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Collaborative Leadership Midterm

“Disciplining a Teammate” Case Study

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James R. Barker’s “Disciplining a Teammate” takes the reader through a series of heated events revolving around an employee’s attendance problems and the subsequent turmoil and emotional outrage that it creates for her team members. Although this incident is an adequate reflection on the self-managing team system present at Technicom Inc., further analysis from a communications perspective will help to provide a deeper understanding as to how the participants behaved (both isolated and as a group) as well as offer insight as to how these actions contributed to the larger altercation. In this paper I will address a wide variety of topics that may be observed in Barker’s case study including: discourses, mental models, priming, core framing tasks, framing types, emotional contagion, and ethics.

Discourse is a term that refers to a specific system of thought and a way of speaking that is influenced and linked to its historical and social setting (i.e. the cultural influence and the system of thought it creates; also referred to as a “linguistic toolbag”). The first example of discourse that I noted in this work was in the first paragraph in which Liz thinks to herself while driving to work the day after the incident, “the team had a job to do…Circuit boards had to be built and customer orders had to be filled.” This is a beautiful example of a corporate and technical discourse being reflected in Liz’s thoughts. She draws from Technicom’s corporate attitude with the classification of the team’s role not withstanding any excuses, and she displays the technical discourse when referencing the parts that the team constructs (to exaggerate the point, “circuit boards” would not be common terminology in a different business discourse such as retail). The next easily recognized discourse comes from the following paragraph in Martha’s snarky response to the Deltas after Sharon’s call, “Well, well, well, bet you can’t guess who that was.” The sarcastic tone of Martha’s statement in addition to her well known repetition of the word well, highlights a discourse more aptly linked to social context, the informal work environment. The discourse (using as linguistic toolbag in this example) she uses amongst coworkers is, in all probability, different than the discourse she would use with a senior employee such as Ron. Later in the case study (page 99 through 100), the reader is given a lengthy and detailed description of how Technicom’s products are made, the company’s transition to the self-managing team system over recent years, and even its ethnic diversity. Although none of this involves any action with the characters, this section sets the historical context that lead up to and encases the current situation at Technicom. As discourse is influenced and in a sense one in the same as culture, this informational passage is a wonderful example of the unique Technicom discourse. Sections of text similar to the one described above occur periodically throughout the case study (for example the background on Ron’s role in structural changes and the information on “concretive control”) that contribute their own discourses that lead up to the Delta’s situation.

Mental Models are more specific than discourses in that they focus primarily on how one’s mind actually processes the culture that surrounds it. A mental model can vary in clarity or depth although it ultimately answers the question, “How does the world function?” In the opening paragraph of “Disciplining a Teammate”, the reader is given a glimpse at two of Liz’s mental models concerning Sharon as she drives into work. Liz “couldn’t believe Sharon had missed work” and viewed her call to inform the team of her absence as “late” and even categorizing it as an “excuse”. Yet, Liz does show a certain depth in her understanding of Sharon by knowing and appreciating that she is a “single mother with two kids, one 3 and the other 5 years old.” However, she quickly reconfirms that “the team had a job to do.” Just from these snippets from the first paragraph, it is apparent that Liz has a moderately complex mental model in her view towards Sharon. She stands at a crossroads between her own personal shock and dismay, a loyal dedication to the team, and her personal understanding of Sharon’s struggles. Liz’s mental model (remember “how the world functions?”) is the method by which she is attempting to sort through the chaos of the situation. Another example of a mental model can be seen in Martha’s snarky response previously described. Her actions demonstrate a well-developed mental model that expects and judges this type of behavior from Sharon that was reconfirmed by her most recent call off. On page one hundred and one, Barker relays to the reader how Technicom’s president and operation’s vice president delegated the mission to Ron to restructure the company using the self-managing team system. This brief passage hints at numerous possible mental models that these individuals may hold: a mental model on what it means to be successful in business (what prompted the urgency to change), a mental model on rapidly addressing problems (more directly stated in text), and a mental model as to what it actually means to be a high ranking management figure (delegating a subordinate to organize desired change).

Another topic commonly linked with mental models is priming. Priming is a technique of preparing yourself before a situation unfolds in order to emphasize or avoid certain aspects of communication spontaneously. For example, Liz contemplating the day before while driving to work and resurfacing her emotions of anger helped to prime her lack of control in the confrontation of Sharon (focus was airing grievances). On the other hand, Sharon looked down before the confrontation occurred, as she “sensed what was coming”. This behavior indicates that she was priming herself for the emotional beat down that was about to ensue as well as maintaining a non-aggressive counter (focus was weathering commentary and posing believable contrition).

Core framing tasks are essentially your purpose for communication at the outset. In the illustration with Technicom’s president and operations vice president, their core framing task (reason to speak) was to ensure that Technicom stayed in business. Referring back to Martha’s sardonic account of Sharon’s absence to the team, her official core frame task (as Sharon knew it) was to inform the Deltas of Sharon’s inability to make it to work. However, as influenced by the informal work discourse and her mental model of Sharon’s pattern of behavior, Martha altered her core framing task to include her own commentary on Sharon’s nonattendance in addition to simply informing the team. As individuals act upon their core framing tasks and begin to communicate, it is important to note that a variety of framing types can unfold. One such frame that can be seen in this case study are metaphorical frames, which involve some form of metaphorical language and can be seen in examples including Liz’s “last straw”, the self-managing teams doing well but not being a “piece of cake”, and the Delta team being pushed “to the breaking point” with Sharon’s pattern of behavior. Simple metaphorical frames such as these add depth and relatability to the passage. Another framing type is simplifying frames whose task is to reduce the complexity of a situation. Examples of simplifying frames can be observed in broad statements such as Liz’s characterization that “nothing had gone right all day” and Liz’s justifying of her behavior at the meeting by stating that it “had to be done”. A final framing type that appears in “Disciplining a Teammate” is a loss frame which emphasizes the potential or actual disadvantages of some particular action or event. The loss frame can be found in the fourth paragraph of the chapter in which the negative consequences of Sharon’s absence are outlined, one team member at a time. This section can be distinguished as a loss frame (as opposed to simply an objective statement of adverse effects) due to the severe focus on the costs to the team while the positives (filling the important order, overcoming adversity, and Ron’s approval) are overlooked. This is not a distinct list of framing types (others such as master and believability frames exist but are less readily evident); however, they all drive to enhance the effectiveness of the overall framing task at hand.

Emotional Contagion is ultimately a self-defining term. When emotions run high (either positive or negative) there is a tendency for these emotions to spread rapidly amongst a group or at the very least be reflected unconsciously by the other individuals present (goes back to the presence of mirror neurons). As Barker’s text deals with a scenario where escalated emotions were running rampant, there are a plethora of examples for emotional contagion. First, we witness Liz allowing her toxic emotions from the previous day’s incident to seep into her activities on her morning commute to work. She fumes during her drive, swears at other drivers on the road, and slams her door once arriving at Technicom; all behaviors that depict that she is primed for emotional contagion in the later confrontation of Sharon. When it came time for the morning meeting, Liz led the charge against Sharon by forcefully confronting Sharon with not only aggressive language but also a domineering physical stance. With this doorway opened, the members of the Delta team (Martha, Katia, and Steven) took their turns in piling on the complaints and insults against Sharon to the point of getting her to cry. Part of the other members’ anger may have come from Sharon’s absence the previous day (in addition to other factors such as employee vacation, the surprise order, and unique personal circumstances), although we have learned that through mirror neurons and mimicry that Liz’s behavior sparked this dramatic response from her coworkers. Going slightly further, the reader observes that as Sharon cries in response to her teammates’ assault that their stances soften and they even seek to console her throughout the day. This process is the exact same as Liz’s negative influence on her coworkers although in reverse. Both of these examples drive at the heart of emotional contagion: altering the overall emotional response of your surroundings through your own emotional output (it is important to note that although each of these responses were instinctive, strategic communicators will intentionally utilize emotional contagion).

Ethics is the study of morality (how do our actions affect those around us). Remaining focused on the examples revolving around the day Sharon was vigorously confronted for her attendance, the reader can observe two distinctly opposite approaches to the ethics. The Deltas displayed a startling lack of ethics as they launched a spirited attack on Sharon without any regard for her emotions; although, they countered themselves by taking up a deep ethical concern for her well-being and emotional state the remainder of the day. As this case study demonstrates, ethics is not a straight forward topic and individuals can exhibit conflicting behaviors on a case by case basis as a product of this.

At the conclusion of reflecting on James R. Barker’s “Disciplining a Teammate” from a communication perspective, the reader can readily observe how various topics relating to communication played a major role in both understanding and contributing to the scenario that unfolded at Technicom Inc. Discourse set the cultural back drop for the events as well as served as a linguistic toolbag for the participants as they formulated their thoughts and dialogues. Mental Models were further developed through priming and helped individuals sort through the chaos of the situation by defining how they saw the world. Core framing tasks provided a purpose and a goal for communication while various framing types enhanced its effectiveness. Mirror neurons, mimicry, and emotional contagion proved particularly valuable in sparking a desired emotional response for those around. Ethics provided an opportunity for serious reevaluation as to the consequences actions may have on others. When taking all of these communication topics together, the reader can begin to view this incident with the Deltas simply as a crucible that will allow them to grow as a team and reach new production heights.