

## TEAMWORK TURMOIL

Tony Marshall, a second-year learning team mentor, stared at his notes again. His interaction with the team last night confirmed what he suspected. Only three weeks into the first year of an MBA program at a big-name school in the eastern United States, the learning team was in trouble. From his own experience the year before, Marshall knew that a first-rate learning team made a huge difference in a student's first-year experience (see **Exhibit 1** for details on learning teams at this particular business school). The corollary was also true: a bad or difficult learning team experience could taint the entire first-year school experience. Although Marshall wanted to help, he was not at all sure how to do so. Perhaps describing the situation to his fellow peer mentors in his second-year elective class on managing teams would draw out some good ideas. In his mind, Marshall could hear himself explain the story:

*Let me first describe the team members.* Essentially, they were all around 26 years of age, athletic, and had professional backgrounds in finance or economics. I'll start with Tom Giffen, who was a self-professed introvert and who was passionate about the Chicago Cubs baseball team. Professionally, prior to business school, Griffin worked as a financial analyst on Wall Street for a few different firms. He spent time at the London School of Economics, but had not traveled outside the country much over the past few years. With plans to target investment banking firms for his summer internship and post-Darden career path, Griffin had been spending a lot of nights networking with banking alumni and recruiters.

Sandeep Prasad was from Bangalore, India. He received a degree in technology and worked for Intel in Bangalore for six years before coming to graduate school. Prasad spoke fluent English and was a huge cricket fan. He followed his favorite team, Bengal, passionately and was also very involved in the informal Indian club at the school and planned to make his chicken curry for the International Food Festival. After graduation, Prasad wanted to pursue a career in consulting and hoped to get sponsored for a visa to live and work in the United States permanently.

Jennifer Martin was the only woman on the learning team and came from a mixed-race family—African American and Caucasian. In 2002, Martin was awarded the crown for Miss Colorado and had been Miss Colorado Teen in 1999. Coupling brains with beauty, Martin

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This case was prepared by Yuctan Hodge (MBA '07) and Stacey Jenkins (MBA '07) under the supervision of Lynn A. Isabella, associate professor of business administration. It was written as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation. Copyright © 2007 by the University of Virginia Darden School Foundation, Charlottesville, VA. All rights reserved. *To order copies, send an e-mail to sales@dardenbusinesspublishing.com. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, used in a spreadsheet, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without the permission of the Darden School Foundation.*

received a dual undergraduate degree in finance and information systems. Prior to business school, she worked as an analyst for a private foundation. Martin planned to focus her career on private wealth. Despite the great amount of networking that her chosen career path required, Martin was very involved in the school community. She spent a lot of time working on projects for the Black Business Student Forum and the National Association of Women MBAs.

Daren Onyealisi was originally from Nigeria and had been living in the United States for more than 10 years. He graduated from the University of Maryland with a degree in government. Following his undergraduate degree, Onyealisi worked as a policy research analyst for the District of Columbia, then changed career paths and worked as a real estate analyst for three years before attending business school. Onyealisi was a first-generation college graduate and awarded the Robert Toigo Foundation Fellowship upon entering the MBA program.<sup>1</sup> While Onyealisi was not very involved in the graduate school community, through the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America organization he was a Big Brother for local youths. Onyealisi planned to target the consulting industry for his summer internship.

Rob Delery was the only scientist in the group and earned a BS in chemical engineering from Penn State. During his undergraduate years, Delery was a member of the Penn State soccer club and the team won the national championship when he was a sophomore. Before business school, Delery worked for Air and Product Chemicals in Allentown, Pennsylvania. He was hired into the competitive Engineering Career Development Program consisting of three one-year rotational assignments in varying locations and functional roles. Being single, Delery embraced the social life of the school community and could often be found at the Thursday Night Drinking Club. Like Griffin, Delery planned on going into investment banking after graduation.

This brings us to the sixth learning team member—Jason Cooper. He was also a former college athlete. While working on a degree in accounting at Washington & Lee University, Cooper was also the captain of the varsity football team. Before business school, he spent five years in real estate investment. Cooper was the only married member of the learning team, and his wife worked in the school's admissions office. He was very involved in the Christian fellowship program at the school and planned to continue his career in real estate.

*Now here's what I saw that night that brought me to share this story with you.* Marshall was already in the room when team members began to arrive, and Onyealisi was the last to enter. "I didn't realize you were going to be here tonight," Delery said looking up from his computer screen. "We haven't seen you all week. Where have you been?"

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<sup>1</sup> The Toigo Fellowship means a lifetime commitment to excellence and a responsibility to carry the Toigo banner of ethical leadership and a spirit of inclusion. Toigo supports the interests of fellows with aspirations for careers on Wall Street in addition to sectors less easily connected to finance roles, such as real estate and pension fund management.

“I’ve been very busy,” Onyealisi responded while smiling at Delery, “I had to head up to D.C. for an interview on Tuesday. But thanks for sending me all the answers and class notes, so I could stay caught up.”

“You’ve already had an interview!?” This was an eye-opener for Delery who continued, “Company briefings haven’t even started yet! And don’t thank me. Jennifer Martin was the one who put everything together.”

With that, Delery looked at Martin, nodded his head, and sat down. When it looked like everyone was ready to go, Martin cleared her throat. “Ok guys; let’s do takeaways from the cases from today.” Delery groaned lightly in response. With an arched eyebrow, Martin asked, “Is there something wrong?”

Delery hesitated for a moment and looked around at the other group members. “Well, we never really agreed that we should do takeaways every day. They take up at least a half hour every meeting and we might be able to make better use of that time or at least get out of here early—I’m sure that Cooper’s wife would appreciate that!”

Cooper just shrugged his shoulders. “I think that takeaways are great and they should really help us when exam time rolls around.” Prasad agreed with Cooper as did Griffin. Martin asked Onyealisi what his opinion was. He shrugged his shoulders and said that it didn’t really matter to him either way. “Well, I guess I’m outvoted then,” Delery said smiling slightly. “Let’s keep going.”

Martin looked at Delery, “If it helps, I can take ownership of the document and put something together at the end of the term for all of us.”

“Anything that helps with exams is great,” Delery responded.

*Okay so none of this seems that bad right? Well please just keep listening.* Martin started with her own notes of takeaways and then asked for additional ones from the rest of the group. As they worked, they passed around the table some chocolate cookies that Cooper’s wife had made. Cooper gave his takeaways and stood up to draw a chart on the board, replicating something that his professor had done in class. As Prasad began covering his takeaways, his cell phone went off and he left the room to answer it. The group paused and several members started to check their e-mail.

Prasad walked back in, apologized for the interruption, and presented his takeaways. Then Martin, who had been taking notes for the group copy, asked Onyealisi if he had anything to say. Onyealisi passed because he had no input, but he looked flustered. “Who’s leading the marketing case tonight?” he asked.

“Well since none of us are marketing experts,” Cooper replied, “we’re just going to have to struggle through this together.”

“I spent some time this afternoon on the first two questions,” Griffin told the group. “Let me go through my responses and we can talk about it as a group, OK?” Martin and Cooper nodded their heads, but none of the other team members responded. Griffin started the case and made sure to mention that everyone was welcome to add anything as he worked his way through the questions. Once Griffin started to repeat himself, Prasad interrupted. “Let me share some of the stories I’ve heard about people having problems with OnStar technology,” he looked at Griffin for approval before continuing. “I think that customer perception is a good indicator of brand awareness.” Cooper spoke up with his interpretation of the case study questions. Delery, who had been sitting silent the entire time then spoke up to mention that OnStar was purchased by affluent people. “No joke,” Onyealisi said, laughing sarcastically. Delery quickly turned his eyes back to his laptop.

*Let me provide you some background about why this was unusual.* Delery was normally the most outgoing of the team members and often shared funny anecdotes from his class sessions. That night he was very quiet. Cooper appeared to notice this because he kept looking over at Delery with a small frown on his face, but he didn’t say anything.

Griffin brought them back to the case questions and provided his thoughts on the next question. Cooper waited for Griffin to finish before he spoke up:

I really don’t understand why you feel that way. I think that you are looking at this too much from a finance standpoint. I think that the important point here is that OnStar has the first mover advantage but it won’t last much longer especially if they can’t fix the defects in the technology.

“Isn’t that pretty much what I said?” Griffin asked the group. Before Cooper could reply Prasad interrupted, “You guys do this every time! One of you thinks he has a different point and you argue about it for 15 minutes before you realize you are saying the same thing.” Cooper and Delery looked at each other and neither responded to Prasad’s comment. Martin looked around the table. “I think we’re working really well on this case tonight so let’s not let things deteriorate, OK?”

“OK, I agree,” Prasad said, “Let’s continue on and talk about the 4 Ps in this situation.” Griffin groaned, “I am so sick of talking about the 4 Ps and we are only three weeks into class!” Delery and Martin laughed as Griffin threw his hands up in the air in disgust. “Well, I heard from a second year,” Prasad smiled and said, “that understanding the components of a marketing plan will be crucial for the final.”

“Well OK. Let’s just do it, then,” Griffin said. “So OnStar is being positioned as a luxury item for a few select brands of car. Do we think that is the right move for them to make?”

“Absolutely not,” Onyealisi snorted. “After all, Toyota only has a few luxury cars and aren’t they mostly lower-end ‘affordable’ cars?” Martin exchanged confused looks with Cooper and Delery and said, “Umm, don’t you mean GM?”

“No, Toyota,” Onyealisi replied, don’t they own OnStar?” Shaking his head slowly Delery asked Onyealisi, “Did you even read the case for tonight?”

“What’s the big deal?” Onyealisi shrugged. “I had to do other things today and besides everyone knows about OnStar.” Martin was visibly upset. “I thought we all talked about how we needed to be prepared for every case,” she sneered. “Otherwise you are basically just using this team to get answers to use in class tomorrow. Why should you benefit from all our work?”

“OK everyone, let’s just slow down for a minute,” Delery said as he waved his hands in the air. “It’s been a really long week and I think that tempers are getting the best of us. Let’s just finish answering these questions so we can get home and try to relax before class tomorrow.” Prasad, Griffin, and Cooper mumbled their assent. Martin didn’t say anything but glared at Onyealisi who said “Fine ... let’s talk about positioning some more.” Martin proceeded to share a personal story about her grandparents love for OnStar and Onyealisi laughed calling them silly and suggested they were wasting money. Martin got defensive about her grandparents, and Cooper and Griffin told similar stories so Onyealisi stopped laughing.

Martin continued and brought up XM as a similar model to follow and again Onyealisi laughed, claiming it was a silly connection since OnStar was not an aftermarket product. The rest of the group again defended Martin’s view arguing that OnStar could be an aftermarket product so that it was not specific to GM cars. Increasing sales and allowing OnStar to get better distribution through Best Buy and Circuit City made sense. Onyealisi stopped laughing and apologized to Martin for not understanding her point. Then he asked some questions about OnStar that were not in the case and that no one had the answers to. The questions concerned the current state of OnStar so he started to Google OnStar. As he did, Prasad cleared his throat and said, “I think that looking up information on the Internet would be a violation of the honor code.”

“Come on, that totally doesn’t make sense,” Onyealisi snorted. “Why shouldn’t we have information about what’s going on today? We already know about the product. It hasn’t been around for that long.” Cooper and Delery agreed with Prasad and told Onyealisi that he definitely couldn’t look any information about OnStar up on-line.

“Do you think it would be possible to sell OnStar through third parties?” Martin asked the group. “For example, having Radio Shack, Circuit City, and Best Buy carry the product. They do it with XM and Sirius radios and I think that OnStar would fit into that market.”

“That is the dumbest idea I have ever heard,” Onyealisi quickly sneered. Martin immediately turned to look him directly in the eye. “Really? And why do you think that, Onyealisi?” Onyealisi smirked and looked down at his computer. He didn’t say anything. Breaking the tension, Delery leaned back in his chair, stretched, and said, “One more question to go. Let’s jam out a positioning statement and call it a night.”

“Can we spend some time talking about what a positioning statement is, and why it’s important?” Cooper looked at Delery and asked. “My professor doesn’t really spend much time

talking about positioning statements so I'm a little confused." Delery groaned and replied. "Can we do that later? Why don't you meet with your professor on your own to talk about that stuff?"

"But I thought that the point of learning team was to help each other grasp concepts—not just work through the case questions," Cooper pressed on. "And I could use the help."

"What if we split cases?" Onyealisi suggested. "That might make us more productive in team meetings and then we can spend more time on concepts."

"I feel like I would go back and redo your work," Prasad said shaking his head. "After all, you didn't even read the case for tonight and we only have two classes tomorrow! You also haven't led any DA, operations, or accounting cases so can I trust that what you share is right?" Cooper frowned at Prasad and asked "What does any of that have to do with my concern about reviewing concepts as a team?"

"We're going to have to talk about splitting cases eventually so why not address it now?" Prasad argued. With this the team meeting quickly deteriorated into multiple side conversations as Prasad and Onyealisi continued to argue about splitting the case work. Delery and Cooper started raising their voices as they volleyed back and forth about spending time on conceptual issues. Martin sighed and looked at Griffin. She turned to me and asked, "Isn't there anything you can do to help?"

*They definitely want me to step in and help but I'm not sure that I'm ready for that—I just don't know what to say or do! I could really use your help. Any ideas?*

Exhibit 1

**TEAMWORK TURMOIL**

The Importance of Learning Teams<sup>1</sup>

With each incoming first-year MBA class, the director of student affairs generated team assignments and kept the members under wraps until the last day of orientation. Learning teams were selected carefully to include diversity (international students, minorities, and females) and mix different class sections with each other. The idea was to offer students an opportunity to work with individuals outside their classroom. Most teams had six or seven individuals who spent two to three hours a night working on case preparation for the following day.

While most students had group or team experiences, the learning teams were different from traditional groups. There was a fundamental difference between teams that had a formally designated leader (e.g., consulting teams, group of analysts, task forces, or project teams) and those teams that were self-managed groups of peers. In the latter, rather than power and accountability being formally situated with one person (i.e., the group manager, the project leader, the chairperson of the taskforce, the informal team leader), there was, at least theoretically, a shared power and accountability. No one was the leader; everyone lead in a learning team. Because these learning teams were self-managed, they called for a distinct set of skills in order to be effective. Rather than one particular individual holding responsibility for things like agenda setting, providing direction or vision, keeping the group focused, mediating conflicts, delegating responsibilities, and debriefing the group's activities, these and all other tasks were distributed throughout the team. Each learning team member was both a leader and a member. This basic distinction was key to understanding how learning teams were different from other teams of which most have been a member.

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the purpose and design of Darden's First Year Learning Teams can be found in the note UVA-OB-0745, "Learning Teams at the Darden Business School," by Joseph Harder and Lynn Isabella.