The Team

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Who knows where the idea started? Someone thought it would be amusing to 'tag' each team member with a title reflecting his or her position in a mythical political system. The project manager, Mark, was dubbed our 'political leader'; Sue was designated as 'head of intelligence', possibly because she had such a good contact network; and, to my embarrassment, I was given the moniker of 'spiritual leader'—I was responsible for the design of the solution. Just as we were having a good laugh at this idea, Fiona entered the room and wanted to know what was going on.

'What can I be?' Fiona asked after we explained the scenario to her.

'Well, you can be anything you like,' Mark said with a chuckle. Mark was invariably perpetuating these ideas. On one occasion we had renamed all our stakeholders after 'Star Wars' characters.

Fiona walked away pondering possible titles. In an hour she returned, grinning with her answer.

'I know what I want to be. I'll be the dog in the Toyota ad that says "bugger".'

We could never work out how Fiona's mind worked. She had an incredible ability to see the world from an entirely different perspective. Who could know what she was thinking that day? Most of her lateral thinking worked for us, but there were times when we spent vast amounts of energy getting Fiona back on track.

Our team was certainly diverse. Snapshots of our lives outside consulting revealed an author of erotic poetry; a bass-playing Irishman with an encyclopaedic knowledge; a South African-born blues lover of Indian descent; a novelty CD producer and nightclub entrepreneur; a Malaysian Indian who, according to the coffee-shop owner, was a passionate woman; an Englishwoman with an iron fist; a graduate on the first project of her first job; and an avant-garde composer with an interest in military history. We were all drawn together as consultants with a project to deliver for our client.

There was no guarantee that this team would function effectively, if at all. The selection process had been based largely on chance—that is, people had been chosen if they had (roughly) the right skills and, more importantly, if they were available to join the team. I had become part of the project only because the previous knowledge-management specialist had left the company and I happened to start with the firm the following week. This *ad hoc* approach is normal for a consulting practice. Teams are composed of people who are finishing one assignment and moving to the next. An adroit project director must move quickly to secure the best talent for the job. To achieve this, the project director must have an extensive network of contacts and the ability to identify quality people with the right attitude for the job from those who are available.

From the outset, Mark organised social activities for the team. Our first was a meal at the Asian Café. We all sat around a large circular table and spun the dishes to one another on a 'Lazy Susan'. We quickly discovered the sharp wit and humour that was to become a hallmark of our team.

'Liam, what do you think of this place?' Mark asked as he took another sip of his laksa.

'Their laksa is probably number two in Canberra after the Dickson Noodle House,' replied Liam.

We soon discovered that Liam kept a mental ranking of a vast array of apparently unrelated items. After that night we frequently asked where something ranked on the 'Liam scale'. But our questions for Liam did not stop there. We ended up asking him all sorts of apparently irrelevant questions. During the report-writing stage, Mark and I were attempting to describe the client's disparate information sets. We knew there was a word for a string of islands, and that this would make an apt metaphor; and we knew that Liam would know the word we were after.

I called Liam on his mobile. 'What do you call a string of islands?' I asked. Without a hint of hesitation, Liam responded with his own question: 'What type of geology are you interested in?'.

I was instantly reminded of a 'Monty Python' scene in which a troll guarding a bridge asks a knight: 'How fast does a swallow fly?'. The knight responds: 'African or Indian?'—at which the troll vanishes in a puff of smoke! Mark and I were frequently 'blown away' by the breadth of Liam's knowledge.

During the six-month project we averaged a social outing every month—including cooking lessons at The Fig restaurant, a rugby match between Australia and Argentina, an afternoon of home brewed beer and paella at Liam's, drinks at the hotel's Presidential suite, Spanish food at another restaurant called Champions and a hike up Mount Ainslie in the hope of meeting Kim Beazley (who at the time was leader of the opposition and getting himself fit for the upcoming election). Spending time with each other created enjoyable and effective work relationships in which we developed trust and an understanding of our various skills and ways of working.

Having clearly defined roles helped to engender cohesion in the team. Mark was the project manager, I was the knowledge-management and intelligence specialist, Liam and Sue provided expertise in information technology, Ann provided high-level contact with the client, Greg and Patricia were human-resources specialists, and Fiona was a business-process consultant. In view of the size of the project, we divided the workload and assigned responsibility for different aspects to various individuals within the team. We developed a level of trust that allowed us to adopt approaches and recommendations devised by our colleagues. This is not to say that we didn't have robust conversations in which we 'nutted out' the important aspects of the project. We undertook these conversations in the understanding that everyone's viewpoint was valuable and that a consensus was required before we progressed. We became adept at playing our respective roles on the team.

I remember Karl-Erik Sveiby saying that trust provides the bandwidth for communication. However, communication is impossible without good conversations. We met every day at 9.30 am over coffee and muffins. We always used the same room, which became covered in our drawings and notes—a constant reminder of previous conversations and agreements. These meetings were an opportunity to raise issues of concern, inform the team of new strategic directions, and update everyone of where we were with respect to the overall project plan.

In addition to our morning meetings (which tended to be only 30 minutes to an hour in duration), we held three half-day sessions in which we included the client and other

stakeholders to develop further ideas on the project. The project made use of Lotus Quickplace for online discussions and as a repository of documents in progress.

The team worked hard and had great fun. We did a quality job for the client. But things were not perfect; there were many lessons to be learnt from our time together. Ultimately we were successful because we respected the rich diversity of the team. 'Group think' was never a problem—because we revelled in the project's complexity and spoke our minds, and because no-one attempted to 'dumb down' the information that we passed to one another. We focused on our roles, and not on the positions we held. We were peers working towards a common goal.

I wouldn't change many things if I had to do this project again. In fact, as a professional consultant, I know that I'm succeeding if I'm having fun, learning, delivering value to the client, and making new friends.