

## How a bunch of four can become a successful self managed team in four weeks

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The paper outlines the approach taken to create successful self managed teams from groups of four, second year, first semester, undergraduate students. The students are studying formal project management - a full semester undergraduate course. Their experiences are captured at the end of a seven-week period, which coincides with the end of the half semester of teaching, learning, and practicing project management planning. The aims of the approach taken are: to improve students communications and social skills, to prepare them better for the work place through exposure to best practices in project management as applied to team building, to use ideas from problem/project solving and collaborative learning to increase their overall technical knowledge and problem solving abilities, to produce better IT managers for tomorrow.

The students are encouraged to form their own teams at the very start of the course. The purpose of this is to give the students some limited time (3 weeks) during which they will get to know each other better while participating in group activities. This in turn is expected to facilitate team building later. The teaching material is organised in such a way that the first three weeks of study expose the students to part of the planning phase in project management: scoping, activities identification, sequencing and precedence. An individual mini research assignment in "why projects succeed" and why "self managed teams achieve better" is used to indoctrinate the students as to the practices they will adopt to manage their own teams and projects very soon.

Their newly acquired technical knowledge, coupled to the few team and personal factors, they have identified as important, develop further, when they are given a reasonably big project in week 4 (case study) to handle for a fictitious client. The goal of this project is to produce a project plan for a client. The scope of the case study is limited to approximately 50 tasks that are loosely defined in terms of

duration. The students have to identify a further 20 % of tasks by brainstorming, as well as by reading the "interviews" supplied by the client's representatives. The students are now expected to play the roles of a project manager, and/or a team member, while planning the activities required for completing the report the client expects. They are jointly responsible for the project's planning phase; therefore they are all in the manager's position. At the same each has to take care of the team member they impersonate. The team eventually produces an extensive project management report, which outlines how the team proposes to handle the project for the client in terms of budget, resources, and specification, having identified major risks and obstacles.

The students' teams conduct their own meetings deciding as they go what is to be handled, by whom and when. The lecturer advises them weekly as to what part of the plan is to be near completion, while at the same time more teaching, and, hopefully, learning, takes place. The team, as well as each team member, keep a journal of activities, dates and times they have been busy on.

Microsoft Project software is used extensively to support the students' work. This is yet another hurdle the team has to go over.

The students' report, supported by network, resource, and financial and contingency plans is evaluated after week 7. Their work is promptly marked and returned. Each team gets a single mark. At that time the students are asked to complete a 20-minute questionnaire to be able to judge their experiences working in a team against the quality of their own work and to introduce some corrective steps in the future. Two sets of results attempting to correlate final marks, questionnaire answers about team building, as well as individual and group journal entries are available. As to whether a bunch of four can become a successful self managed team in four weeks - there is still room for improvement.