

Case Study Challenges: What Really Happened

Challenge 1 – How does a leader influence others and motivate others to participate actively?

Mr. Leadership continuously and enthusiastically articulated and reiterated the project's vision to senior leaders outside of the working group and to the working group members. His passion and commitment for this project were contagious. To sustain the project's momentum, he began each meeting by reviewing positive progress from past meetings, recognizing group members for their contributions, reminding group members about the project's urgency and importance, and discussing the project's milestones and deadlines. He described how challenging it would be to meet the project's goals, but he always demonstrated confidence in the working group's ability to bring this initiative to a successful conclusion. With both working group members and key stakeholders outside of the working group, Mr. Leadership helped continually answer the question, "What's in it for me and why should I support this effort?"

He also brought in a trained facilitator, Ms. Helena Helper, to facilitate the working group. She was able to keep the working group structured and productive, and she encouraged fair and uniform participation from all group members. Additionally, Ms. Helper served as the project manager, and helped to ensure adherence to timelines and project deliverables.

Challenge 2 – How does a leader advocate for change?

In order to secure buy-in from key stakeholders, Mr. Leadership implemented several communication tactics. For example, in order to maintain the support of senior leaders outside of the working group, Mr. Leadership continuously provided updates on the progress of the working group, addressed concerns, accepted input, and gauged and emphasized the importance of continued commitment. He highlighted specific examples of the current system's inefficiencies and consequences, which would persist if the problem with the performance appraisal system was not resolved. He communicated the achievements of the working group, and he sought feedback, solutions, and continued support. To ensure buy-in within the working group, Mr. Leadership candidly managed expectations by clarifying that not all ideas could necessarily be adopted and emphasized that requiring statutory or regulatory change may not be feasible, considering the amount of time and consensus required outside of the working group's control; however, all ideas would be genuinely discussed and considered. Consequently, Mr. Leadership implemented and strictly enforced a ground rule that all ideas were "on the table," and this consistent approach encouraged participants to engage and share suggestions in a constructive setting. This dynamic brainstorming provided an opportunity for each individual to have a voice and feel heard. Members reported feeling more committed to the initiative because their ideas had been considered and discussed, even if those ideas were not ultimately adopted.

One participant, Mr. Carlos Contributor, indicated "successes occurred because we all assumed positive intent. In other words, we believed that we were all there to help make this possibility into reality. At the same time, everyone was at the table to safeguard their own agency's interest and to

ensure their agency was heard and considered. This balanced approach allowed us all to be open and fair with one another.”

Mr. Leadership ensured continuous buy-in during the generation of solutions as well, by encouraging members to formulate approaches that might be far-reaching or appear infeasible, or even risky. Once an exhaustive list of solutions was developed, the group analyzed each solution by identifying its potential value, advantages and disadvantages, as well as the feasibility of implementation. From there, the group was able to narrow down the list of solutions and produce strategies for implementation.

Challenge 3 – How does a leader secure and maintain commitment from agencies with varying levels of power and influence?

Mr. Leadership identified key stakeholders and worked to form alliances with them by engaging them outside of the working group. For example, it was particularly important for Mr. Leadership to form a meaningful relationship with Mr. Ira Important, the Director of the Bureau of Military Diplomacy (BMD), as he is a leader at one of the largest Federal agencies with significant influence in Congress and across the Federal Government. Mr. Leadership reserved considerable time to regularly meet with Mr. Important to address his concerns, adopt his ideas, and to ensure he was dedicated and committed to the successful implementation of the new SES appraisal system. Mr. Leadership also worked hard to understand the needs of other stakeholders, form coalitions, and secure their commitment to the project. Mr. Leadership also encouraged stakeholders to communicate and collaborate between their agencies to foster common understandings and solutions. Mr. Leadership also focused on building coalitions and support from key stakeholders not directly involved in developing the new system. Mr. Leadership included these stakeholders in regular discussions, providing them with updates and seeking their perspectives on needs and solutions.

To build support with key stakeholders, Mr. Leadership emphasized the challenges of the current system and the importance and value of a coordinated approach. He discussed at length the undue burden incurred by agency personnel under their current appraisal systems, and helped stakeholders assess the time and resources lost in trying to manage these inefficient systems. He then highlighted the rewards of creating an effective system with a consistent, streamlined process, which was fair and unbiased. He also discussed how the new system would encourage SES mobility among Federal agencies and the benefits of that mobility. Describing both the negative effects of the current systems and the positive consequences of developing a unified system helped to motivate the stakeholders and ultimately allowed them to share a common vision.

Challenge 4 – How does a leader enlist the support of other leaders to help spearhead and promote the initiative?

Mr. Leadership recognized that a key aspect of success would be to identify individuals who would be willing to advocate for the new appraisal system back at their home agencies and throughout the Federal Government. In identifying champions, Mr. Leadership looked for individuals who had the capability to view the project not only from the narrower focus of the needs and perspectives of their

own agencies, but also with the broader scope of the best interests of the entire Federal Government. Mr. Leadership also sought individuals who were well respected by their peers, and who demonstrated the ability to influence and persuade others while still understanding and acknowledging the challenges and obstacles they may face in implementing a new appraisal system. Once these individuals were identified, Mr. Leadership worked to convince them of their roles as champions by emphasizing how instrumental they would be in stimulating support for the new system across the government, and by giving them a lot of latitude in how they conveyed the importance of this new system. Though not everyone was initially comfortable with the responsibility, attention, and risk of this role, Mr. Leadership's strategic identification of the right individuals and his confident encouragement resulted in a core of respected and visible advocates dedicated to championing the project. At the conclusion of this project, the assigned champions indicated that their leadership roles enhanced their feelings of responsibility and ownership for the initiative. The leadership provided by these champions also proved invaluable to establishing a broad and higher level of focus, and commitment and support of the project. This larger, selfless approach was critical to driving the successful outcome of the interagency effort.

Challenge 5 – How does a leader ensure positive, constructive conversation?

Mr. Leadership's response to this issue was to hold private, frank conversations with individuals who acted as saboteurs (or who were potential saboteurs) to demonstrate the group had a genuine interest in considering diverse opinions and concerns. Although his first impulse was to avoid any unnecessary conflict and the discomfort associated with it, he realized that the best course of action was to face the conflict directly. Mr. Leadership invited these individuals to share their doubts and concerns one-on-one and in private, so that the individuals would feel comfortable expressing themselves without scrutiny or attribution. He wanted to fully understand their concerns and wanted the individuals to know he was listening and taking their concerns and objections seriously. He empathized with them and worked with them to generate realistic examples of how the system would work in their specific environments. He addressed the issues thoroughly and quickly when possible, and further committed to presenting unresolved issues to the working group for further discussion and development of solutions.

For example, Mr. Saboteur, of the Department of Community Programs (DoCP), consistently communicated to Mr. Leadership his support for the initiative but consistently voiced tremendous pessimism and anxiety during the working group's discussions. Mr. Saboteur also opposed many of the group's ideas but could not articulate his objections or the underlying rationale for his objections. As Mr. Saboteur began to impact the working group with a sizable amount of unproductive energy and anxiety, Mr. Leadership made a concerted effort to attend to Mr. Saboteur's concerns. Mr. Leadership spoke privately to Mr. Saboteur to better understand and address Mr. Saboteur's concerns. Mr. Leadership also spoke candidly to Mr. Saboteur about the impact of Mr. Saboteur's behavior on the dynamics of the working group and the importance of Mr. Saboteur's positive contribution and leadership to help achieve a successful outcome. Mr. Leadership also invested a significant amount of time and energy to regularly addressing Mr. Saboteur's anxiety, and to reassure Mr. Saboteur.

Mr. Leadership took a risk in creating a potentially uncomfortable situation. However, his approach ultimately enabled him to have an effective discussion with Mr. Saboteur, who he persuaded to candidly communicate his concerns. During this private discussion, Mr. Saboteur admitted that he did not necessarily disagree with the initiative or the direction of the group but that his allegiance and philosophies were pulled in a different direction by leadership at his agency, including several senior officials who had invested a significant amount of time and funding into a different system. These senior officials had also been influenced by the skepticism of officials in other agencies on the low probability of success for such interagency collaborations, particularly in the ambitiously short time frame of the current project. After continually experiencing anxiety over the potential drawbacks and failure of the project, Mr. Saboteur held private conversations with other working group members to express his fears and attempt to build support against the project.

Mr. Leadership held a lengthy discussion with Mr. Saboteur about the value proposition of the current effort to Mr. Saboteur and his agency, and the need for Mr. Saboteur to positively contribute – or at least not impede – a high-impact, positive achievement to support the entire Federal Government. Mr. Leadership also provided specific examples of the successful progress of the working group. Mr. Leadership conveyed his personal assurance of the success of the initiative and his commitment to supporting the successful implementation of the new system at Mr. Saboteur's agency, including helping to secure the buy-in of Mr. Saboteur's senior leaders. Mr. Leadership asked Mr. Saboteur to discuss any future concerns with him in private before group meetings, and together they would find a way to constructively raise his concerns to the larger group. Subsequently, Mr. Saboteur no longer took a negative approach or tone during the working group's meetings and instead constructively expressed genuine concerns and obstacles which the working group was able to successfully discuss and resolve. Mr. Saboteur continued to feel doubt about the success of the initiative, exacerbated by the lack of support he continued to experience with his own senior leadership; however, Mr. Saboteur raised these to Mr. Leadership in private conversations in which Mr. Leadership and Mr. Saboteur were able to continually discuss and manage these concerns.

Challenge 6 – How does a leader ensure engagement and commitment to meetings?

Mr. Leadership knew that to drive higher levels of engagement, he would need to further stimulate pride in the success of the project and emphasize that participation is really about representing each individual's agency. The opportunity to speak for one's agency is a weighty task that bestows influence and credibility and should not be taken lightly. During one meeting he announced, "The train is leaving the station and is pulling all agencies together and forward; this overhaul of the system is going to happen but it needs all of us on board. You can serve as an integral part of this transformation so the entire Federal Government benefits from your knowledge and expertise. Or you can just sit back and watch it happen, but the government will suffer from not having the benefit of your critical contribution." The messaging seemed to have a profound effect. Members began to feel like responsible spokespersons. For those who were absent, Mr. Leadership reached out to their supervisors to explain the importance of the project, plead for support and commitment, and request that accommodations be made to encourage consistent participation. Additionally, working group participants

reported feeling a sense of pride and peer pressure to represent their agencies and themselves in the most professional and competent light, fueled somewhat by a constructive competitive desire to be well-respected in relation to other agencies and Federal professionals.

Other strategies used by Mr. Leadership to encourage participation included continuously expressing the importance of regular meetings; summarizing the project schedule, milestones, key accomplishments, and decisions at every meeting; ending each meeting with a clear reminder about the next meeting's time, date, location, goals, and intended outcomes; and providing take-home assignments. For example, members were asked after one meeting to take the list of each idea generated and rate them on value and achievability. These rankings were then aggregated and discussed at the subsequent meeting. This take-home assignment enabled working group members to continue their work on the project outside of the formal meetings and provided a measure of accountability for all participants.

Challenge 7 – How does a leader foster collaboration?

Mr. Leadership asked the facilitator, Ms. Helena Helper, to divide the working group into smaller teams of about 5 people each in order to focus work around specific areas and accelerate development. The right composition of the teams was critical, so he encouraged her to create teams that were diverse in thought and background. The areas of focus for these smaller teams included: Communications and Marketing, Appraisal System Design, System Training, and System Implementation. These smaller teams met independently outside of the regular working group meetings as well as during the larger working group sessions and were delegated specific assignments and internal deadlines to meet. Working group members felt especially compelled to complete assignments since the success of each team was ultimately related to and dependent on the other teams. Participants remarked that the smaller teams were productive, the diversity led to constructive working dynamics, and that informal leaders emerged and took initiative to ensure that people were heard, especially when challenges would arise. After seeing that this behavior had a positive impact on team effectiveness, Mr. Leadership encouraged the leaders of the other teams to conduct their meetings, outside of the working group gatherings, in a similar manner. He asked individuals he thought would display similar leadership behaviors to adopt the same proactive facilitation style that other teams displayed. This empowerment of a broad group of participants and the sharing of work helped promote increased collaboration. Ultimately, the working group succeeded in including broad and diverse concerns, philosophies, needs, and solutions – all while operating with a focus on achieving consensus.