

1 Purpose

The purpose of this puzzle is to teach a team at a biotech startup (who will present the product to investors) how to produce high-quality work.

2 Context

One is working at a Seattle biotech startup as an expert in the field. Specifically, the startup aims to set up “open science” biology labs around the area so people can rent equipment and lab space in order to conduct their own experiments. Since the founder of the startup is not on the team, he is not especially helpful. One’s team consists of oneself (a UW dropout) and the following people:

- A taciturn man in his 20s who is seemingly scornful of the others on the team.
- A professional-dressing woman in her 40s who asks “sharp, and biting, questions”, and who talks about “management and resource needs”.
- A woman in her 20s who “talks like a valley girl” and is good at transferring data from labs to the computer models.
- A man in his 30s who draws sketches during meetings and doesn’t seem focused.

The team members have been getting hostile with each other as of late.

3 Materials needed

No specific materials are needed, other than perhaps the attention of the team . . .

4 Method

The strategy here is to bring the team together by letting each person share their views in front of the others. Ideally, one would also meet up with each member individually either before or after (or both) the group meeting, so that one can obtain more candid feedback, and also feedback on the meeting itself. Also, since communicating in text might be easier for some (especially the taciturn man), one would also ideally send out messages via email in order to get even more detailed feedback.

The plan will be to have a round-table discussion of sorts, guided by the following questions, so that each member can come to some conclusions as to what the team must do (and to reiterate these points so it is clear). In other words, the idea is that it is impossible to teach people how to do something better without first understanding their current difficulties. (And in general, giving specific advice is much more useful.)

- What do you think about the level of productivity on the team lately? Why do you think this is?
- Is my impression correct that some of our team members haven't been getting along lately? Without naming anyone, why do you think this has been the case?
- Are we motivated enough to get the job done well? If not, what can we do to motivate ourselves better?
- What do you think of the founder, and do you think there are things we need to tell him (suggestions, insights, etc.)?
- Are we feeling overwhelmed?

Cold-calling would also be used to facilitate discussion.

5 Results

The consensus was that the discussion went very well. Several people stated in their reviews that cold-calling worked well, and I felt the same way. People also thought that they were properly involved in the discussion (especially if they were playing the role of not being very involved). The minor criticisms I received were that (1) I was a bit too direct in pointing out the dysfunction of the team (and should have used vaguer terms like “improving teamwork”) and (2) the conclusion that was reached was to talk to the boss, which hadn't worked so far. (Although it's worth mentioning that I would dispute both of these.) I also received the feedback that having everyone listen to each other was a good idea. One person even remarked that this method seemed to work better than they had anticipated.