with conflict etc.), he agreed to the terms of the contract. The meeting went smoothly and the team seemed to be making a good start.

This is one of the reasons why we try to focus on solving team problems as they arise rather than moving an individual student which, as this case, shows moves the problem from one team to another; instead of moving the student it would be better to address the team issues as they arise.

Tuckman’s model of forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning is relevant here. Kenny missed the forming stage and, although he later agreed with the contract drawn up by the others, he was not part of that important forming
Catherine then sent an email to request a meeting with John to discuss the “difficulties” that the other team members were experiencing with Kenny. John e-mailed a reply to Catherine (for forwarding to the rest of the team), saying that he would be happy to meet with the team but, first, could they clarify what they meant by “difficulties”. He also asked the team to outline the actions they had taken to help themselves. Catherine sent an e-mail, stating that the team was having problems with Kenny because he was authoritarian. He would give them “orders” to conduct tasks that he was not prepared to do himself (e.g., he proposed that a member look up certain research, when he had not done his own research). Catherine said that Kenny had fixed ideas about how the team should handle the assignment and was not prepared to listen to others, and would disengage from discussions.

John arranged a meeting with all the. He decided that the first part of the meeting should be dedicated to clearing the air, as it was obvious emotions were running high. The three female members discussed Kenny’s authoritarian approach and how they found it de-motivating. Kenny defended himself by saying that, if they did not have a clear leader, the assignment would not get done. John established that a large part of the conflict was due to different working styles: Kenny was very regimented – he preferred a clear agenda for the meetings and clear tasks to be established during the meeting. The three female members preferred a more open ended meeting where ideas could be generated and discussed. John discussed the benefits of both approaches and suggested that the team should try to combine them. Following this, John focused on setting a task-related action plan to allow the team to submit their assignment.

The action plan stipulated the following: (1) no more disengaging – everyone had to be involved in the discussions; (2) no more commanding – requests should be phrased as questions in order to be less directive; (3) work targets were set for the next two days; (4) work roles were allocated – Gen and Catherine agreed to write up the case while Kenny and Lora would do the editing. The editing task was separated out since Lora said she could not work in a pair with Kenny due to their different styles.

Lora agreed to update John on the team’s progress and wrote the following e-mail.

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Hi John,

We had a meeting today at 3.30pm in the library. Gen, Catherine and I were there first, and Kenny only joined us at around 4.15pm because he had a class before that but we were not informed earlier about it.

We discussed what we were going to do during the meeting and decided to end the meeting at 6.15pm so that we would be on track and Catherine and Gen will have more time to write the essay up at home. At first, we discussed about what question 2 wants, and what we were going to put as our answers. Everyone did their research and took notes before the meeting, so we just put forward our ideas and then discussed the ones that were relevant to the assignment.

We had two different opinions on what we were supposed to incorporate into the essay. Gen, Catherine and I felt that we should just write about the more important process.

It is a good idea to get as much clarification as possible before going into the meeting – make sure you ask all members.

It is useful to let everyone speak – not only does it “clear” the air, it allows the tutor to hear all sides of the story.
and crucial factors while Kenny thought that we should write about all the 7 factors. Each gave their own arguments about their choices and, in the end; the team went with the first opinion. This is partly due to the fact that although Kenny proposed that we should incorporate all the 7 factors, he did not have sufficient materials to support those factors. I also noticed that what he had prepared is quite different from the rest. Gen, Catherine and I researched on the relevant recommendations together with other examples to support the ideas, but Kenny only has the recommendations and no extra articles to back up his work.

All members participated actively during the discussion, and whenever someone had any question, they immediately clarified that uncertainty, instead of “keeping mum” and continuing to be confused. At least, that was what I did when I did not understand what Kenny was talking about. But sometimes, when I tried to clarify some matters with him, he did not understand what I was saying. There were also times when the rest of us do not know what he was trying to do.

But anyway, today's meeting was quite productive and there was less conflict. We managed to put forward all the main points needed so that Gen and Catherine will be able to finish up the essay by tonight. It was quite obvious that Kenny was less dictatorial in his approach and was more open to suggestions from other members. Most of the time, when there was a clash of ideas, the team will decide which idea to take, based on the arguments provided.

Regards, Lora

John then set the team one more task – they were to draw up a new contract that specified more effective team dynamics for completing the assignment. The team submitted the new contract; and John received no further emails. He assumed that the team was finally working well together.

The team member had meanwhile decided that they could not work together and, so, set up a plan to divide up the remaining tasks for the assignment. Lora and Gen would do the research for the assignment, while Kenney and Catherine would put the assignment together. All four members agreed that they wanted to move away from the commitments they had made in their revised team contract, and establish a “divide and conquer” strategy, but they did not inform John of this new work method.

When Catherine and Kenny got together to put the assignment together, Kenny reverted to his authoritarian approach. He sent abrasive e-mails to the other two team members, ordering them to go back and do more research. This prompted Catherine to request another team meeting with John. This third meeting lasted for 2 hours. By now, the team was under time pressure as the assignment was due in four days.

Most of the meeting was dedicated to setting up an action plan for getting the assignment done. The team agreed upon the following activities: (1) Lora and Gen would meet that afternoon to work on the two sections of the assignment that required more research; (2) the next day the whole team would put together a detailed outline of the entire assignment; (3) during the following two days, Kenny and Catherine would write up the sections, and Kenny promised not to be

It is important to follow up on a team that has been having problems – the fact that you do not hear anything does not mean that everything is going smoothly. In this case, the team is failing to advance to the norming stage. The conflict was so great that members went to the “divide and conquer” strategy, violating the contract to which they had agreed and preventing them from acting as a true team.
authoritarian; and (4) on the last day, they would meet as a team to edit each section and put the entire assignment together.

John then spent a half an hour encouraging each team member to reflect on how they could improve their team experiences in the future. He asked each member to identify one thing that they found particularly helpful about another member of the team; and one thing which they had learned from other members. As an example, Lora suggested that she had learnt from Catherine how to be “cool under pressure”. Gen did acknowledge that she admired Kenny’s attention to detail (just not the way he communicated it!). John then asked the team members to identify something that they felt they would do differently next time they were in a team. Connie said “I’d be more professional. I’d make it a point to come to the meeting on time.” Kenny talked about his work in the army. He explained that this army experience had shaped the way he felt a team should operate and that he could not understand the way his team worked: going into a meeting without a “battle plan”, and then hanging out at a meeting without any discipline. He talked about his frustration that the other members spent time surfing the net during meetings, arguing that discipline was needed to get the job done. But Catherine talked about how their Net-surfing had helped them to come up with a few critical ideas that informed their case analysis. She put forward the case that flexibility, rather than discipline, had led to innovation. Kenny agreed and it seemed he was finally starting to see that discipline was not the only key to team success.

John then used the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI) to explain that Kenny’s disciplined, regimented approach suggests he may be a Judging type and the three female students might be Perceiving types. These personality differences can be at the root of many team conflicts. Understanding they had different working styles and discussing how these differences could be used to enhance, rather than detract from, the team process would be useful. Once they are understood, individual differences can be a source of increased effectiveness. In this way, by raising underlying assumptions that each team member had about the basic ways in which a team should operate, this conversation was starting to heal some wounds.

“It’s a pity”, John thought to himself “that this conversation did not occur at the start of the team’s life. But at least they have each learnt something through the process.”

This is a useful way to debrief the team’s experience in a positive light. John could also have discussed how Kenny tried to fill what he perceived to be a leadership void in the team with a very authoritarian leadership style. The other team members resisted this leadership style. This resistance might have been predicted given their desire for flexibility. Taking into account these situational factors such as the personalities of the other group members, the task, and the nature of the group, Kenny could have evaluated whether the authoritarian leadership style was appropriate for that situation; and the other team members could have understood how they contributed to the team’s problems.
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. John clearly puts a lot of effort into coaching this team. If you engage in a similar experience as a tutor, how will you manage your time and energy?

2. Some say the 'squeaky wheel' gets the most oil, how will you ensure that all of your students are getting your best efforts as coach?

3. How will you manage individual differences in your student teams?

4. In this case the team gets to debrief the experience - who will you go to debrief your experience as Tutor of a difficult team?

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2 Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and MBTI are registered trademarks of Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc.
