

# Facilitating Team Projects in the Online Classroom: Enhancing Student Team Effectiveness

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to discuss a best practices exercise for facilitating team projects in the online classroom and enhancing the internal environment of the team-building process. The implications are particularly valuable to enhancing the effectiveness of team-based projects. The paper includes a brief overview of the significance of using team-based projects in the classroom, a description of the exercise, and a discussion of the experiences from professors currently using the activity.

**Keywords:** Team projects, Team effectiveness, Online education, Online classroom, Team building process, Internal team environment, Shared leadership, Cohesion, Virtual team

## INTRODUCTION

Effective team work is necessary for businesses to remain competitive and innovative (Gardner & Korth, 2010) and allows for improvements in quality, speed, and customer satisfaction (Andrews, 1995). Business schools are constantly pressured by organizations to have a greater emphasis on interpersonal and team-related skills (Gardner & Korth, 2010; Porter & McKibbin, 1988). As professors, it is our obligation to provide a quality education and enriched learning experience that meet the demands of the business workforce (Gardner & Korth, 2010). As proposed by Francis and Young (1992), for teams to be effective, team members must understand their roles, have the necessary processes in place, and build relationships that allow for the giving and receiving of feedback. Achieving these goals can be difficult in the classroom – particularly in an online environment – however, with the proper tools, instructors can be more effective in creating productive team experiences.

The vast growth and interest in online courses as an educational medium present both opportunities and challenges for higher education (Grandzol & Grandzol, 2006). Business schools are forced to face the pressures of reaching this market and expanding their distance-learning opportunities while facing the demands of maintaining quality instruction and academic integrity of the curriculum (Gardner & Korth, 2010). The transition from traditional face-to-face classes to virtual (online) courses requires that new instructors be hired to lead the new course sections or for current faculty to develop new sections deliverable in a virtual context. Because the dynamics in online course vary from that of face-to-face classrooms, the need to understand best practices for online instruction becomes paramount to achieve desired learning outcomes (Grant & Thornton, 2007).

While leading a course in an online environment may present challenges, introducing team-based projects and team-building exercises may introduce further challenges given the idiosyncrasies of the online environment. According to Grandzol and Grandzol (2006), “recognizing online education’s potential it is important to identify best practices and establish standards that assure quality, comply with accrediting bodies, support faculty initiatives, and provide business students with a product that leads to a satisfying and wholly worthwhile learning experience.” The exercise discussed herein provides students an opportunity for a valuable, team-based learning experience by focusing on enhancing the internal team environment, which leads to enhanced shared leadership, cohesion, and overall team effectiveness.

### Overview of the Exercise

The exercise consists of two parts. (A version of the full exercise is presented in the appendix.) For Part 1, students are asked to create a team charter and engage in a “fun” activity together. The team charter requires students to create guiding principles for decision making, resolving conflict, and ensuring overall team progress. The team charter includes pertinent topics such as a mission statement, code of conduct, communication plan, project deadlines, conflict resolution, team goals and team structure. When developing the team charter, emphasis is given for the teams to consider how each member’s contributions will be considered and how various ideas and suggestions will be managed.

Also in the first part of the exercise, the students are also asked to “do something fun,” and post a description on the course webpage. In an online course, this task may seem difficult at first, especially for students in diverse geographic locations, but the assignment does not require the team members to physically be present together. Rather the students must identify an activity they would all enjoy, with each individual taking a picture completing the task and sharing those images as a team. Many teams find creative ways to merge their photos online and even more creative activities to participate in the activity as a team. For example, students who choose to eat pizza all take photos of themselves at their favorite pizza restaurants individually and then post their pictures on the course page. Dialogue with the pictures is often about their local pizza place, favorite toppings, or what style of pizza is prominent in their region. Students find engaging ways to participate and often post photos from athletic events, art and cultural events, dining experiences, and an array of other activities.

The second part of the exercise offers students an explanation as to why each task was required. Specifically, students were asked to create a team charter in order to develop a “shared purpose” among team members. Further, each team was asked to decide how to incorporate ideas and suggestions from each member to ensure each member had a “voice” in the team. Finally, the “fun” activity was assigned to develop social support among the members. These three components (shared purpose, voice, and social support) are the dimensions of internal team environment.

In this second part of the exercise, a discussion is held to describe why internal team environment is important and why it is important to actively engage in team tasks and take leadership roles early in the team-building process (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Students are also informed that research demonstrates that internal team environment directly influences shared leadership (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007) and cohesion. Additionally, shared leadership and cohesion are found to influence team effectiveness (Daspit, Tillman, Boyd, & McKee, 2013). Part 2 of the exercise helps students make the link between theory and practice.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, we have received consistently positive feedback from this team-based exercise. Throughout the project, and course, we have recognized greater student engagement in the team-based exercise, as well as other individual assignments and course activities. In the online courses, students are more active on course wikis, discussion boards, and other interactive communication tools (particularly student-to-student communication). Students have engaged in greater interaction among their team members, reducing complaints about a single team member loafing or not participating. From course evaluations, we have recognized an increase in overall satisfaction with the course and team-based exercise in both face-to-face and online sections. With the leadership roles being shared, students take greater pride in their work, showing more responsibility and accountability for their project grade. We have also recognized greater creativity in the team-based projects and excitement in using various forms of technology to complete their tasks throughout the project.

In addition to this being an exercise that results in positive implications for group-level phenomena and outcomes, this exercise is also an example of how to apply theory to practice. Business schools are criticized for lacking critical components that help students link theory and practice (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). This exercise is designed to first engage students in a practical exercise (Part 1) prior to explaining that the exercise is based on theory (and theoretically proven relationships). This offers students a “real life” example of how to apply theory to practice, and it provides the instructor a foundation from which to build upon in subsequent theory-driven lectures.

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## APPENDIX

### Team Orientation Assignment: Initial Exercise

#### **Goal #1: Create Team Charter**

Team charters are helpful in providing a set of ground rules for managing the team’s progress. Team charters can include a mission statement, rules for governing, details on how decisions will be made, etc. The first objective of this assignment is for each team to create a team charter. When creating your team charter, be sure to discuss how the team will work together to *ensure individual contributions are considered*. It is advised that each team should include a clause in the charter to describe *how ideas and suggestions will be managed*. Also, be sure to specifically state the goals of your team. When complete, all members must sign the team charter and submit a copy.

#### Recommended Components of the Charter

- Mission Statement and Team Objectives
- Team Process Management
  - Meeting Management: Meeting schedule, agendas, expectations, attendance, functional roles
  - Communication: Handling team communication, ensuring the ability for all to contribute
  - Decision Making: Decision procedures (vote?), conflict resolution plan
  - Tasks: Task assignment process, consequences of unsatisfactory and/or untimely contribution
- Performance Measurement
  - Assessment of Team Effectiveness: Achievement of team goals, timely completion, effectiveness working together, peer evaluation forms

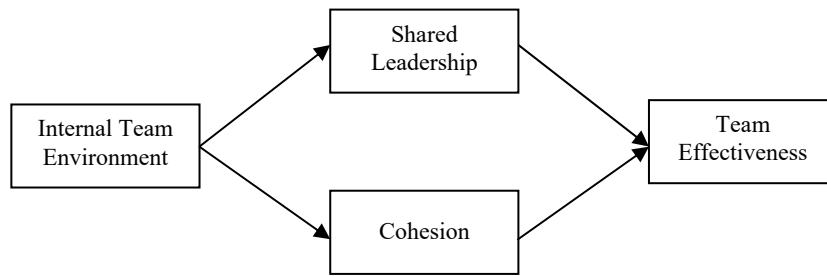
#### **Goal #2: Have Fun**

The second objective of this assignment is for all members of your group to get together and do something fun. (Yes, you should have fun!) Your group should plan some sort of social activity for all members of your team. For example, you may have dinner, meet for coffee, go bowling, go to a movie, go to a sporting event, etc. It’s your choice. *Be creative!* At the event, have someone take a picture. Your team will then submit the picture on our course page. Note: You do not have to physically be in the same location to complete this activity. For example, your team may decide to all have pizza. Go to your favorite pizza location and be sure to get a picture. Then post or merge your pictures on our course page and discuss the experience with your teammates. What style is your pizza? What are your favorite toppings? Do something creative, something you all would enjoy!

### Team Orientation Assignment: Follow-up Exercise

*Now, the rest of the story...* The original objectives of this assignment were for your team to (1) create a team charter, and (2) have fun! However, the underlying purpose of the activities was to enhance your team’s internal environment early in the team-building process.

A strong *internal team environment* produces a context that encourages members to take leadership roles and actively engage in team tasks (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Internal team environment directly influences shared leadership (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007) and cohesion, and internal team environment is shown to indirectly influence team effectiveness (Daspit, Tillman, Boyd, & McKee, 2013).



Without realizing it, you and your team were enhancing the internal environment of your team. To enhance the internal team environment, research recommends focusing on three components: shared purpose, voice, and social support (Carson et al., 2007).

Shared Purpose. Shared purpose exists when members have common goals and work together to achieve goals of the team (Carson et al., 2007: 1222). To accomplish this, your team was advised to create a *team charter*, which incorporated your team goals.

Voice. Voice describes the extent to which individuals feel as though they can contribute to the team by recommending changes (Hirshman, 1970). When creating the team charter, your team was asked to discuss how members will work together to ensure *individual contributions are considered*.

Social Support. Social support is the extent to which a person feels cared for, valued, and part of the team (Kirmeyer & Lin, 1987; Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983). Building a solid social base in a team from the beginning is important for later success. To do this, your team's assignment was to *do something fun*.

#### Overall

This assignment *applied theory to practice*. It was designed so that your team built a solid internal team environment using all three components (without consciously thinking about it). When working with teams in the future, you may consider focusing on these three components to enhance the internal team environment and positively influence the effectiveness of the team.

\*\*This exercise may be used with written permission from the authors and if citation to this article and authors is made on the exercise.

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