



Effective Leadership in Voluntary Academic Environments: Lessons from the Masterminds Club's Tower Crane Challenge

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Abstract. This paper examines the challenges faced by the Masterminds Club at Maxton University during the planning and execution of the Tower Crane Challenge, a student-led event aimed at fostering teamwork and engineering skills. Through a detailed case study analysis, the research identifies three primary challenges: coordination and communication breakdowns, interpersonal conflicts between key members, and differing perspectives on problem-solving. The leadership styles of Harott, Zoha, and Professor Sharon are evaluated, revealing how their approaches impacted team performance and event outcomes. Additionally, the study discusses ethical dilemmas encountered during the planning process, such as favouritism and the dismissal of critical details. Drawing from the literature on team dynamics, leadership, and conflict resolution, the paper offers suggestions for improving collaboration, accountability, and ethical standards within voluntary teams. The findings highlight the importance of effective leadership and communication in navigating complex group dynamics, ultimately providing a framework for future research and practical applications in organizing successful events.

Index Terms- Leadership, Conflict resolution, Team dynamics, Ethics, Micromanagement, communication and coordination.

I. Introduction

Group work is an essential part of academic life, especially during school and university years, where it serves as a training ground for developing crucial interpersonal skills. These collaborative activities are often implemented with the intention of fostering teamwork, promoting inclusivity, and enhancing problem-solving through exposure to different perspectives (Education for Life and Work, 2012). The underlying objective is to prepare students for future professional environments where collaboration, adaptability, and communication are vital for success (Cynthia, 2015). By working in groups, students have the opportunity to refine their soft skills such as leadership, time management, conflict resolution, and empathy which are increasingly recognized as critical competencies for career development (Majid et al., 2019).

Despite these positive intentions, group activities in academic settings often fall short of their potential. One of the primary reasons for this failure lies in the



diverse personalities, working styles, and motivations of the group members (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). Some students prefer a proactive approach, aiming to complete tasks well ahead of deadlines to ensure high-quality results, while others tend to procrastinate, delaying their contributions until the last minute (Felker, 2024). Similarly, student's perceptions of success can vary widely. Some strive for excellence and seek recognition for their efforts, whereas others may be satisfied with simply completing the task. Furthermore, some students thrive on receiving praise and validation for their contributions, while others may be indifferent to external recognition (Covington & Müeller, 2001). These differences can lead to misaligned goals and expectations within the group, resulting in internal friction, misunderstandings, and diminished performance (Murray, 2017).

In academic group work, the presence of external controls, such as faculty oversight and grading criteria, often helps to mitigate these issues. Even in group projects, individual assessments are common, holding each member accountable for their specific contributions to the overall outcome. This accountability structure acts as a balancing force, ensuring that students cannot completely rely on others to carry the weight of the project (Murray, 2017). Additionally, faculty members can provide guidance and intervene in case of conflicts, offering a measure of control over group dynamics (Cole, 2017). As a result, while challenging, academic group activities can usually be managed with a degree of oversight, helping to reduce disparities in effort and engagement among team members.

However, managing group dynamics becomes far more complex in voluntary or extracurricular settings, such as university clubs or student-led organizations (Bodolica et al., 2021; Borders, 2021). In these contexts, there is often no formal grading system or external authority to oversee the process. The participants in voluntary group activities are typically highly motivated individuals often the best students in their respective fields, who are driven by the desire for recognition, leadership roles, and personal development. While these motivations can drive excellence, they can also lead to heightened competitiveness and interpersonal conflicts. In some cases, students may adopt aggressive behaviours or engage in tactics, attempting to undermine their peers in order to gain the spotlight or secure recognition for themselves. This competitive atmosphere can create an environment where collaboration is overshadowed by personal ambition, leading to tension and breakdowns in communication (Swaab et al., 2014).

Leadership within the group must come from within, often requiring one or more members to step up and navigate the delicate balance between collaboration and competition (Omilion-Hodges & Hamel, 2024). This can either improve the team dynamics and bring everyone under one page or it can even disrupt the existing team dynamics. This paper explores these dynamics through the lens of a case study, focusing on the challenges faced by a university club during the planning and execution of a major event. The case study centers on Zoha Dzoza, a key figure in the event planning process, and highlights the complexities of managing group dynamics in a voluntary, high stakes setting. Through Zoha's experiences, this study aims to shed light on the potential pitfalls that can arise when managing group in an academic setting. The study provides insights into different types of leaderships, different



perspectives, ethical considerations, etc. Ultimately, this paper aims to contribute to the broader understanding of group dynamics in voluntary settings, offering practical insights for managing complex team environments in both academic and professional contexts. By analysing the challenges faced by Zoha and her team, the study highlights the importance of effective leadership, communication, and conflict resolution in ensuring the success of group activities.

II. Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study is designed to explore the factors that influence team dynamics, particularly within the context of voluntary team settings. The first phase of the methodology involves conducting a comprehensive literature review. This review examines existing theories, models, and empirical studies related to team dynamics, leadership styles, conflict resolution, and decision-making in voluntary or non-profit organizational contexts. The literature review aims to identify key factors that contribute to successful team collaboration as well as challenges that may arise in these settings, such as communication breakdowns, role ambiguity, and differing motivations among team members. Building on insights from the literature, the second phase of the study involves a detailed case study. The case study focuses on the dynamics observed during the organization of a club event, providing a real-world example to compare against the theoretical frameworks identified in the literature review. The case study captures the roles, behaviours, and interactions of team members throughout the event planning process, documenting both positive and negative aspects of the team's functioning. Data is gathered through participant observation, interviews, and document analysis, such as meeting minutes and communication logs. In the third phase, the research further analyses the leadership styles exhibited by different individuals within the club. This includes examining how various leaders approached conflict resolution, task delegation, and motivation of team members. The leadership analysis focuses on identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each style in addressing issues that arose during the event planning process. By doing so, the study aims to uncover patterns in leadership effectiveness in voluntary team settings. Finally, the study evaluates potential alternative strategies that could have been employed to resolve the challenges faced by the team more effectively. This includes a reflective analysis comparing actual outcomes with possible approaches drawn from both the literature and the observations made during the case study. The aim is to provide practical recommendations for improving team dynamics and leadership practices in similar voluntary organizational contexts. By combining a robust literature review with an in-depth case study and leadership analysis, this research offers a comprehensive examination of the factors that shape team dynamics and leadership effectiveness in voluntary teams.



Figure 1 Research methodology

III. Literature Review

Voluntary or non-profit organizations (NPOs) face unique challenges in team dynamics and leadership due to their mission-driven nature, limited resources, and the involvement of volunteers alongside paid staff (Iseah, 2022). These organizations must balance their commitment to social impact with the practicalities of resource management and stakeholder expectations (Hammer, 2023). As such, team dynamics and leadership strategies within NPOs require tailored approaches. This literature review examines key theories and models related to team dynamics, leadership styles, conflict resolution, and decision-making in the context of NPOs, drawing on empirical studies to highlight the critical factors that influence the functioning of these organizations.

Some of the common models that has proven to be successful in in voluntary settings include Tuckman's Stages of Group Development - Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, and Transforming (Tuckman, 2010). It provides a foundational model for understanding team dynamics in NPOs. During the Forming stage, team members come together to achieve a shared mission, often driven by the organization's social impact goals. In the Storming stage, disagreements about approaches or visions for accomplishing these goals can arise, which is common in mission-driven settings where team members are highly passionate. As teams Norm, relationships solidify, enabling more coordinated progress towards organizational objectives. The Performing stage represents optimal functioning, where the team is able to deliver results aligned with the organization's mission. In NPOs, frequent turnover of volunteers or shifting project-based teams often leads to the Transforming stage, where new goals are set as the team adapts to changing condition (Natvig & Stark, 2016; Tuckman, 2010). Another useful framework is Social Exchange Theory, which posits that the reciprocal relationships between leaders and followers are influenced by the rewards they receive (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In NPOs, where financial incentives are limited, non-monetary rewards such as recognition, empowerment, and personal growth are crucial (Cook et al., 2013). Transformational leaders who provide these social rewards can inspire commitment and positive behaviour in their followers. On the other hand, transactional leaders, when perceived as fair, can elicit positive work-related attitudes, even in the absence of significant



financial rewards (Cropanzano et al., 2017). In NPOs, teams can also benefit from developing Communities of Practice, which are informal networks of individuals who come together based on shared interests or tasks. These communities foster knowledge sharing and capacity building, enhancing the team's ability to innovate and respond to challenges. Within the non-profit sector, fostering communities of practice can improve competencies across teams and help address resource constraints (Meyerhoff & Strycharz, 2013).

Leadership in NPOs is another pivotal area to look into, as leaders must motivate individuals who are often driven by altruism rather than financial incentives. Several leadership styles have been identified as particularly effective in NPOs. Transformational leadership has been extensively studied in the context of NPOs and is widely considered one of the most effective styles in this sector (Koo et al., 2017). Transformational leaders inspire their teams by articulating a compelling vision and fostering a sense of purpose (Mburu et al., 2024). Empirical studies indicate that transformational leadership positively impacts affective commitment and organizational citizenship behaviour, which are critical for maintaining volunteer engagement and achieving organizational goals (Mburu et al., 2024, (Akkad, 2016). For example, research conducted in Indian NGOs found that transformational leaders significantly enhanced organizational culture and effectiveness, while studies in US NPOs linked this leadership style to increased innovation (Bass & Avolio, 2004). Key components of transformational leadership include charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, each of which helps leaders in NPOs navigate the challenges posed by resource limitations and volunteer management. While transformational leadership often takes precedence in NPOs, transactional leadership plays an important role in setting clear expectations and maintaining performance standards (Hamstra et al., 2013). Transactional leaders, by providing contingent rewards, can motivate staff and volunteers to meet specific objectives. Studies show that transactional leadership positively influences affective commitment and organizational citizenship behaviour in NPOs, highlighting its relevance even in mission-driven environments (Brahim et al., 2015). However, the application of transactional leadership in NPOs must be balanced with the broader organizational mission to avoid over-emphasizing short-term goals at the expense of long-term impact. Another type of leadership that has proven to be successful in NGO setting is the Servant leadership. It aligns particularly well with the ethos of NPOs, which prioritize serving communities and stakeholders over personal or financial gain. Servant leaders focus on empowering others, sharing leadership roles, and fostering a positive organizational culture. This leadership style has been shown to reduce volunteer turnover and enhance engagement by emphasizing emotional support and trust (The Power of Servant-Leadership, n.d.). However, caution is advised, as prioritizing individuals' needs over organizational effectiveness can hinder the achievement of mission-related goals (Eva et al., 2018). A newer approach gaining traction is Liberatory Leadership, which emphasizes authenticity, collective leadership, and community building. Liberatory leaders encourage diversity of thought and embrace shared responsibility, which is crucial in NPOs where decisions must reflect a wide range of stakeholder interests. This leadership style promotes inclusion and ensures that decisions align with the organization's core values, making it particularly well-suited for NPOs (Owen & Komives, 2023).



Conflict is common in NPOs, arising from resource constraints, diverse stakeholder interests, and differing perspectives on mission-driven goals. Effective conflict resolution is crucial for maintaining team harmony and achieving organizational objectives. Open communication is fundamental for conflict resolution in NPOs, where transparency and the inclusion of diverse perspectives are necessary (Williams & Taylor, 2012). Establishing clear channels for feedback and discussion helps prevent misunderstandings (Rosa & Karimov, 2018). Mediation, particularly through neutral third parties, can help resolve more complex disputes that arise from conflicting priorities (Benedikt et al., 2020). Ensuring that conflict resolution processes align with the organization's core values and mission is essential in maintaining the integrity of NPOs. Conflict resolution that centres around shared values helps foster stronger team cohesion and reinforces the organization's commitment to its goals (Williams & Taylor, 2012). Decision-making in NPOs often differs from that in for-profit organizations due to the mission-driven nature of the former. NPOs typically involve a broader array of stakeholders in the decision-making process, reflecting the need for inclusivity and transparency. In NPOs, decisions tend to be more collaborative and inclusive of stakeholders such as board members, staff, volunteers, and beneficiaries (Wellens & Jegers, 2013). This approach ensures that decisions align with the organization's mission and social impact goals. However, the process can be slower compared to for-profit organizations, where decision-making is more hierarchical and profit driven.

In summary, team dynamics and leadership in NPOs are shaped by the unique context of mission-driven goals, limited resources, and volunteer engagement. Theories such as Tuckman's Stages of Group Development, Social Exchange Theory, and Communities of Practice provide valuable insights into how NPO team's function. Leadership styles, particularly transformational, servant, and liberatory leadership, are crucial in motivating and engaging teams in the absence of financial rewards. Conflict resolution strategies must prioritize open communication and alignment with organizational values, while decision-making processes in NPOs tend to be more inclusive and collaborative compared to for-profit organizations.

Case Study

This case study examines the intricate dynamics of event planning within a university setting, focusing on Maxton University's Masterminds Club. After the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a significant decline in student engagement, the Masterminds Club strives to reclaim its former prominence by organizing the Tower Crane Challenge, an intra-university technical competition. The narrative delves into the multifaceted challenges faced during the event's planning and execution phases, highlighting the interpersonal conflicts, leadership struggles, and ethical dilemmas encountered by the organizing team. This study provides a comprehensive understanding of the importance of meticulous planning, effective communication, and ethical leadership in successfully managing Voluntary or NPO initiatives.

Introduction

Maxton University is renowned for its diverse array of disciplines, including engineering, business, humanities, and more. Among these, the engineering department stood out prominently, boasting multiple clubs, competitions, seminars,



and activities aimed at enhancing student's knowledge and skills. These endeavours also fostered qualities such as teamwork, leadership, dedication, and punctuality among the students. Two notable clubs within the department were the Masterminds Club and the Innovators Club, both STEM-focused clubs established in 2014. While both clubs initially flourished, the Masterminds Club enjoyed greater student engagement and participation in its various activities under the dedicated guidance of its faculty advisor, Professor Sharon. Her passion for the club's endeavours propelled them to numerous victories in technical competitions such as the Wooden Bridge Challenge, the Q-Tip Dome Challenge, and the Water Rocket Launch Challenge. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant disruptions. With the university transitioning to hybrid learning from December 2019 to May 2021, physical club activities came to a halt. Even after the resumption of in-person classes, the revival of club activities to pre-pandemic levels was proving challenging.

Need for a Revival

Despite the reduced participation in club activities, the club elections were held as usual, resulting in Zoha D'Souza and Harott Peter being chosen as the student Presidents of the Innovators Club and the Masterminds Club, respectively. Due to the significantly low student enrolment in the Engineering Science Department, the membership composition of both clubs was nearly identical.

Zoha took proactive steps to revitalize the Innovators Club, garnering appreciation for its activities. The club even organized an intra-university STEM Challenge that received good recognition across the university. In contrast, the Masterminds Club struggled to regain its former glory, hampered by factors such as a lack of initiatives, the continued suspension of inter-university competitions following the pandemic, and members being busy with Innovators Club events. Realizing the need to revive the Masterminds Club, the club's President, Harott, and Faculty Advisor, Professor Sharon, resolved to reignite its spirit. As the first step towards this goal, they decided to conduct the Tower Crane Challenge.

The Tower Crane Challenge

The Tower Crane Challenge was proposed as an intra-university competition organized under the banner of the Masterminds Club. In this competition, participants were expected to construct a model tower crane, with the arm able to hold a 250 g weight for 20 seconds without collapsing. The participants had to follow a set of rules regarding the dimensions of the model, materials to be used, etc., while constructing the tower crane. The lightest tower crane that successfully held the 250 g weight would be declared the winner of the competition.

Formation of the Team

On June 10th, 2023, a meeting was convened to assemble the organizing team and begin the planning phase. The team was supervised by Professor Sharon, who had significant experience in organizing club events. Alongside her was Harott, fueled by a burning desire to elevate his club's status above that of the Innovators Club. With him were the rest of the club committee: Ryan, Sam, Ali, and Tom, all deeply committed to the same cause. Zoha, who was also the President of the Innovators Club, along with a few junior members (John, Asher, Prat, Alex, and Annie), were



also asked to join the organizing team to provide additional support. With sky-high expectations and a drive to succeed, the team set out on their journey, guided by Professor Sharon's determination to host the event flawlessly.

A Roadblock in Progress

The planning phase of the event began in mid-June, just before the summer break, to allow ample time for preparations, with the hope of hosting the event on October 16th, 2023. Harott created a list of various tasks to be completed, including preparing the challenge brief, creating the advertising poster, preparing the registration form, ordering the 250 g weight that was to be carried by the model tower cranes, printing the club banner, etc. Together, they promised Professor Sharon to dedicate part of their vacation to meticulously plan every aspect, so that the event would be ready to roll out when the university reopened.

Harott even created a WhatsApp group and assigned tasks to each member, which were to be completed before the university reopened.

However, as the summer break progressed, Professor Sharon began encountering difficulties obtaining updates and progress reports from the team. Despite multiple attempts to reach out to Harott, Ryan, and other senior members of the team, the responses were either non-existent or vague. The only person who communicated with Professor Sharon was Zoha who was assigned the duty of poster designing. However, Zoha was reluctant to get too deeply involved due to her already strained relations with Harott and the others from the previous Innovators Club event, the STEM Challenge.

Rivalry Between the Club Presidents

Zoha had initially not wanted to join the team, but upon Professor Sharon's insistence and due to the low number of student members in the club, she decided to get involved. The reason for her initial hesitation was that she was exhausted by her enormous responsibilities and the lack of cooperation among the members while leading the STEM Challenge for the Innovators Club. Additionally, Harott had claimed that his involvement alone had propelled the STEM Challenge to success because he had suggested many improvements to Zoha's initial plan.

Zoha acknowledged that while Harott had contributed valuable insights, the critical components of organizing the event such as planning, documentation, and design work were predominantly handled by herself. Harott's tendency to dismiss these tasks as easy and unimportant was not appreciated by Zoha. This caused tension between them to the point where neither of them wanted to work with each other again. Professor Sharon was aware of this, and she wanted to use the Tower Crane Challenge as an opportunity to resolve their differences.

A Change in Plan

As the team was unresponsive during the summer break, Professor Sharon decided to wait until the university reopened so that all the team members could meet in person and discuss the progress of the event. When the university reopened on August 29th, 2023, Professor Sharon requested Harott and Zoha to meet the head of



the department, Professor Richard, to seek approval for the event to be conducted on October 16th, 2023. However, on the day of the meeting, Harott unexpectedly brought Ryan and a few others, which created confusion since most of them did not know the purpose of the meeting.

During the meeting, Professor Richard informed them that the proposed date would not be feasible since the event had to have been added to the academic calendar beforehand. He then suggested organizing the Tower Crane Challenge as a sub-event under the Mega Fest (an intra-university fest where different departments displayed their innovations through exhibitions, competitions, and games).

Harott and Zoha tried to convince Professor Richard that organizing the event under the Mega Fest would be unideal for them. They argued that the Mega Fest usually includes various non-technical events and fun-based activities, which might overshadow this purely technical event. Additionally, their event required participants to construct the models prior to the competition day, and students might be unwilling to do so when they had the option to participate in competitions that did not demand prior preparation.

Despite their efforts to convince Professor Richard, he remained firm in his decision that organizing the event on October 16th, 2023, was not possible. To mitigate their disappointment, Professor Richard reminded them of the mandatory requirement that each department had to conduct at least one technical event during the Mega Fest. He also added that the first day of the fest was allocated to technical events only, with school students as participants, while the second day would be a hybrid of both technical and fun-based events for university students. He tried to console them by saying, "Since the technical event is mandatory and conducted only for school students, the challenges that the different departments have to face will be the same. Also, you won't have to worry about getting participants since school students are usually very enthusiastic about participating in such competitions, irrespective of them being technical or non-technical."

Although the members were not completely satisfied with the decision, they found solace in the opportunity to fulfil the mandatory technical event requirement for their department and engage with school students. Upon leaving Professor Richard's office, frustrations among the team members boiled over, with some expressing discontent towards Professor Richard and attributing blame to Professor Sharon for not reserving the time slot for the event beforehand. Zoha conveyed the outcome of the meeting and the team's grievances to Professor Sharon, feeling conflicted about being perceived as a snitch. Professor Sharon explained that she had already informed Professor Richard that they were planning to organize an event on October 16th, 2023. However, she pointed out the impracticality of confirming the date without any updates from the team, which is why she was not able to make an official booking.

In the end, Harott informed the rest of the team about the change in plans. Meanwhile, Professor Sharon and Zoha modified the event requirements to be suitable for school students and revised the related documents. They were optimistic about the prospect of the event's success under the revised plan.



Is Perfection Really Important?

As the planning progressed, Professor Sharon approached Harott regarding updates on the 250g weight required to test the load capacity of the model tower cranes. When he did not respond to her messages, she asked Zoha for an update. This was not a responsibility assigned to Zoha, so she was unaware of its status. Therefore, she reached out to the WhatsApp group seeking an update on the 250g weight. A junior member named Prat privately sent a message informing her that he knew a shop selling 250g plumb bobs. She coordinated with Harott to confirm this information and subsequently organized a meeting to test the bob on a sample tower crane. The meeting was attended by Professor Sharon, Zoha, Prat, and the junior members, but notably lacked the presence of some key committee members, including Harott himself.

During the meeting, they discovered that although the weight of the plumb bob was 250g, its height was approximately 15 cm with the hook. However, the specified height of the tower crane was also to be 15 cm. Thus, while hooking the plumb bob to the arm of the tower crane, it would still touch the ground and, therefore, would not be able to test the load capacity of the tower crane. Everyone who attended the meeting understood the reason for rejecting the plumb bob. However, when Professor Sharon later informed Harott that the bob could not be used, he expressed frustration toward her for creating hurdles by bringing up what seemed to him to be trivial issues. Zoha also attempted to explain the rationale behind Professor Sharon's decision, but Harott remained unconvinced.

Accepting that Harott would not be cooperative in finding a new weight, Professor Sharon asked one of the lab assistants in the department to help her make a 250g disc. Finally, the disc was made, but the new weight slightly exceeded the desired 250g, weighing about 258g. In the following meeting, Professor Sharon brought up the discrepancy. Harott, however, believed that addressing this issue would impose unnecessary tasks on his teammates and felt that Professor Sharon was overreacting. He firmly stated that he couldn't assign anyone to deal with it and suggested they could simply claim the disc weighed 250g, as no one would actually measure it on the day of the event.

However, Professor Sharon opposed this idea, emphasizing the importance of maintaining ethics and honesty. Realizing that no one else was going to address the extra 8 grams, she took matters into her own hands and carefully filed the disc down to the exact weight of 250 grams.

The Split of the Group

Professor Sharon wanted Harott to take the lead and focus on details instead of brushing them off as unimportant. However, Harott thought Professor Sharon was spending too much time on minor details and micromanaging the team. Harott and his team asked Professor Sharon not to worry, claiming that they were experts at hiding mistakes. But she responded, stating that hiding mistakes was not something to take pride in. She also quoted the idiom, "The devil is in the details," and reminded them that ignoring details could cause many future problems.



That evening, Harott called Zoha, expressing his frustration over what he perceived as Professor Sharon's lack of confidence in his abilities. He said, "You see, Professor Sharon says that she wants to give me complete control of the event, but at the same time, she interferes in everything I do. She was disturbing me, Ryan, and others throughout our vacation, asking for updates on the event until we stopped responding to her." Zoha knew that Professor Sharon was concerned about Harott and his friend's habitual tendency to overlook details. Additionally, Professor Sharon was not the kind of person who showered her students with compliments. There was even a rumor in the department that if Professor Sharon appreciated your work, it signified that you had truly done an excellent job.

At the same time, it was important to consider that this was Harott's first time leading an event, and he may not have been accustomed to receiving criticism. Given the contrasting character traits at play, the likelihood of smooth cooperation seemed nearly impossible. Zoha opted not to interfere, fearing it could aggravate the situation. With two weeks left for the Mega Fest, the group split into two: one comprising Professor Sharon, Zoha, and some junior members who took charge of the Tower Crane competition; the other group consisted of Harott, Ryan, and other senior members who felt excessively stressed because of Professor Sharon. They also began planning a different event in the non-technical category with greater dedication, aiming to demonstrate their capability to execute tasks independently to Professor Sharon.

As the day of the Tower Crane Challenge neared, Harott asked Zoha to take on the role of marketing lead. She initially refused since she felt that she had been handling all the tasks that were originally supposed to have been undertaken by Harott. Harott assured her that he had assigned Tom and Alex to do the marketing tasks and that she only had to oversee them. She then reluctantly agreed to take on the role. However, Tom and Alex displayed minimal dedication, often procrastinating and making excuses for their delays. Finally, Zoha was left with no choice but to do the marketing tasks herself. Zoha, John, and Prat undertook the poster distribution, social media promotion, etc., to market the event.

In the end, more participants registered for the event than they had originally expected. Several individuals on the team then attempted to claim credit for work they had not contributed to. However, their attempts were in vain. Zoha ensured that her work was duly recognized. She openly stated in front of everyone that only John, Prat, and she had worked on the marketing, while those who had been assigned the work had skipped classes in the name of marketing duties. This annoyed Tom and Alex because Zoha had criticized them in front of everyone.

Harott's Misunderstandings

A huge burden was lifted from the team's shoulders when they finally secured enough participants. However, this tranquility was short-lived when Harott presented a new poster design to Professor Sharon for approval with less than a week remaining until the event. While Professor Sharon appreciated the design, she explained that it could not be used as the official poster since Zoha had already



created one, which had been approved by the university and was already in circulation.

Moreover, Professor Sharon pointed out that Harott's design failed to include Zoha's name as the co-team leader, crediting only himself as the event head. Harott misunderstood Professor Sharon's rejection, assuming it was because he had created the design and that she was favouring Zoha. To validate his efforts, Harott sought praise from other faculty members, who complimented his design, further deepening his misunderstanding.

Another issue that fuelled the tension was the decision about participant certificates. Zoha had promoted the event by promising certificates to all participants, unaware that Harott had already discussed the matter with Professor Sharon. When Harott shared his certificate templates with Professor Sharon, she expressed concerns about the printing costs and time constraints. Assuming she disliked the idea, Harott dropped it. Later, when Zoha mentioned that she had promised certificates during promotion, Professor Sharon informed her that the plan had been abandoned due to the cost and time limitations.

Zoha then proposed an alternative: issuing e-certificates with digital signatures and seals, addressing both cost and time concerns. Since Zoha had already committed to certificates in her promotion and the solution seemed feasible, Professor Sharon approved the idea. This further intensified the tension between Harott and Professor Sharon. Harott felt disrespected, believing that his idea had been rejected only for Zoha to present a similar one and receive approval.

Harott, feeling increasingly alienated, began ignoring Professor Sharon's calls and messages entirely. Despite this, Professor Sharon still wanted to keep him on the team as the President of the Masterminds Club. With only four days remaining until the event, Professor Sharon asked Harott about the roll-up banner, as he had been responsible for its design and printing. However, Harott declared that he was no longer willing to do it. At this point, even Professor Sharon had lost hope of aligning Harott's thinking with hers. As a result, she asked Zoha to design the roll-up banner and have it printed.

Zoha's Unintentional Leadership

All this while, Zoha had been feeling uneasy about replacing Harott and potentially undermining his role. She feared that this could worsen the existing grudge between her and Harott. As Professor Sharon grew increasingly exhausted and frustrated with Harott's attitude, she relied more and more on Zoha's involvement. Consequently, Zoha herself felt that she was perhaps being unfairly favoured and that she was in the spotlight in such a manner that an outsider might perceive her as the only event head.

On the day before the Tower Crane Challenge, Harott voiced his dissatisfaction with Zoha's elevated role. He raised questions, saying, "Why is Zoha taking credit for an event of which I'm the lead organizer? Did she not argue that the



leader should be recognized for an event's success, not the team members, regardless of their contributions? But now, why is she in the spotlight?"

Zoha responded by saying that she had not said anything like that. She had only wanted Harott to stop telling others that he should have been the event head for the STEM Challenge previously organized by the Innovators Club and that he had contributed more to its success than her.

Harott replied that he had never wanted to be the head for the STEM Challenge, and that he was merely informing everyone of his contributions so that Zoha would not take undue credit for the success of the event. He accused Zoha of now trying to undermine him and take over his position with the help of Professor Sharon during the Tower Crane Challenge too. This eventually led to a heated argument between the students where Harott, Ryan, Ali and Tom were accusing Zoha and she was defending herself.

Zoha found it challenging to assess and untangle the current situation of the team. She could not understand whether the fault lay with herself, Harott, or Professor Sharon. She was also worried about what might happen to the Tower Crane Challenge the next day. While Zoha was contemplating this dilemma, she got a call from Professor Richard informing her that he wanted her to head a STEM challenge for the Innovators Club at an inter-university level with the same team that did it before.

IV. Results and Discussions

This paper presents a detailed case study of team dynamics and leadership challenges encountered during the organization of a Tower Crane Challenge at Maxton University. The narrative revolves around the strained interactions between Zoha, President of the Innovators Club, and Harott, President of the Masterminds Club, as they attempt to navigate the complex task of event planning and execution within an academic, voluntary setting. Despite both being capable leaders, their rivalry, rooted in previous interactions during a STEM Challenge, exacerbated existing tensions and became a central theme throughout the planning process. Harott's initial reluctance to collaborate effectively and his dismissive attitude towards Professor Sharon's leadership guidance were evident from the early stages, where he and other senior members of the Masterminds Club failed to provide timely updates on their assigned tasks during the summer break. In contrast, Zoha, who initially hesitated to join the organizing team due to her previous strained relationship with Harott, displayed greater commitment by consistently communicating with Professor Sharon and completing the tasks she was assigned. However, Zoha's involvement in the planning process eventually heightened the rivalry, with Harott feeling sidelined and increasingly threatened by Zoha's leadership, further straining their already fragile working relationship. Professor Sharon, acting as a mediator and supervisor, faced her own set of challenges in balancing the personalities and conflicting motivations within the team. Her approach to leadership, while rooted in ethical considerations and a meticulous attention to detail, sometimes clashed with the desires of team members like Harott, who felt micromanaged and underappreciated. This divergence in leadership expectations underscored a broader issue: the struggle



between transformational and transactional leadership styles in a voluntary setting where the absence of formal accountability structures and external rewards such as grades or financial compensation placed greater pressure on intrinsic motivations like recognition and personal achievement. Harott's transactional approach, where he sought recognition for completing tasks and assumed that others should follow suit, contrasted sharply with Zoha's transformational leadership, where she led by example and stepped in to complete tasks that others had neglected. The conflict between these two leadership styles, further complicated by personal ambition and a desire for validation, created a highly competitive atmosphere that ultimately fragmented the team into two opposing factions. The lack of open communication and the absence of formal conflict resolution mechanisms only worsened the situation. Harott's frustration with Professor Sharon's focus on minute details, such as the precise weight of the 250g test load for the tower cranes, became symbolic of the broader leadership conflict. While Professor Sharon emphasized the importance of ethics and accuracy in leadership, Harott perceived this attention to detail as an unnecessary obstacle to progress, further deepening his sense of alienation from the team. The narrative also reveals how leadership and power dynamics, when not carefully managed, can lead to unnecessary competition and personal grievances, particularly in a voluntary, academic setting where recognition and praise replace traditional forms of compensation. The case study shows how Zoha, initially hesitant to take on a leadership role, ultimately found herself leading the team by necessity, as Harott increasingly distanced himself from the event's planning. Her growing responsibilities, while critical to the event's success, exacerbated tensions with other team members, particularly those like Tom and Alex, who had neglected their own duties but later attempted to claim credit for the success of the event's marketing. These dynamic highlights a common issue in voluntary settings: the uneven distribution of workload, where certain members take on more responsibility out of necessity rather than choice, leading to resentment and frustration. The competition between Zoha and Harott was further amplified by external pressures, such as the decision by Professor Richard to incorporate the Tower Crane Challenge into the university's Mega Fest, a move that neither Zoha nor Harott initially supported. Their objections stemmed from a fear that their event would be overshadowed by the fest's broader, non-technical focus, yet they were ultimately forced to comply with the university's decision. This decision served as a reminder of the broader institutional challenges that voluntary teams face when navigating bureaucratic processes that may not always align with their specific goals. In the end, despite these significant interpersonal and institutional challenges, the Tower Crane Challenge was a success, drawing more participants than initially expected. However, the event's success was overshadowed by the deep divisions within the team. The split between the senior members of the Masterminds Club, led by Harott, and the more junior members, led by Zoha and supported by Professor Sharon, was never fully resolved. The case study illustrates that while transformational leadership can drive success in voluntary settings, it is not a panacea for deeper interpersonal conflicts and power struggles.

V. Conclusion

The findings suggest that a more balanced approach to leadership could have helped in the organization of the event. The Tower Crane Challenge, while successful in



terms of participation, serves as a cautionary tale of the potential pitfalls that can arise when personal ambition and leadership conflicts overshadow the collaborative spirit that is essential for voluntary teams to function effectively. This narrative reveals the fine balance between competition and collaboration in such settings and calls for a more nuanced approach to leadership that prioritizes the collective success of the team over individual recognition. The case study of the Tower Crane Challenge at Maxton University highlights several leadership and team dynamics issues, which can be better understood through the lens of existing literature on voluntary organizations and team management. The team's failure to move smoothly through Tuckman's Stages of Group Development, especially during the storming phase, was exacerbated by conflicts between Zoha and Harott, stemming from leadership rivalry and poor communication. The literature shows that teams in voluntary settings benefit from transformational leadership, as Zoha displayed by taking on additional responsibilities, but her efforts were undermined by Harott's transactional leadership style, where he sought personal recognition. This rivalry could have been mitigated by adopting servant leadership principles (Eva et al.2018), where both leaders would have prioritized the needs of the team over personal ambition. Moreover, the lack of formal conflict resolution mechanisms, such as mediation or structured communication channels, allowed personal grievances to fester, which is a common issue in voluntary teams without accountability structures. The literature also highlights the importance of ethical leadership, which was evident in Professor Sharon's focus on integrity and detail, contrasting with Harott's tendency to overlook small issues. Ethical lapses, as shown by Harott's suggestion to hide mistakes, erode trust and compromise team cohesion, emphasizing the need for clearer ethical expectations from the start. Furthermore, the issue of recognition, critical in voluntary teams where intrinsic rewards like acknowledgment replace formal compensation, created unhealthy competition between Zoha and Harott. This rivalry could have been alleviated by establishing clear recognition processes, as suggested by Social Exchange Theory, ensuring that contributions were fairly acknowledged. Institutional pressures, such as Professor Richard's decision to incorporate the event into the Mega Fest, also introduced challenges, but these could have been addressed through earlier stakeholder involvement and a more collaborative decision-making approach. Finally, the imbalance in workload, where Zoha took on tasks that others neglected, reflects poor task delegation and accountability, which could have been avoided with better project management tools and clearer role assignments. By integrating these insights from the literature, the team could have adopted a more structured, collaborative, and ethically sound approach to managing the challenges that arose during event planning, ultimately improving their team cohesion and success. In conclusion, the case study offers valuable insights into the challenges that can arise within a team setting.

The approach taken by the students of the Masterminds Club to handle these issues was not the most effective, but the lessons learned from this experience highlight opportunities for improvement. This situation serves as a foundation for future research on strategies for leading successful events and managing team dynamics more effectively in Voluntary Academic Environments.



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