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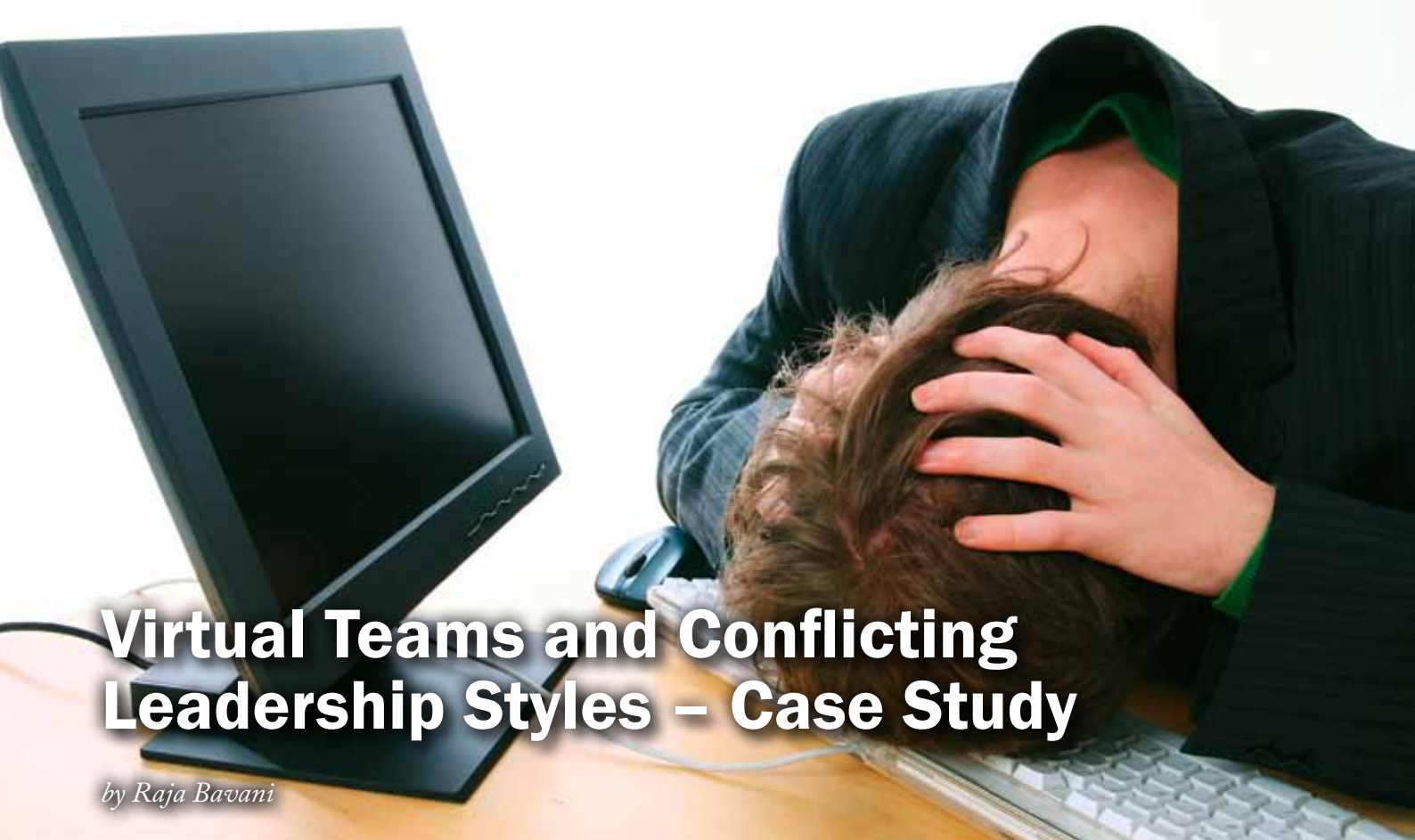
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# Virtual Teams and Conflicting Leadership Styles – Case Study

by Raja Bavani

Virtual teams are nurtured in an ecosystem where leaders from all locations share a common vision and minimize conflicts rising because of differences in leadership styles. The adoption of agile practices in global software engineering teams is often challenged by conflicting leadership styles. Let me share with you in this article a case study adapted from my experience and discuss my findings and recommendations.

## Case study: It is my style of leadership!

This is about a software development project that started couple of months ago with a team of 8 in Europe and a team of five in North America. Andy is the Product Owner in San Francisco, California. John, the offshore manager went onsite and worked with Andy and his team for about four weeks. As you observe, both Andy and John are managers by designation. They have gone through agile software development training programs and worked with agile teams over the past twelve months. The team in San Francisco is responsible for developing interfaces to external systems, whereas John's team is responsible for developing the GUI based modules and corresponding features of the system. These two teams interact on need basis to resolve all common areas of concerns. John and his team in Europe are from a vendor organization that provides software services to several companies in the United States and Europe.

At the offshore location, John has started playing the role of Scrum Master on this development project. After Sprint-1 and Sprint-2, he is busy focusing on Sprint-3.

On the 3rd day of Sprint-3, John receives a mail from Andy. It reads...

“.....

Hi John,

This is about Sprint-2 delivery. We had an internal meeting today with Nick and Jim. They had several questions on why the team delivered less.

I don't understand why we have failed to complete all user stories. Our inability to complete all of them has got a negative impression from the VP here. Let us discuss this today. Please call me in 30 minutes from now. This is urgent.

Thanks,

Andy

..... ”

John becomes restless. Thinks over it alone in a meeting room and eventually breaks his pencil. He is under pressure.

He goes through the daily reports and dashboards of the previous Sprint.

In fact, he participated in daily stand-up calls and provided timely updates. He has not hidden any information from Andy!

Puzzled, John calls Andy over phone.

“Hi Andy, Good morning! How are you?”

“Hi John, I am ok. How about you?”

“Good. I went through your email. I am a little surprised. We have

been sharing daily status with you along with our metrics. For example, we were aware of the velocity and burn down.”

*“John, let us discuss this. We know the status. I appreciate you and the team for sharing these with me on regular basis. The point here is that my boss Nick is the Director here and his boss is Jim. Jim is the VP. Nick and Jim are upset over the progress.”*

“Oh. Why is that? “

*“John, let me tell you something. I looked at the dip in our charts. Two of our team members in your team have consumed a lot more than the estimated efforts in completing their tasks. I am talking about a 50 to 100 % effort variance. This hurts. The result is we delivered only 12 out of 16 stories. That is we pay 100% and get only 75%. That’s where the management is concerned. I think we should replace these two engineers with those who can perform better.”*

“Andy, these two guys are my star performers. They consumed more time because of technical reasons. They had to solve some technical issues related to their tasks for the team to progress. Also, the team is new. They are just getting their feet wet. We are moving into Sprint-3. Over the next iteration we will be geared up to deliver. Our velocity will stabilize and improve by that time.

*“Well. Let us be practical. My team members here strongly feel that we must get rid of those who need more effort to deliver. In our organization we believe in performance. Everything else comes next. Once we commit, no reason can stop us from not delivering. Above all, I need to provide an answer to Jim.”*

“I am listening to you. I need to think this through. Let me come back to you with a couple of options.”

*“Ok then, I will wait for an update from you tomorrow. Let us talk again. Take care. Bye.”*

“Thanks Andy! Take care. Bye.”

**John hangs up the phone and thinks.... “I know, I have hand-picked my team. I don’t think I need to replace anyone. How can I make Andy understand this? I think more than Andy his boss needs to understand how agile teams work during the initial sprints. How can I solve this problem? How can I get some help here?”**

#### **Analysis:**

I am sure many of you have come across similar situations before. This is a case of two leaders with conflicting leadership styles. This situation can happen in collocated teams too. However, when it happens in geographically distributed teams it becomes very challenging because of inherent reasons such as participation of two or more teams from different organizations and countries, and location specific views and expectations on agile.

In this case study, Andy wants to pursue his agenda whereas John is diffident and does not want to push back and demonstrate that he is confident of his team. Andy wants to fulfill the decision of Nick and Jim whereas John does not know whom should he approach in his organization for help in this situation. What do you think John should do? How can we avoid such incidents in projects?

During my interaction on this case with a group of software engineers, I came across very interesting views. However, a common theme among all of them was to consider a two-pronged approach by handling the current situation first and then preventing this from happening in future.

Some of us may feel that there is a lack of common understanding between Andy and John. John did all he can to keep Andy informed about the progress in each Sprint. So, it is not about the lack of common understanding. It is about the lack of common vision and empathy coupled with conflicting leadership styles. When there is lack of common vision in geographically distributed teams, expectation management becomes extremely difficult.

Has John been left alone? Yes. It appears that he has no one to go to for any support or help. He does not have someone up in his hierarchy or a mentor in his organization to help him.

Above all, it appears that these two entities involved in this software development project have not thought about the importance of governance in distributed agile projects.

I wrote an article titled ‘Governance of Distributed Agile Projects: 5 Steps to Ensure Early Success’ for the 7th issue of Agile Record. From a governance perspective, there has to be a common understanding among governance team members that iterations do progress and that it is very idealistic to expect perfect results during the first two or three iterations. This will help them welcome or embrace iteration progression and avoid negative perceptions that lead to red alerts or escalations. This is because aiming for instantaneous results is nothing but an unrealistic expectation in distributed agile projects.

Periodic steering committee reviews are essential to understand and improve the performance of distributed agile projects. During initial stages it is required to have these reviews every month, and as soon as the first few early successes happen, the frequency of these reviews can be once in two months or once in a quarter.

Having said that, let us explore an option to deal with the situation in this case study. Andy is constrained to follow two leaders – Nick and Jim. In addition to playing the role of ‘Product Owner’, he plays the role of ‘Customer’ and instructs John to replace those two engineers. John appears to be a docile Scrum Master. If John replaces two engineers from his team, there will be a consequent dip in velocity. This move can impact team morale. So, a better option for John and Andy is to team up and present their confidence to Nick and Jim so that they do not resort to the replacement of two performing engineers. For this, John has to rise up to this situation

and voice his opinion with adequate data which he already has. If Nick and Jim do not agree to this, it is tough luck!

Above all, they need to set up a governance team with the help of Nick and Jim so that such issues do not surface again.

### Conclusion

Conflicting leadership styles can create insurmountable challenges in distributed projects. However, with adequate rapport and empathy, differences in leadership styles can yield positive results too. Organizations participating in distributed Agile need to understand this and invest time and money in setting up functional governance teams in order to avoid such situations and to provide adequate support for early success in projects.

### > About the author



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