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## INTERNAL COMPETITION — A CURSE FOR TEAM PERFORMANCE

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*V. Padhmanabhan wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The author does not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The author may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.*

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*Version: 2012-05-04*

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Steve Fernandez, the HR manager of FIS Consulting Services, returned to his office exhausted after a day-long discussion with the vice-president of human resources and the head of the project operation. The extended meeting addressed an incident that had taken place in an off-shore project team at a client in the United States. The company's reputation was badly damaged by the incident and urgent measures were required to save the project team. Fernandez believed the project team members possessed substantial individual technical expertise, but lacked the skills to perform together successfully. Fernandez wanted to identify the mistakes made and enact safeguards to prevent future incidents of this nature.

FIS Consulting Services was a business process outsourcing company located in Noida, India, specializing in consulting and financial advisory to clients across the globe. The company also assisted clients in enterprise application implementation. It offered onsite and offsite services based on the client's requirements. Client service teams, under the leadership of managers, provided consulting and other services based on the client's needs.

Nirmal Sara was a 28-year-old junior content developer at FIS Consulting Services, tasked with preparing and designing training modules for ERP implementation per client requirements. Prior to joining FIS Consulting Services, she worked at a digital publishing company for four years. This experience and expertise helped her land a position at FIS.

### TRAINING MATERIAL PREPARATION AND JOB DESIGN

The company treated the development of ERP training materials for a client as support tasks for the major ERP implementation project. To complete these supportive tasks, a team would be formed with an experienced executive as team leader. While most of the tasks were done online, select clients required team members to relocate onsite to complete and implement the training materials effectively. A team typically spent a minimum of two months to one year to complete an assignment.

A team was comprised of anywhere between two members to a maximum of twenty-five. The onsite team was selected based on communication skills, writing and documentation capabilities. The selection process entailed identifying employees based on their specific skill sets and experience matching the

project requirements, which were then forwarded to the client, and finally confirmed during an interview with the client team.

Training materials usually involved designing course curriculum and a course outline, and then modules for the clients. The training material focused on varied areas like HRM, finance or other general management modules.

A typical project team included a project manager, a team leader, senior developers and junior developers. The team members' promotion, pay hike and future prospects for off-shore projects depended upon the appraisal and feedback provided by the project manager. There were three levels in an appraisal — (a) below expectations (b) met expectations and (c) exceeded expectations. Each individual wished to "exceed expectations" to increase their prospects and growth within the company.

## **THE TEAM**

In the first phase of the project, Sara and Shri Shalini were selected and sent to a client in New Jersey. They both reported to Pete Philly, a project manager in FIS' North American division. It was Sara's fourth project and third off-shore assignment with North American clients. She was primarily selected based on an evaluation of her previous performance in both offshore and onshore projects. Sara was also evaluated based on her approach towards her team leaders, peers and clients, and most importantly, her ability to meet deadlines. She always "exceeded expectations" and once was even quoted as "an important asset for the team" on her performance evaluation feedback by a previous project manager.

Philly was known to be a polite person and an expert in designing training materials. He had vast experience in handling and executing huge projects for FIS.

According to Shalini,

When it came to organizing his work for the current project, Philly seemed very lax for unknown reasons. He always took a week to reply to our emails. There were occasions where I had to remind him about important emails requiring his immediate attention. Once, Philly mentioned in a meeting that he always had around 200 unread emails at any given point. His lackadaisical approach affected the team a lot and consequently, our course materials went to the clients unchecked. Approvals were delayed, creating frustration among team members. The project team ended up working late hours in the office and struggled to meet deadlines. There were instances when Philly refused to take important calls from clients, claiming he was neck deep in work. He also failed to make calls he had promised to make. Philly's approach toward each project started irritating the client team; they would often take the initiative to walk up to his desk for a discussion.

## **ABOUT THE TEAM**

After two months, a few more members from India joined the team, increasing its membership to 15. Sara and Shalini were the most junior members overall, but in terms of onsite visits, this was their third deputation. For the rest of the team members, this was their first onsite experience. The entire team stayed at a hotel and each member was provided with a separate room. As some of the earliest arrivals, Sara and Shalini provided the initial orientation and briefing about the clients' place and the status of the work to their team. The team was assigned with designing different courses, training material and preparation

tasks. Each component of these tasks was performed by different team members; these components would later require alignment and integration to complete the final module.

A week after the team's arrival, they began forming groups inside the team. A few members had worked together in a previous organization; they always moved among themselves and were reluctant to involve the other members. They preferred to be together during tea breaks or lunch breaks. These members almost always kept the office pick-up van waiting, refusing to step into it until their companions joined them. Even the team leader, Sai Rishi, was reluctant to get along with other members outside his own group.

In meetings conducted by Philly, team members commonly framed their suggestions as group oriented. Members who voiced their opinions or gave suggestions often stated, "We have decided" or "We have worked-out" to identify their own small groups. These groups provided suggestions without consulting or briefing the rest of team members prior to the meeting. Often, debates during these meetings ended acrimoniously with every member promoting their own agenda.

According to Sara,

It got to the point where people started refusing to share resources and critical information. In one instance, I was seeking information regarding a deadline. A senior team member named Abey Sidharth, a close companion of Rishi, refused to share this information with me. When I requested the resources, he bluntly refused to share, stating that it took him two days to gather those documents. He believed I should spend the same amount of time looking for it. He also advised to return to him, if I failed to find them. I was disappointed, when I saw Sidharth sharing the same documents with one of his group members. Shalini and I told Philly about this particular incident. We stressed that information sharing had to be addressed at the next meeting. We also suggested that a common folder be created so team members people could openly share documents.

According to Lia Aarthi, another team member,

For me, it took days to find which team members had a connection with my training material and course work. We were working like individuals and mini-groups within a team. The team members did not realize this project required integrating each individual's work into a cohesive whole; they were stuck in a rivalry mindset. A few members were even reluctant to reveal the details about their own work. Our work was like a difficult puzzle. Every morning, there were debates and arguments due to confusion in the integration issues, chaotic situations resembling a fish-market. Throughout this project, we worked with misunderstandings, clashes and disagreements.

### **ABOUT RISHI — THE TEAM LEADER**

It was a common sight to see Rishi running behind Philly, gifting him books and memorabilia on any ordinary day. Rishi regularly requested Philly to join him for lunch or tea. For Rishi, the current project was significant for his promotion, pay hike and future in off-shore projects. He always showed the utmost compliance to whatever Philly said and rarely offered opinions or counter suggestions to Philly's own statements. In some instances, Rishi took advantage of Philly's delayed decisions and started working on most of Philly's tasks. Philly then began relying on Rishi even for minor decisions regarding the project.

## SARA'S ENCOUNTERS

Rishi and his group often gossiped about the rest of team members in the hotel's lobby. One evening while Sara was in the lobby waiting for Shalini, she happened to overhear Rishi discussing Philly with others. Rishi claimed Philly had lost his concentration and looked depressed due to his upcoming divorce. Rishi claimed Philly was relying on him to complete his tasks. In another instance, Aarthi heard Rishi state Sara was not competent or talented enough to prepare course curriculum. When told about this incident, Sara was taken aback — Rishi had never shown any obvious discontent with her work. Annoyed with his comments, Sara felt Rishi should have discussed the issue with her rather than talking about it behind her back. However, Sara chose to ignore this and concentrate on her work.

Rishi derived pleasure from making junior team members feel inferior about their own knowledge and skills. He tried to intimidate Sara, but her assertive replies and non-submissive approach began bothering him.

After the incident with Rishi, Sara noticed gradual changes in Philly's behaviour towards her, who had previously treated her politely. He began snubbing her and politely mocked her suggestions and opinions in meetings. In one instance, Philly asked Sara, specifically, to submit a course deliverable the day before her normal deadline. Sara completed the task as he asked, but to her surprise, Philly stated in the next meeting that Sara had failed to submit her work on time. Philly mentioned that he did not want anyone to delay deadlines like Sara did. Sara retaliated immediately, mentioning the date and time of the deadline met, including the email's details.

These events began to disturb Sara; she felt that she was being cornered by Philly for no obvious reason. She even got confirmation from other trusted teammates about a noticeable change in Philly's behaviour toward her. Following this confrontation with Philly, Sara found deadline dates had suddenly been advanced. Sara reported Philly's biased behaviour to Rishi, expecting him to help her as a team leader. Instead of discussing this with Philly, Rishi suggested Sara avoid creating any more problems and meet the new deadlines as Philly expected.

## SARA'S RETURN TO INDIA

Both Sara and Shalini returned to India after the completion of their eight-month onsite posting. In India, they had to provide the final shape of the training materials, based on the client's interactions in New Jersey. There were three levels in the preparation of the training material — first, second and final draft. The first draft contained comprehensive coverage of essential course materials, prepared based on the interaction with the client. This first draft often contained a few blank pages, spaces and grammatical errors, which would require further formatting and editing. Blank pages and spaces were normally filled after receiving clarifications from the client through video conferences. Once these were completed, the second draft would be sent to the team leader, Rishi, for review. After his review and suggestions, a final draft would be prepared and sent to Philly for a final review. After the final review, the course would be delivered to the training leader on the client's side.

After Sara's return to India, she finished her first draft and sent a copy to Rishi, highlighting the points to be discussed further with the clients. The next day, Sara received a call from Philly to tell Sara her training material was very poor, including formatting errors and blank pages. He also mentioned the client was very disappointed with her course design. Sara tried to explain this was the first draft; she still had pending online meetings with the client to provide further clarifications. Sara also asked Philly why the

course went to the client when it was only to be sent after the final draft was reviewed, following protocol. Philly hung up.

That evening Sara received a call from her teammate, Aarthi, who was still at the client's place. She mentioned Rishi had presented Sara's draft to Philly and the client, showing common errors often committed during a first draft. Rishi had assured them he would immediately rectify these errors. Sara was shocked and could not understand why Rishi would point out these initial mistakes to the client. She felt Rishi had not only put her career at stake, but also the company's reputation. Sara rushed to report this issue to the company's HR manager, Fernandez. Following her report, Rishi was asked to explain his understanding of the incident. Meanwhile, the unhappy client reported the confusion and shabby work to the lead client service manager of the U.S. division, and also contacted Roy, the Indian division head. As a measure to contain the situation, Rishi was immediately called back to India and replaced with another experienced senior team leader. Philly was given a reprimand, but retained until the project was completed.

Fernandez contemplated this issue, hoping the new team leader would resolve the crisis, allowing the team to finally complete the project. He also understood this incident had severely damaged the company's image — a careful effort would be required to undo the damage. Fernandez could not understand how a mature group of people could create so much conflict among themselves while working toward a common goal. He understood that the success of the project did not solely depend upon technical expertise of team members and that something beyond that was needed.

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