SUGGESTIONS for DEALING WITH PEOPLE PROBLEMS IN TEAMS

Generally students find working in teams to be stimulating and productive. But, things are not always perfect. Occasionally team members behave in ways that are detrimental to the progress of the team. Often this is because they are not aware of team norms, but in other cases an attitude adjustment is required.

We offer below some tried and true methods for dealing with common situations. In the business world, where a team is expected to have an established leader, it is his or her responsibility to initiate action. In student teams, which often operate without a designated leader it will be necessary for the team to identify a member to talk with the offending person. In cases of prolonged abuse, it may be necessary to bring the issue to the attention of your instructor.

The following suggestions are primarily based on P.R. Scholtes, *The Team Handbook: How to use teams to improve quality*, (1988), Joiner Associates, Inc. Madison, WI.

Aimlessness: Indicated by indecision, false starts, directionless discussions, postponed decisions, and lack of follow-through. This may occur because the team is overwhelmed, there is a lack of consensus on how to proceed, or the team is reluctant to finish and disband.

Ask the team to review how their project is being run ("let's review the charge/mission/task and see if everyone is clear") and ask probing questions ("what needs to happen so the group can move on?" or "what do you think is holding the team up?"). Also ask "what's missing?" Consensus? Data? Information? Support? Unacknowledged feelings?

Using the **Plan-Do-Check-Act** strategy proposed by Shewhart and popularized by J. Edwards Deming is a good remedy for a floundering or aimless team.

- **Plan** – the team discusses a plan for improvement. What have you learned so far? What new understanding do you need before beginning the next stage of the project?
- **Do –** make some early attempts at forward progress. Learn from your mistakes and improve.
- **Check –** study what you have done and find ways to improve them. What worked well; what didn't work well? What do you need to do a better job (training, resources, etc.)?
- **Act** – discuss how to utilize what you have learned from your trial attempts. Repeat you earlier efforts with the improvements included.

Dictatorial participants: Indicated by "experts" exerting too much influence in the group; "untouchability" of his or her ideas; and discounting others' experiences and suggestions. Such people often come across as overbearing because they are impetuous quick thinkers, but they make important contributions if they can be "toned down" so as to gain team acceptance.

Establish that everyone is a part of the process and no area is off limits for discussion.. Ask the expert to share expertise and not ultimatums so the rest of the group can be empowered, and reinforce importance of data (and not just expert opinion) in making progress on the project

Dominating participants: Indicated by group members who spend more time than is welcome speaking (or lecturing) during team meetings, dominate the team interactions, and do not listen to others.

Structure the discussion so that everyone gets to speak: use round robins, ask members to write down thoughts and share, and evaluate group process (ask the question: "does everyone participate?")

Unwilling participants: Indicated by group members who do not speak (opposite of overbearing), who are shy or unsure of themselves, and who rarely volunteer or act.

Same as dominating participants. Assign specific assignments or duties and ask the individual directly for input. In addition, have a heart-to-heart meeting with the reluctant team member to find out reasons for

his/her silence. If it is shyness ask some team members to work with the shy person to make them feel more welcome in the team. If the person is unwilling to engage in discussion because they do not want to contribute, give them an individual assignment to report on at the next team meeting. Failure to do this results in expulsion from the team.

The Slacker: This person takes on assignments and fails to deliver, or does an incomplete job. Also, the slacker often misses team meetings. Usually has a plausible excuse, but is a repeat offender. This is the most common complaint from student teams. Not generally found in teams is industry where he/she would be "bounced" after two episodes.

On a first offense the slacker should be reminded about the Team Contract that he/she signed and told that he is expected to live up to it. On a second offense one of the team members should talk with the slacker to find out why the offense continues to occur. If due to conflicting time schedule the team should attempt to adjust their meeting time. If due to heavy non-academic work load, the slacker should be asked to drop the class. The slacker should be told that the team will consider continued behavior of this type as a serious offense and will severely mark down his performance on team evaluations .After no more than two weeks in which there is no change in behavior the team should report the slacker to the course instructor.

Confusing opinions with facts: Indicated by team members who express their opinions with such assurance that other members are reluctant to question their points of view for fear of appearing impolite or wrong.

Suggest group members ask directly, "Is what you said an opinion or fact?" or "Do you have data?" (Scholtes, p. 6-41). Review the importance of all group members understanding and engaging in consensus-based actions grounded in mutually understood evidence.

Rushing to conclusion: Indicated by at least one action-oriented member who pressures the group into premature action. This individual is impatient with the engineering design process and may discount group process activities in exchange for the need to solve the problem.

Remind the team of the planned process and the need to proceed systematically: talk to the individual, pointing out examples of rushing and the impact this has on the work of the group.

(Mis)Attribution: Indicated by labeling another's behavior due to a misunderstanding or attributing motives to others without data or information ("he's just lazy/waiting for others to do the work").

Establish the need for evidence at all junctures: ask "How do you know that? or "Can this be validated with hard evidence?" Ask the individuals being (mis)attributed how they would describe his or her intentions ("How would you describe what was just said?" or "Is this what you meant?").

Disregarded ideas: Indicated by the discounting of other members' statements and opinions, the team ignores input and moves on without acknowledging the member's contribution.

Every team member deserves respect and attention from the team. The team leader should reinforce that all members' contributions need to be acknowledged, even the ones that seem useless or do not make sense. Seek clarification; use active listening (e.g., follow-up questions); ask the individual, "before the team moves on, should we spend more time on this idea? Can you help us see where this fits or helps the discussion?" Remind all group members that the use of constructive feedback and active listening are key to group functioning.

Tangents and Digression: Indicated by wide-ranging, unfocused but enthusiastic discussions that stray from the project.

Suggest that the team create an agenda at the beginning of each meeting by agreeing on a list of points and topics to be covered and referred back to as necessary. Identify one "traffic cop" whose job is to direct members back to the topic ("We've moved away from the topic, let's get back on track."). Ask the team to

discover if they are avoiding the work and ask why: "Since the team has difficulty maintaining focus on this topic, is there something about it that enables avoidance?" (e.g., inability to do the work or fear of change).

Feuding team members: Indicated by overt conflict between a subset of team members that disrupts the entire team. Often the feud predates the formation of the team, and if this is known those two members should not be selected for the team.

Discuss the problem outside of the team meeting. Encourage combatants to agree to manage their differences outside the team without disrupting the group. Offering to facilitate the dialogue may speed the conflict resolution. Review conflict management skills and stress the equal importance of completing the team project/product and having successful group processes.

PROVIDING CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

Feedback is specific information about how a project is progressing or how an individual is making his or her contribution to the project. The above suggestions often involve providing feedback to a poorly behaving team member. Another way that feedback is important in a student design project is the way that team members communicate with each other in doing the work. We list below some suggestions about how feedback can be made so as to be as constructive as possible.

- Feedback, both positive and negative, is vital to a team committed to improving itself, for it s the only way to know what needs to be improved. Therefore, it is important for the team to agree that giving and receiving feedback is an acceptable part of their project.

- Feedback requires putting the advice in context: what happened, why did it happen? Be very specific and descriptive. Relate as objectively as possible what you read or saw, or was related to you. Don't use labels and say things like "your behavior was unprofessional or irresponsible". It is better to say, "You missed th deadline we had agreed on". Or, "Your failure to make deadlines is hurting your team's chances for a good grade". Avoid judgmental words like "worst" or "bad".

- Provide feedback as soon as you learn of a problem. Provide the feedback directly to the person you have an issue with, not to an intermediary.

- Be respectful when giving feedback. Give the recipient a chance to express their view of the issue by asking "What do you think?" or "Would you agree?" Where appropriate use a problem solving approach. Ask" How can we fix this?" or "What can the team do to make this better?"

- Phrase the issue as a question and start it with "I" rather than "you". Thus, "I feel annoyed when you are late for meetings" is less confrontational than "When are you going to stop being late for meetings?" The latter form is confrontational and controlling because it implies that you are in the wrong and must change to my way. People become defensive and angry when spoken to this way. The first form implies that I think we have an issue that we must resolve together