

Friends that Matter: How Social-Media Closed-Groups Strengthen and Maintain Social-Ties

It was the first Sunday of March already, time to go back home to the cold weather of Michigan. On her way to Monterrey's airport, Laura posted a detailed plan about how to help Anna, a dear childhood friend since their time at the Sacred Heart Mater Institute (K-12). All 76 "Mater Friends" on the WhatsApp¹ chat group receiving the post were members of the same cohort and many had immediately pledged their support to the plan. Lucy and Gloria would lead the effort locally. It had been the perfect ending to a 2,000-mile trip, which main purpose had been to attend her niece's wedding at Fundidora's "Horno 3."



Horno 3 (inside)²



Horno 3 (outside)³

The following Thursday, Laura received a call from Gloria. There was problem brewing, some of the "Mater Friends" had two main complains: 1) Why are we helping Anna? Others are also in need, and 2) There is no need to 'publicly' post the names of the pledgers into the chat. Laura reflected on the challenge. Would the project to help Anna actually torn apart the "Mater Friends" group? What were Laura, Lucy, and Gloria to do?

Mater Admirabilis and the Mater Institute

In 1800, St. Madeleine Sophie Barat founded the Society of the Sacred Heart in France. The Religious of the Sacred Heart (RSCJ) are present in 41 countries, including Canada and The United States. In 1908, the RSCJ founded the Mater Institute in Monterrey (Mexico) to educate young girls (K-12) from well-to-do families. The name honors RSCJ Pauline Perdrau' 1828 Mater Admirabilis painting⁴.

Many of the moms and even grandmothers of the "Mater Friends" had been Mater Institute alumni themselves. During the 1960s and until 1976 (when the Mater friends were in the school) the Institute was still run by disciplined and compassionate nuns. The ever-present Mother Alcocer patiently predicated Catholic doctrine via the entertaining adventures of "Piedrita y Almendrita" (Pebble and Little Almond), to make the message more relatable



¹Bought by Facebook for \$19.3 billion in 2014, WhatsApp is a messaging and voice over service serving 1.5 billion people worldwide. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WhatsApp>. While not that popular in the US, it is a 'staple' in many countries. Almost 50% of the smart-phone population in Mexico uses WhatsApp. Germany leads the developed markets WhatsApp users with 55% of its population. <https://www.basichinking.com/usa-whatsapp-unpopular/>

WhatsApp works similarly to GroupMe, a type of private group "Twitter"

²<https://www.google.com/search?q=horno+3+para+bodas&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewiEn8mCotiaAhWIOYMKHfb6BEgQAUoAXoECAAQAw&biw=1396&bih=668#imgsrc=9dV5ksxqPUjXbM>

³ <https://centrourbano.com/2017/08/02/museo-del-acero-horno3-10-aniversario/>

⁴ <https://rscjinternational.org/news/mater-admirabilis>

16 years

to her audience of young girls. Mother Volpe, while being the Institute's Principal (1969-1976, after which she became Provincial Superior and taken to Mexico City) still had time to display joy through her singing, guitar playing, and loving advice. Both of them, among others, are fondly remembered by their students. Some "Mater Friends" commented that the *Santa Teresa de los Andes* mini-series has reminded them of their own experience at the Institute.

Friends



Mater Institute building (1965) – before moving to the new facilities⁵

Anna

According to social convention in the Monterrey of 1980, Anna married before finishing her Bachelor's. Her husband Roberto became a successful entrepreneur and was able to provide Anna and their three children a Javish lifestyle. As a devoted housewife, she was in charge of home duties that included a hectic set of social functions; she learned and enjoyed making flower arrangements, handcraft jewelry, confectionery, and made herself available to visit and care for older family members. However, life as she knew it turned 180° on November 1998. A car accident took Roberto's life, and with it, his family's economic stability. Anna was not up to date about her husband's many businesses; Roberto's brothers (his partners) did not help matters. In just a few months, she was forced out of her cul-de-sac pool home with panoramic views of the entire city. Anna's ailing mom took them in until her death in 2005 – for 7 years, Anna's chief activity was to look after her deteriorating health. After that, she lived at a boarding house for a few years, with the support of one of her cousins; her now teenage children had to live with friends. In 2012, Anna and his children were once again leaving under the same roof. With the proceeds from her mom's estate, she bought a compact car and a small house in a low-income Monterrey suburb, adjacent to San Pedro Garza García (the wealthiest community in Mexico⁶). In the 20 years since the accident, Anna had engaged in many activities to earn a living: nanny, elderly companion, florist, cook, and even chauffeur. She did not marry again, and while excluded from fancy vacations and social gatherings, she frequently visited with Roberto's wealthy family and her very well-off close friends from the Mater. Her main motivation had been to keep their (now adult) children as united as possible. Yet, hardship had taken a toll. She was not healthy (there was a suspicion of heart attack risk), yet she could not afford the corresponding medical care.

Opportunity knocks, from beyond: Project Adrienne is born (for Anna)

⁵ https://www.google.com/search?biw=1396&bih=668&tbn=isch&sa=1&ei=UALiWpn-JpDCJgSkm6ilAg&q=Escuela+Superior+de+M%C3%BAAsica+y+Danza+en+Monterrey+%E2%80%9C&oq=Escuela+Superior+de+M%C3%BAAsica+y+Danza+en+Monterrey+%E2%80%9C&gs_l=psy-ab.12...11347.11347.0.12656.1.1.0.0.0.53.53.1.1.0...0...1c.1.64.psy-ab.0.0.0...0.KYfc6WBegBs#imgrc=BSBaGF14gQWCRM:

⁶ <https://www.sdpnoticias.com/local/monterrey/2016/05/24/san-pedro-garza-garcia-continua-siendo-el-municipio-mas-rico-del-pais>

On Wednesday February 28, a day before Laura's arriving to Monterrey, one of the "Mater Friends" had succumbed to a long illness. Before the tragic event, about 10 of the Mater Friends had contacted Laura and agreed to meet for breakfast on Saturday – some of them had not seen one another in almost 40 years. They arrived sharply on time at Macadam Restaurant. The first minutes of the conversation were mainly about the recent tragedy. The ones closer to the deceased commented about her trying economic situation during her last days; it was also said that most of the "Mater Friends" had no idea about it. An air of remorse invaded the table as they realized they might have done something for her. Suddenly, Paulina mumbled, "in life sister, in life⁷." Taking advantage of the seemingly unique opportunity, Laura expressed what she knew about Anna's current situation. They immediately expressed their sympathy for Anna and willingness to help her. Lucy took matters into her own hands and suggested a raffle, as a first step; she had previous experience with such causes. Laura called Eileen (the group's artist) to donate one of her paintings; she accepted. Toward the end of the meeting, they had sketched a tentative plan to sell 50 raffle tickets and secured a beautiful painting as the prize.



Macadam Restaurant⁸



The Prize

The Raffle

Lucy was in charge of collecting payments and hosting the raffle on Monday March 19. Roughly 30 "Mater Friends" had pledged to buy the 50 available tickets, and 10 attended the event at Casa Grande Restaurant. Despite not being present, Corina drew the lucky number – she had been one of the attendees of the March 3 meeting, when on her way to Dallas decided to rearrange her plans to support her friends. The proceeds were given to Gloria (roughly \$1,300), whom had been selected as the project's treasurer. It took 16 days, from March 3 - 19, to fund Anna.



The Raffle @ Casa Grande Restaurant (Monday March 19) – The Project is fully funded⁹

⁷ Paraphrasing Rabatte's famous poem entitled "en vida, hermano, en vida" (in life, brother, in life). The poem is an invitation to express our love (and do good) onto others while they are still alive.

⁸ https://www.tripadvisor.com/Restaurant_Review-g1154799-d12056470-Reviews-Macadam-San_Pedro_Garza_Garcia_Monterrey_Northern_Mexico.html

⁹ <http://www.casagrandemty.com/>

Challenges and Reactions (between idea conception and funding)

As the project was put in motion, Anna saw Dr. Salazar, renowned cardiologist and the husband of Esther (one of the “Mater Friends”). Anna said the recommended studies had come back negative. Likewise, other studies supervised by Dr. Gonzalez (another “Mater Friend”) were found to be normal. Anna’s life was not threatened by illness, as first believed, yet her quality of life still was concerning; her dental health had substantially deteriorated. Nonetheless, one of the conditions mentioned in the first meeting was no longer present.

Gloria had received a call from a “Mater Friend” mentioning that some of them were not happy about the project. Among the chief complaints: 1) “there are others needing help, why Anna?” And 2) “we feel uncomfortable reading the names of the ones buying the tickets; those of us not named appear uncooperative.” While this development planted a seed of uncertainty, Lucy and Laura remained undeterred.

In light of these complaints and Anna’s health status upgrade, Gloria asked Laura to inform the group about the situation – since she had been the one posting the detailed plan to help Anna. Pressure from some ‘unhappy’ members could escalate; the project could be canceled or generate division amongst them. Laura reacted swiftly by communicating with a couple of the ‘unhappy’ members and trying to appease them. By the same token, she posted a detailed Word document to the group chat before the raffle, which can be summarized as follows:

- Anna’s life is not in danger, but her dental health is a priority.
- A written authorization, due to this priority change, will be secured via Survey Monkey.
- The Survey Monkey results will be posted on the Matter Friends WhatsApp Group Chat.
 - *Note: Without any dissenting voice, 18 members answered four questions where they unanimously recognized Laura, Lucy, and Gloria as the leaders of the project, authorizing them to use the moneys for Anna’s dental health or other charitable initiatives.*

Some Reflections about the Experience¹⁰

While this Mater Friends group was solely to reconnect with their cohort classmates, often times emerging trends ensue...

Laura had been involved in many charity projects in the past. She had led a successful grant effort (\$3,000) for a church community in Boone (NC), taught poor children at “Mano Amiga” in Torreon, (Mexico), and directly helped friends or acquaintances. However, this was the first time she had been a part of a peer-led project to help a schoolmate.

Gloria also believes in helping others. She has been involved in a number of charity efforts, a good administrator, and is very close to Anna; hence her role as treasurer of the project.

Lucy, the local force behind what had occurred in Anna’s assistance project, also has a deep sense of giving. She shared a previous experience from different Mater group cohort (she repeated a year while in grade school). Recently, Lucy and that other cohort had successfully organized painting raffles for \$40,000. The beneficiary, a divorced friend of that other group, needed help paying her child’s medical procedure, for which she owed \$75,000. Lucy mentioned the procedure was urgent (a matter of life and death), and that the friend’s ex-husband would not help. Lucy does not recall anybody challenging that cause (unlike some did with Anna’s effort).

The three women that lead Anna’s assistance project are active housewives with variegated obligations and interests. Laura and Lucy vividly remember the nuns and her Mater years very fondly. For Gloria, the experience was a bit more challenging; she said it took her some time to adjust after moving to the Institute in the 6th grade. Notwithstanding, their shared Mater experience took place

¹⁰ One of the authors interviewed each one of the leaders of the project (Laura, Lucy, and Gloria) and the childhood friend (Anna) whom received the support.

during the mid-1960s and 1970s (K-12, while the Institute was still run by nuns). They travel extensively, inclusive of visiting children and grandchildren.

Lastly, when directly asked to compare the experience between helping “a stranger” and one of their own (i.e., a schoolmate and friend from K-12), the answers were unambiguous. They all said there was no difference. Yet, when asked differently, they did acknowledge a deeper sense of obligation toward the friend/acquaintance. They recognized two main differences: 1) the speed of response, and 2) type of expense/need worthy of support. Neither of them thought that leisure and recreational activities qualify as worthy of monetary support.

Upon reading the above case, please consider the following aspects (pick one):

Find a way to connect what took place in the case to a specific course topic. Here are some suggestions:

1) Ethics and Social Responsibility

To whom are we socially responsible? Extend the obligation of an organization to that of a group (even an informal one like the one presented) and that of an individual of that group.

May you connect some insights from 4-3b (Moral development) and/or 4-3c (Principles of Ethical Decision Making) to the events of the case?

Under those principles, is helping Anna justified? Why?

Is it relevant that she is a member of the group? – You should have realized that Anna is NOT poor by emergent market standards. (4-5, 4-6)

2) Innovation and Change

You may talk about change forces/resistance forces (7-4)

To that end, why do you think Anna’s assistance project was challenged? Why did the leaders were able to succeed? Did they appear to have used a particular technique? (7-4b/c)

3) Global Management/Teams

The case illustrates a ubiquitous worldwide phenomenon, that of “closed-group” dynamics. Besides the cultural differences that can be learned on the cultural dimension topics explained by Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, the case opens a window into a society that organizes somewhat differently; it is not organized by activity or interest, but by people.

Upon reading Hofstede’s dimensions (8-5) and the dynamics of the case, would you agree with extent of the differences argued by Hofstede? That is the distance between the case characters and events and those from your own experience here in the US.

<https://www.hofstede-insights.com/models/national-culture/>

Even if these are not “office teams,” you may explore the case events to concepts like Norms, Cohesiveness, Conflict, and Size (10-3). You may also comment on effectiveness (10-4).

4) Ch15. Communication

Perception and Communication problems (15-1) may also match the dynamic of this case. Per Attribution Theory rationale, may we draw inferences that suggest the existence of defensive bias, fundamental attribution error, or self-serving bias? (15-1c) Are there instances of selective perception or closure? (15-1b).

5) Book and other

You also make connect the events of the case to other management dynamics. You may draw on your absorption of the Dutton and Spreitzer’s book. Likewise, there may be relevant dynamics that you could identify.

You have probably noticed that this case is about adult women on their early 60s from a developing country who are using technology to organize small ventures. Think about the possibilities of these or other groups to unleash the power to help others. Would management techniques improve these efforts? How so? What should be our role as students (receiving this knowledge) and educators alike?