## Cases for Small Group Discussion

**Case 4–1. Teams and Technology**

Team Green was ecstatic. Their analysis of the firm's latest investment projects had been chosen over the Blue and Red teams yet again, for the sixth time in a row. The competition, the brainchild of CEO Roger Cannon, had been going on for three years, once every quarter. The teams were to analyze the projects under consideration and present their analyses and recommendations to the top management and any board members who wanted to attend. Managers and directors were all together for quarterly corporate retreats in remote locations, so the presentations were accomplished via videoconference from the company to the location of the retreat. For the first year and a half, the teams were fairly competitive, but then Team Green had dominated the competition and earned the reward: time off and three-day paid vacations at a Destin, Florida, resort.

The members of the other two teams had become disgruntled, and Team Red seemed to have given up, turning in a marginal analysis and a short, minimal presentation. Rather than foster a cooperative and edifying mood, the competition had taken a turn for the worse, creating hostility and suppressing communication among the groups. Roger had noticed the trend away from the analysts debating and negotiating with one another, but he did not want to fail in his rewarding of excellence. The competition, he felt, had greatly enhanced the quality of the firm’s capital investment decisions.

Prior to the establishment of the competition, the analysts had been one big group, arguing back and forth about the best way to analyze the firm’s projects and about the best decision. Roger wanted to enjoy the benefits of both systems but wondered if that was possible given the current state of affairs.

**Case 4-1 Questions**

*1. Was the competition a good idea? What are the benefits and drawbacks?*

Benefits include

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| * Higher-quality decisions |
| * Increased productivity |
| * Increased commitment, loyalty, retention |
| * Fewer communication breakdowns |
| * Increased motivation |

Drawbacks include

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| * Low-quality or premature decisions |
| * Wasted time |
| * Costly |
| * Overused |
| * Risk of groupthink |

*2. How does the use of videoconferencing technology affect participants’ attitudes toward the other teams and teamwork in general?*

The chapter explains that videoconferencing provides most of the features and benefits of face-to-face communication—it is a wide bandwidth channel that allows participants to see and hear nonverbal cues as well as verbal messages. Long distance relationships are typically easier to develop and maintain with videoconferencing.

In this case, however, the technology was creating a barrier and was less effective than face-to-face because it strengthened affiliations within a team and weakened affiliations among the teams.

*3. Suppose you are hired as a communication consultant, with the task of coming up with a system to reward excellence but avoid hard feelings and discouragement. What would you change?*

Answers will vary. Some options are

* Scramble the team members to weaken the within-team affiliations
* Limit the number of times a team can win
* Eliminate competition among teams and insist that all employees cooperate on the project together, with shared rewards.

**Case 4-2. The Regional Relationships**

Jerry Blaire is the regional manager of a national electronic franchise retail store. This franchise has over 200 locally owned stores throughout the eastern United States. As the regional manager, Blaire is responsible for an urban area in which there are eight stores plus the remainder of the state, which has another six stores.

The regional manager is the liaison between the manager-owner of the stores and the corporate offices in Boston. Responsibilities include monitoring the individual stores to ensure the provisions of the franchise agreement are maintained, dealing with any complaints from managers, taking product orders, introducing new products, and managing the regional advertising program.

Blaire has been with this company for seven years, and before that he worked with a home entertainment retail store for three years after he earned his degree in marketing.

Blaire is responsible for coordinating the advertising campaign for all 14 stores in the region. A major part of the campaign involves store hours, which had traditionally been from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Monday through Saturday. The minimum number of hours required by the national office is 40 per week. However, lately several of the managers have been pressing to change the store hours, especially those from downtown areas. They maintain that their business is minimal after 6 p.m., so they would like to close earlier. Meanwhile, the suburban stores want to stay open later because they do more business in the evening. According to the provisions of the franchise, all the stores in a region must maintain the same store hours.

The problem is getting more attention from the store managers and is a frequent topic of discussion as Blaire makes his visits. Blaire has decided to have a meeting for all the managers so he can systematically analyze the problem of store hours.

### **Case 4-2 Questions**

1. *What type of leadership style should Blaire use in this meeting? Why?*

Blair should use an informal, group-oriented approach. He must be careful to have a consensus of all the managers present. This is more likely to happen if there is full participation in the discussion.

1. *What meeting format would you recommend?*

The rational problem-solving format, including brainstorming, would be appropriate to generate the ideas necessary. If there is likelihood of pressure or intimidation from more powerful or vocal group members, NGT is a better option.

1. *What special problems would you anticipate for this meeting?*

The eight urban stores will outnumber the suburban stores and may try to dominate whatever decisions are made. The suburban stores may have a higher rate of annual sales, and try to dominate the decisions by that virtue. Also, no matter what decision is reached, the main office in Boston may refuse to change the current rules.

1. *What preliminary arrangements are particularly important for this meeting?*

A round table, open format; the attendance of all of the managers; a neutral setting in which the participants are united in any final decisions and in which Blaire is willing to support their decisions will all be necessary.

1. *Do you think it is a good idea for Blaire to have a meeting, or should he make this decision about hours himself?*

It is a good idea for him to have a consensus agreement by all of the store managers before he goes to the corporate office to discuss what the owner wants.

## Case 4-3. Keeping the Meeting on the Topic

Waith Manufacturing Company’s data processing department was preparing to implement a new computerized production information system at its new Madison plant. The project was divided into two parts. One consisted of the installation of a new computer network at the plant and the development of new database programs. The second involved hooking the plant's network into the company intranet so all departments had access to the production reports.

Alonzo Mendoza was the systems analyst responsible for the development and implementation of the project. Janet DeLaura was a lead programmer under Mendoza working on the plant side of the project. Bill Synge was the other lead programmer responsible for the intranet. Mendoza scheduled a series of weekly status meetings with DeLaura and Synge to ensure the project was moving along as scheduled and to allow for discussion of critical problems. One month before the scheduled implementation of the project, Mendoza called a special meeting to develop the actual series of tasks needed for the final system conversion. During this meeting, Mendoza outlined the major tasks concerning the whole project that had to be done on that last day.

He then solicited input from DeLaura and Synge. DeLaura spoke up immediately and began talking about several new problems that had surfaced on her side of the project. Mendoza interrupted her, saying those problems would be discussed at the regular status meeting since this meeting had been called to develop final conversion tasks only. DeLaura became irritated and was silent for a few minutes. Synge said he had a few items to add to the conversion list and covered the first two tasks. Then he said the last task covered reminded him of a current problem he had in the interface program. Mendoza replied brusquely that only conversion tasks would be discussed at this meeting. Neither DeLaura nor Synge had much to say during the rest of the meeting.

### **Case 4-3 Questions**

1. *What would you have done to keep the meeting on the right topic?*

Mendoza should have had an agenda that outlined everything that the meeting was to cover. A copy of this agenda should have been given to all participants so that they would be aware of the topics to be covered.

1. *What technique might Mendoza have used to avoid interfering with the flow of ideas?*

Once Mendoza realized that other topics were coming up that interfered with the flow of ideas, he should have scheduled time at the end of the meeting or the next day to deal with the other legitimate problems that Synge and DeLaura were having.

If he realized that he was going to get nowhere that day, then he could have tried the Delphi method as an alternative means to solving this problem, since he had the time available to carry out that process.

1. *What might DeLaura and Synge have done to improve communications?*

They could have stayed on task by dealing with the topics of the meeting. They also could have avoided becoming upset by simply agreeing to discuss their problem situations later or by telling Mendoza that they would like to schedule time to discuss their specific problems.