

Case Study Analysis: The Team That Wasn't

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Differing leadership perspectives and beliefs can fuel divisive behaviors. This principle is playing out explicitly in the life of FireArt, Inc.'s Director of Strategy, Eric Holt. Eric is in a difficult situation as the leader of a cross-divisional team that has been charged with the task of creating "a comprehensive plan for the company's strategic realignment." After 4 team meetings, the group feels more disjointed than its conception. Bruce Avolio's, Full Range Leadership Development will be the primary text helping us analyze Eric's current obstacles and possible steps he could take to accomplish his goal within the six-month timeline given by CEO, Jack Derry.

The first challenge in this failing team scenario is the lack of a clear compact of understanding (Avolio, 17). In this section of the Avolio text, the interconnected nature found in leader-follower relationships is discussed. This relationship requires detailed expectations to be clearly communicated and agreed upon by both parties within the relationship. Eric and his team have been tasked with company-wide strategic realignment. What does that mean? How is the company currently aligned? How do they know when they have reached their goal? What specific steps will the team take to get there? Finally, what conduct and contribution is expected of each team member? This general mission, given by the CEO, begs several questions that need to further clarify the purpose of this team, building a basis for the team's development and productivity. Further, this lack of a clear team objective fuels the insecurities each member brings with him/her into the conference room.

Maureen is a talented artist but has felt unappreciated in her tenure. She has lobbied for more company emphasis on design for years, but to no avail. The lack of validation she has felt as the leader of the design department is evident in the way she

presents her ideas for improvement. Maureen is hesitant to trust this process, but is engaging this opportunity of intellectual stimulation (Avolio, 61) where Eric is seeking her insight for company improvement.

Ray, not your typical conference room guy, feels outside of his comfort zone on this team. He is accustomed to physically solving problems, with his hands and has the least education in the group. Thinking, talking, and strategizing seems like a waste of time to him, but he is willing to do his part in saving the company. As he gives his perspective, the validation he feels when his ideas are well received will fuel more ideas along with continued willingness to share. Ray has a solid relationship with his manufacturing personnel which will be a critical asset as changes are made and passed down to frontline employees.

Carl is newly hired (six months), and is surely still getting used to the environment at FireArt, Inc. As he tries to navigate fitting in within the management, he is also trying to lead the distribution department. Carl is enthusiastic, but his relationships are so new he is only performing at the accountability level of ownership (Avolio, 7). He quickly retreats if his ideas are not well received. Carl may very well be questioning whether it was a good idea to begin working at FireArt, Inc.

Randy is the final team member named in the case study, and the biggest challenge for Eric. Randy's previous experience as a founder/owner of a once successful marketing firm has not set him up well for collaborative teamwork. It is clear through Randy's comments that being led is beneath him and teams simply evoke mediocrity. Randy's vibrato masks an insecurity after his company's bankruptcy. He

chooses to ride the fame of his success rather than address the blind spots that caused his failure.

Eric's task is difficult. Jack has given a general, unclear objective and is taking a hands-off approach to the process. He is asking for a six-month deliverable and has asked Eric to rely heavily on the one team member that doesn't believe in teams. Eric's past experience as VP of a consulting firm had him working with a group where the individuals were vetted as highly competent team players. Their entire job revolved around their ability to solve manufacturing inefficiencies. Additionally, as a consulting firm, they did not enter discussion about the current client's problems with the emotional and experiential baggage that Eric is plodding through at FireArt, Inc. Eric is expecting this team to work like his previous experience and is obviously disappointed. Avolio would describe this time in FireArt, Inc.'s history and these individuals' lives as an important life stream event (Avolio, 40). Putting thought into the individualized consideration required to keep each team member engaged will be critical to this team's transformation (Avolio, 62).

As the conference room clears, Eric should ask Randy to stick around to discuss the position he is taking regarding executive teams. This conversation is overdue and Randy's perspective is an obstacle that must be dealt with immediately. Randy should be given the opportunity to expand on his claims that brilliant ideas never develop from teams and that consensus conceives mediocrity. Randy would likely tell stories of his business's heralded success. Eric could affirm that success, because Randy's occasional brilliance is truly an asset to the team's goal. However, Eric's experience demonstrates that there are times when a team, centered around a common objective,

is more valuable than the sum of its individual members. Based on the dogmatic nature of Randy's comments, it is unlikely his mind will be changed after one conversation.

Eric should schedule another meeting with Randy, but could leverage his relationship with Jack by inviting Jack to help better explain the objectives of the team. In this meeting Eric and Jack could validate to Randy how valuable his contributions are to FireArt, Inc. and to listen further to Randy's reasoning for his perspective on teams. With Jack's support, Eric could gently suggest that if Randy had other perspectives within his understanding of his previous business, he may have not suffered the resulting bankruptcy. This conversation could be very productive or catastrophic for this group, depending heavily on Jack's relationship with Randy and the support Jack demonstrates for the assembled team's overall objectives. Eric must ask pointed questions, keep a calm tone, and stay focused on Jack's objectives. Ultimately, Eric needs Randy to engage in the process out of his own volition, not coercion. He also does not want Randy to quit his job as he could likely secure a position with one of FireArt, Inc.'s competitors and further frustrate Eric's situation. If Eric cannot convince Randy of a new perspective on teams, he could work with him individually as a management by exception tactic (Avolio, 57). This could leverage Randy's insight for realignment while limiting his social impact on the team dynamic. Although this option is not ideal, it may be necessary to meet Jack's deadline.

Now that Eric has a concrete understanding of the team's purpose he needs to bring the rest of the team in on establishing a shared mental model for guiding the team's development (Avolio, 100). The difficult variable in this scenario is the six-month timeframe. Now that Randy is either on board or isolated, Eric must begin to develop

trust between individuals that are not used to cross-departmental work. Each comes to the table with his/her own insecurities and defense mechanisms that can impede the necessary humility for effective teamwork. Eric could validate and expand on Maureen's plea to Randy in the last meeting: "We can't work alone for a solution. We need to understand each other."

One way to further encourage alignment is to cast vision for FireArt, Inc. 5 years from now. Effectively communicating attributes of vision like clarity, challenge, and future orientations along with a strategy can positively impact growth over time (Avolio, 109). This vision needs to initially focus on the tasks required to achieve the team's goals over the next six months. Then, the vision cast focuses on a culture of "unbuntu" an African philosophy translated "unity in diversity" (Avolio 119). This is a powerful word picture each of the team members needs to be able to apply to the strategic team as well as their individual departments. With the vision in mind, all team members need to be given specific deliverables for each meeting and all discussion needs to remain focused on required tasks rather than the struggles and emotions of the past.

The principles that confront Eric in this situation resonate well with the work my wife and I do as Houseparents at a private boarding school. Teamwork and collaboration is often evasive in a living environment with twelve high school girls, each from a different home community. We emphasize a culture of trust and safety for our home frequently, but previous to this class, we hadn't laid a solid transactional foundation for what that looks like. Since the start of this class, we have given our students the main five behaviors that define what it means to be a member of this student home. We have created incentives and seek ways to validate students that lead

in positive behaviors. These clear expectations or a simple compact of understanding, is building a transactional basis for the leader-follower relationship. This basis is necessary for moving the sense of belonging and ownership required for transformation.

In addition to the dynamic between our students within the home, teamwork and collaboration is hard to come by between houseparents and the supervising administration. Houseparents are a Union workforce that has a history of tension with the administration of the school. The relationship then is strictly contractual and leaves no room for exceptions. This, in some cases, removes the importance of relationship and rarely moves Houseparents into the ownership level of belonging or identification. This problem feels overwhelming at times because of the number of stakeholders within the Union/Administration relationship. My opinion is the entire dynamic is a constraint on productivity and progress. Good ideas take a long time for approval because everything has to be weighed against the agreed upon, 5-year contract. Although it isn't the case within all Houseparent-Direct Supervisor relationships, we have fortunately developed a strong and trusting relationship with our supervisor. Hopefully, as we see how beneficial it is to the school for teamwork to develop within the HomeLife department, the contractual and sometimes punitive relationships will end.

References:

1. Avolio, B. J. (2011) *Full Range Leadership Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
2. Wetlaufer, S. (1994) The Team That Wasn't. *Harvard Business Review*, (November-December). 22-26.