Manager’s Hot Seat Teaching Notes

Video #20 Leadership and Credibility

Introduction

Teams are at the forefront of most business and organizational settings. This scenario explores what happens when a new leader wants to introduce change and the team is resistant to that change. The case will spark good discussion about leadership and effective and ineffective traits in teams.

Learning Objectives

1. To recognize that teams go through development stages before they function at their best.
2. To identify characteristics of ineffective teams.
3. To analyze the dangers of groupthink in team settings.
4. To identify traits of procedural leaders.

Scenario Description

Overview

Malcolm Price has recently transitioned from an IT coordinator with low-level managerial responsibility to a leadership role, heading up the technical side at Schumacker’s Company Formations, a web-based business start-up and support company. Unfortunately, no one is willing or comfortable following his lead as the person in charge. During a small group meeting about revising the company website, the group ignores his direction, and looks to another coworker, Samantha, for guidance.

Profile

* **Malcolm Price**, Technical Director, joined Schumacker’s IT department a year and a half ago, in which time he showed himself to be an innovative, creative thinker as well as competent technician, prompting the Schumacker’s to promote him to Technical Director.
* **Samantha Kasparoff**, Finance Manager and In-house Legal Advisor, came to the company soon after its inception in 1998 and has extensive experience in finance management, company formation, and legal doctrine, as well as being an outstanding negotiator and pathfinder.
* **Steve Olsen**, Sales Manager, is a dynamic and productive sales force at Schumacker’s. He enjoys his job, which allows him to make use of his exceptional people skills.
* **Anthony Norton**, Product Manager, is Schumacker’s Senior Product Manager, a position he has held for more than six years. He is a solid worker and a stickler for detail, qualities which makes him the perfect overseer of product consistency and strategic development.
* **Lisa Kelly**, Marketing Manager, is the youngest member of the team. This position is her first since graduating from business school three years ago. She is enthusiastic about her job and working as part of a team.

Backstory

The team all know each other well, as they have been working on various projects together for the best part of two years. The only outlier is Malcom, who has come to the team late and whose leadership they don’t trust. Instead, they rely on Samantha, who's been with the company longest and continue to defer to her and solicit her opinion.

Scene Setup

Malcom, promoted to supervisor role one-month prior, has a small group meeting with team leaders to discuss the revision of Schumacker’s company website.

On the agenda:

* The “look and feel” of the website, including changes to design and navigation.
* Introducing a Company News Hotspot, where Schumacker’s could share information on what’s happening at the firm and on any developments in company law, as well as acting as a “shop window” by offering existing and new clients the latest updates on products and services.
* The idea of collaborating with search engines, and how that might work to achieve a reciprocal advertising deal.
* A schedule for carrying out the work.
* The budget.

At the last meeting for a similar project, the updating of the website in 2009, Samantha proposed “The Legal Forum”, a separate page offering clients legal news, updates, and FAQs. This offered more comprehensive legal information than would be available if company law were to be condensed to part of the Company News Hotspot.

When this same team (Samantha, Steve, Anthony, and Lisa) had recently reviewed the website, before Price’s promotion, the general consensus had been that the website was working well and that only cosmetic changes needed to be made. However, upper management believes that the whole website would benefit from an overhaul, making it more user friendly, offering a chance to make some product-enhancing changes, and opening a window to attract new customers.

Scene Location

Conference room at Schumacker’s.

The Meeting—Summary

Malcom begins the meeting by outlining some mandated changes for the website from the CEO, Investors, and the Board of Directors. The team, who helped build the current website, lashes out at the suggested changes and immediately dismisses them. In the process, they defer to Samantha for guidance.

Malcom constantly reminds the rest of the team that he is in charge of this project, and it must be carried out to the wishes of the Schumacker’s upper management so they can attract new clients. The team does not have the choice to not do the work. However, they refuse to listen to what Malcom has to suggest, and there is a general unwillingness to even explore new possibilities. Malcom tries to reign in the group by specifically asking each member to perform a task that will contribute to the new website. By the end of the meeting, the team agrees they will meet in two weeks to discuss their findings.

Afterthoughts—Summary

Malcom believes the meeting went well and that it was productive. He recognizes that it was the first meeting they have had together under his leadership and that members wanted to support and hear what Samantha wanted rather than him. However, he remains optimistic that the team will evolve and eventually “toe the line” to complete the task at hand. Malcom was intentionally calm and allowed the team to voice their concerns. He is also smart in that he recognizes the importance of valuing Samantha. He will seek her input so that the rest of the team gets on board more easily.

Discussion Questions

*Leaning Objective #1 To recognize that teams go through development stages before they function at their best.*

Teams typically go through three stages—formation, coordination, and formalization—on any given project. Which of these stages is the Schumacker’s team on in the meeting?

During the formation stage, members meet and begin to define their tasks, develop some social cohesiveness, and develop procedures for acting. Typically in this stage, conflicts are likely to occur. Successful teams clarify what each member is supposed to do.

In the coordination stage, which is the longest, most of the team’s work is completed. Successful teams during this stage consider as many solutions as possible.

In the formalization stage, the group seeks consensus and determines how things will be implemented. Typically during this stage, the team forgets earlier conflicts.

The Schumacker’s team is in the formation stage. They are just beginning to meet as a new team and define new tasks. By the end of the meeting, Malcom helps the team clarify what each member will complete before the next meeting in two weeks.

*Leaning Objective #2 To identify characteristics of ineffective teams.*

What were some of the negative characteristics of the team you watched?

Negative roles and actions can hurt a team’s process and product. During the meeting, some member were ***blocking***, that is, they were disagreeing with everything that Malcom proposed. Some members were also ***overspeaking***, that is, taking everyone opportunity to state their negative view of the proposed website changes. At one point, Samantha was also ***dominating***, that is, trying to run the team by ordering what should happen.

*Leaning Objective #3 To analyze the dangers of groupthink in team settings.*

Groupthink is the tendency for teams to put such a high premium on agreement that directly (or indirectly) punish dissent. Was the Schumacker’s team guilty of groupthink? Why or why not?

Answers will vary by student discussion; however, in general, the team was somewhat guilty of groupthink. The team was so set in their approval and acceptance of the current website that they were reluctant to even explore alternative options. As a result, Malcom was indirectly punished by having his leadership role usurped by Samantha, who supported the view of the rest of the team.

*Leaning Objective #4 To identify traits of procedural leaders.*

A procedural leader sets an agenda, makes sure that everyone knows what’s due for the next meeting, and checks to be sure that tasks are carried out. Does Malcom fulfill the role of an effective procedural leader? Why or why not?

Answers will vary by student discussion; however, in general, yes, Malcom is a procedural leader. He set an agenda for the team meeting and also made plans for upcoming meetings. He went around the table one-by-one to ask each member if they could handle doing the research for the new website. Finally, he made sure each knew their responsibility for the next meeting in two weeks.