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ENGR 408 – Personal Reflective Paper

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Throughout the course of ENGR 408/493, I’ve learned that leadership isn’t quite as simple as I previously thought. Of course, a good leader is quite recognizable, but what is it that makes them a good leader? This isn’t a simple question to answer, which is why people consider leadership to be a natural talent that can’t be learned. Fortunately, for those of us who want to be leaders but might not yet know how, there is hope. The best way to learn anything is by practice! This semester, I got the chance to practice being a leader for fourteen weeks with a few of my classmates

The first interaction I had with my group members, Atindra Garigipati, Alex Lotz, and Kaitlyn Triebl, was in the HUB near the fish tank. This day in the HUB, Kaitlyn would be arriving late to the meeting, but I would meet Atindra and Alex at the fish tank. Because Atindra is a foreign name, I thought it was a female name, and because I have a sister named Alexandra, whom I call Alex, I thought Alex was also a female. While waiting at the fish tank, two guys asked me if I was in the ENGR 408 class. Since I was sure I was meeting two girls at the fish tank, I assumed they were a different group in ENGR 408 and proceeded to tell the guys that I was in ENGR 408, but I was supposed to be meeting two girls there. After asking their names and apologizing for assuming their names were female, we proceeded to sit down and discuss our project. The incident was quite embarrassing, but I must say, it was a wonderful icebreaker that got the group chuckling right from the start. On the other hand, I had come to terms with how quick I was to guess someone’s gender without thinking about the possibility of other cultures. Even though the guys were very light about the name mix-up, I realized then that I could have seriously offended someone depending on their culture and personal beliefs.

After getting to know my group members a little bit, it was interesting to find that each of us had a different major. Kaitlyn is majoring in Architectural Engineering, Atindra is majoring in Chemical Engineering, Alex is majoring in Electrical Engineering, and I am majoring in Civil Engineering. I liked this aspect of our group because we had a very wide range of knowledge that could be applied to our project, along with the fact that there was a lesser chance a clique would form in the group, which can be difficult when trying to communicate.

Starting with the very first meeting, my group members and I had to come up with some goals for the project. This is the point where we all had to establish our motivations and expectations for the project. Because Atindra, Kaitlyn, Alex and I all planned on pursuing the Engineering Leadership and Development Minor, we were all very excited to start the project. Each one of us felt a passion for bettering the world, so it was obvious that we were all going to do our share in the project.

The first few meetings were difficult for my group members and I because our project was to simply search for a patent for the process. Not only did the project seem simple and we felt like we weren’t going to have much to show for at the end of the semester, the patent search was proving to be more challenging than we initially expected. Everyone was doing patent searches, but nobody was finding anything close to what was needed. It was difficult for us to not be frustrated with our lack of direction and lack of results, but we just kept searching for whatever keywords we could use to find the patent. One great way we overcame this struggle was creating a Google Document where everyone could post any findings that were worth noting. It helped because of the extra data flow that could trigger new thoughts and ideas.

It was easy for everyone to want to give up. We couldn’t find a patent after weeks of searching. I would say this is when the group found its leaders. Kaitlyn and I really took the reins at this point. We needed to push, push, push, because our deadline was fast approaching. The leadership roles remained like this for the rest of the semester. If I hadn’t been in contact with the group for some time, Kaitlyn would fill in and make sure we were all meeting with each other. Through this, we came up with some good ideas about the feasibility of the whole project and decided to take this route. It sparked a new excitement for the project, which was really important.

As the semester progressed, and everyone became very busy with school, more of the group dynamics were uncovered. Kaitlyn and I maintained our roles as the communicators and organizers. We were constantly contacting the group trying to keep making progress. Alex was the creative thinker. He seemed to always come up with the good ideas. His passion for the project was obvious, but he wasn’t as concerned with the group meetings. I think he would have rather planned the next step than have a meeting with no direction. Atindra seemed like he was always out of the loop throughout the semester. He wasn’t one to contact the group about something he wanted to discuss; he usually waited for the group to contact him or tell him what to do. Sometimes, it felt like Atindra wasn’t doing much for the project, but looking back, he always got his share of the work done, so we never really had to worry about his lack of communication. Despite his busy class schedule, the group could always trust him to get the job done.

Towards the end of the semester, the scope of the project changed and the motivation of the group as a whole plummeted. Nobody knew what to do, and our excitement about working with the international consortium was crushed. At this point, we were scrambling to figure out what we could show for the work we had done for so many weeks. The tension in the group was rising. Kaitlyn was becoming frustrated with the lack of motivation everyone was presenting, I was frustrated with the lack of communication that was occurring, and Alex was frustrated that nothing was being done. At this point, the strength of the bonds between the group members was tested. Kaitlyn and I had a little argument at one point, but through all of the tension, we could all sit down and effectively delegate tasks, discuss our roles, and plan for the future. It was clear that we were a strong, motivated bunch.

Overall, the ENGR 493 experience went well. I’m always leery about group projects because not everybody shares an equal amount of motivation. I’ve realized that for the most part, you can get people to do what you want them to do as long as you key in on their specific personality and work styles. Although the project became very frustrating at points, the group never gave up. It was refreshing to have a team of motivated, intelligent, cooperative people, and I very much enjoyed getting to know them. Despite our unique fields of study, I hope to again have to pleasure of working with Atindra, Alex, and Kaitlyn.