4. Improving team dynamics through inclusion

Ahmed, who recently became a team leader, has noticed some challenging patterns of interaction in team meetings. Hasan is the longest serving team member. In team meetings he now talks over others and does not listen to their views. Other team members seem to take his lead; they don't offer counterviews.

Hasan's behaviour seems disrespectful to Ahmed, who is averse to confrontation and whose own cultural background is one that places a high value on group harmony. As a new team leader, he is cautious and needs to know he has the support of the team to take action.

On closer exploration of the team dynamics, Ahmed appreciates that different cultural customs are playing out. He can see that some people are naturally more emotionally demonstrative while others convey their emotions only through body language. For the team to be performing at its best, Ahmed needs to manage this.

Hasan is encouraged to demonstrate more inclusive behaviour and to learn how to be a better team player. Other team members need to be encouraged to make constructive contributions and use their full talents. Ahmed institutes a number of changes:

1. To ensure everyone has the chance to contribute, he encourages each person to voice their opinion or perspective on an issue. He encourages exploration by asking more open-ended questions of each person so that their ideas become more fully developed.

2. To minimise over-dominant team members, he puts a limit on each person's turn by giving them a four-sentence rule.

3. To encourage healthy debate, Ahmed has each person also identify the pros and cons of a range of positions, including their own.

4. He designates a devil's advocate whose remit is to consider and prompt discussion of the challenges associated with different propositions. That shifts some of the weight from the team leader and gives everyone the opportunity to take this role.

If the situation did not resolve itself then Ahmed would escalate to:

1. Facilitating a team building exercise offsite to enable them to develop a deeper understanding of each other and their customs and styles. They could explore different ways of engaging despite their styles and preferences while setting rules of engagement.

2. For specific individuals such as Hasan, counselling for him may be the best option.

3. If the differences are between particular individuals, take them aside to discuss the impact of their behaviour and request they participate in line with the team's and organisation's expectations.

Key messages

1. Team decision making can sometimes be overrun by one or more people.

2. The best team decisions occur when everyone's input is considered.

3. Formal processes can be introduced to draw out multiple viewpoints and ensure that the positives and negatives of all decisions are considered.

4. A manager needs to keep an eye out for the need for stronger interventions such as counselling and warnings. So policies and procedures need to be up to date, understood and implemented.

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