



# Team Process Report

**Course:** Communication and Team Building

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**Instructor:** Professor Fatima Albar

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**Team:** Team 4

Yassir Alamari  
Hamed Alyaqout  
Qin Guo  
Jerrod Thomas

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## Executive Summary

Our team found this Communication and Team Building course turned out to be a fascinating journey in working together. Like most classes, you begin with the end in mind; everyone desires an excellent final grade and there is a lot of expectation in the beginning. The group was comprised of one electrical engineering student, one mechanical engineering student, and two engineering and technology management students, three of whom this was their first exposure to any ETM course. All of our team members came from various cultural backgrounds with a Kuwaiti, a Saudi, a Chinese, and an American. We had a spread of ages ranging from just out of undergraduate, to middle-aged, two members with families, one just starting their family, three babies on the way, and one not even thinking about that stage of life yet. Through this course, this rag-tag assembly of students committed to each other to succeed and in doing so achieved a great example of what it means to form and engage as a team.

## Observation and Analysis

Our team really got off on the right foot. This is not always the case, as some teams take significantly more time to organize and get to the first stage of team development: forming.

### Team dynamics

#### Forming

It was in this formative stage that we quickly agreed on a few key criteria that held all term long and made us successful: we agreed to meet regularly and we choose to engage in all projects and presentations as early as possible. This was especially helpful during the forming stage as it quickly built trust around that shared vision of completing our assignments during the earlier part of the term to allow for a slower second half, something that was very helpful for several team members who were burdened with additional courses with heavy deliverables due late in the term.

We used the course syllabus as our guidepost. During our first team meeting, Sunday at 8:30 a.m., we laid out the basics of how the term's deliverables would be met. Everyone was enthusiastic and agreed to share the workload; task assignments required no extra effort to find a willing participant. We laid out the proposed deliverables and attached a name to each. For the selected readings, we chose to have one individual be responsible for writing each one, and two other responsible for reading, editing, and reporting back. This eagerness to commit to work on day one made everyone happy to be in a group where the work would be split, and alleviated a lot of fear of having to do more than their fair share.

By using the syllabus as a formal reward system, a tool that laid out the expectations, deliverables, timetables, etc., we were able to move through the required agenda quickly. This ended up leaving a lot of room for small talk and this gave us time to create a more informal relationship between team members. Over the course of the term, we spent much time discussing our families, interests, hobbies, places we had visited and all other manner of topics that helped to solidify the relationships and reinforced that initial trust.

Our first sessions were not without some awkwardness. When we started planning our first presentation, there was a lot of discussion about how to present the topics and what game we should set up for the class to play. This went unanswered for a week as we decided to let everyone go home, think about more original ideas, and come back to make our final decision while we completed the presentation slides. This presented some friction within the group, but the level of dissent was muted because of the newness of our relationship. In the end, we decided on a highly engaging game that was well-received and our presentation's only major negative feedback was to be sure to spread the amount of presentation time more equitably between our team members.

### Storming

By the third team meeting, it was impressive how easily we talked and discussed topics, even for which we disagreed upon; the communication never became argumentative and ideas were expressed and examined openly, again building trust. We took the feedback from the professor about the first team presentations and discussed these remarks so that we were as prepared as possible to deliver on our first presentation. Once we received the feedback that we should share the presentation time, we quickly pivoted for our second presentation and made sub-teams for the major topics, two per topic. This allowed us to focus on specific topics and allowed us to share the work even more equitably. During this time, we had also worked through a couple selected reading assignments and team members had the opportunity to provide critical feedback to each other. This could have turned out to generate conflict, but each team member was respectful and supportive of the author, providing constructive criticism and edits were needed.

After a couple of team meetings, one team member became took on the role of coach, helping with more detailed commentary on the writing assignments and generally keeping things on track as they had been exposed to many ETM courses. Everyone started to 'gel' a bit and things really progressed into the next stage of team development.

### Norming

By the middle of the term, we were on a roll. Everyone was comfortable with each other, discussions came easy, and we were ahead of schedule. Our bizarre 8:30am on a Sunday meeting schedule worked perfectly and we met every week of the term without fail. All term long there was not a single absence from any of our team meetings.

Because we gave ourselves plenty of time, and didn't skip meetings when we potentially could have, we were able to do the assignments in smaller pieces, allow for more time to discuss, and generally came away with a better final product with less stress and overall work. This again allowed us more time to engage in small-talk during our sessions. Getting to know each other really helped us smile and have fun while we worked. It was early, but even our 22-year-old compatriot was up and smiling along with us older folks.

When it came to the final presentations, there was one final preparation session that we had to make some decision on what content to include and what content to cut and we had a lot of good ideas available. When it came down to it, we trusted each other, came to a couple compromises, and some team members gave up on their preferred game in exchange for completing the presentation and being ready and well rehearsed. This could have gone much worse. Some of us have had experiences with team projects where there are significant amounts of infighting within the team and no ideas are left out. This often results in overly complicated, or just plain bad reports or projects. By trusting each other, we were able to focus down to key topics and ideas and deliver clear and unified presentations for which we were proud of. Once our second presentation was done, we were on the home-stretch. We had completed all the selected reading assignments early, our research report was turned in, and all that was left was this document and something fun to do. The last team meeting was more about enjoying each other's company than it was about getting our homework done. It was about as far away from a harried, long-shot, mad-dash to the finish as it could be, far different than many other group project experiences.

### **Performing**

While our performance was high, we did not have sufficient time to become a true high-performing team. We were well into norming and really enjoyed working together, and a few more assignments we may have been classified as such, but with only 10 weeks and only a few assignments, we'd feel remiss making this leap to full performing status.

### **Individual Contributions**

As a team, we worked well because we learned to listen and value each member's contributions as an individual. We discussed each other's strengths and tried to share the work, but also target the workload to play to these strengths. In some cases, we made assignments to individuals in areas they were weak, but we also supported those individuals in those tasks so they could grow and improve. Below we discuss just some of these individual contributions are areas of growth.

### **Hamed**

Hamed is a most passionate and gregarious individual, always the heart of our meetings. He brought a lot of energy, great ideas for engaging games, and a keen analytical eye. He was always looking out for what was required, what would work well

for the instructor, for the student audience. This ability to evaluate our plans through various perspectives was invaluable in the process of designing and planning our presentations. His effervescent personality charged the room during presentations as he committed himself completely to the role. While his contributions were many, one thing that stood out was his wide smile and constant inclusion of fun into our team and the class.

#### Jerrod

As the person with the most experience with ETM courses, Jerrod helped chart the path for assignments; he was the logistical support. Having employment with the University also came with the benefit of having access to an office with a large-screen TV and comfortable meeting arrangement that was used exclusively for our team meeting each and every week. In addition to space, he also brought some organizational tools into play, keeping meeting minutes, agendas, and shared assignments organized in the PSU Google Drive platform. Since Jerrod was the only native English speaker, he also provided instrumental support in editing content, providing constructive feedback to the team and helping finalize our written reports.

#### Qin

Being brand-new to her masters program, Qin was a bit nervous for her first presentations in front of a foreign audience in her non-native tongue. For all those nerves, she stood up and presented one of more complicated sections during our second presentation while providing all sorts of invaluable back-end support not obvious to the audience in class. Qin was extremely efficient in any task assigned to her and dedicated to her duty to edit other authors' works. She would jump into documents and give them a rework, grammar pass, and sometimes significant rewriting to make them clearer, regardless of what time of day or night it was. This was actually very surprising to the rest of the team but it was a skill we quickly put to use in both composition of much of our written material, as well as editing. Basically every word written by our team has been reviewed and improved because of Qin.

#### Yassir

Yassir was the catalyst. Within the first two minutes of us forming our team in class he said, let's do all this work as soon as possible. Now that might have been his 11 graduate credit hour load talking, or possibly his wife's pregnancy talking, but either way, he pushed us from day one to a pace that made our entire class experience easier and more rewarding. It was also Yassir who volunteered to do the first selected reading and offered to do the fifth without hesitation. This attitude so early in our forming process really galvanized our team to achieve. When it came to our research report, Yassir brought a great personal experience forward that fit within the course materials perfectly. We quickly agreed that this was the topic we should cover and got started. He was able

to supply all the materials we needed to do our research paper and we had little trouble in getting that assignment out the door.

## Communication

When our team was formed during the first class, Jerrod compiled the contact information and emailed it to the team and set up a Google Drive for communication and sharing file. Posting a note in the Google Drive became the way to make assignment and track ongoing work. Email was used to ask questions or when any issues came up. Since we had each other's contact information we would occasionally text or call each other when a quick response was required. These tools made it remarkably easy to keep all team members apprised of what was going on and no one ever felt left out or unsure of what they were assigned to.

With such a culturally diverse, coming from three different cultures with different native languages, different communication styles and different cultural values, communication could have been challenging. What ended up happening is that we used it as a bridge to get to know each other and push team formation. We used personal experiences to compare our ideas in both formal and informal conversations. The team members were frank enough to talk about their own culture and about their preconceived understanding of each other's cultures and this both helped us understand the material, and grew our individual perspectives about how different cultures experience things differently.

## Discussion

Our team worked surprisingly well together. It was an interesting grouping of individuals with very different backgrounds, both culturally, technically, and professionally. After discussing this extensively, we've been trying to find something we would have done differently and are having a problem coming up with anything. This has been one of the more smooth team projects that Jerrod has been involved in, and the rest of us agree: we had a good plan from the beginning and we worked that plan.

## Conclusion

As a cross-cultural team, it is somewhat difficult to achieve outstanding performance since we have to navigate our past cross-cultural pitfalls<sup>[1]</sup>. People from different cultural backgrounds are more likely to have different attitudes towards hierarchy, ambiguity, achievement-orientation, and time<sup>[3]</sup> For example, when it comes to how people focus on their activity, American culture is doing-oriented. They believe in hard working and constant pursuit of achievement. However, Chinese, who are of a controlling orientation, rationally and logic, are primary to working and living<sup>[1]</sup> In our

team, we have three different cultures-American, Chinese, and Middle Eastern cultures. Our differences in value systems moderately influenced the way team members worked together<sup>[2]</sup>, such as the approach we used to communicate with each other, the attitude toward time management, and the way we deal with crisis, which ultimately impacted the team performance.

In order to overcome the problems caused by cultural differences and maximize our team performance, we established discipline within the team in our first team meeting. As mentioned previously, this included: meeting regularly at a pre-determined time, utilizing Google Drive to share course materials and collaborate on composition of papers and presentations, and creating team meeting notes to allocate assignments and record team dynamics. These disciplines contributed to the formation of a real team by getting team members from different cultures to develop a common approach—how we work together to accomplish our purpose<sup>[3]</sup>. We all agreed on who would do specific work, how schedules would be set, what skills needed to be developed, and how the team would modify its decisions. These rules helped to establish the mutual trust between each team member and as a result, we never missed a Sunday with everyone attending every meeting.

On the other hand, the team meeting notes have been used as a measure to monitor the assignments and activities to make sure that everyone is on a given task at the right time<sup>[4]</sup>. During this project, our team played the lead role in designing our own measurement system, and adopted only a handful of measures—four in total—, which significantly improved our team performance. For instance, when preparing for the project report, we formed two sub-teams (Yassir, Hamed) (Qin, Jerrod), and each sub-team worked together to finish part of the report. The primary reason why we formed two sub-teams is that Yassir provided entire background and photographs of the case study used in our project, and Hamed has excellent analysis ability that could be applied to the discussion section. Since Jerrod has fabulous ability of combining various materials, and Qin is good at grammar editing, they worked together to guarantee the smooth and correct flow of the project report. With the right mix of skills, we succeeded in the accomplishment of the project report.

Katzenbach and Smith (2002) mentioned in their book that when selecting a team, it is a mistake to ignore each individual's skills<sup>[3]</sup>. However, as a team that formed to work on a course project in the university, it is hard to assemble individuals with all the necessary skills, especially when most students in the class never know each other before. Therefore, after becoming a team, the performance focus helped us quickly identify our skill gaps and the potential skills needed to develop in order to accomplish the project. Our team also shaped our purposes according to the various demands during the different phases of the project. This obviously caused more challenges to



surpass while the shared commitment to a common purpose and performance goals encouraged an optimistic attitude.

Meanwhile, each team member tried their best to find some method to make their own contribution to the team since we all held ourselves accountable as a team. Team accountability is about “the sincere promises we make to ourselves and others,” including two crucial aspects of teams: “commitment and trust.”<sup>[3]</sup> The trust between the team and the commitment to a common purpose and performance goals drive each team member to continuously pursue the success of the project. When talking about how we established the trust within our team, the correct approach of communication played a critical role. Communication has long been considered crucial for establishing and maintaining a productive team<sup>[5]</sup>. Our team preferred face-to-face communication, therefore, we meet weekly in person. Occasionally we used written communication, such as, email, texting, or Google Documents, which helped to reduce the misunderstanding within the team. Basically, in our team, the communication patterns are formal, cordial, and very little conflict due to the equitable distribution of work. The other important reason is that we are always willing to support each other when someone is unable to handle his/her task. For example, in the week six, one team member needed to prepare for the midterm exams, thus having little time to accomplish the write-ups. Then another team member took over his work and finished the write-ups. Such things like that contributed to a harmonious environment within our team, which significantly improved the team performance.

Upon dealing with the communication problems, our team predominantly followed these principles. Firstly, we shared information with each other. Building relationships is a “two-way process”<sup>[2]</sup>. When working with people from different cultures, trying to share your own cultures is a good way to help them establish a better understanding of your cultural background. For example, two members in our team come from Middle Eastern countries, and from time to time, they would tell us some certain customs in their countries. Secondly, getting to know each team members’ strengths and weakness helps to rationally allocate the tasks<sup>[6]</sup>. If someone has a strong ability of delivering an excellent presentation while poor at auditing/editing papers, he would be uncomfortable to be assigned a writing task instead of a presentation. Last but not the least, it is important to treat each team member equally. People would be reluctant to make contributions if being treated unfairly, and obviously this will cause conflicts within the team. Despite these challenges caused by cultural diversity, working with people from different cultural backgrounds benefited each team member with “increased knowledge,” “broader skills,” “wider participation,” and “continuous improvement”<sup>[2]</sup>. We also had a good deal of fun.

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