

The marshmallow challenge

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Perspectives on Creative Leadership

Leadership practice in the marshmallow challenge



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Introduction

Based on reflective thinking theory, this study will focus on effects of leadership on teamwork. The evaluation of the marshmallow challenge will give an outlook on collaboration. Leader's actions will be comprehensively analysed in order to prove the decision making process and its effectiveness or lack of it. Accurate reflection on leader's practices will provide me and the reader with relevant insights of leadership style applied and its functionality. It will also analyse efficiency in different situations with detailed justification.

Phase 1 - describe the experience

- Context/background and Method

The story is a real-life experience of group work, based in 2019 when the lectures went ahead. Completely unaware of what's coming in just a few months, I was diligently studying at a university in Finland while on my exchange semester.

One day, Digital Marketing class that was supposed to be a regular lecture, turned into an eager competition. Lecturer decided to carry out the marshmallow challenge to enrich our exchange experience. The whole class was excited and intrigued about the challenge. When the rules were being introduced, each table, thus a group was given such items: one marshmallow, 20 uncooked spaghetti sticks and one tape. The speaker finished up with the rules and gave us a start signal. Our group started a fast-paced debate which seemed like we were creating a plan of action when actually we had no idea how to approach designing. As the intricate collocation spans, some of us were contemplating on pasta and tape. Dynamic action occurred when we just grabbed all the items and expeditiously tried to form a structure. No one actually had an action plan which effected in an unsuccessful approach and general mess. It was time someone took the wheel. When no one really seemed confident about what we were creating, I stepped in. My only and most rational idea at the time was to form a triangle as a firm base. Intense focus on the project made the time fly and suddenly 18 minutes elapsed. After the timeout, we were marvelling at the 'ta-dah' moment of other groups' self-standing structures. Most of them collapsed while we were restraining our structure against the same scenario. When it was our time to shine, once unsupported our structure fell down.

Out of eight tables, only three succeeded which is quite impressing having in mind we are no architectures, just business students.

- Stage 1: Description of the event

Our ex-lecturer has held this kind of activity as a fun team building ice-breaker. The marshmallow challenge emphasises communication, leadership, collaboration, problem-solving and dynamics of cooperation (Whybrow, 2015). The rules are simple: a group must build a free-standing structure, out of spaghetti sticks and tape, that will hold a marshmallow on the top. Marshmallows are light and create the wrong assumption that spaghetti sticks will easily support them. The task to all appearances seems doable, but when one actually tries it, the marshmallows do not seem so light. That makes it the perfect metaphor for real-life projects.



The structure of our involvement showed a few stages. Naturally, what first looked like planning, quickly transformed into fierce discussion and jockey for power. When the first attempt at the construction turned into a complete failure caused by haywire actions of our group, I knew we needed

guidance and control. Immediately, I have taken the lead and assigned tasks within the group. I had no plan on how to create a firm structure but others came to the conclusion I did. With no objections and without a concrete plan they went along with my course. Collaborative and simultaneous work enabled us to finish on time.

- Stage 2: Feelings

I always cast my mind back over to this event to analyse my actions and personal traits. It makes me reflect mainly on my leadership skills and how successful I was to lead the project to the last. Even though we did not succeed, I think I did my best as a leader. Otherwise, I am positive that we would not be able to finish the structure. It is normally not in my habit to jump the gun, I would rather give other people the chance to prove themselves. In my decisions, I was trying to include everyone and divide the actions fairly so each one of the attendees would not feel excluded. I am also satisfied with our team workability as we did not know each other, we all came from different backgrounds, countries and social groups.

I am happy I was part of this project and this group. Thanks to this experience I have a better view on collaboration and how it influences all of our actions, not only in day to day life but in a professional workplace. It is also a perfect reflection of planning things and their importance.



Phase 2 - Examine the experience

- Theoretical Framework and Analysis

Dr Peter Northouse (2016) defined leadership as a subject to influence. That influence may take various forms, thereby define different leadership styles. Frameworks allow having a better understanding of these styles (Cherry, 2020a).

For the purpose of analysing an issue described above, autocratic leadership theory will be used. Autocratic leaders characterise authoritarian control over followers. Authoritarian leaders tend to have the ability to dictate work methods and process. Decision making is mostly individual with little input from group members (Wang and Guan, 2018). Such leadership style is also marked by clear expectations, established rules and highly structured, rigid environments (De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2009). Autocratic leaders are often seen as bossy and controlling. Lewin (1939) also concluded that under this leadership style, people perform worse as decision-makers. Moreover "authoritarian leadership has been found to negatively influence outcome variables such as team interaction, organizational commitment, task performance" (Du Jing et.al. 2020).



Such a theoretical framework was applied as it fits the described issue the most. Many characteristics matched and were helpful in addressing the issue. Problems with involvement and lack of contribution are easily noticeable here. Decision-making in our issue of focus was dependent on the leader only and less creative from followers' side. Lack of contribution and creativity may have been caused by the leadership style. It is also easy to observe a clear division of roles within the group, strongly focused on command by the leader and control over the followers.

- Stage 3: Evaluation

When the leader broke forth and made almost all decisions, what might have happened was that members became followers. With the work plan being dictated, no space for input was left. Assigned tasks, clear command and pressure relieved, enabled followers to focus on performing without

worrying about complex decisions. According to Cherry (2020b), those factors have significant influence over group performance, thereby increasing odds of finishing on time and meeting the goal. In this situation, the autocratic leader took care of fast and effective decisions in a stress-filled situation (Cherry, 2020b). Considering the positive effects of such a leadership style, the group would be expected to succeed. However, the outcome was a failure and that could have been due to downsides of the framework. If the leader has been more task-oriented which is common for this style, followers may have not felt important or trusted and that could have led to resentment (St.Thomas Uni, 2014). Zhang's (2017) research showed that authoritarian leaders tend to be emotionally detached and unable to empathise with followers. In result problem of contribution and discouraged creativity appears here. Failing to consult with team members might have caused in dissatisfaction and stress (De Hoogh et al, 2015).

- Stage 4: Analysis

As a leader, I took decision making as my responsibility, however by contrast to the autocratic leadership style I did not ignore expertise from members. The issue that occurred here is when asked, followers had no creative solutions or ideas. What could have discouraged them is assuming they not have ideas till the end of the project. Not enough effort made to ensure of their contribution may have caused a lack of it. Being a leader can feel stressful under the pressure of time and makes one more goal focused (Bal, 2008).

Accordingly, to Bass and Bass (2008), such leadership is successful when the decisions need to be rapid and actions decisive. When I stepped in, I believed that our group can still make it with the proper guidance and structure. In certain situations, only guidance and sense of order can increase the odds of succeeding (Bass and Bass, 2008). Bass and Bass (2008) also noted that such leadership often presented adversely overlooks positives of stressing rules and taking the responsibility which I have also demonstrated.

In terms of teamworking, our group did great. There was no conflicts nor misunderstandings. Once the structure of the team was clear, members went along perfectly. With the lucid separation of roles within the group, members were more likely to focus on the task and perform better (Cherry, 2020b).

What did not go well at all is the outcome of our hard work. Explained by Wojec (2010) in his Ted conference it is because "business students are trained to find the single right plan". That is exactly what I did after our first prototype fell down. None of the group members thought about making a few designs and trying out which one would hold the marshmallow. We were so confident that there is one single plan to succeed that everyone went along with me.

Phase 3 - Articulate reflective learning

This essay reflects were aimed at specific aspects of leadership to better understand its principles. Application of specific framework enabled to deeply examine our issue of focus and draw conclusions. Autocratic leadership theory enabled better view on various behaviours throughout the event. It has also let me analyse the situation better by digging more deeply into actions undertaken by me or my colleagues. Questions like: Why did we not succeed? What had an impact on our work? Or How my decisions evaluated throughout the challenge?, were successfully answered.

The research showed that such leadership style can be beneficial and problematic in specific situations and environments. Mostly is considered adverse in professional environments (Wang and Guan, 2018). Authoritarian reign in the workplace may equal poor performance, negative outcomes, fear of leader or work pressure (Farh and Cheng, 2000).Such leadership is used in numerous political strategies around the world, especially in historic events. With the example of South Korea and authority increasing economic numbers it did not survive due to democracy (Strand, 2017). However,

according to Wang and Guan (2018), recent scholars have found positive effects of authoritarian leadership. The study proved it can improve the leader-employee relationship and employee performance (Wang and Guan, 2018). It perfectly applies to a small group of people/students/co-workers where leadership and organisation are lacking. According to Cherry (2020b), "these types of group projects tend to work better when one person is either assigned the role of leader or simply takes on the job on their own". Construction or manufacturing workers can benefit from this type of leadership too. The clarity on tasks, deadlines and rules is crucial here as it gives a better idea of organisation and commitment (Cherry, 2020b). Moreover, it could be beneficial in hospital-based scenarios where rapid decisions are needed (Indeed, 2021). Family businesses culture is also profitable with autocratic rules, it gives the idea of hierarchy especially needed in family-work environments due to casual relations (Martynowska, 2019). Industries that advantage from autocratic leaders are also military and law enforcement fields (Indeed, 2021).

Concluded research and information provided can prove such finding: we need to identify the assumptions in our projects/work, analyse the process and reflect on it. Just like the marshmallow challenge provides us with a better understanding of the structure and need of the prototyping, the analysis of our actions can help to reflect and improve them in the future. Like application of framework allowed to justify the actions and elucidate them. That's the mechanism that leads to effective innovation.

- Stage 5: Conclusion

The challenge gave me a relevant view of roles within the team. It made me reflect on how they rapidly originate, evolve and change in such a short period of time. I observed how quickly members after experiencing failure put their trust in someone else's hands. They have committed fully to follower roles. However, efficient collaboration and dutifulness can be only credited to their hard work and obedience.

The marshmallow challenge is also a perfect learning opportunity and greatest metaphor. It proves insight into business' real needs, cost of the product and duration of the service. Additionally allows me to reflect on decisions I have made. For the future events I would put more effort in ascertaining each and every member's equal contribution and pushing them to creative solutions. I would also definitely practice planning with special attention to prototyping.



- Stage 6: Action Plan

After extensive research and detailed reflection I would make some adjustments to my actions. Considering same scenario-situation with such limited time-frame it would be a challenge to modify and hone my actions and decisions. However, I am more than positive that after carrying such reflection out, I am more aware of steps that need to be taken especially in terms of leadership.

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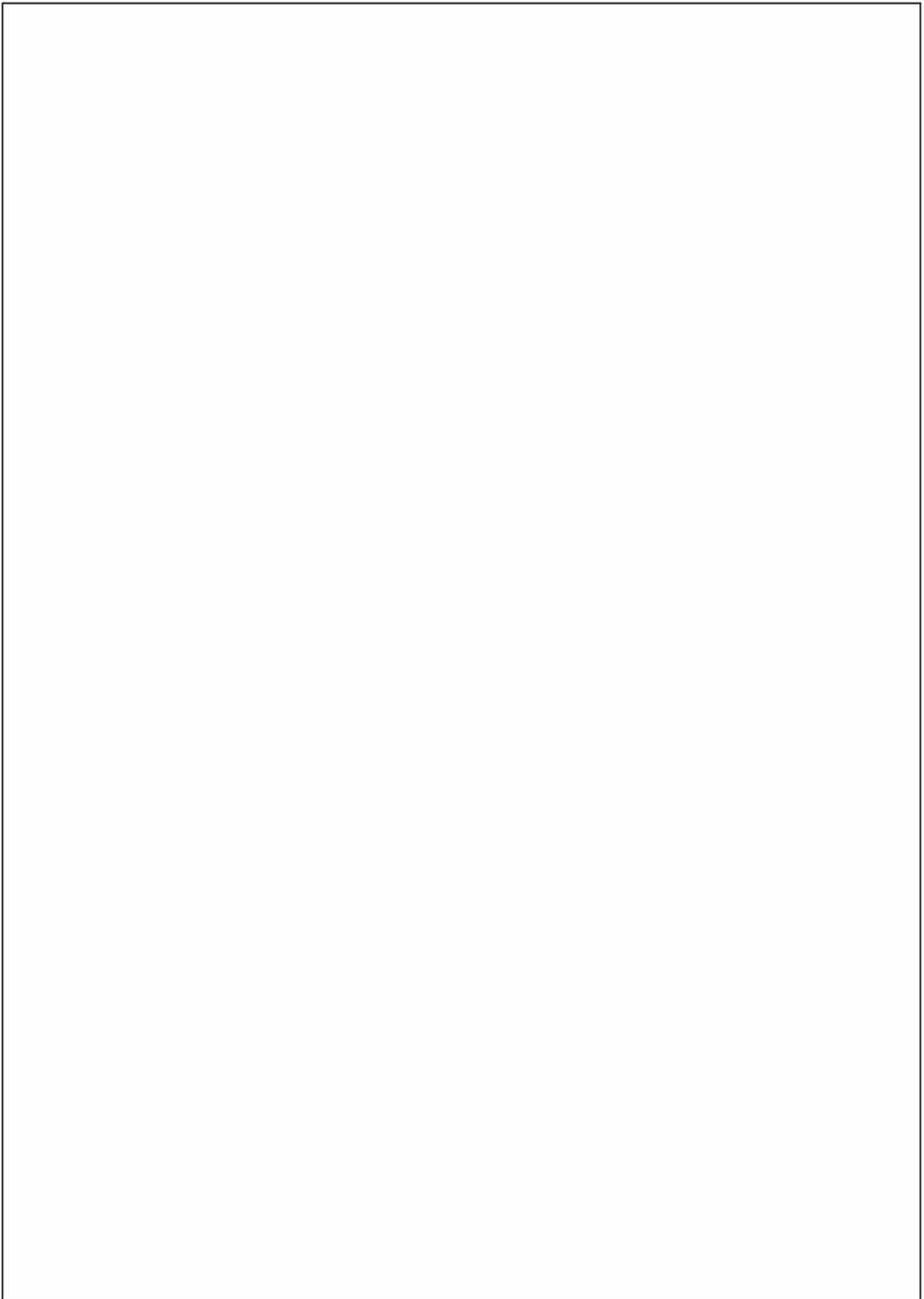
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GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

 *A voice comment was left for this paper.*

XX / 100

PAGE 1

PAGE 2



Comment 1

lovely anology!

PAGE 3



Comment 2

what did planning take? This needs more explanation and clarity, you mention planning but not much how or what it actually involves, the steps in it etc.



Comment 3

what about the positive sides to this side of leadership?

I also think that this might be about the position&level of the leadership as well as the scope&size of the followers. AS far as I know many developing country leaders have used to adapt this kind of leadership styles and have got very effective growth in rspective countries in the short period of time. I think you could bring discussions from different ontexs to the attention of the reader.

PAGE 4



Comment 4

I am not so sure about that perhaps the skills of the follower were not good enough for this task



Comment 5

why do you think creativity but not other aspects such as knowledge and&or skills were important in here need justification



Comment 6

you asked then you invited them to be part of the process



Comment 7

this is a good reflection!



Comment 8

you didnt describe this. THis you should de better the next time. What guidance what structure what instructions what division of labor? took place.



Comment 9

I agree with this observation!



Comment 10

May be not only business students but everyone else believes in that so that we have leaders to follow!

As there are shared or collective leadership but we do not talk or study much about them

PAGE 5



Comment 11

you tried to do it but it didnt work ow you think you will make it work can be a good question_ starting with studying team and individual dynamics that led to the fa'lure 'n relation to and not in relation to the leadership.

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INTRODUCTION (10%)

2 / 4

NON-REFLECTIVE LEADER (1)	No Introduction
REFLECTIVE NOVICE (2)	Introduction briefly introduces some of the practical/managerial or personal relevance
AWARE LEADER (3)	Introduction states practical/managerial or personal relevance
REFLECTIVE LEADER (4)	Introduction states practical/managerial and personal relevance as well as theoretical motivation/justification.

STRUCTURE (20%)

3 / 4

NON-REFLECTIVE LEADER (1)	Clarity and structure in organizing and presenting the key themes of the chosen topic is poor. Language is unclear and confusing throughout. Concepts are either not discussed or are presented inaccurately.
REFLECTIVE NOVICE (2)	There is room for better Clarity and structure in organising and presenting the key themes of the chosen experience. There are frequent lapses in clarity and accuracy
AWARE LEADER (3)	Clarity and structure in organising and presenting the key themes of the chosen experience is good.Minor, infrequent lapses in clarity and accuracy.
REFLECTIVE LEADER (4)	The language is clear and expressive. The reader can create a mental picture of the experiential situation being described. Abstract concepts are explained accurately. Explanation of concepts makes sense to an uninformed reader.

RELEVANCE (10%)

4 / 4

NON-REFLECTIVE LEADER (1)	Most of the reflection is irrelevant to student and/or assignment brief & learning goals
REFLECTIVE NOVICE (2)	Student makes attempts to demonstrate relevance, but the relevance is unclear to the reader.
AWARE LEADER (3)	The learning experience being reflected upon is relevant and meaningful to student and/or assignment brief & learning goals.
REFLECTIVE LEADER (4)	The learning experience being reflected upon is relevant and meaningful to student and/or assignment brief & learning goals.

ANALYSIS (20%)

4 / 4

NON-REFLECTIVE LEADER (1)	Reflection does not move beyond description of the learning experience(s).	
REFLECTIVE NOVICE (2)	Student makes attempts at applying the learning experience to understanding of self, others, and relevant leadership concepts but fails to demonstrate depth of analysis.	
AWARE LEADER (3)	The reflection demonstrates student attempts to analyse the experience but analysis lacks depth.	
REFLECTIVE LEADER (4)	The reflection moves beyond simple description of the experience to an analysis of how the experience contributed to student understanding of self, others, and leadership frameworks/concepts.	
INTERCONNECTI (10%)		3 / 4
NON-REFLECTIVE LEADER (1)	No attempt to demonstrate connections to previous learning or experience.	
REFLECTIVE NOVICE (2)	There is little to no attempt to demonstrate connections between the learning experience and previous other personal and/or learning experiences.	
AWARE LEADER (3)	The reflection demonstrates connections between the experience and material from other research; past experience; and/or personal goals.	
REFLECTIVE LEADER (4)	The reflection makes creative and rigorous connections between the experience and material from other research; past experience; and/or personal goals.	
CRITICAL ART (20%)		3 / 4
NON-REFLECTIVE LEADER (1)	Not attempt at self-other-theoretical criticism.	
REFLECTIVE NOVICE (2)	There is some attempt at self-criticism, but the self-reflection fails to demonstrate a new awareness of personal, contextual and/or theoretical assumptions or biases, etc.	
AWARE LEADER (3)	The reflection demonstrates ability of the student to question their own biases, stereotypes, preconceptions as well as contextual and/or theoretical assumptions or biases, etc.	
REFLECTIVE LEADER (4)	The reflection demonstrates ability of the student to question their own biases, stereotypes, preconceptions, and/or assumptions and contextual and/or theoretical assumptions or biases, etc. which define new modes of thinking as a result.	
FORMAT/REF (10%)		4 / 4

NON-REFLECTIVE LEADER (1)	Poor presentation throughout in terms of word count, grammar/spelling, proper use of figures, tables and/or appendices and accurate referencing (DMU Harvard Style)
REFLECTIVE NOVICE (2)	Some consideration of word count, grammar/spelling, proper use of figures, tables and/or appendices and accurate referencing (DMU Harvard Style)
AWARE LEADER (3)	Proper application of word count, grammar/spelling, proper use of figures, tables and/or appendices and accurate referencing (DMU Harvard Style)
REFLECTIVE LEADER (4)	Excellent presentation throughout in terms of of word count, grammar/spelling, proper use of figures, tables and/or appendices and accurate referencing (DMU Harvard Style)