CASE STUDY THREE
COACHING STUDENT TEAMS:
DEALING WITH SELECTING TEAM MEMBERS

In this case study, you will learn about the experience of Aaron in coaching one of his student teams. This case is designed to help you deal with a situation where a student made a judgement about other students on the basis of stereotyping, as well as the difficulties that arise during the team formation stage when students leave and join a team, which can develop into more complex problems during the latter stages of team progress. 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.

The day after the students formed teams through a process of self selection in Week 3 of the Semester, Aaron – the team coach – received an email from one of his students Gordan. The email stated that Gordan felt that he would be “significantly disadvantaged” in his current team since the three members, Vivian, Li and Ying were “international students”. He requested that he be allowed to join another team. Gordan explained that he had a particular team in mind that he wanted to join whose members were all local students. Aaron replied via email that since the teams had been finalised and the team contracts completed it was not a good idea to change at this late stage. Aaron added that, in any event, the team that Gordan wished to move to would need to be informed of his request and his current team needed to also be told of his request to move. Aaron stressed the importance of open communication for all concerned. Aaron did not receive an email reply from Gordan.

During the next tutorial, all the students were asked to complete the tutorial activity in their newly formed tutorial teams as a means to begin getting used to working with each other. Aaron used this tutorial as an opportunity to observe how the teams were working together. He noticed that Gordan was sitting on the edge of the table and not contributing to the team’s discussion. The other three members attempted to include him in the discussion and suggested that he be the spokesperson for their team. Gordan refused.

During the early stages of team formation, it is important that the tutor (as a coach) engages in activities that foster team effectiveness, in particular to help teams to select team members and work with individual differences. It would have been useful if Aaron had set up a meeting with Gordan and discussed with him in person the problems he foresees working with international students.

Interaction with teams during tutorials is essential to identify problems and improve team performance. One way to do this is for the coach to observe the actual behaviours of each member and note behaviours that may impede the team’s work. In this instance, taking note of students’ body language is a good way of determining the working relationships.

1 Case prepared by Valerie-Cotronei Baird, Department of Management & Marketing, University of Melbourne in conjunction with Andrew Rixon.
At the end of the tutorial Aaron approached Gordan and his team members and asked if he could have a quick chat to them. Aaron said he needed to hear from all the members how they felt they were working as a team. No one volunteered a response, so Aaron asked Gordan: “Have you talked to your team members about the email you sent me a week ago?” Gordan said that he had not, but then turned to the rest of the members and said that he would prefer to join another team. Gordan explained that he had already approached the other team’s members and they were happy for him to join their team. The three other members were horrified. Gordan said he needed to leave to attend another tutorial, but that he had made up his mind and was joining his new team. Prior to his departure, one of the team members Vivian, stated that she was very concerned about not having a native English speaker in their team. The other two members agreed. Gordan said “I’m South African so technically I’m not a native English speaking person anyway” and left on that note. The remaining members, Vivian, Li, and Ying were left very unhappy with this situation. 

During the week Aaron received an email from Gordan:
Hey, thanks for your help with changing teams today. It is a difficult situation, Kind regards, Gordan.

Aaron replied asking for the names of the members of the team that Gordan was intending to switch to. He said he wanted to email everyone and arrange a meeting so that the team could revise its team contract and include Gordan’s contribution to his new team. They met the following day. The three members – Peter, Darren and Jessica – said they were happy to have Gordan join them and felt that they would work well together. They amended the Team Contract to include Gordan’s roles and responsibilities.

Over the next few weeks, Gordan’s original team Vivian, Li and Ying moved on without him. Gordan appeared happy with his new team although not all of the team members were present during tutorials – Darren in particular missed a number of tutorials. The week before the team assignment was due in Week 9, Aaron received an email from one of Gordan’s new team mates, Peter.
Hi Aaron, My team has been having a lot of trouble reaching one of our members. His name is Darren. He hasn’t responded to emails, phone calls and SMS. To the best of your knowledge, is he still enrolled? What should we do about this? Is it possible to get an extension? Peter.

Aaron agreed that the team could seek an extension since the remaining members would now have to complete the assignment without Darren, who still had not been contacted.

It would have been useful if Aaron had set up a private meeting with Gordan to discuss his desire to move to another team. He then should have set up a meeting with all members to discuss the issues. Often moving an individual student to another team does not solve any problems; it merely shifts the problem and/or creates new problems for another team. It is better to address the problems at hand. After this incident, it would be necessary for Aaron to set up a meeting with the rest of the team members. It is important to debrief the team and provide support to revise their team contract since they now have one less member.

It is important that the team which Gordan is joining to draw up a new contract. All members should be part of the “forming” stage of team development. Drawing up a new contract in this case helps to ensure that Gordan agrees to the terms of the contract.

Accordingly, Peter emailed the Head Tutor.

_I was advised by my tutor to contact you as one of our team members has been completely uncontactable for two weeks. He has not responded to emails, phone calls, messages and has been absent from tutorials. As well as this, one of our other team members claims to have injured their back and is unable to join any planned meetings. If he provides a doctor’s certificate, is it possible to get an extension? Peter._

The extension was granted on the basis of a medical certificate; however, the situation escalated dramatically. Prior to the assignment being submitted, Peter requested that he be marked only for his contribution to the team assignment since he believed that he wrote the best parts of the assignment.

The Head Tutor responded that the best action to take was to organise a coaching session to give each member an opportunity to discuss the situation. She also requested that each member complete the Team Diagnostic prior to the meeting. There was no reply. Peter then met with the Head Tutor and said that he felt it was too late to “solve any team issues”. The assignment was due in a couple of days and had already been completed. He said he just wanted to be marked differently to the other members and to be acknowledged for his contribution only. He further argued that the second part of the assignment should not count towards his mark because it was not a reflection of his ability (he argued that the other team members had completed this section). The Head Tutor stressed the fact that such a decision could not be made unless all members were present to discuss the issues. Peter expressed to the Head Tutor that he could “kick himself for not addressing the missing team mate issue earlier”. He said that he had wanted to “kick him off the team weeks ago”. Peter chose not to pursue the issue any further and received the same mark as the other team members.

During the final tutorial, Aaron conducted an evaluation session of the team experience. He asked all the students to consider the room like a scale of 1-10, with 1 on one side of the room and 10 on the other side. He asked them to think about their experience with the team assignment and to go and stand in a place that best represented how they had found it: with 1 being a poor experience and 10 being the best possible experience. Gordan, Peter and Jessica (Darren still had not returned to tutorials) all stood on the side of the room that represented 1. Meanwhile Gordan’s old team mates – Vivian, Li and Ying stood at around 8.

Setting up a coaching session that all team members attend is a necessary step towards dealing with problems teams face. Prior to the session students should fill in the Student Team Diagnostic separately and give it to their coach – it helps team members reflect on the problems, as well as helping the coach identify the cause of problems. During the coaching session, a coach should maintain a neutral position; manage the discussion to ensure fairness; explore options by focusing on the interests behind stated positions; and assist the students to generate solutions and develop an action plan5

Identifying and solving problems as they arise (developmental coaching6) is important so that issues can be dealt with sooner rather than later. Teams need help with different issues at the different stages of their development. It is important that a coach reviews the team’s progress and identify any issues that need to be dealt with. As discussed above, using the tutorial time to observe the teams working with each other is a good opportunity for tutors to identify any issues.

5 Refer to the Department of Management and Marketing Training Website.

Gordan’s old team mates were proud of their achievements without Gordan. It turned out that none of the members from Gordan’s old team were “international students” – although their cultural backgrounds were Asian and they were born overseas, they were from very different Asian backgrounds and countries. In fact, these three students had all been raised from an early age in Australia – in three very different Australian locations. One was from interstate, one was from country Victoria and the third one was from Melbourne. Li pointed out that having worked with students she had not previously worked with before, and working with people with these different backgrounds, experiences and skills had contributed to the success of their team experience. In contrast, in explaining why they considered their team experience a 1, Gordan and his new team mates admitted that the team had suffered because (a) not all members had been present at the formation stage; and (b) they had not acted early enough or collectively in dealing with the member who had missed meetings and tutorials.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Coaches help people perform their tasks. How important is it that Tutors deal with the issues outlined in the above case to ensure that the team complete the set tasks?
2. Why do you think it is important that students make decisions about who will comprise the membership of their team using factors other than cultural background? What other factors should tutors encourage students to look for in potential team members?
3. Gordan used a process of team evaluation during his last tutorial? How important is it for tutors to coach students to continually evaluate their performance throughout the semester?
4. How would you, as a tutor, encourage students to evaluate their team performance throughout the course of the semester?