

the multitude of information and ideas we subsequently generate the solution to our problem. By doing so, we frequently recur to theories and scholarly methods. Subsequently, the group decides which tasks need to be tackled in order to reach the overall objective. It is expected that every team member brings his or her expertise and thoughts into this discussion process. The decisions to be reached should be based on a general consensus, be supported by everyone and be regarded as final. The decisions taken at this meeting will direct all ensuing activities. This process might take some time in the beginning, but in the end it might well save us time as we don't need to go back to the drawing board anymore. Unfortunately, Jim didn't understand this concept at all. We tried to encourage him to share with us his perspective on our project. In fact, we specifically asked for an American expert who could share with us the experiences won on the American market, but he just didn't come forward with his knowledge. We found this particularly unhelpful. Instead, he always tried to push us prematurely to break up the work into individual assignments, but at this initial phase we barely started to grasp the problem we were facing. How are we supposed to break our work down into assignments if we collectively still don't fully understand what we are trying to achieve? After some time he even stopped paying full attention to our deliberations. But once we fully understood the problem, developed our strategy and subsequently started working we noticed that Jim just had not grasped the

concept which was the basis of our work. Typical American: no willingness to invest time in the beginning to thoroughly understand a problem, just focusing on setting some superficial targets and then seeing later on how one gets along and muddling your way through. We prefer to do things a lot more methodically.

Working under the team leader

Once we reached an agreement about what to do, all the team members started working on their assignments. They had a good understanding of our overall objective and how we wanted to achieve this. We had discussed all eventualities during the planning phase, so everyone had all the information which was needed and was now ready to focus fully on working individually on his or her job. That is everyone except Jim. As he hadn't paid attention when we had discussed our overall strategy, he was subsequently unable to understand what was expected from him. Instead, he felt confused by not having targets nicely broken down for him, so that he didn't have to think about the overall picture but could sequentially tick off one job after the other. This is what I call intellectual laziness. I also thought Jim had completely different expectations from me as his team leader. He expected me to show more authority and be less participatory while we planned our project. I tried to explain to him my more "democratic" understanding of my role as team leader, that I perceived myself more as a "primus inter pares". As team leader I have probably the best technical know-how about our project and all its details, and this is also what my team

members expect from me. However, this does not mean that I tell my team what they have to do, I moderate more the decision making process, keep the group together, promote consensus and control the outcome. It is only in the case of conflict that I will enforce a decision. But I think he considered this leadership concept just as a weakness. Also, during the implementation phase he wanted more guidance from me, as he continuously asked me what exactly he should be doing and the exact target against which his performance would be measured. I think our German team members are much more independent in the way they do their job.

Jim also seemed quite annoyed when I tried to align his work to our way of operating and insisted he knew best how to do his job. I should judge his results, not his methods, he said. However, we have certain procedures here and everyone is expected to follow them. I understand that while we have all worked here for at least 10 years and know our company procedures very well, all this was unknown to Jim. But he should have at least shown some respect for our methods and should have tried to follow them, instead of insisting on doing things in his own way. Furthermore, it only makes sense to check on someone regularly and not just evaluate the final result, because by then it can be already too late to adjust things.

Working with the team members

While all team members were concentrating on their jobs, Jim bothered them all the time with specific questions. If he had paid more attention in the first place, this would

have been completely unnecessary. During the implementation phase we prefer to work individually in a focused way on our own and don't need much communication with other members of the team. At that stage group meetings only take place if another exchange of information is considered necessary. The incentive to such meetings can come from anybody in the group. And if we come together, we tend to have again a holistic discussion of the entire project, but this time based on a more advanced degree of understanding. What we certainly don't like is to make some little changes here and there, because it might be momentarily more convenient. We try to come up with fundamental solutions to fundamental problems and some quick fixes will only endanger the overall applicability of these solutions. We therefore expect that everybody sticks to what was initially agreed upon and solves their tasks in a way they will be in harmony to our overall plan. If we have to correct any mistakes then we will do this in a very systematic and thorough way and try to understand all possible effects a change in plan will have. Consequently, we were not too pleased that whenever a problem occurred Jim was willing to throw overboard everything we had carefully elaborated on and just try out something different. Changing direction without prior intensive reflection is a sign of sloppiness. Good solutions should last a long time and we try to work here for the long-term.

When we had the final meeting in which he presented us the results of his work, we noticed that he had

actually done quite a good job. However, a little more modesty about his work would have been appropriate. He was also somewhat playing out too much his certainly well established presentation skills. I would have preferred a little more substance in his presentation and less of a show. For example, instead of just telling us his conclusions of what we should be doing and elaborating on that, he should first have explained more about the way he developed his proposals.

To sum up, I had thought the Americans were such great managers. But now, having had the experience of working with Jim, I honestly believe that our way of doing business makes more sense.

Introduction

While our company was responsible for the launch of the new laser in Europe, our American partners called the shots for the North American market. Still, I was sent over from our headquarters in Stuttgart to share with our American partners the experiences we gained in Germany and to make sure that our interests were also sufficiently considered on the American turf. In principle, the task wasn't that difficult, as we hardly had any genuine conflicts of interest. It was just a matter of getting it right. But, as it turned out, working with the Americans was not so easy. I always thought they were so professional, however I wasn't overly impressed by how the project was managed. But in the end we did alright and I am glad to return home now.

Planning phase

Problems had already started in the planning phase. I am an expert in my field and could have contributed more thoroughly to the definition of our overall strategy. Instead, I was given right away specific targets and was expected to reach them in a very short period of time. But were these really the best targets I could have been given? I would have preferred to give more of my input during the all important planning phase. I was actually not overly convinced about the underlying assumptions on which our strategy was based. But for the sake of speed a thorough collection of information and discussion did not take place. How should one do quality work on this basis?

Working under the team leader

Right from the word go, I was put under so much time pressure that there was no way that I could deliver something with real substance. And yet to my surprise what I did was good enough for my American team leader. Well, it wasn't for me. And indeed later on I had to substantially modify my original suggestions once more information became available. All these subsequent improvements here and there annoyed me greatly. These are indications of sloppy work and in the end cost more time and energy than if we had invested a little more thought in the first place. Moreover, these "quick and dirty" solutions and quick fixes are not exactly testament to the upholding of high quality standards. There was no sense of perfection.

I was always astonished to see how quickly my American team leader reached a decision. He briefly thought

about a problem, announced his decision and that was it. Never any doubts about possibly being wrong. Also the other team members just accepted his decisions without ever questioning him. They were even expecting our team leader to make specific decisions all the time, so that they knew exactly what to do. Despite the casual tone in the company, my American colleagues were much more hierarchy oriented compared to what I am used to in Germany. Even though we are much more formal in Germany, I thought in the American company the atmosphere was in the end more authoritarian. This actually came as quite a surprise to me, as I wasn't expecting this.

The head of the department insisted that everybody addressed him by first name, but at the same time he wouldn't have the slightest problem firing someone as soon as he detected some underperformance. By contrast, in Germany we would never call our boss by first name (and neither would he address us by first name) even though we have known each other for more than ten years. But he would also never fire someone who works loyally for the company, after all we are a team, care for each other and the company has a social responsibility.

I was also put off by the speeches our team leader gave us all the time. I guess they were supposed to motivate us, but for me that was just cheap pep talk, probably copied from these motivation seminars the Americans are so fond of. However, what I really appreciated was the feedback our team leader gave us, particularly as it always focused on the positive. I think that is something I'd also like to see in Germany.

Working with the team members

While working on our assignments, frequent adaptations had to be made. If we all had followed more precise procedures this could have been entirely avoided. Moreover, as long as we met our individual targets my American team colleagues didn't even care if the overall result made any sense or not. No team member except the leader has any holistic concern for the entire project and feels responsible for the greater picture. I found it somewhat of a paradox that the Americans, the archetype of capitalists, were almost as obsessed with reaching specific targets as the communists were under the centrally planned economy.

At one instance, I was criticized, because my work didn't fit with what the others were doing. But this was exactly my point. If we don't bother to make a detailed picture for ourselves in the first place, how should I know what to do? But I was only told I should have checked with my team members.

I always had problems with these informalities. I don't mind enjoying a drink after work, but during work we should refrain from joking around. As we say in German: "Work is work and schnaps are schnaps." I also noticed that women in the company don't like to be treated with special courtesy. Whenever I held a door open for a woman or, after a working lunch, helped a woman with her coat, I was looked at as if I was doing something bad.

And when we discussed our final results, I felt my American colleagues were all highlighting their individual inputs by far too much. We are all team members and there is no reason to

brag about one's own achievements. All my American team members at first appeared to be so collegial but in the end everyone was fighting for his or her own. Everyone pretends to be good buddy with the others, but at the same time I have never seen so much open and almost aggressive competition among team members. In this company they always talk about their team spirit, but I think that is all corporate propaganda.

Introduction

For two months we had Klaus working with us in order to prepare the presentation of our new laser system on the North American market. Klaus had been sent over by our German joint venture partner. He was certainly very competent and in addition a really nice guy, once one got to know him a little better. Nevertheless, working with him proved to be quite difficult, he just drove us nuts with his complete inflexibility. What can you say, a real German.

Planning phase

Klaus just couldn't focus on specific targets and solutions. When we had our first meeting in order to decide who does what, Klaus wanted to drag us into a long discussion about fundamental issues which we just perceived as either irrelevant or something to think about at a later stage. He wanted to plan everything down to the last detail. But you just can't foresee everything and therefore you have to adapt and be flexible along the way. But Klaus just misunderstood our flexibility and open-mindedness for superficiality which of course is nonsense. A first planning meeting should be solution driven. What exactly do we want to

achieve? Once we understand this, we identify the specific steps we need to take in order to get there. The main task of the team leader in the planning phase is to assign specific team members to clearly defined tasks and develop a time plan, specifying what and when tasks should be achieved. With the delegation of responsibilities the planning process is finished and off you go.

Working under the team leader

Klaus was always quite nervous about the fact that as team leader I expected him to be fully responsible for his assignment. When I told him his evaluation would be primarily based on his results he got quite anxious about it, always saying that the final result could depend on many things some of which could well be beyond his control. But as a manager you have to stand up for your own performance. No excuses.

In our company it is the team leader who defines the overall objective and specific targets, who structures the assignments, and delegates responsibilities. Subsequently, during the implementation phase, the team leader is always available for questions, provides constant feedback, supports the information exchange, keeps the morale of the team up, controls whether the various tasks are achieved on time and evaluates the team members according to their individual performance. Overall, the team leader has a strong position, he pushes the project forward.

In the end, Klaus came up with some good results, but in the final presentation he was completely underselling himself. How should people see whether you are a high performer if you can't even show how good you

are? Also, instead of telling us his proposal right away he started out explaining at great lengths the specific assumptions on which his proposal was based, the various alternative solutions he formulated, what his selection criteria were etc. etc. When we all thought he would never come to the point, he finally told us what his proposal was. That was quite a clumsy way of doing a presentation.

Working with the team members

Once Klaus got his assignment he complained that he didn't have enough information to do his job. But that is what a manager is about: to make decisions under uncertainty. And if you don't have the information you need, well, then get it. First he complained that we hadn't discussed the problem enough, but then he just never really communicated with his team members or participated in the ongoing exchange of information. While we continuously popped into each others' offices to clarify things, Klaus just sat in his office and worked by himself.

When we get our tasks from our team leader we are expected to clearly structure our working schedule and solve each single task, one after the other. The trial-and-error principle is an important and often used mechanism. In this phase we use our own knowledge but also frequently ask our colleagues for advice. This implementation phase is usually characterized by an intense information exchange. We see constant feedback from both team leader and team members as essential to achieving our individual tasks. This information exchange takes place in a very informal way, through e-mails, telephone calls, dropping by at others' offices or just a quick chat on the corridor. Everyone is available

at every point in time for a short discussion. We frequently circulate written documentation to update each other on the various working steps. If we feel that we can improve the final solution by modifying our plan we do so at every stage in the process. If one solution doesn't work we try the next one. To quickly come up with a solution is important, but to be prepared to quickly drop a decision if a better one is found is equally important. This way we constantly improve the final outcome. For all this, good time management is important so that we can stick to the initial time plan. But I think Klaus had little understanding for all that.

Overall, I think Klaus should loosen up a bit. He can actually be quite a humorous guy and when we went to a bar after work we often had a good laugh. But the next day at work he was dead serious again, never made a joke and came across as rather unfriendly and cold. In particular, the secretaries didn't like him much, as he never spoke a private word with them, only focused on the job. Also female colleagues felt at times rather uncomfortable with his manners. They thought of the special attention and courtesy he paid them as rather sexist. I don't think he meant it in that way, but female managers in this country prefer to be treated as fully equal to men and that includes no preferential treatment.

Anyway, Klaus will be going back to Germany now. It was interesting to see how differently people from other countries act and behave. And I am relieved to say that our way of doing things clearly appears to me to make most sense.