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**Resolving Student Team Conflict via Role Clarification:**

***RACI Charting and the “Planning a Wedding” Exercise***

*An Exercise that Improves the Health of Student Teams*

**Resolving Student Team Conflict via Role Clarification**

An active experiential exercise that teaches a tool and process that reduces the all too common distress caused by a lack of role clarity, role overlap, role confusion and role conflict. Participants learn to properly use a role clarification tool and process while engaging in an active and informative experiential exercise entitled “Planning a Wedding.” Subsequently, the Teams can use the same tool and process as their team embarks on a major team project.

**Abstract**

A common structure of an academic course within a traditional academic semester often requires the formation of productive and functional student teams very quickly. The student teams typically need to complete a substantive project, case study analysis or paper by the end of the term. Often, the academic objectives associated with the team projects are not achieved simply because the student team fails to spend an appropriate amount of time and effort organizing the task ahead of them and clarifying the roles of individual team members. Indeed, consideration of any team dysfunction often only occurs towards the end of the semester as the project deadline approaches or passes. Intra-team conflict, social loafing, student and professor dissatisfaction and poor quality projects often result. This paper proposes a means to prevent the student team conflict and dysfunction that is caused by a lack of student attention to the essential tasks of project planning and role clarification. The “Planning a Wedding” experiential exercise uses film clips, a role clarification tool and process as well as supporting materials to ensure students recognize the essential nature of early project planning, equitable division of labor and role clarification.

**RATIONALE FOR THE EXERCISE:**

Student team projects too often fail to meet their teaching objectives. The authors of this paper collectively assessed poor student team performances, drawn from their 2016 classes, and found that a number of common team dysfunctions often occur. These include:

* Over-reliance on one or two team members (when team size ranges from 5-8 members)
* Disjointed projects or papers that develop from a lack of integrative efforts (different students doing different sections of the project and then simply stringing their individual pieces of work together)
* Missing required elements or sections of the project or paper
* Poor quality projects that result from students engaging in last minute rescue efforts for some or all elements of the project.

Unfortunately, poor performance on a major team project can have negative effects that go beyond the classroom. Damaged interpersonal relationships, lowered grade point averages, course dissatisfaction and declining student interest in a discipline all may result from a contentious and negative experience.

The need to establish role clarity in workplace settings has spawned a variety of practitioner tools and techniques such as “responsibility charting” and “RACI” processes[[1]](#footnote-1). The exercise described here teaches the use of one of those practitioner tools (the RACI chart and process) in order that it can be used to assist in the execution of student projects. The exercise will also help prepare our graduates to deal with dynamics that they will undoubtedly encounter early in their managerial careers.

**LEARNING GOALS:**

1. Identify the basic processes commonly used to enhance the effectiveness of the division of labor and role clarity.
2. Analyze a decision-making scenario using a model which applies conflict avoiding concepts.
3. Describe why conflict and dysfunction arise due role ambiguity.

**APPROXIMATE TIMING:**

This exercise is well suited to be run across two class sessions, with homework being assigned between the two. Seventy minutes is required in the first class session and 45 minutes are needed in the second class session. The exercise and homework assignment can also be done in one long class session (e.g. 2 hours).

Explanations of what is to be done in each of the class segments are fully described in the Teaching Note which begins on page 7.

**Class 1:**

**Set the Context for the Exercise Using Film Clips** 15 Minutes

**Introduce the RACI Charting Tool (See Appendix A & B):** 10 Minutes

**Explain the RACI Charting Process: (See Teaching Note):** 10 Minutes

**Explain the Wedding Planning Assignment – Take Questions:**  5 Minutes

**Have Teams Break the Wedding Planning Project into 10 tasks:** 10 Minutes

**Chronologically Order the Tasks** 5 Minutes

**Assign “Players”; Assign Primary Responsibilities** 10 Minutes

**Explain the Homework Assignment** 5 Minutes

**Class 2:**

**Break-out Group Discussions: Conduct a RACI Meeting** 30 Minutes

* **Record Results**

**Class Discussion – Explain to the students how they are to use the tool and execute the same process as they begin to engage on their “real” student team project.** 15 Minutes

**NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS**:

Can be adapted for any class size. (You will be breaking the students into groups of approximately 8 participants for parts of the exercise.)

**MATERIALS NEEDED:**

* RACI Charting Introduction: Provided here as Appendix A
* RACI Chart Template: Provided here as Appendix B
* Blank index cards
* Large “Post it” Notes (3 inch square or larger)
* LCD Projector, sound, screen and computer to play film clips from the popular Hollywood movie “Father of the Bride” (Touchstone Pictures Films; 1991)

**MATERIALS NEEDED FOR EAM PRESENTATON:**

* LCD Projector/Screen for laptop projection

**TEACHING NOTE**

**Resolving Student Team Conflict via Role Clarification:**

**Introducing the Exe**r**cise:**

Provide the students with a minimal description of the exercise. Tell them that they will be functioning as a group of people who are involved in the planning of a wedding. They will be using a RACI Charting tool and process as they do so. Acknowledge that weddings take all shapes and forms and vary greatly across cultures and religions. Acknowledge that for the purpose of this exercise they will be planning a wedding such as one such as that depicted in the Hollywood movie “Father of the Bride”. The film clips set the context and shows some of the elements they will be required to incorporate into their wedding plan (e.g. a guest list, reception facility, etc).

**Show a few clips from the movie Father of the Bride:**

* Scene 1: (Chapter 1 and Chapter 2: 4:16-8:40) The opening scene sets the context for the wedding.
* Scene 2: (Chapter 2: 12:45-15:15) This scene further sets the context but can be eliminated if the Professor is running short on time.
* Scene 3: (Chapter 6: 37:30 - 42:25) This scene shows the beginning of family/team conflict caused by a lack role clarification.

**Discussion:**

Following the film clips, engage the students in a discussion of why the family is experiencing such conflict when a wedding should logically be a joyous occasion. Students will respond with concepts such as:

1. The characters are battling for control of key parts of the wedding plan
2. The characters have different perceptions of what they want to see happen
3. The characters don’t have role clarity as to who is going to plan what, or by when.

Introduce the RACI Chart Tool as a tool that practitioners often use to establish goal and role clarity on complex projects. They will be applying the tool to the task of planning a wedding. Explain the tool, its coding (See Appendices A and B) and the RACI charting process.

**RACI Charting Process:**

**Step 1: Developing the task list**

Describe “Planning a Wedding” as a project. The students’ first step will be to break that complex project down into manageable pieces. Instruct the students to break the wedding project down into 10-12 tasks. Mandate that they include the following tasks and allow them to generate the remainder of the tasks.

1. Set the date
2. Choose and reserve the wedding venue
3. Establish a budget
4. Choose and reserve the reception venue
5. Decide upon the guest list

Note: Sometimes the students will ask about the “level of granularity” they should use when they break the project into tasks. Give guidance that each of the tasks should be able to be logically assigned as the responsibility of one or, at the most, two people. If not, the task should be further broken down. The person or persons who assume responsibility for the task will eventually be designated the big “R” in terms of the RACI coding and should be capable of taking the responsibility for completing that task. After the students have broken the complex task of “Planning a Wedding” into 10-12 manageable tasks, each task should then be written separately on a large “Post it” note.

**Step 2:** **Chronologically order the tasks**

Ask the student groups to then put the tasks into chronological order. (Arranging and re-arranging the “Post it” notes on a wall will facilitate the completion of this task). Explain that timing of task completion needs to be commonly understood by all team members, for some of the tasks are dependent on the prior completion of other tasks. Once this step is finished the students should be instructed to put the chronologically ordered list into the “Y” axis of their RACI charting template.

**Step 3: Determine the “Players”**

Ask the students to determine the players who need to be involved in the planning of the wedding. This will fill in the “X” axis of the RACI chart template. Give a few examples such as:

* Bride
* Groom
* Mother of the Bride
* Father of the Bride
* Mother of the Groom

Ask the students to come up with a list of “players” that has the same number of people as are in their group. Once the list is generated the students should create one set of index cards – each card will have the name of one player written on one side of the card.

**Step 4: Assign Roles**

Instruct the students that they are going to assume the roles that are across the “X” axis of the RACI Chart. Explain that the roles will be assigned by a random drawing of the index cards. There will be no consideration of marital status, gender or sexual orientation for the purposes of this exercise. It’s merely an exercise to learn the RACI tool and process. The random selection of roles turns out to be engaging and humorous.

**Step 5: Assign Primary Responsibility for Each Task**

Ask the students to begin their RACI chart coding with the selection of one person (or at most two) to be the big “R” (Primarily Responsible) for each task. After discussion of who should be responsible for each task, the big “R” code should be recorded on the RACI chart for each task.

**Assign Homework:**

Students who have been selected as the big “R” for any task will be asked to fill in what code they believe should be assigned for every cell within their “row”. For example, if the Bride is assigned the big “R” for the development of the guest list, she may propose that the Mother of the Groom should be consulted (“C”) before the guest list is developed. Also, instruct the students that players may have two codes assigned to any one particular task cell. For example, a Mother of the Groom may be assigned a “C/I” coding for the “Develop a Guest List” task. This would indicate that the Mother of the Groom would want to be consulted before the final decision is made and informed after the final decision has been made.

Every student should fill out their column on the RACI matrix with the RACI code they should be asked to execute for each task.

Explain that during the next class the students will have to reconcile their proposed RACI chart coding during a team meeting. Each task will have a proposed set of coding as designed by the primarily responsible person, and each “player” will have prepared their proposed role for each task. Thus, if the coding in a cell is identical on both the big “R’s” matrix and the “Player’s” spreadsheet, agreement as to the proper role for that person on that task should be easy to achieve. If the coding assigned by the two differs, then a discussion needs to be had and consensus needs to be achieved.

**Class Two:**

**Reconcile RACI Charts (30 minutes)**

Explain to the students that this step is perhaps the most important of the entire RACI process. The value in the process is in the dialogue that occurs between the different players, as they discuss their proposed codes and reconcile their RACI charts. Of critical importance in this step is the role clarification associated with those players who are assigned a small “r” or “partially responsible” codes. It is important for all parties to know “how” someone is partially responsible; what support does the big “R” need and by when do they need it?

**Report Outs (15 minutes)**

Have each student team “report out” their results for one task/row of the RACI chart. (Our preference is to ask them to report out the row associated with the “Develop a Guest List” task.) You will find different groups had different assignments for the players on this task. We suggest you leverage this observation to explain that the “value” of the process is the role clarifying dialogue that occurs between the players.

**Wrap Up: (5 minutes)**

Review the entire RACI process and the guidelines associated with RACI charting (e.g. limit the number of players assigned the big “R” for any single task, etc.)

**Teaching Option:**

As the “Wedding Planning Exercise” wraps up we often stipulate that the students must do a RACI chart for their major term project. The RACI chart must be turned in to the professor along with a two – three page paper that describes:

1. A brief description of the process they followed
2. Key task and timing commitments made by the students and
3. Their reflections on the value of taking the time to do a RACI chart at the beginning of their efforts to complete a team project.

# Appendix A

# Roles and Responsibilities Charting

* If goals and roles are clear, teams automatically are ready to move into action.
* Responsibility charting helps focus on who will do what on the team in team in terms of:
  + activities
  + decisions
* communications

**RACI Definitions**

* **R** — Responsible
* The doers. The person or persons directly involved in performing the activity per defined procedure and in impacting the results. These people are responsible for performing the tasks and accountable for their actions.
* **A** — Accountable
  + The buck stops here. The person with ultimate authority and accountability. The person that knows what policies and procedures are adhered to, that progress is measured, that

results are achieved.

* **C** — Consult
  + The reference points. The person or persons who must be consulted or whose opinion must be obtained before a decision is made.
* **I** — Inform
  + The need to know. The person or persons that need to know of a decision or action.

**Appendix B**

**Coding:**

**Before**

**C** = Must be consulted

**During**

**R =**Primary Responsibility

**r =**Contributing, partial,

support responsibility

**After**

**A =**Accountable/Must approve

**I =** Must be informed

**Rules:**

For each task, determine who gets the "R." If it's you, complete the line for the task. If it's not you, complete only your relationship to the task. You will have a coding for all tasks in your name column.

**Responsibility Chart**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Team Member |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Tasks |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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1. Role Clarification Process Acronym – RACI: Responsible, Accountable, Consult, Inform. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)