



Oxford University

A Lesson in Team Dynamics

The traditional approach to managing staff at the University of Oxford was to find the brightest people and slot them into jobs. While this has served the University's reputation for academic brilliance and world-leading research very well, the structure of autonomous teams made it difficult to improve team dynamics and communications. This is changing, thanks in large part to the Margerison-McCann Team Management Profile.

The challenge

The historical approach to managing staff across Oxford University was to find the brightest and the best, slot them into jobs and let them get on with it. This fits well with some of the latest management scholarship about how to get the best out of clever people, but it doesn't necessarily give you an obvious route for helping people deal with the interpersonal difficulties that can arise in any team. And, as Rebecca Nestor, associate director of The Oxford Learning Institute, the staff development unit for the University of Oxford, points out: "Not everyone is skilled at team dynamics."

Rebecca decided that the Margerison-McCann Team Management Profile would be an ideal tool to help improve team communications and dynamics across the University, combining as it does the kind of personal insights to be gleaned through the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® and the more practical work-based results offered by Belbin Team Roles.

But in an institution that entertains only tools, ideas and developments that have a robust academic



© Nasir Hamid

underpinning and are properly grounded in research, Rebecca and her team had to counter early scepticism about the validity of the Team Management Profile.

"Some people start out by thinking that the Team Management Profile is about as reliable and robust as a newspaper horoscope," she says. "But because it is such a well-grounded tool, we are able to easily explain it to people. And in any case, what we have found from the beginning is that once people have filled out the Questionnaire and got their Profile back, all doubts evaporate. The most common response is how 'scarily accurate' the reports are. That opens the door for a whole raft of team development activities."

The solution

One of the most successful applications of the Team Management Profile has been in the University's 26-strong Undergraduate Admissions team, which has gone through rapid and dramatic change during the

“There is a much greater understanding now that anyone in the team can make a valuable contribution to the University as a whole”

past three years. The team is an eclectic mix of people with a range of personalities and backgrounds, both Oxbridge and non-Oxbridge, and director of Undergraduate Admissions Mike Nicholson was very keen, he says, to “forge people into a unified team with a common purpose and identity.”

An afternoon of management training, focusing on the Team Management Profile, revealed an uneven spread of preferences on the Margerison-McCann Team Management Wheel.

“It quickly became apparent that I was the only one of the team in the Creator-Innovator/Explorer-Promoter area,” says Mike. “Most of the team were Concluder-Producers, and there was no-one in the Controller-Inspector/Upholder-Maintainer area. We had an interesting discussion about the implications for how we operated. I had a bit of a rant about the need for people to take the initiative and responsibility in their areas, which led to many of the team feeling depressed and at fault for the team dynamics not working. But at this point the initial sceptics rose to the challenge and helped to get us focused on how to tackle the problems.”

The result

One of Mike's aims in doing the Team Management Profile was to make the team understand the expert contribution they could make to the work of the wider collegiate community.

He explains: “I have staff who are real experts in their area, but they didn't fully appreciate this. Hierarchy and tradition would get in the way of them speaking up if they had a good idea or innovative suggestion. There is a much greater understanding now that anyone in the team can make a valuable contribution to the University as a whole.”

The exercise has also encouraged greater mutual respect and understanding of why people work in particular ways, which has led to better communication and co-operation.

“Team managers have a greater appreciation of how others' activities impinge on their own areas, and have begun to identify where others have pressure points and take the initiative to help them. There have been instances over the past year where we have needed all hands to the pumps and people have responded very well,” says Mike.

The Team Management Profile has also been used to good effect in a team formed to oversee a major HR information systems change at the University. Programme manager Heather Skevington explains: “Seeing what people's preferences were through doing the Team Management Profile meant I could map them according to the type of work they would most enjoy, rather than put them into roles that they would do but would be against their nature.”

Acceptance of the Team Management Profile concept has grown over the past two years as more and more teams from an ever wider range of departments have gone through it. Increasingly, Rebecca and her colleagues use it strategically as part of a Chartered Management Institute-accredited course for first-line managers, and are set to incorporate it in a similar course for the next tier of management.

“People tell us the Team Management Profile really makes a difference to how they do their jobs,” she says. “They are more confident managers, they deal with conflict better, promote collaborative working more easily, and so on. There are some longer-term issues, like communications breakdowns or resistance to being managed, which the Team Management Profile can't easily fix. But because the tool is being used so widely now, more of those sorts of issues are being nipped in the bud before they become major problems.”