

Gemini Systems: Managing From The Middle In A High-Tech Company


Timm L. Kainen, University of Massachusetts Lowell, USA

ABSTRACT

This business case study is designed for MBA courses in Organizational Behavior, Organization Change and Negotiations. The case follows a young middle manager who has very little formal authority as she attempts to implement a new project staffing system for engineers in a high-tech matrix organization. As the company rapidly grows, she experiences significant resistance to change from section leaders, program managers and engineers who have become accustomed to competitive behavior in an environment rich with opportunities. However, as the company experiences retrenchment during the economic downturn of 2009, the change resistance continues, but within an environment where there is a paucity of projects. The case shows how Sophie grows as a middle manager and learns the necessary skills to be successful at managing change and “influencing without authority”.

Keywords: Middle-managers, Influence without authority, Managing scientists and engineers, Negotiating change, Matrix organizations

CASE A

 In an August afternoon, Sophie sat at her desk pondering her next move. Her first three years at Gemini Systems had been very challenging, but also full of opportunities that she had wholeheartedly embraced. She had made her share of mistakes as a “free agent” middle manager with no direct reports, but she had established herself as someone who could get things done. As a Project Control Analyst, she had successfully and consistently improved many parts of the system used to manage the staffing requirements of the multiple projects in her division. Her tireless efforts had saved large cost over-runs for her division and earned her a reputation as one who did not shrink from tough assignments or back down from disagreements.

In fact, her outstanding performance had earned her three battlefield promotions as she successfully navigated her way through an endless series of conflicts with a wide variety of technical specialists, project leads, bosses and other project control analysts. The roots of these conflicts over project funding and staffing were embedded in the company’s matrix structure and were the tacitly shared value system that made up its corporate culture. She accepted this work environment as her management reality and knew full well that it would not be restructured to accommodate the new ideas she was planning to implement. She would have to push the collaboration envelope if she wanted the usual protagonists to work within the parameters of her new and more integrated system for tracking and managing the overall staffing requirements of the collective projects.

BACKGROUND

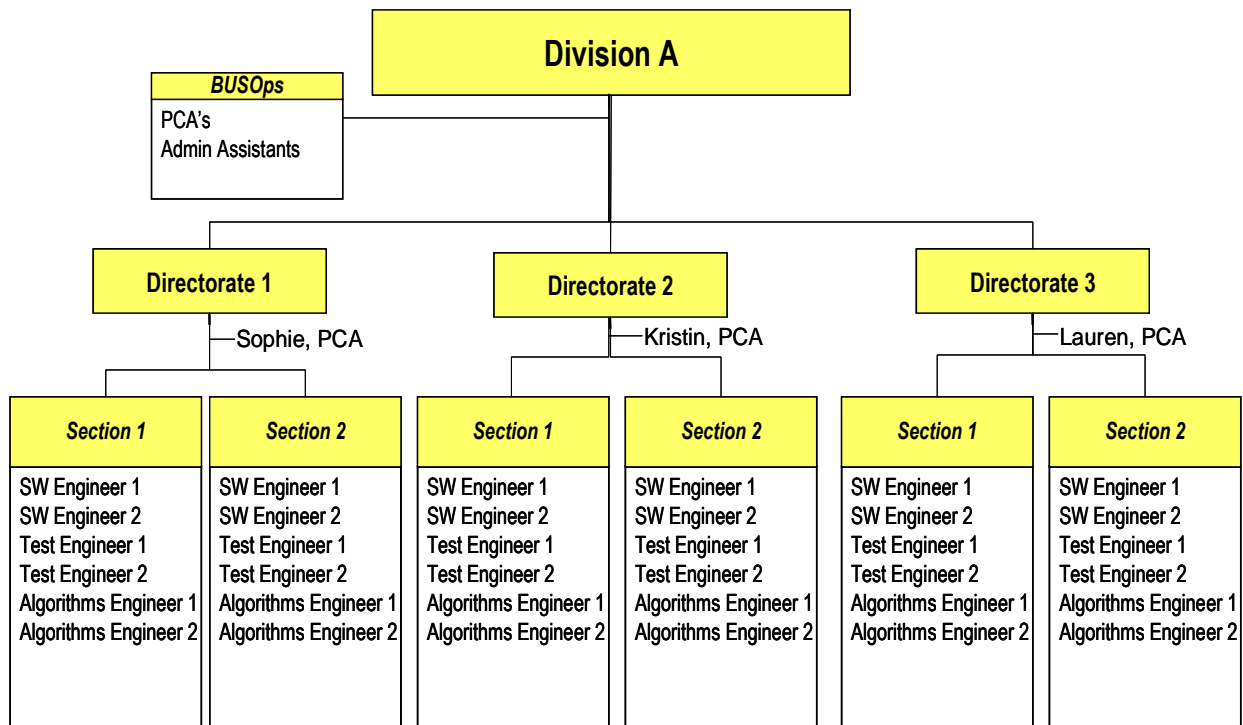
Gemini Systems began as a small independent software development company working on U.S. government defense contracts. In 2004, it was acquired by Scorpio Inc., a large defense contractor that was expanding its software systems capabilities. Gemini had been an attractive acquisition primarily because of its talented engineers. As such, the Gemini team of engineers and their support staff were allowed to operate as an autonomous group within Scorpio Inc. The only difference was that the Gemini CEO would report to top management at Scorpio.

Scorpio quickly began to funnel more projects to Gemini and it rapidly grew to 400 employees who were spread throughout three different locations within the United States. This larger talent pool also allowed Gemini to take on larger and more complex projects. However, success came with a price. The old system for staffing, funding and monitoring projects became increasingly difficult to maintain. Since these processes were built for the original smaller organization, they were becoming outdated in the newly expanded company. Additionally, while Gemini still operated independently, Scorpio’s more bureaucratic reporting procedures were beginning to make new demands on how the Gemini group reported its financial numbers as well as other project data. Gemini realized it would need to adapt and change its current operation if it was going to be able to operate successfully and compete in this new world of million dollar projects.

Division A, the largest of the three divisions within Gemini, was having the most difficulty in making adjustments. This group had a history of being the most successful division within the Gemini group. It had rapidly doubled in size to about 120 people within the last few years. As such, it felt more entitled to handle projects in its own way.

As shown in Exhibit 1, Division A was comprised of Directorate 1, Directorate 2, and Directorate 3. Each directorate represented a certain technological expertise and worked to solve customers’ problems in that field. The engineers in each division would be assigned to the division that was their best fit based on their individual technical skills and knowledge. Furthermore, each of the three directorates was further broken into two individual sections which further segmented the engineers according to their technological expertise. Each section would have a section leader and then a number of engineers that reported to them. The company organization chart was a matrix structure where the engineers were assigned to projects within their own directorate, as well as the other directorates as projects had certain technological needs arise. As such, they had two bosses - their functional section leader and the manager of the project to which they were assigned.

Exhibit 1: Division “A” Organization Chart



THE BUSINESS OPERATIONS GROUP

Sophie was part of the Business Operations Group which was a staff support unit for the technical directors, section leaders and project managers (PM's) in the three Directorates. The BOG assigned technical specialists and engineers to the various projects and monitored project costs, and performance efficiencies against pre-established parameters. By providing financial information to both PM's and the section leads within the matrix organization, they were a critical part of the control system for both the Gemini group and Scorpio Inc. Within each of the three directorates, one person from the business operation group specifically worked on that directorate's projects. This person was called a project control analyst (PCA). Within Division A, there were three PCA's: Sophie who was responsible for Directorate 1, Kristin who was responsible for Directorate 2, and Lauren who was responsible for Directorate 3.

Each PCA used an excel tool called the "staffing planner". It contained a tab for each project where the staffing plan could be mapped out and expenses tracked. This was useful to not only report data back to the customer, but also to make sure that any given project was not over or under spending. At the front of each work book, there was a rollup sheet which linked to the multiple excel pages and illustrated the allocations for each staff member per month so that the PCA could see the project to which each member was allocated and whether the project was over or under staffed. Since Division A was a matrix organization, it was not unusual for various engineers to be assigned to multiple projects in multiple directorates. This forced the PCA to have an additional tab on the excel worksheet entitled 'other directorate' where these concurrent assignments could be logged. This extra tab was needed to confirm that all of the available financial and human resources were being used to maximize profit and assigned to the appropriate projects to maximize efficiency.

At the end of every month, each PCA would have a meeting with their individual directorate, which included the directorate manager and the section leads, in order to update the staffing plans for their projects and allocate staff members based on the different project needs. The PCA would then look at the rollup page to make sure there were no staffing conflicts for the month ahead. Changes to the staffing plans would often affect other PCA's projects within the division. In order to ensure that all changes were accurately captured, the PCA's had to constantly communicate with each other. This way the PCA's could verify that the changes were acceptable and reported to the PM in charge of the project. This process began during the last two weeks of the month and had to be completed before the month was up in order for the staff members to know what they would be working on in a timely manner. The process was not particularly well organized because each PCA worked individually until it was time to combine and rectify all of the information at the month:

End of the Month Sequence

1. Last week of the month, work with PM's to update projects to spend out correctly and request any additional staff that they needed
2. Meet with directorates to go over staffing conflicts that arose from the new staffing requests
3. Send any updates that were made to a separate workbook to the PCA responsible
4. If meetings already happened and a PCA sends additional changes, then meet with their directorate to discuss again and resolve if necessary

Communication was essential because while the section leads were responsible for staffing the engineers in their section, the PM's were responsible for staffing their own projects. It was the PM's job to have all staffing requests in before the staffing meeting. It was during the meeting that the section leads would make the call as to which staffing requests from the PM's were to be accepted. After the meeting, any changes that were made or requests that were rejected needed to be communicated back to the PM's so they could go back to the drawing board if necessary. If a PM absolutely needed a certain engineer and could not get him or her, it was taken up to their section lead to work it out with the appropriate parties. If the section leads could not work it out, it was then the directorate manager's say as to where the engineer would be staffed. If the conflict could not be resolved at that level, then it was the Division A manager who would step in and make the final call depending on the priorities of the division. The hope was that the conflict would not have to escalate to the division manager, but lately with the lack of communication, this was happening more frequently.

Whatever projects Gemini worked on, it did so as an outside contractor. As such, it billed customers by the labor hours for all employees working on any given project within a prescribed timeframe. Having all the financial information and staffing allocations rolled up at the end of the month for each division was critical. Upper management and the CEO needed an accurate accounting of all division activity to get a complete picture of how each division was tracking against its goals. In addition to measuring overall efficiency, this data allowed management to assess needs for additional hiring and determine if they had enough funded backlog to cover the cost of maintaining the current staff. It also allowed for the estimation of how much additional work they may be able to take on as new business.

SOPHIE'S BACKGROUND

Sophie started at Gemini as an administrative assistant shortly after graduating from college. Her father, a chief engineer at Scorpio, had learned of the job opening. During her first year, Sophie put in long hours, learned how the systems operated and took on extra responsibilities where ever she could find them. Toward the end of that year, she learned of an opening within her division for a PCA. There were two PCA's within the division, one for each directorate, and now one of them was leaving the company and would need to be replaced. Sophie, knowing she had the skills for the job, went to her boss, Sam, and told him of her interest in the position, citing the fact that she had already learned how the systems operated during the last year. She also argued that promoting her would set a good precedent and establish a career path for other motivated administrative assistants within the company. This last point was important since Gemini had traditionally been concerned with only the engineers' career paths. Sophie argued that establishing a career path for employees in the Business Operations Group that lead to a PM role would give them incentive to work harder and be a source of home-grown talent for the company. Sam agreed that she had the capability to do the job and he could see the potential long-term benefits to the company. He decided to recommend her for the promotion which would begin at the start of the following fiscal year.

When it came time for Sophie's promotion, it turned out that Division A was re-organizing from two divisions into three. In addition to Sophie's promotion, Kristin, a five-year veteran administrative assistant in the division, would also be getting promoted. Even though Sophie had actively pursued the job opening, Kristin was upset about the promotion because she had seniority within the company. Sam, the assistant division manager and head of the business operations group, did not want to hurt Kristin's feelings, so he decided to establish two jobs. The establishment of two positions, as opposed to one, would also fit the new organization structure with one PCA for each of the three new directorates.

As the youngest and newest member of the business operations group, Sophie was eager to prove her worth to the company and start working her way up the corporate ladder. She had started at Gemini a couple of years after the acquisition, but before Scorpio's corporate bureaucracy had overtaken the Gemini way of doing things. As the two companies grew, she began to see even more potential career growth opportunities.

THE NEW STAFFING PROCESS

Along with the new division structure, a new process for tracking projects and recording staffing allocations was also under development. A new software package for managing and planning the staffing of projects was in the development process and Sophie was put in charge of its testing. Sophie was chosen to head the roll-out of the new software to her division. Even though she was the newest PC, she had the best grasp of how the excel spreadsheets and databases worked. Sophie successfully implemented the new workbook and process into Directorate 1. She followed up by training the other two divisional PCA's (Lauren and Kristin) to use the new staffing system. Throughout the year, Sophie proved herself as a PCA and gained the trust of the director, section leads and PM's by providing on time and accurate data. She also showed her ability to dig down and analyze what was going on with projects and what they would need to spend out properly.

Sophie's long-term goal when joining Gemini was to eventually become a PM for the company and to do so by going back to school for her MBA. Keeping her aspirations of PM in mind while at her PCA position, Sophie approached other PM's within the group who were overwhelmed with work and offered to help offload some of their work. At the end of the year when Sophie went in for her annual review with Sam, she had taken on a number of additional duties and tasks that a PCA normally did not do. She was hoping this extra activity would help prove her worth to the company and further develop her career path, which it did.

During their evaluation meeting, she and Sam formulated a new career growth path for her. It went from PCA to Deputy PM (DPM), and eventually on to PM. They agreed to allow Sophie to be the DPM on one or two smaller projects. As DPM, Sophie would now do all the internal PM-type roles of keeping the project on task, ensuring that milestones and deliverables were met. The only difference between her position as Deputy PM and the PM on the project is that the main PM would still continue to be the customer point of contact. Gemini's staffing pay scale and titles were different from those at Scorpio, so there was no title within the organizational matrix which fit this new position for Sophie; so instead, she was given a promotion from PCA II to PCA III.

THE NEW STAFFING PROCESS DEVELOPS NEW ISSUES

Sophie had been a PCA within Division A for about a year when the issues with the staffing process started to become an apparent problem for the company. The staffing allocation process was initially handling the needs of the division, but as Division A grew in size and more contracts were awarded, it became increasingly difficult for the PCA's to communicate with one another. At the end of each month, the PM's and the Section Leads would communicate staffing updates to each of the three PCA's. Often times, these updates would affect more than one directorate, so it was the PCA's job to communicate with the other PCA who was being affected.

This often did not happen and the staffing updates were not getting captured accurately. As a result, the projects started to suffer. PM's were losing employees that were critical to their projects because needs were not getting recognized by the Section Leaders whose main concern was to have all of the engineers in their group staffed at 100%. The right employees were not working on the right projects because PM's did not realize that they needed to request the PCA's to assign them. Projects started to be over or under spent and the division overhead was taking a huge hit due to the miscommunication.

After all staffing inputs had been recorded in the staffing planners, the PCA's would then meet with the section leaders to de-conflict any of their staff who were over or under 100% allocated. Instead of having one meeting with the section leads, there had to be multiple meetings because the section leaders did not have a grasp on all of the projects in Directorate A's needs. The PCA's were not able to help either because they also were not aware of the status of projects in other divisions, so this resulted in the section leads having to scramble to find coverage and then meet again once they had an answer. Also, this lack of knowledge caused the section leads to just add staff to projects to make sure they were covered with no regard for whether or not the project budget could support them. The meetings were often chaotic with the section leads arguing their projects' needs without listening to what the other projects needed. Instead of compromising for the better of the division, they did not care if other projects suffered.

The process was so manual that every time a change was made to a staffing allocation, the project page itself had to be re-created, the rollup page updated, and then (if the project was in another directorate) that tab had to be updated and the other PCA notified. One misstep and a request for a staff member could fall through the cracks or an update could go un-captured by one of the PCA's. By the end of the month, there would still be a number of conflicts unresolved and the engineers that were impacted would still not know what projects they should be working on. It became increasingly difficult for the PCA's to get the PM's and section leads to make staffing decisions in a timely fashion. This started to have a negative impact on the whole division.

It was not clear whether the section leads and PM's understood the importance of the staffing allocation exercise, or that they did not want to understand. They kept neglecting their homework and did not seem to understand the needs of the projects. This problem started to become painfully present to Greg, the Division A manager, who saw the division's overhead budget numbers diminishing much too quickly and projects starting to fall behind schedule. If Division A was going to continue to grow and expand in order to assist Gemini in reaching its overall goal of 20% growth, then better management of the projects within this division was essential. If the current level of project management performance remained unchanged, it would be impossible for Gemini to compete for multimillion dollar contracts against large powerhouse companies, such as Raytheon and Northrop Grumman. Looking to solve the management and staffing allocation problems that were impeding the divisions' growth, Greg looked to the business operations group manager to set a new precedent in how better management of the staffing allocations could be achieved.

TAKING OVER DIVISIONAL STAFFING ALLOCATION

Around the time of her promotion to PCA II, Sophie started to take on the responsibility of combining the three staffing workbooks and updating the staffing line in order to calculate projected future internal sales throughout the year based upon staffing allocations. This projected future data would then be matched against the funding to give upper management a better picture of how the company was doing financially. The analysis allowed upper management to see how much funding was allocated to cover the existing staff, the time period, and whether there were any discrepancies between the projected numbers and the actual monthly numbers. Sophie was getting settled with her new assignments when she started to notice a problem with engineers who were not allocated on her projects, yet they were charging hours to her projects. When she brought this to the attention of the PM's, she found out they were actually tasking them, but the updates to the staffing planner never made it to Sophie's desk. She also began to notice that some engineers who were assigned to her projects were not actually charging those projects, but charging hours to the division's overhead account...or to a completely different project. Again, when this was brought up to the PM's, it came as a surprise to them.

Sophie went to her boss, Sam, with her findings in the hope that they could come up with an improvement to better capture the planned data more accurately. The timing of Sophie's diagnosis could not have been more perfect. Earlier that week, the division manager had expressed, to Sophie's boss, his concerns about the overhead margins and poor tracking on projects. The division manager felt as though Division A needed to develop a better system of staffing and communicating between multiple PM's.

Sophie explained to Sam her process of going through the staffing allocation exercise with Directorate 1 each month and that at the end of each month, her directorate was the only one who was able to allocate all staff at 100%, on time. Sophie still struggled with getting accurate and timely data from Lauren and Kristin (the PCA's in Directorates 1 and 2), which made the overall process less effective. Sam was impressed with how Sophie was able to tackle the staffing issues within Directorate 1 and felt that if the other directorates could do it the same way, then the issues could be resolved.

The problem was that Lauren and Kristin were not really getting the job done within their respective Directorates and did not seem to have the ability to do so. Seeking a resolution, Sophie's boss asked her if she would be interested in taking over control of staffing for the entire Division A. He wanted her to develop a process similar to the one she had created for her own directorate and make it work effectively for the whole division. Sophie knew this was a huge responsibility but also a great opportunity as it presented her with her first real shot at a management position. Her new responsibilities included the implementation of her new project staffing design. Her performance on this task could either enhance or hurt her career path at Gemini. After analyzing the pros and cons of the position, Sophie felt very confident in her ability to perform this task and was eager to prove herself. This new opportunity was a great starting point and Sophie hoped that it would open more doors along the way to reaching her project management goal.

FIRST STEPS

The following month, Sophie was going to take over staffing allocation for the entire division. Looking for guidance, Sophie decided to set up a meeting with Jacky, a senior member of the business operations group, who was responsible for the way the workbooks were currently staffed. Sophie voiced her concerns with regard to the current way of rolling up the staffing, which she believed was leaving room for errors because the allocations were being done manually. Sophie felt that if she was going to be doing the staffing for the entire division, it did not make sense for her to go into each workbook individually and update each and every change that was made on the overall summary page. After discussing the current issues, Jacky mentioned that he could develop an access database that, at the push of a button, could read each of the three staffing workbooks, pulling out all staff and their allocations across Division A at one time. Combining all the manual steps on the workbook into one Access project would definitely allow all changes to staffing allocation to be captured in the summary page, which would then show any conflicts within the division.

CASE B

Though Sophie was excited about the possibility of a new Access database and felt her meeting with Jacky had gone well, she did hear some unexpected news. Lauren and Kristin felt that it was not the way they were doing things, but the management's unwillingness to cooperate, that was causing the issues. While it was true that management was not fully cooperating, Sophie didn't see the issue. She had had been able to get her own section leads and PM's to cooperate and get all inputs on time, so why shouldn't the other directorates be able to do it? She thought it was the other PCAs' technique that was causing the issue.

Sophie designed a process that she believed would solve the problem. Two weeks before the end of the month, she would send out notices that all project staffing planners need to be updated by the end of the first of the two weeks. At the same time, she would send out a summary of all staffing allocations in Division A across three months so that people could see what they were working with. As updates came in, she would resend the conflicts list so everyone would be aware of the changes that were being made and how the people in their section were being affected. During the last week of the month, she would meet with each of the three directors and their section leads to work through the conflict list. Any conflicts that were remaining would be action items for people to follow up with and resolve by the end of the week.

In the meetings where changes were made, Sophie would open the staffing spreadsheets for all to see and to make sure any projects were not being negatively affected. By constantly communicating these changes to the PM's and section leads and identifying any remaining issues, Sophie felt that she could start to coax on-time updates out of the directorates. To gain a little more control, she also included top management on the email lists. Sophie was confident going into the first month of staffing the division that with her process and the new access database, she could tackle the problem efficiently.

INITIAL SUCCESS AND SOME RESISTANCE

The first month of staffing the division went fairly smoothly, with minimal problems and concerns. Directorate 1 continued to function as it had prior to Sophie taking over divisional staffing. Directorate 2, which had previously experienced staffing issues, went smoother than it ever had in the past. Dan, the manager of Directorate 1, and Brooke, the manager of Directorate 2, were extremely pleased and excited that all conflicts were resolved as a result of just one meeting. If one of the divisions had a person who they needed to staff, Sophie knew the needs of all the other projects in the division and could help get a staffing match for them. However, though two Directorates were on board with the change, Directorate 3 was being difficult. Paul, the manager of Directorate 3, did not like the newly implemented access database and was continuing to do his staffing in the same manner he had before Sophie took over the new position. Paul expressed that he liked Lauren, his old PCA, and was accustomed to everything being updated in real time, manually. Sophie discussed with Paul that although they preferred the old staffing system, the new database and new way of doing things was the way it needed to be. Sophie stressed the importance of Directorate 3 implementing her new process because if they did not have all their employees allocated at 100% for the next three months, the division manager would not be happy with the outcome. Even though Paul complained and resisted, Sophie was still able to get everyone in the division (including his directorate) staffed out at 100% before the two-week deadline.

During this first month, Sophie got her updates and entered those into the three staffing planners without giving much attention or thought to the other PCA's. However, Sophie soon discovered they were unhappy with her. Lauren and Kristin did not appreciate Sophie going through the workbooks, changing the pages and updating the staffing allocation without giving them a "heads-up" on the situation. Sophie realized she needed to get both Lauren and Kristin more directly involved in the current system so they would not be upset or feel like she was taking over their jobs. Once Sophie came to this realization, she started making a summary of all of her changes and emailing them to Lauren and Kristin in an effort to let them know any changes she made to their staffing planners so they were not left out of the loop. By including them in this crucial step, they had an understanding of the changes being made, agreed with them, and now could send out the allocations to the staff members in their respective groups.

Throughout the first six months, the staffing allocation exercise continued to go smoothly. The process was working and Sophie was able to meet the deadline and get all staffing completed on time by the end of the month. The smoothed staffing line that Sophie updated each month, based on the staffing allocations, started to become more accurate. The accuracy can be attributed to PM's and section leads getting their monthly allocations in on time and the communication that started to take place after which helped the PM's to become more aware of what project their personnel were working on.

However, even though Sophie had a handle on Directorate 1 and Directorate 2, Directorate 3 was still giving her a very hard time. They were not providing Sophie with the division's staffing updates and not giving her insight into their projects. Directorate 3 was still going to Lauren and having her update their plans. While both Lauren and Kristin were told to direct the staffing allocation to Sophie so that she would be responsible for the updates, Lauren was still doing the staffing updates. She did not want to give up the task and was encouraging her Division 3 PM's and section leads to still come see her. Having the division report to Lauren instead of Sophie was hurting Sophie's insight into the overall project status in Division A. Not knowing what was happening with the staffing for Directorate 3 kept Sophie from having all the answers when the division manager came to ask her questions about the status of projects. So even though the overall staffing process was going smoothly, Directorate 3 was still resisting the change.

A CURVE BALL

That November, Sophie had her annual review with Sam and she felt that it went extremely well. Greg was very pleased with the progress that had been made and both Dan and Brooke had nothing but good things to say about the new staffing allocation. The same could not be said for Paul as he voiced his displeasure with the new system. Paul felt that Sophie could have taken more time to understand the current process that was in place and could have been more open to other solutions for staffing other than the process she created. When Paul's opinions became apparent, both Sophie and Sam agreed the current manner in which she was completing the staff allocation was in fact productive. The problem was that Paul was acting like a dinosaur, not willing to change his ways.

During this meeting, Sophie, to her surprise, discovered that Division "A" was scheduled to be re-organized into five directorates in January. The overall goal was for Sophie to continue to do the staffing allocations until March and by that time, hopefully everything would be smoothed over. Sophie's main objective was to have staffing coordinated among the five directorates and then transfer the current staffing allocations to either Kristin or Lauren so that one of them could be the sole person responsible for Division A's staffing.

From January 2009 to May 2009, Sophie started managing the staffing across five directorates instead of three. The last two weeks of the month when the staffing exercises were taking place, Sophie had little time to concentrate on anything else because she was always updating staffing and then meeting with the five different directorates to ensure all of the allocations were done correctly. Although the staffing was being completed on time, Sophie found herself dreading the meetings needed to accomplish this task. It seemed like the section leads showed up to the meetings not knowing what the conflicts were, not knowing where they could put these people, and not having spoken to anyone beforehand! The meetings could take up to two hours and often consisted of nothing more than arguments between section leads. There was no organization within the meetings and all of the section leads were not working as a team to get all project needs met.

At these meetings, Sophie was forced to deal with section leaders who were technically knowledgeable but only average when it came to collaboration skills. These section leads could not effectively negotiate with one another. Winning was achieved through yelling, intimidation and politics. Since all of the section leads were preoccupied with their personal needs, long-term solutions were overlooked and a number projects went unstaffed. The result was that upper management, employees, and ultimately, some of the customers, became unhappy. Initially, it looked like the toughest section leads were reaching their goals, but eventually their inability to negotiate win-win solutions affected their relationships with colleagues.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

During the years leading up to 2009, the company had been in a growth mode, so it seemed more willing to tolerate the ever-present conflict and tension in Division A. However, in 2009, the economy had started to collapse and all companies, even giants like Scorpio, were starting to see their business change. In previous years, the problem had been to find enough technical talent to staff all the newly won projects. They had been hiring at a record pace. Now the problem was that Scorpio would win contracts, but the government could not provide them with the appropriate funding and the process was taking three, six, or even nine months to get the right amount of funding. In January 2009, a new administration assumed control in Washington and certain Defense Department budgets were being cut. This led to some of Scorpio's larger projects being dropped. Now, many of the engineers were underutilized because the projects in Division A could no longer support them. As it became more difficult for section leads to find projects to support their people, they began to search for potential projects in other directorates and other divisions within the company.

This situation created even more conflict in the meetings. By the end of any given two-hour meeting, only some of the staffing problems would get resolved. The rest of the week was spent following up on the remaining conflicts and making sure the section leads remembered to follow up with other PM's on coverage issues. Additionally, one of the five directorates was still giving Sophie a problem about getting her updates and using her process. This was her old nemesis - Paul from Directorate 3 (and the PCA Lauren).

Sophie sat in her office in mid-May 2009 about to begin the staffing for the next month. She was dreading the next two weeks and wondering what she could do to hold things together. As she pondered her next move, she was counting on the negotiation skills she would learn in her final MBA course to help her gain the new level of collaboration that would be required.

CASE C - EPILOGUE

The last week in May 2009, Sophie began a negotiations course, a course she needed for the completion of her MBA. Sophie had signed up for this class because she thought it would help her attain her ultimate goal of becoming a PM who was capable of not only the internal logistics, but also excelled at interfacing with the customer. She felt that this class would increase her communication skills with customers and still solve any conflicts or issues in a professional manner. So focused on finishing her MBA, it never occurred to Sophie that this negotiations class would help her fix her staffing problems.

By the second week of negotiations class, Sophie experienced her 'ah-ha' moment. Sophie now possessed the negotiation skills that most other section leads and PM's at Gemini did not have. Using these skills during the upcoming dreaded staffing meetings could help her facilitate, organize, and coach the other section leads. All along, her job was to facilitate these meetings, but she never really knew how to grasp and maintain control of these section leads while helping them make decisions. Sophie had often found herself cutting into the conversation in order to tell the section leads to take it offline and making an action item to follow up later. Sophie's newly polished negotiation skills would be perfect in aiding her in these meetings and the acquisition of these skills could not have come at a better time. Sophie had been doing the staffing for a couple of years now and she had gained the technical respect of the section leads and PM's. However, she now had an additional skill that would help her to manage without having formal authority over any of them. This skill was particularly important now that things had become critical for the whole company and tensions were running high.

Sophie learned that she was an ESTJ personality type, meaning that she liked to get to the point, get the details, and get it done fast. Sophie started to think about the other personality types she dealt with and immediately thought of Lauren, with whom she just could not seem to work. Paul insisted upon doing things differently and always wanted to look at the big picture and take the time to map it all out, which was something Sophie felt was a waste of time. As Sophie thought about this issue, it occurred to her that maybe if she had gone to Lauren in the beginning and taken the time to understand her divisional needs, something could have been worked out sooner. In an effort to smooth things over, Sophie decided to meet with Paul and Lauren to figure out a way they could all work together. From speaking with Paul, she began to understand the way he liked to accomplish his tasks and he

was able to grasp her staffing needs and tight deadlines. Next, Sophie took it upon herself to speak to Lauren who was unwilling to give Sophie control of updating the plans. By speaking directly with Lauren, she was able to see her point of view and understand that Lauren liked to have control of her own projects and the interaction with the SL's and PM's in her group. She was also willing to take extra time to do it the way that Paul liked it done. Sophie decided it would be best for everyone involved to let Lauren take over inputting all updates to her divisions staffing planners as long as she did it by the deadline and provided Sophie with a summary of the projects and changes. Even with this new change, when Sophie went to her meetings, she would still have all the facts. This new process made Lauren, Paul and Sophie happy because now they could complete the assignments in a way they all felt was comfortable; it also reduced Sophie's work load!

Sophie also began to realize the importance of doing homework and making sure that not only did she come prepared to the staffing meetings, but so did the other section leaders. The meetings would move along faster and smoother if the section leads were informed about potential conflicts ahead of time. Currently, the section leads came to the meetings to find out what the conflicts were and then proceeded to argue until one was able to out yell the other. They would often leave the meeting with nothing resolved. Sophie re-crafted the email she sent out at the start of the staffing process to emphasize what she expected at each meeting and what the section leaders and directors' roles were going to be. She next met with Greg to get him on board with what she needed and to have him understand her process. Greg then made it a point to meet with his directors and stress the importance of the staffing getting done on time and what he expected of them.

By the third week in June, Sophie was seeing significant improvement. Many of the conflicts were actually being resolved before the meetings. Having learned to ask well thought-out questions, rather than make ad hoc statements, Sophie had turned the tables. She was now able to help each of them to understand other project needs, as well as the overall division needs. Sophie had started to lead and her staffing plan for the five directorates now started to take root.

The new process works much better because there is an established timeline which the PM's know they must meet in order to ensure there are no staffing conflicts. Previously, it would be a scramble during the last week of the month to get the staffing allocations de-conflicted and that was contingent upon all PCA's working in a timely manner. Having come to agreement on the process to ensure these deadlines are met, Sophie can now properly staff all the divisions without upsetting any other employees by not notifying them of any changes. There is clear and concise communication between all the parties as well as an understanding of the responsibilities of everyone involved.

The staffing process was going so smoothly that when it came time for Sophie to hand off this system to another PCA, the division manager did not like the idea of throwing a wrench into an already functioning system. While the staffing conflicts were starting to get resolved, the staffing needed to stay as accurate as possible because the company was going through a tough time with layoffs. Unfortunately, if people could not be placed on projects, then they would be the next to go. Sophie agreed to stay on doing the staffing, but now that she had the process running so smoothly that she felt it no longer was a challenging position for her. She had accomplished her goal.

Everyone was starting to understand the process and getting the conflicts resolved, so now Sophie felt like she needed a new problem to solve. Does she keep trying to reinvent the staffing process by finding areas that could be improved and creating solutions to those areas so she remains valuable to the company? Or is there some way she can convince her boss to let her offload the staffing to someone else which would allow her to concentrate on building her PM career? Sophie would prefer the latter of the two choices but is worried that she is confined to the staffing position for the time being!

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr. Timm L. Kainen is a senior professor of management at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. He teaches MBA courses in Organization Design, Change & Negotiations. He is also a corporate consultant in these areas. His applied research and publication activity is focused on the performance effectiveness of middle managers whose primary training and experience is in science and technology. Contact Timm_Kainen@uml.edu to access the case teaching notes,