BUSINESS EDUCATION

Painful steps on the road to team-building

Ralph Klingmann recounts how he and his fellow MBA students survived a stressful clash of personalities and learnt to work together.

In part two of his diary from Iese Business School in Barcelona, where he is enrolled on the global executive MBA programme, the chief executive of the South African subsidiary of SmithKline Beecham finds his team suffering tithing problems.

My first day on the Barcelona campus brought back college memories - seeing students reading on the lawn. But I was unaware, as I headed to my first class, that I was also returning to some of the rigours of student life.

The day began with our being assigned to teams, each with its own room.

My team has quite a cast of characters: a likeable Catalan working with a property development agency run by the Catalan government; an energetic Englishman born in Zambia; a witty Californian from Silicon Valley; an extrast venezuelan working in Manhattan’s financial district; and a devout businesswoman who owns and operates a furniture company in her native Nigeria.

As the module has progressed, an emphasis on team-building has become apparent. One sign of this is the composition of the teams themselves; they all have a similar balance of geographical, professional and personal diversities.

There was a classroom exercise involving an interactive survival game simulation and a fun-filled afternoon of outdoor team-building activities. Although we did not recognise it at the time, these were all necessary to prepare our teams for the tremendous workload ahead. Our days begin in the campus coffee bar, giving us time to prepare for the morning lectures. Lunch is followed by another two hours of study before we return to classes until 7pm.

The need for extra study time often brings us back to the classroom until either close to midnight, or the need for sleep gains the upper hand.

I am often consoled by the thought that my hotel is a five-minute walk away, which affords me additional, precious time for sleeping.

Adjusting to this “student schedule” was a challenge for me during our first on-campus session, but there is simply no other way to complete the work in time - and that assumes that the team is working together! This was not yet the case during the first week, when my team had problems organizing who did what. The struggle reached its climax at the end of the week. Sunday was supposed to be our free day but it was not to be. We had changes on Saturday and our team paper was due on Monday, leaving only the Sunday to resolve our case.

To summarise a long and painful story, our team spent the whole Sunday on that paper. There were several emotional and nerve-racking episodes that threatened to jeopardize our endeavours (and I have heard reports from other teams that made our own Sunday seem mild in comparison). On a personal note, I was the driving force of that exercise, in galvanising our team during the first module.

After our first two weeks together on campus, the class was released into distance learning.

We were each well-equipped with a top-of-the-range Toshiba laptop with the professional version of Microsoft Office.

During our on-campus computer orientation, we were shown how to use the collaboration tools to complete the individual and team assignments of distance learning.

Fortunately, the programme allows a week after each campus session for participants to give priority to their work responsibilities. I had to fly to South Africa immediately for work commitments.

The weeks that followed were a time of difficult adjustment for me. The workload was such that I needed to study most evenings and weekends in order to participate in the daily discussions and complete the weekly assignments.

Because of the geographical diversity of my team, we decided to chat every second day on the internet to coordinate our efforts. Some technical issues were quickly resolved by our information technology help desk and our team made great strides in the first weeks of distance learning, to capitalise on our individual strengths and make the amount of work manageable for each member.

When we returned to Iese for the second module, it seemed we had all been together for much longer. The second on-campus module went well and I began to hope we had left the rowdy waters behind, but I was wrong.

A combination of personal and business-related events precipitated the “crisis”. At that time we were preparing for a big product launch, the sales manager fell ill. At the same time I was trying to organise my move to South Africa (I had been staying in a furnished apartment) and I was just trying to organise my move to South Africa (I had been staying in a furnished apartment) and Iese’s programme was conspiring to occupy every remaining minute of my day.

The distance learning session of Module 2 became a greater exercise of priority setting than the previous module. I was unable to carry my share for several weeks, and am grateful for the understanding and support of my team mates.

By module 3, it was back to the now familiar routine of student life in Barcelona. Faces were now attached not only to names but also to personalities and social dinners became a highlight of our busy weeks, fueling a growing sense of camaraderie.

Over the past three modules, the staff of Iese has also done much to enrich our academic experience and guest speakers have covered topics ranging from strategy in the airline sector to consumer electronics.

On Saturdays, after the morning class, there have been company visits in and near Barcelona, including an insider’s perspective of Port Aventura amusement park and Cordonui, a cellar for sparkling wine.

There also seems to be more emphasis on the softer business skills in this module. The discussions in our leadership and ethics sessions have been a thought-provoking mix of practice and theory, drawing out the personal and business experience of the group for a refreshing examination of values and what it means to be a leader today.

I look forward to our modules in Silicon Valley and Shanghai and what my team and I will be able to experience, learn and accomplish. I am expecting the coming months to be eventful, strenuous but rewarding.

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