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Leadership Roles in a Small-Group Project

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Marginal annotations indicate APA-style formatting and effective writing.

Source: Lunsford Handbooks (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2013).
This project follows the style guidelines in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association,* 6th ed. (2010).

Abstract

Using the interpersonal communications research of J. K. Brilhart and G. J. Galanes as well as that of W. Wilmot and J. Hocker, along with T. Hartman's Personality Assessment, I observed and analyzed the leadership roles and group dynamics of my project collaborators in a communications course. Based on results of the Hartman Personality Assessment, I predicted that a single leader would emerge. However, complementary individual strengths and gender differences encouraged a distributed leadership style, in which the group experienced little confrontation. Conflict, because it was handled positively, was crucial to the group's progress.

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Double-spaced text throughout.

Study described.

Key points of report discussed.

Leadership Roles in a Small-Group Project

Although classroom lectures provide students with volumes of information, many experiences can be understood only by living them. So it is with the workings of a small, task-focused group. What observations can I make after working with a group of peers on a class project? And what have I learned as a result?

Leadership Expectations and Emergence

The six members of this group were selected by the instructor; half were male and half were female. By performing the Hartman Personality Assessment (Hartman, 1998) in class, we learned that Hartman has associated key personality traits with the colors red, blue, white, and yellow (see Table 1). The assessment identified most of us as "Blues," concerned with intimacy and caring. Because of the bold qualities associated with "Reds," I expected that Nate, our only "Red" member, might become our leader. (Kaari, the only "White," seemed poised to become the peacekeeper.) However, after Nate missed the first two meetings, it seemed that Pat, who contributed often during our first three meetings, might emerge as leader. Pat has strong communications skills, a commanding presence, and displays sensitivity to others. I was surprised, then, when our group developed a distributed style of leadership (Brilhart & Galanes, 1998). The longer we worked together, however, the more I was convinced that this approach to leadership was best for our group.

As Brilhart and Galanes have noted, "distributed leadership explicitly acknowledges that the leadership of a group is spread among members, with each member expected to move the group toward its goal" (p. 175). These researchers divide positive

Full title, centered and not boldface.

Paragraphs indented.

Questions indicate the focus of the essay.

Headings help organize the report.

APA-style parenthetical reference.

Background information about team members' personality types.

First observations about leadership roles.

Quotation defines key term for this study.

Source: Lunsford Handbooks (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2013).

Table 1

Hartman's Key Personality Traits

Trait category	Color			
	Red	Blue	White	Yellow
Motive	Power	Intimacy	Peace	Fun
Strengths	Loyal to tasks	Loyal to people	Tolerant	Positive
Limitations	Arrogant	Self-righteous	Timid	Uncommitted

Note. Table is adapted from information found at The Hartman Personality Profile, by N. Hayden. Retrieved from http://students .cs.byu.edu/~nhayden/Code/index.php

Table displays information concisely and is referred to in preceding text.

Source of table listed.

communicative actions into two types: *task functions* that affect a group's productivity and maintenance functions that influence the interactions of group members. One of our group's most immediate task-function needs was decision-making, and as we made our first major decision—what topic to pursue—our group's distributedleadership style began to emerge.

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Decision-Making Methods

Our choice of topic—the parking services at Oregon State University (OSU)—was the result not of a majority vote but of negotiated consensus. During this decision-making meeting, several of us argued that a presentation on parking services at OSU would interest most students, and after considerable discussion, the other group members agreed. Once we had a topic, other decisions came naturally.

Discussion of the group's decision-making supports claim of distributed leadership style.

Roles Played

Thanks in part to the distributed leadership that our group developed, the strengths of individual group members became increasingly apparent. Although early in our project Pat was the key initiator and Nate was largely an information seeker, all group members eventually took on these functions in addition to serving as recorders, gathering information, and working on our questionnaire. Every member coordinated the group's work at some point; several made sure that everyone could speak and be heard, and one member was especially good at catching important details the rest of us were apt to miss. Joe, McKenzie, Kaari, and I frequently clarified or elaborated on information, whereas Pat, Kaari, and Nate were good at contributing ideas during brainstorming sessions. Nate, Joe, and McKenzie brought tension-relieving humor to the group.

Another example of distributed-leadership style.

Just as each member brought individual strengths to the group, gender differences also made us effective. For example, the women took a holistic approach to the project, looking at the big picture and making intuitive leaps in ways that the men generally did not. The men preferred a more systematic process. Brilhart and Galanes have suggested that men working in groups dominated by women may display "subtle forms of resistance to a dominant presence of women" (p. 98). Although the men in our group did not attend all the meetings and the women did, I did not find that the men's nonattendance implied male resistance any more than the women's attendance implied female dominance. Rather, our differing qualities complemented each other and enabled us to work together effectively.

Transition to gender influences.

Social Environment

As previously noted, most of our group members were Blues on the Hartman scale, valuing altruism, intimacy, appreciation, and having a moral conscience (Hayden). At least three of the four Blues had White as their secondary color, signifying the importance of peace, kindness, independence, and sacrifice (Hayden). The presence of these traits may explain why our group experienced little confrontation and conflict. Nate (a Red) was most likely to speak bluntly. The one time that Nate seemed put off, it was not his words but his body language that expressed his discomfort. This was an awkward moment, but a rare one given our group's generally positive handling of conflict.

Writer returns to categories defined earlier.

Conclusion

Perhaps most important is the lesson I learned about conflict. Prior to participating in this group, I always avoided conflict because, as Wilmot and Hocker (1998) have suggested, most people think "harmony is normal and conflict is abnormal" (p. 9). Now I recognize that some kinds of conflict are essential for increasing understanding between group members and creating an effective collaborative result. It was essential, for instance, that our group explore different members' ideas about possible topics for our project, and this process inevitably required some conflict. The end result, however, was a positive one.

In her concluding section, writer clearly answers question posed in the introduction.

Constructive conflict requires an open and engaging attitude among group members, encourages personal growth, and ends when the issue at hand is resolved. Most important for our group, such conflict encouraged cooperation (pp. 47–48) and increased the group's cohesiveness. All the members of our group felt, for

instance, that their ideas about possible topics were seriously considered. Once we decided on a topic, everyone fully committed to it. Thus our group effectiveness was enhanced by constructive conflict.

As a result of this project, I have a better sense of when conflict is—and isn't—productive. My group used conflict productively when we hashed out our ideas, and we avoided the kind of conflict that creates morale problems and wastes time. Although all groups operate somewhat differently, I now feel more prepared to understand and participate in future small-group projects.

Conclusion looks toward future.

References

Brilhart, J. K., & Galanes, G. J. (1998). *Effective group discussion* (9th ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.

Hartman, T. (1998). *The color code: A new way to see yourself, your relationships, and your life.* New York, NY: Scribner.

Hayden, N. (n.d.). *The Hartman Personality Profile.* Retrieved from http://students.cs.byu.edu/~nhayden/Code/index.php

Wilmot, W., & Hocker, J. (1998). *Interpersonal conflict* (5th ed.) Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.

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Document from a Web site.

Book.