Helping Teams Cope with Slackers

A common problem for project teams is the presence of a slacker who refuses to do a fair share of the work. The use of peer ratings for determining part of each student's grade is a powerful tool to help teams encourage slackers to work and to give fair grades if slackers do not work. However, teams need assistance in dealing with this situation.

After project teams are formed, require each team to develop and turn in a copy of a Code of Cooperation, a document listing team norms/ rules that all team members agree to. When a team complains about a member slacking, remind the team that their code explicitly states that members will do their assigned work. Then suggest a team meeting without the instructor present to see if the slacker will agree to do a fair share of work.

If a team meeting does not solve the difficulties, the slacker needs to be confronted. Since there are a number of unspoken thoughts and feelings hidden immediately under the surface, and the self-images of members are at risk; confrontation is difficult.[1] The following procedure is often effective.

First, team members meet without the slacker present to discuss and agree that a problem exists. Since the slacker will probably interpret meeting with the entire team as an attack, a spokesperson for the team is selected to confront the slacker. The spokesperson communicates with the slacker what was expected by the entire group and explains what was observed without making assumptions about why something was done. Then the spokesperson gives the slacker time to respond. The slacker may have different expectations or may not have realized it was important. Alternatively, the group may have misinterpreted actions. Often there will be excuses. Since what the team wants is change in behavior, ask if the slacker can change behavior despite these "reasons." Group peer pressure may be sufficient to get change. Students who have never been in a well-functioning team may be surprised by others' expectations, although if the team developed a Code of Cooperation there should be no surprises. Communication may be sufficient to solve the problem.

If communication does not solve the problem or the slacker promises to change but does not, then consequences need to be discussed. Start with low-level consequences by explaining that someone on the team has to do extra work if the slacker doesn't do the work (surprisingly, people do not always think of this). The slacker may not have considered the effects of his/her behavior on others, and may promise to change. If the slacker promises to change give him or her an opportunity to demonstrate this change. If the slacker appears unmoved by the pain inflicted on other team members discuss low-level consequences for the slacker. These consequences can include losing friends and learning less. Then close the meeting to give the slacker time to think about the situation and to change behavior.

What the team should look for is a change in behavior, not perfect behavior. If the slacker does not change behavior another meeting is needed. At this follow-up discussion the spokesperson escalates the consequences. Typically, the increased consequence of not doing work is lower peer ratings that will result in a lower or failing grade.

During this entire procedure the spokesperson needs to stay calm and avoid blaming or becoming defensive. Unfortunately, if the group waits too long before confronting, the spokesperson will be angry and remaining calm will be difficult.

Since teams cannot make a person change behavior, confrontation may not be successful; however, it is much more likely to be successful than doing nothing. If the confrontation is not successful the team needs to follow through with lower peer ratings and the instructor needs to factor these ratings into the slacker's grade.

REFERENCE

1. Stone, D., B. Patton, and S. Heen, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2010 ❑

—PHIL WANKAT