

Read the Part I Case Study beginning on page 121 after Chapter 3. Write a 250-500 word paper using APA format including the following:

- Identification and summary of the key organizational behavior issues evident in the case
- Reflection on the identified issues along with recommendations or potential solutions to identified issues

## COOPERATING AND

# Americans and Germans Working in a Project Team

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This case was written by Dr Markus Pudelko, The University of Edinburgh Management School. It is intended to be used as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a management situation. The case was compiled from generalized experience and on relevant literature, in particular Schroll-Machl, S. (1996) 'Kulturbedingte Unterschiede im Problemlösungsprozeß bei deutsch-amerikanischen Arbeitsgruppen', in Thomas, A. (ed) *Psychologie interkulturellen Handelns*,

Göttingen et al: Hogrefe, 383-409).

## 1. SITUATION: THE PROJECT IS DOMINATED BY GERMANS

### The American perspective

#### Introduction

Two months ago I was sent by my company from our Philadelphia headquarters to Stuttgart in order to prepare the launch of a new product on the European market. The product, a laser for eye surgery, was developed by a joint venture between us and our German partner. Even though the joint venture belongs in equal shares to both companies it was agreed that our German partner would take the lead in introducing the product on the European market and that we

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would have the say for launching the product in North America. For all other regions both partners agreed to work in tandem.

So I was selected to represent our company on what was otherwise a German team. Even though I had never worked in Germany before, I was considered to be the natural candidate for the assignment: I speak fluent German as my wife is German. In addition, I thought I was also culturally quite well prepared for the job. Next to speaking the language and having gotten used to putting up with my wife's tick for over-punctuality, I also regularly travel to Germany to visit my wife's family. Also, I have had frequent e-mail exchanges and telephone conversations with our German partners. But now, after two months working around the clock with my German team colleagues, I realize how difficult it has been for me to cooperate and communicate effectively with them. Our project of preparing the launch of our new laser is finished now and in the end we did a good job, but it was very tough and certainly not without frictions. Now I am happy and relieved to be returning to the States.

#### **Planning phase**

The problems already started with our first meeting. We were supposed to define our key objectives, our main challenges and our overall strategy. I was expecting something like a brainstorming session, in order to develop some general ideas and solutions, select the best ones, develop a plan and delegate specific tasks to the project team members. I anticipated this meeting to last for one morning or so. Instead, we sat

there for three full days. All details were discussed at great length, but no concrete decisions were taken, no real plan was developed and no clear-cut objectives were formulated. The Germans love to see themselves as "Volk der Dichter und Denker" (people of poets and thinkers), but we don't have to endlessly dispute everything and act like a bunch of little Immanuel Kants in order to get a laser on the market! In the beginning, I patiently sat there, joined the discussion and thought it best to just go with the flow. On the second day, however, I became increasingly impatient and suggested several times to focus on what we should do now and then start working. But I was only looked at with amazement and was told that this was still much too early for any specific plan and so our philosophy seminar continued. Much of the third day of the debate I hardly bothered to pay attention anymore.

At the end of day three we finally came up with a decision of where to go from there, but I still was not content. We had wasted a lot of time to achieve so little. This was all very inefficient. How would we ever get the project finished if we continued like this? And moreover, I still did not have a precise idea of what I was supposed to do now. My German team members had discussed all issues at great length and from every possible perspective and developed a fantastic picture of the overall problem, but spent little time on spelling out our next activities. Many details which were relevant to our tasks were mentioned in our lengthy discussions but were never systematically

summarized on a chart. How could I remember everything which was said during a three day long discussion? Furthermore, we came up with overall objectives to achieve, but never specified any broken down targets. How can we effectively work without having specific targets by which we can measure our progress and our performance along the way? An overall objective is just not providing enough guidance. To summarize, the Germans are obsessed with their focus on the problem, whereas we Americans focus more on solutions.

#### **Working under the team leader**

I would have expected my German team leader to be much more decisive. He was the boss, so he should have called the shots. But no, in particular during the planning phase he consistently asked his team members what they were thinking, was patiently listening to everyone and acted more like just another team member. For a while I would have listened to everyone's opinion, but then I would just have made my mind up, announced my decision, delegated the tasks and controlled the outcome.

I also got particularly annoyed that the team leader frequently interfered in my work. He kept insisting that I had to double-check every little detail before I pass it on to other team members. I don't like to be controlled all the time, I know what I am doing. At the end of the assignment I am happy to get evaluated on my performance, but until then I prefer to be left alone, so that I can do my job. My team leader also constantly reminded me to observe certain procedural rules of which the company seemed to have an endless amount. It seemed to me

that they followed their internal procedural rules for the sake of it. It is like the red traffic lights. No German pedestrian crosses the street on red, even if no car is in sight for miles.

Another thing, I thought our team leader was a poor motivator. Instead of pushing people, making them excited about the job and provide them with encouraging feedback, our team leader was always very reserved, formal and fact oriented. No emotions ever came across. Sometimes a pat on the shoulder wouldn't do any harm.

#### **Working with the team members**

Not only had I no clear understanding of what I was supposed to do when we started our assignments, I also didn't have a good understanding of what my German colleagues were working on. And there was little exchange of information among us. I am used to working sequentially on a clear set of well broken down targets and at every step of the way getting the information I need from my colleagues. However, whenever I went over to my team members and asked them a specific question, they did answer me politely, but I had the impression they felt disturbed by me asking them questions. Everyone just worked on his or her own.

Furthermore, I was deliberately brought in to share my specific know-how with the Germans. But when we started working on our assignments no one came to see me and asked me for advice. They probably thought they knew everything better and didn't need my expertise. But then why did they want an expert from the States on their team?

I was also puzzled by how badly my German counterparts

reacted when I suggested some changes in our strategy. Whenever we hit a problem, it seemed natural for me to adapt our strategy, after all one cannot foresee everything at first and one needs to keep an open mind and remain flexible. It is through trial and error that objectives are reached. But no, we had to stick to our grand master-plan, because so much time was invested in reaching it in the first place.

#### *The German perspective*

##### **Introduction**

For two months we had Jim, a marketing expert from our joint venture partner in the States, here in Stuttgart. His job was to help us in preparing the launch of our new laser on the European market. He was certainly well qualified for the job and also a really nice guy. He even spoke fluent German. That facilitated our job greatly. Otherwise it would have been quite odd, on a team with 16 Germans and one American, to speak English all the time. It's not so much of a problem during a formal meeting, when everyone listens to what the one speaking has to say. But what about a more informal setting, over lunch for example? If the American is listening, it's fine to talk in English, but if he directs his attention to someone else, should I then continue talking in English with my other German colleagues, as he might want to enter our conversation again? It is completely awkward to talk among Germans in English, searching for words for what you could otherwise express so easily in your own language. Also, to adapt to the Anglo-Saxon style and not look overly formal, we

use first names when speaking in English. But it is very embarrassing to call my boss "Hans" when talking in English and then switch right away to "Herr Doktor Fischer" when speaking German again. In the end, with English entering our company communication more and more, we even tend to avoid addressing by name colleagues we have known for years, out of pure confusion over what to say. Therefore, we were really relieved when we heard that our American colleague was speaking German, it saved us from a lot of potentially embarrassing situations. But, as we found out, mastering the language is one thing, being able to truly communicate is a completely different story. I think Jim had no clue of how we do things here and he was little willing to adapt, always thinking that the American way is the only one which makes sense.

##### **Planning phase**

First, all members of a newly established team gather all relevant information and discuss them intensively. The objective is to reach a holistic understanding of the problems to be solved. During this phase team leader and team members cooperate on quite equal terms. The team leader is more the moderator of this thought process. Our deliberations are rather complex and abstract, with the intention to establish an overall conceptual foundation that covers all possible eventualities, assumptions and ramifications which lead to a set of logical conclusions. In this process we focus on the underlying principles but already include all potentially relevant details to get to the bottom of our problem. From