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31W. From Scream Team to Dream Team: Practical Ways to Improve Group Relations

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Abstract

Do you use group projects in your IS course? Do interpersonal issues in your student groups drive you crazy? Whilst students often find group work frustrating, working in groups “better simulates the work environment in which graduates are expected to perform” according to the IS 2009 curriculum guidelines for IS programs (Topi *et al*, 2009). As lecturers we are responsible to teach not only the content but also to equip students with the necessary skills to apply the content successfully and improve their workplace readiness. This workshop will show you how to use team role preferences to improve group dynamics to reduce group work frustration for both students and lecturers.

Keywords

group project, group dynamics, teamwork, team role preferences

1. Overview

Do you use group projects in your IS course? Do interpersonal issues in groups drive you crazy? Whilst students often find group work frustrating, working in groups “better simulates the work environment in which graduates are expected to perform” according to the IS 2009 curriculum guidelines for IS programs (Topi *et al*, 2009). As lecturers we are responsible to teach not only the content but also to equip students with the necessary skills to apply the content successfully and improve their workplace readiness. This workshop will show you how to use thinking styles and team role preferences to improve group relations.

As lecturers we have many choices when allocating students to groups: we can allocate students randomly or decide based on any number of factors such as student performance, prior experience, skill levels, student motivation, schedule availability, and/or geographic location. Another option is to let students self-select. Irrespective of the method of allocation, once allocated the focus is very often mostly on *task completion*: submitting the required assignments on time to an acceptable standard. By comparison, *group dynamics and team processes* receive little attention and yet, successful group work is a combination of all three. Many interpersonal issues in groups can be resolved, reduced, or even avoided through more attention to the latter.

All of us have preferred roles when working in a group. Although there is a great number of team role models, the one proposed by Belbin (1981) is widely used by in organizations to compose effective teams and to develop these teams. Its wide usage is both due to its simplicity of use and ease of interpreting results. Belbin’s model stresses that all team roles are useful and necessary and does not allocate greater significance to any individual role.

This is one of the main advantages: it provides a non-confrontational and non-hierarchical language to describe a person's natural behavioural tendencies in a group context.

Additional benefits when students know their own and their group member's preferred thinking styles and team roles are that they:

- Are better informed about their own behavior in a group environment;
- Are more perceptive about others who think and behave differently;
- Are able to better plan and allocate group activities;
- Learn to recognise skills which are absent in their groups and recognize that there is a need to explicitly address this; and
- Through practice, override their natural tendencies to behave in ways not conducive to successful group work.

2. Objectives

This workshop will introduce you to thinking styles and team role preferences that you can use either as a basis on which to allocate students to groups, to help identify teams that are at risk of failure and may require closer monitoring and support (especially when using self-selection), and/or help students better understand themselves and others in a group and thereby improve their group dynamics. You will also learn about your own preferences by completing questionnaires during the workshop.

3. Outline of workshop

The workshop will consist of brief lectures, questionnaire completion, interpretation, and discussion. All participants will receive a CD containing the workshop notes covering:

- Setting the scene;
- Team roles and the implications for group projects;
- Why teams fail: risk factors based on cognitive preferences and team roles; and
- Implications for group allocation.

4. Who should attend?

Instructors and faculty responsible for courses that incorporate group projects, particularly system analysis and design, capstone courses, and anyone interested in exploring group dynamics and team processes.

5. Prerequisite knowledge required

No prior knowledge is assumed or required.

6. Duration

Workshop duration is 1½ hours.

7. The presenter

As both a member and leader on numerous project teams with *Atos KPMG Consulting* and *Andersen*, Shana has extensive experience of team dynamics and team development within real-world project teams. In addition, she has taught numerous courses with the School of Information Studies at the *University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee* and the Department of Informatics at the *University of Pretoria* that incorporate group projects as teaching method, including systems analysis and design (SAD), human computer interaction (HCI), databases, and the capstone. Shana has presented findings from research conducted on the team role composition of capstone IS project teams at international conferences.

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