

WORKPLACE CONFLICT: SOLVING THROUGH CULTURAL DIMENSIONS AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

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INSTRUCTORS' NOTES

CASE OVERVIEW

The purpose of this study is to analyze a conflict in a Finance team of 25 people of company CaliWeb. A manager, Marcelo, and a direct report, Tom, with distinct personalities 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 the Finance team not to be as effective and efficient as they used to be, due to the cultural barriers and the lack of emotional intelligence among employees.

Challenges included personalities clashes, different background and cultures, distinct manager styles and lack of emotional intelligence. Marcelo and Tom had opposite personalities and perspectives as well as different cultural values, which were causing the conflicts between them. In addition, both employees were unable to manage their own emotions and to understand the other person's feeling. These issues pushed this conflict so far that Tom threatened to leave the company. Thus, John needed to find a solution in the next two weeks before was too late and one of the team's best analyst was gone.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This case could be used for a management or leadership class covering Emotional Intelligence or Hofstede's cultural dimensions. The case is intended to be used for one class period.

After Studying this case, students will be able to:

1. **Apply** Goleman's Emotional Intelligence concept to an employee conflict situation.
2. **Analyze** Marcelo and Tom's True Colors assessment to discover why they are having conflicts.
3. **Explain** Hofstede cultural dimensions and analyze the complexities that arise in the workplace with different cultural backgrounds.
4. **Compare and evaluate** the different course of actions available for John (compare and contrast the pros and cons of each).

KEY THEORETICAL LINKAGES

Emotional Intelligence skills are essential in the workplace and in the personal life to keep relationships healthy. This is a theoretical concept that will help students to analyze this case. After understanding and applying these skills, students should be able to better recognize the root cause of the case conflict and know how to develop more emotionally intelligent employees (Dollard, 2018). Once students know the importance of emotional intelligence in the workplace, students usually have a clearer picture of why EQ is key to successful leadership. In this specific case, Tom and Marcelo have varying levels of Emotional intelligence and thus have conflict with one another.

A second theoretical concept important for this case is the True Colors Assessment which identifies employees primary and secondary colors based on personality (Honaker, 2013). After examining and understanding Marcelo and Tom's different personalities, students will understand how to minimize the differences and work effectively as a team. This framework shows how one employee's actions impact the others and how both can enhance their strengths and minimize their blind spots (Honaker, 2013). Students must understand how framework True Colors can help the manager and other employees mitigate the conflict. Tom and Marcelo as noted in the case, have the opposite colors, Marcelo is blue and Tom is green. This makes it difficult for them to communicate effectively.

Lastly, students will be knowledgeable about the Hofstede cultural dimensions and how the United States and Brazil are ranked differently based on their cultural background and values. Using the Hofstede applicable dimensions; power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation and indulgence (Hofstede & Bond, 1984), students should be able to explore each applicable country cultural values and understand why the employees could be clashing. In our case, John must look at individualism (how people look at teams) and long-term orientation. Examining these two specific dimensions of Hofstede will allow the students to understand the cultural differences present in the case.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The facts of this case are true, the name of the company and the people have been altered to preserve anonymity. The primary research method for gathering information was through the True Colors assessment and face-to-face conversations with 25 employees. The conversations were informal, usually during lunch and it took place over one year. The True Colors assessment was distributed to the whole team and employees had one week to complete it online. After the assessment and the discussions, additional data was gathered from the consulting group, who conducted the True Colors assessment, and from John, the director of the team. There was a team meeting with the consulting firm to explain the different types of personalities and the colors associated with them. During this meeting the team had a chance to review the overall results and provide opinions about the assessment. At the end, every employee participated in a discussion to identify the key learnings from the session. Additionally, online research was

conducted to hone the understanding of the Hofstede cultural dimensions and Goleman emotional intelligence skills.

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

Instructors may want to begin by asking students who have experienced conflicts during group/team projects. Building an introductory discussion with the questions below may help the students to be engaged:

- *Who has experienced conflicts in group projects?*
- *Who has worked with team members from different cultures? And how was this a positive or negative aspect?*
- *Has anyone taken a personality test to learn more about themselves? If yes, what were the main takeaways?*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The discussion questions below are linked to each learning objective:

1. *Use Goleman's Emotional Intelligence dimensions to analyze which skills Marcello and Tom need to be improve. (LO1)*
2. *Why do you believe Marcelo and Tom are clashing based on their True Colors assessment? (LO2)*
3. *From Hofstede's six cultural dimensions, which are the two most important dimensions that John needs to think about and why? (LO3)*
4. *What is the best course of action for John and why? (LO4)*

ANSWERS TO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Table 1 from the case is included below but we added some hints in the first column. The hints show which concepts (EQi, Hofstede's dimensions, True Colors) are illustrated in the behaviors of Marcelo and John.

	Marcelo	Tom
<p>Communication</p> <p><u>True Colors</u> Marcelo = Blue</p> <p>Tom = Green</p>	<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>Planning</p> <p><u>Hofstede:</u> Marcelo = LT orientation</p> <p>Tom = ST orientation</p>	<p>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.</p>	<p>"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.</p>
<p>Teamwork</p> <p><u>Hofstede:</u> Marcelo = Collectivist</p> <p>Tom = Individualistic</p> <p><u>True Colors</u> Marcelo = Blue</p> <p>Tom = Green</p>	<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>Professional interactions</p> <p><u>Hofstede:</u> Marcelo = high Power Distance</p> <p>Tom = Low Power Distance</p>	<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>Conflict</p> <p><u>EQ_i</u> Marcelo = High Self-Awareness</p> <p>Tom = Low Self-Awareness</p>	<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>

<p>Interpersonal relations</p> <p><u>EQi</u></p> <p>Marcelo = High Empathy</p> <p>Tom = Low Empathy</p>	<p>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!</p>	<p>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.</p>
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1. Use Goleman’s Emotional Intelligence dimensions to analyze which skills Marcello and Tom need to be improve.

This question will get students thinking about Goleman’s four emotional intelligence skills; self-awareness, social awareness, relationship management and self-management (Goleman, 2006). The conflicts that arise in the workplace are mainly driven by the lack of emotional intelligence, which is the case in Marcello and Tom’s troubled relationship. This question is important to get students thinking outside the box and open a dialogue among the class.

The first skill that student may bring up is the social awareness, which is the ability of understanding emotions of others and knowing what motivate others. Marcello and Tom were complaining about each other instead of trying to understand one another. Both need to work in identifying what the other person is feeling and how their actions affect the other’s behavior. One of the most important skill for a manager, such as Marcello, is the ability to empathize with others. As a manager you need to be able to relate and understand others, thus Marcello needs to be a better listener and be able to recognize emotional boundaries. Additionally, Tom needs to be less self-centered and show more empathy towards Marcello’s feeling since he is more of a sensitive person.

Both employees also need to improve their relationship management skill. They need to be able to use their own awareness and understand others’ emotions to maintain good relationships. For example, Marcello needs to be able to adapt his management style based on his employees’ personality. In this situation with Tom, Marcello needs to be more direct, straight to the point and avoid as much as he can micromanaging Tom. On the other hand, Tom needs to be more caring and gracious towards Marcello.

Students might also mention the other two skills; self-awareness and self-management, which are also applicable for this answer. Tom and Marcello need to be more aware of how their feelings affect them and their job performance. Additionally, if they were able to control their impulses and be more flexible, the relationship between them would have been much better. Thus, in this answer students can pick any of the four skills as long as their explanation correctly describe the concept and apply it to the case.

2. Why do you believe Marcelo and Tom are clashing based on their True Colors assessment?

This question is asking students to analyze the True Colors personality assessment and identify the main causes of the conflict between Marcelo and Tom. This will make students understand that people with distinct personalities can work together effectively. The True Colors assessment helps employees understand their character traits and their decision-making approach. The assessment reveals four colors: gold, orange, green and blue, whereas gold is the opposite of orange and blue the opposite of green. For this case study, students need to mainly focus on the green, blue and gold colors because these are Tom, Marcelo and John's primary colors, respectively.

Marcelo has blue as the primary color which implies that he is a caretaker and sensitive. He is very social and values kindness, sincerity and compassion. On the other hand, Tom's personality color is green which shows that he is analytical, intuitive, and visionary. Based on these, students should be able to explain that the main reason why they are clashing is because their personalities are very different, the opposite from each other. When it comes to the workplace, someone like Tom that has green as their primary color has an extreme need to be right and prefer a more efficient decision-making process, whereas Marcelo is always looking for ways to collaborate and develop connections.

Students should be able to explain that this assessment is important because you learn more about yourself and others in your team and how your actions can be interpreted differently based on someone's personality and values. Some students who will go deeper in this analysis, might also mention how a combination of values from the four colors can help people improve their personality and become more approachable.

3. From Hofstede's six cultural dimensions, which are the two most important dimensions that John needs to think about and why?

This question is referring to the last theoretical linkage; Hofstede cultural dimensions. This will get students to think outside the box and analyze the conflict based on cultural values since both employees have different nationalities; Marcelo is from Brazil and Tom from the US. Students are no longer simply looking at the different types of personalities, rather they are combining the personalities with the cultural background to examine the conflict between Marcelo and Tom. The Hofstede model is a framework for cross-cultural norms that can provide guidance for communication. The theory uses six dimensions of culture; individualism, power distance, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation and indulgence (Hofstede & Bond, 1984). Students are asked to pick the two most important dimensions that John needs to focus in order to mitigate the conflict.

The first dimension that students will probably choose is individualism and it has to do with whether people think in terms of "I" or "We." Both Marcelo and Tom are lacking teamwork skills. Each individual is focusing on his own needs. For instance, Marcelo is upset that Tom is not being more caring and kind, but he should not take this personally because this is Tom's

nature and Marcelo need to be able to focus on the big picture and work efficiently as a team. On the other hand, Tom does not care about Marcelo's feelings and is not interested in pleasing him to make the relationship better. Tom just wants to get the job done and leave, which is not wrong but when working with a team he needs to be more aware of his surroundings and try to create a good work environment.

The second most important dimension that students will probably analyze is long term orientation that deals with the past and how societies should maintain the link with their past to keep their traditions. In this dimension we can see that Tom has a more traditional and professional way of working, whereas Marcelo comes from a country that is less established and has a more contemporary way of doing business. For instance, in the long-term orientation dimension Brazil scored a 44 and the US scored a 26. Brazil has a higher score than the US because it has a less traditional and professional way of doing things in the business world (Sheikh & Varga, 2015). This is another reason why both employees are clashing; Tom likes to follow an outline and prefers an efficient decision-making process, whereas Marcelo likes to use personal values when making decisions and does not have a structured way of working.

John needs to find a way to lower these cultural barriers and identify a mid-point where both employees learn how to work efficiently together despite their different cultural values. Students might go further in the analyses and choose other dimensions that John needs to focus on, which is not wrong as long as they are able to relate to the conflict and provide a good explanation.

4. What is the best course of action for John and why?

This question will show how students conclude their thoughts about the case and what John's next steps should be. Students should clearly state John's actionable steps and provide a good reasoning behind their explanation. The first thing that students should have in mind is that John needs to act fast because Tom has threatened to leave the company in two weeks. John has two options; separate these two employees and place them in different teams or make them learn how to work through their differences together as a team.

The first option of separating the employees is actually not solving the conflict, instead is running away from it and finding a quick short-term solution that will probably have a negative long-term impact. For instance, if Tom moves to a different team and does not adapt to the new manager's style, he would probably complain again to John and threat to leave the company once more. On the other hand, if Marcelo gets a new employee in his team that has a similar personality as Tom has and is not very personal to him, Marcelo will probably have the Marceloe complications again which will keep negatively affecting the overall team's effectiveness and harmony. Thus, this is not a viable solution.

John needs to make Marcelo and Tom learn how to work together as a team, respecting each other's differences. The first step John should take is to have separate conversations with each employee and identify the main points of concerns of each, then try to make them understand why they are clashing based on their personalities and cultural background. Once they understand the causes of the conflict, John should explain how their differences can be beneficial in the work environment because both could bring different perspectives to problems

and ideas. After talking to each employee separately, John should have a meeting with both together to clarify all the issues and give another chance for them to work together. John needs to emphasize that they have to be team players and think on the overall good for the team. Additionally, John needs to mention that any issues or problems going forward should be addressed among the three of them and avoid the gossip with the rest of the team. Lastly, in the next month, John should maintain weekly short meetings with each one to make sure things are running smoothly and the conflicts have been eased.

EPILOGUE

John was not able to find a solution within the two weeks and asked Tom to give him a couple more weeks to solve this issue. John was trying to do a reorganization and push Tom to another manager, however other managers were not willing to take Tom because they were afraid that they would have conflicts with him due to his strong personality and due to the things Marcelo had told them. One of the other managers who has been working with John for a long time, told him that he needed to make Marcelo and Tom work together despite their differences, however John was a very conflict avoidance person and was trying to run away from the conflict. Due to his limited choices, John had decided to give them another chance and told Marcelo specifically to be more open to Tom since Marcelo is the manager and has more authority. John had a long meeting with Tom and explained how important his work is for the team and that he really needed Tom in the team. He asked Tom to be more patient and more friendly to Marcelo. So far things have been working out much better for both of them, but John knows he needs to keep checking on them to make sure things are running smoothly.

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