

WORKPLACE CONFLICT: SOLVING THROUGH CULTURAL DIMENSIONS AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

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CASE DESCRIPTION

This case concerns workplace conflict, and the secondary issues to examine to conflict include emotional intelligence (EQ) and Hofstede's cultural dimensions. The case is designed for undergraduate students in organizational behavior, principles of management, and international management. This case is designed to be taught in one class period, from 1 to 3 class hours, depending on if the instructor assigns the readings prior to class or it is done in class. There are no outside readings expected but it is expected that the class will be already familiar with EQ, Hofstede's concept of Cultural Dimensions and personality assessments in general.

CASE SYNOPSIS

The purpose of this case study is to analyze a conflict in a finance team of 25 people who work at CaliWeb, a large technology company headquartered in California. A manager, Marcelo, and a direct report, Tom, were having difficulties in their relationship, and it was affecting the performance and harmony of the rest of the team. The senior director of the team, John, had been aware of the situation for a while and did not know how to mitigate this conflict. The company was going through a restructuring phase that was causing uncertainty among employees in the finance team. Several employees reported being anxious about how their job descriptions might change after the restructuring. Furthermore, there was evidence of cross-cultural clashes and a wide range of EQ variance among team members.

Marcelo and Tom had frequent disagreements about decisions and policies in the department. Their disagreements had become public and many people on the team had begun to "take sides." In addition to their professional disputes, their relationship was complicated by their different cultural values. In addition, both employees were unable to manage their emotions and to understand the other person's feelings. The animosity had reached the point that Tom threatened to leave the company. Thus, John needed to find a solution in the next two weeks before one of the team's best employees was gone.

This case study shows how emotional intelligence, national cultural dimensions, and personality can impact conflict behaviors within teams. The situation in this case is based on actual events. The names of the people and company have been altered to preserve anonymity.

Key Words: *Conflict, Emotional Intelligence, True Colors, Hofstede Cultural Dimensions*

BACKGROUND

CaliWeb¹ was an American multinational organization with the headquarters in California. The firm was founded in 1998 and it served the internet industry. It had over \$4 billion in revenue and more than 7000 employees in 2019. Since 2002 the company has been performing acquisitions to sustain its growth (Reuters, 2020).

Two years earlier, the organization performed its largest acquisition which changed the structure of most of the teams. For instance, the Americas' Finance team used to be small with only 12 employees and after the acquisition it became a team of 25 employees. Some of the new employees that came with the acquisition were having a hard time adjusting to the company's culture such as working with their direct managers. To encourage better alignment of the company's goals and objectives, the executives decided to change the organizational structure and concentrated all the decision making for the Americas with the North America team. The executives brought a few managers from South America to join the North America team and help with the process of standardization. This change helped standardize the company's operations, but it also brought cultural issues and conflicts.

THE CONFLICT

Marcelo, and his direct report Tom, had been having frequent conflict for a few months and the rest of the team had started noticing that something was not right. Marcelo and Tom had distinct personalities, nationalities, and they were often unable to put the differences aside and work professionally together. Marcelo liked to communicate openly, to be creative and to be appreciated. While his direct report, Tom, was more independent, liked to have more time alone and was very resistant to change.

Marcelo became Tom's manager about 18 months ago when he was transferred from the Brazil team to the United States, to manage the US Finance team. At first, Marcelo's transition to the US seemed to be working just fine. Marcelo was enjoying his new position and his direct reports. Marcelo would take them for lunch and drinks on Fridays and by all measures, the team was reaching its targets and working well together. After a few months in the position, Marcelo started to get frustrated with some of the behaviors of his direct report, Tom, and took them personally. Tom started to show up late to work, take long lunch breaks, schedule vacations on

¹ 1 The facts of this case are true; the name of the company and the people have been altered to preserve anonymity

busy weeks and would frequently question Marcelo's ideas and decisions. Tom would regularly challenge Marcelo with questions like "Why do we have to do this? I don't see a purpose for this report." In the beginning Marcelo would explain the reasoning behind the decisions, however he noticed that Tom was questioning everything, and Marcelo felt he was doing it to be annoying.

Because of the interpersonal friction, Marcelo started to get very frustrated. However, he didn't discuss the matter with Tom. Instead, Marcelo discussed his concerns with the other managers. Marcelo's complaints always followed a pattern like: "I don't know what to do with Tom. He is always late, does not care about the work and doesn't listen to me." The other managers would say: "You should have a one-on-one conversation with Tom, let him know how you feel and what is bothering you." Finally, Marcelo accepted their advice and scheduled a time to discuss the matter with Tom. By that time, however, things were very tense, and the meeting did not go well. Tom was upset because he felt falsely accused. He claimed that his work was getting done correctly, even though he wasn't always on time or at the office. After realizing that the meeting did not resolve any of the animosity, Tom talked to the director, John, and said he wanted a new manager, or else he would start looking for a new job within the next month. John had been aware of the friction since the beginning but did not intervene or take assertive actions to resolve the conflict between Marcelo and Tom. After hearing from Tom, he realized the situation was worse than he expected. Under Tom's threat of resignation, he knew it was time to get involved with this conflict.

John felt he had two options. First, he could split the team, so that Tom would report to a different manager. This option would not resolve the conflict, but it would avoid future conflict because Tom and Marcelo would no longer be required to work together regularly. A drawback of this option was that the other managers in the team had heard Marcelo's side of the story, and many believed that Tom was difficult and lazy, so they did not want to have Tom on their team either. Second, John thought he could make a concerted effort to help Marcelo and Tom resolve their differences in a healthy way. He recognized that progress would be slow and difficult, but it would be a win/win outcome if he could pull it off.

THE MANAGER'S PERSPECTIVE

As John contemplated how to help resolve the clash between Tom and Marcelo, he decided to write some notes about their characteristics. Table 1 summarizes his observations about the differences between the two.

Table 1: John's Notes on Marcelo and Tom

| | Marcelo | Tom |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Communication | Prefers frequent meetings with small groups; often they are unplanned. He turns a coffee break into a casual work meeting. He encourages full involvement and enjoys the give-and-take in group settings. Seems reluctant to correct a person, even when it's obvious the person is wrong about an idea. | Prefers to write detailed memos to his department. They are often complicated and analytical. He sends them by email wants the recipients to "reply all" to discuss the memos. His email responses are usually very direct and factual. In meetings, he tends to be succinct and sometimes forceful. |
| Planning | A bit of a dreamer. Likes to talk about the big picture and the big plans to get there. His office has posterboards and flip charts with scribbles and figures all over the place. | "Practicality" is the key word here. Not an optimist or a pessimist – he just wants to make a rock-solid plan and get all the details planned for the next few weeks. |
| Teamwork | Wants input from everyone. Even non-employees occasionally! Still asks advice from an uncle in Brazil when he is finalizing finance proposals. Also is generous with giving credit. Likes to share good results with anyone who was involved in a project. Sensitive to the relationships within his direct report group. | Not even sure if Tom likes teamwork. I've seen him produce amazing work, but he rarely asks for help, and he doesn't usually accept the suggestions when people do make them. |
| Professional interactions | I see he likes to maintain his status as the leader of his group. He is warm and welcoming, but he likes his title and the authority that comes with it. New to the team and unfamiliar with some USA norms but is proud of his role. | Sometimes seems unaware of the organizational structure. Sometimes talks to my boss about issues when he should talk to Marcelo. Seems a little disrespectful of authority. |
| Conflict | Seems like a conflict-avoider person. Doesn't want to have the hard talks with Tom. I wonder if he hopes it will "smooth over" without working on it. He seems truly offended but is being too passive about it. | Reminds me of a bulldozer. Powers ahead without noticing any bumps or boundaries. I don't think he's bitter or mean but kind of oblivious to how he can be harsh and how it affects others in the team. Also shows signs of a temper when people disagree with him. |
| Interpersonal relations | Definitely cares about people – his direct reports and everyone in Fin. Department. Almost seems like he should be in the HR department. Wants people to like him and like the company. Knows people's kids' and spouse's names! | Gives great advice to people, but only when they ask. Doesn't go out of way to help & isn't patient when people are slower than him. He is sharp but doesn't understand why people won't follow his logic. Or why they can't solve their own problems. |

TRUE COLORS 24 ASSESSMENT

In addition to his observations of Marcelo and Tom, John had the advantage of data from the True Colors 24 personality test (Honaker, 2013). As part of the re-structuring initiative, he required the finance team in North America to take the assessment.

John hired a consulting firm that assisted in developing leaders and high performing teams. John told the team: “This assessment will help us learn more about each other and how to interact better as a team. It is designed to help individuals understand their character traits and their main decision-making approach.”

The True Colors assessment categorizes people into one of four personality styles. Each style is assigned a color code: gold, orange, blue and green. **Gold** describes people who are detail-oriented, structured, organized, realistic and who have a strong sense of right and wrong. **Orange** is the opposite color from gold, people in the orange category are spontaneous, impulsive, high energy, playful, adventurous, and action oriented. **Blue** is for people who are caretakers, sensitive, great listeners, harmony-driven and who value relationships. Finally, **Green** is the opposite of blue and includes people who are very analytical, see the big picture, innovative, future focused and don’t need a lot of recognition (Honaker, 2003). Table 1 shows the self-image of each color and their main characteristics and table 2 illustrates the one-word associate to each color.

Table 2: Descriptions of the Four Categories

| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| <p>Primary ORANGE</p> <p>Energetic, spontaneous, and charming. If you're an Orange, you tend to be action-oriented and are comfortable taking risks. You probably also tend to be competitive and seek out adventures with opportunities to push the boundaries. Living in the moment and enjoying an adaptable time schedule are important to you.</p> | <p>Primary GOLD</p> <p>Punctual, organized, and precise. "Golds" tend to need structure and organization. If you're a Gold, then order, rules, respect, and dependability are important to you. Time is a key part of your life if you're a Gold personality type. You need to be on time and want others to be punctual as well. Following the plan or schedule is best for you.</p> | <p>Primary GREEN</p> <p>Analytical, intuitive, and visionary. These are traits of the Green Personality type. "Greens" find innovative thinking and problem solving exciting. If you're a Green, you tend to be able to see the big picture and able to effectively analyze situations. Thinking outside the box is a real strength. You also have an extreme need to be right.</p> | <p>Primary BLUE</p> <p>Empathetic, compassionate, and cooperative. "Blues" tend to be very social people. If you're a Blue, you value relationships and harmony. Genuine kindness, sincerity, and compassion are important to you. You enjoy opportunities to work with others and collaborate and any opportunity to develop a connection.</p> |
|--|--|--|--|

(TrueColors, 2019)

Table 3: One-word Association of the Four Colors

| | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Primary ORANGE ADVENTUROUS | Primary GOLD TRADITIONAL | Primary GREEN VISIONARY | Primary BLUE NURTURER |
|---|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|

(O'Brian, 2019)

The results of the True Colors assessment gave John some valuable insights. His result showed that gold was his primary color and orange was his weakest. He managed a large group of employees, so John tried to be task oriented, extremely responsible and organized. He was not

very open to change; however, and therefore he was having a hard time dealing with the issues in the team.

Marcelo had blue as his primary color, whereas Tom had the opposite primary color, green. Marcelo preferred a collaborative way of working that resulted in meaningful outcomes. He also liked to apply his imagination and personal values in decision-making, which could have been related to his Brazilian culture. On the other hand, Tom preferred a more efficient decision-making process that resulted in logical outcomes and liked to apply analytical skills to his decisions. The main point was that Marcelo focused on needs, values and relationships, whereas Tom was more of a logical person and appeared to be uncaring and insensitive to Marcelo.

CONCLUSION

As the year came to an end, John had two weeks to find a way to solve this conflict and bring harmony and effectiveness back to the team. Otherwise, Tom, one of his best employees, said he would leave. John became more familiar with the cultural differences and the personality of the employees based on the True Colors assessment. He was also aware that the team needed more training and information sessions regarding emotional intelligence and the cross-cultural norms so they could better work together. John needed to decide how to approach Marcelo and Tom and had to find a way to solve this conflict without negatively affecting the rest of the team.

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