



The problem

Last year I was asked to provide coaching support to the leader (referred to here as "John") of a business division within a City financial institution. The problem was presented as the behaviour of some of his direct reports which, at best, was damaging team cohesion and, at worst, was placing the institution at risk of law suits and negative publicity. This behaviour ranged from politically incorrect comments to aggressive behaviour towards certain team members. Generally the team environment was not a positive one and the group had had several resignations, a couple of near-miss tribunal cases and junior staff on rotation consistently declining offers to return to the team on their next rotation.

We started to explore the nature and extent of the problem and how he could better manage the individuals in his team. It soon transpired that there was more going on than the inappropriate behaviour of one or two individuals.

Firstly the "team" was actually two distinct and previously separate groups who were brought together some eighteen months previously for operational and managerial convenience, when, in reality, there was little actual need for the two to work together. Thus there was a very real sense of "us and them". Compounding this were the very different characteristics of the two sub groups. One (Team A) was very homogeneous, being ethnically and nationally alike, male and motivated by the hard, technical side of business deals. The other (Team B) was about as heterogeneous as a group can be in terms of nationality, ethnicity, sex and sexual orientation and, in general, more motivated by the client relationship aspects of the business.

Secondly there was a power struggle bubbling under the surface, with the leader of Team A believing he should head the entire group and resenting John's authority. Thirdly John's personality and management style were such that he valued harmony, preferred a hands-off, non-directive leadership approach and was highly conflict-averse. In essence he was not naturally best placed to tackle these issues.

As is so often the case in practice, it soon became apparent that the initial plan for coaching support was not likely to be the most effective solution. John really wanted someone else to make the problem go away with minimum risk of escalating conflict or of exposing individuals. Furthermore there was a desire not to make explicit the nature or perpetrators of the inappropriate behaviour, as there was a belief that not all team members knew about it and that it was best if things remained that way. The intervention, whatever it was to be, would therefore have to be positioned as "an initiative to improve team cohesion". This indirect approach was not necessarily one which I would have chosen or recommended but, as is so often the case in practice, it was the only reality I could operate.

The Intervention

We agreed and communicated a five step intervention:

1 First I conducted a series of semi-structured one-to-one interviews with a cross section of the team – that is both teams. The aim of these interviews was to establish, in their own words, what individuals felt was good in terms of the current team environment; what they felt was not good about the current environment; and what would be the characteristics of their ideal team environment.



Amanda White
Director, CGR Business Psychologists Ltd

“ The intervention, whatever it was to be, would therefore have to be positioned as “an initiative to improve team cohesion”. This indirect approach was not necessarily one which I would have chosen or recommended but, as is so often the case in practice, it was the only reality I could operate. ”

2 The interview data were content analysed and Q-sorted to reveal common “themes” or aspects of teamworking that team members valued or would value. Five such themes emerged, such as “Respect for All” and these were incorporated into a draft of “Teamworking Values” unique to this team. As well as definitions of the values, examples of desirable and undesirable behaviour were included to bring these to life and, in the case of desirable behaviours, to act as a guide for behavioural change.

A report was also produced for the team leader, summarising (in anonymous form) general issues outside the charter of values that emerged. This included the issue of the power struggle and the team's awareness of this and a desire for it to be resolved.

3 The team gathered for a half day event where the draft Charter of Values were presented and where, in small mixed (in terms of sub-team membership and seniority) groups, team-members took responsibility for editing, amending and adding to the draft, thus making it "their own". At the end of the event, all were asked to highlight any aspects of the Values to which they would not commit. No objections were raised.

4 Several team members invested considerable time and energy into producing a high-quality final version of the Charter of Values, which was then published within the group. From this, a sample the positive behaviours from each of the five values were incorporated into a 360 degree feedback questionnaire. This questionnaire was administered to all the core team-members and was designed to provide a Time 1 measure of how individuals were performing against their desirable behaviours. It also provided a collective audit of the team's position.

5 One-to-one feedback meetings were held with each individual, together with a report that included ratings (self, team leader and peers) and open comments. Some of these meetings were difficult, both for me and for the individuals concerned, but generally participants found it useful and informative. Each drew up a development plan tailored to their particular strengths and development needs. The plan was to repeat the 360 degree feedback process six months later to provide Time 2 individual and team measures and, hopefully, to provide evidence of positive behavioural change. However, as Time 2 approached, I found it impossible to set up the necessary steps to launch this next phase. In part this was due to the very real time

pressures under which this very high-performing and high-revenue team operated. However, when I eventually made contact with John he expressed a desire not to undertake this last step because "things were going so well within the team" and he "didn't want to rock the boat".

The outcome

So, was the intervention truly successful?

As they did not complete the Time 2 questionnaire, I have no hard data to prove a "significant" effect. Had we merely acted as a palliative to help the team through a difficult patch? And, did we really add value to the organisation? I think many readers will have experienced these questions at the end of an assignment. I still have concerns that the decision not to undertake the Time 2 questionnaire masked a weakness within the team that allowed the problems to go unchecked in the first place; that is, a reluctance to tackle sensitive issues and a desire to avoid conflict in the hope that it will somehow go away.

Looking back, I had doubts about the probability of effecting significant behavioural change given the realities of the situation. However, John and other team-members described the team as "transformed". All junior staff on rotation elected to rejoin the team on their next rotation. A by-product of the interview research was clarification of the power-struggle issue that John addressed and to which a mutually satisfactory solution was negotiated. As such, and from this anecdotal information, it was generally a greater success than I would have predicted from the outset.

Amanda joined CGR in January 1994 and was appointed to the board in 1997.

Her portfolio of clients includes those operating in the fields of professional services, electronics manufacturing, retail and investment banking. Several of Amanda's clients operate in a multinational or global arena.

Examples of recent projects include the design and implementation of a pan-European career development workshop for senior managers and acting as an expert observer on a development workshop for economists in a national institution. Amanda also has a particular interest in competency profiling. Examples of work in this field include frameworks for the top 100 leaders of a Japanese/European manufacturing organisation.

As a Director, Amanda takes an active role in the management of CGR's growing business, taking particular responsibility for human resources management.

Amanda is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist, holding a BSc in Psychology and an MSc in Occupational Psychology from the University of Hertfordshire. She is a verified Level A Assessor and holds a full Level B certificate of competence. She has featured on Radio 4 and in the Guardian newspaper as a subject matter expert. She also appeared on Sky Television giving her views on the selection and retention of graduates.

