WHAT'S IN YOUR BARREL? TEAMWORK, BAD APPLE AND TEAM CHARTER

Dr. Chynette Nealy[1]

[1]*Professor of Business Administration, University of Houston Downtown, Marilyn Davies College of Business, Department of General Business, Marketing & Supply Chain Management*

Abstract

Soft Skills: Can the saying "one bad apple spoils the barrel" help stakeholders identify gaps in soft skills linked to teamwork? In the context of developing soft skills, different perceptions about career readiness exist between stakeholders, i.e., employers, college graduates and educators. This article discusses the use of a realistic workplace scenario, "bad apple" phenomenon about teamwork to authentically engage stakeholders in contemplating how to improve (transfer of learning) before business students *graduate and seek employment*. The author hopes this article will contribute to business literature related to bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Keywords

Authentic Engagement, Bad Apple Phenomenon, Business Communication, Team Charter, Teamwork, Theory and Practice

Introduction

Soft Skills: Can the saying "one bad apple spoils the barrel" help stakeholders identify gaps in soft skills linked to teamwork?

In the context of developing soft skills, different perceptions about career readiness exist between stakeholders, i.e., employers, college graduates and educators. For example, Stewart, Wall & Marciniec (2016) reported employers have a different perspective "... The majority of college graduates are confident in the level of their abilities, while in reality their skills fall short of employer expectations. …What accounts for this disconnect of perception, this "gap" between college graduates and employer perspectives? Acknowledging the gap leads to further reflection: Do college graduates understand the soft skills employers seek? (p.276)

To address this question, the author suggests perusing literature "about the varying definitions of soft skills to glean contextual relevance interrelated to each stakeholder's perception. For instance, findings from a historical study conducted by MacDermott & Ortiz (2017) indicated, "While there appears to be fairly broad consensus on when soft skills development should take place—before graduation—there is a lack of consensus as to how or where" (p.13). These findings typify observations by Abston & Soter (2020), "If one spends any time at all with a diverse group of academicians and/or employers, such as at a committee meeting or at a conference, inevitably the topic of student competence arises in some form. Over the past decade, we have observed how unprepared some of our students seem to be for the careers they are working so hard to achieve. While they have acquired the necessary discipline-specific or technical knowledge and skills, many students are sorely lacking when it comes to other skills that are essential to successful careers: collaboration, oral and written communication, interpersonal skills, and professionalism, among others" (p. 266).

Acknowledging these *interrelated* findings, the author proposes exploring bridging stakeholders' perceptions about soft skills, i.e., teamwork, by discussing the saying "one bad apple spoils the barrel." This article discusses the use of a realistic workplace scenario, "bad apple" phenomenon about teamwork to authentically engage stakeholders in contemplating how to improve (transfer of learning) before business students *graduate and seek employment*. The author hopes this article will contribute to business literature related to bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Definitions of Soft Skills

As numerous business researchers and literature have noted, there are varying definitions of soft skills (Danao & Main, 2024; Dean & East, 2019; Fletcher & Thornton, 2023; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017; Nealy, 2005; Robles, 2012; Rockwood, 2021; Smith, 2007; Stewart, Wall & Marciniec, 2016; Wright & Hall, 2019). Drawing from this selected business literature, for contextual purposes in this article, soft skills are defined using the following two definitions.

> Robles (2012) "Soft skills are character traits, attitudes, and behaviors – rather than technical aptitude or knowledge. Soft skills are the intangible, nontechnical, personality-specific skills that determine one's strengths as a leader, facilitator, mediator, and negotiator" (p. 457).
> Danao & Main (2024) "From communication and collaboration to adaptability and problem-solving, soft skills are the foundation of effective teamwork and organizational success" (p.1).

The author suggests that exploration of these two *interrelated* definitions provides a contextual framework useful for stakeholders, i.e., employers, college graduates and educators, concerning career readiness. From a pedagogical perspective, the objective is built with literature and practical experiences to generalize identifying gaps in soft skills linked to teamwork. Specifically, the "bad apple" phenomenon - how, when and why the behaviors of one negative member can have powerful and often detrimental influence on teams and groups. Common defensive mechanisms employees use to cope with a "bad apple" include denial, social withdrawal, anger, anxiety and fear. Trust in the team deteriorates and as the group loses its positive culture, members physically and psychologically disengage themselves from the team" (Gardener, 2007, p.3).

The findings, abbreviated by Gardener, highlight research conducted by Felps, Mitchell and Byington (2006) which examined negative behaviors of employees assigned to teamwork at various *workplace settings*. These researchers were "interested in the instances when constructive responses are not available or utilized and when negative behavior persists day after day with little recourse. … They believed these scenarios described the circumstances under which the "bad apple spoils the barrel," through a profound and harmful effect on the group. … those situations where the group functions poorly and may alternately fail or disband as a result of one member's actions" (p. 177, para.2). Generalizing from these findings, it is plausible to suggest recognizing the participative nature of teamwork is a way to explore gaps in soft skills. In the following discussion, the author *narrates* a feasible approach for stakeholders, i.e., employers, college graduates and educators, to develop *shared perceptions* about teamwork.

Exploring Bridging the Perception Gaps

Based on the author's experiences, i.e., pedagogy, scholarly research and practitioner, these *workplace findings* about behaviors within a team context provide a realistic scenario. "Almost all of us have either had the personal experience of working with someone who displayed bad apple behaviors or had a friend, coworker, or spouse who has shared such stories with us. When this process starts to unfold at work, it consumes inordinate amounts of time, psychological resources, and emotional energy" (Felps, Mitchell and Byington, 2006, p. 213). On the learning level, with *authentic engagement* of business students in mind, this realistic scenario provides a useful framework for addressing the disconnect of perceptions about soft skills between college graduates and employer perspectives. In responses to different stakeholders' perceptions the author offers suggestions using the "bad apple" phenomenon, reality-based findings to help business students – before graduating – gain a better understanding of identifying gaps in soft skills, i.e., teamwork employers seek.

Reality- Based Settings

Business students (departments/majors: accounting, finance, general business, management, management information systems, marketing, and supply chain) enrolled in the undergraduate business communication course *replicate* workplace settings with team members from different backgrounds (education, departments, genders, generations, work experiences, etc.). In general, both settings have applicable plans for stakeholders (students and/or employees) detailing expected performance with beneficial outcomes. Yet, as detailed in Felps, Mitchell and Byington (2006) findings above "… there are circumstances under which the "bad apple spoils the barrel" (p. 177, para.2). This problematic finding from the workplace provides insight useful for developing engaging pedagogy designed to help business students identify soft skill gaps linked to teamwork.

Using a metaphorical "apple" for teamwork, the foundation (*plant*) for this assignment has (*grown*) by means of collaborations, e.g., business communication faculty, industry representatives/potential employers, business alumni, and adapting ideas (*harvesting*) from a (*barrel*) of pedagogic resources/practical skill building,

business literature, favorite assignments, and classroom strategies. The following section provides an example of how-to operationalize *authentic engagement* of business students useful for examining "apples in the barrel."

Authentic Assignment

Reflecting Schlechty (2002) definition of authentic engagement: "The task, activity, or work the student is assigned or encouraged to undertake is associated with a result or outcome that has clear meaning and relatively immediate value to the student" (p.3).

This assignment is adaptable and relevant for equipping students with teamwork skills employers seek. The foundation for this assignment originated in an article by (Snyder, 2009) about preparing students before working on collaborative projects. Given the author's experiences noted above, each use of this assignment allows, e.g., collaborations with stakeholders, perusing sources explaining best practices from industry, scholarly research, pedagogies, and other relevant sources linked to teamwork skills. These methods are used to gather information and track trends to identify and/or update course content.

For example, in the original article, Snyder (2009) described "in-class activities to allow students to practice and model effective collaboration, e.g., "demonstrate how to create a timeline by working backward from a deadline" (p. 77). Although during discussions with stakeholders, there was agreement about creating timelines, they emphasized the need for students to develop a broader understanding of (time). Examples shared focused on contextual understanding of elements which influence (time) such as: team members (experiences, gender, etc.), workplace settings (virtual, international, etc.), generations and cultures. Based on these examples, stakeholders suggested changing the originated assignment's in-class activity about (timelines). They (clearly) recommended coverage about negative outcomes of teamwork related to inadequate time management skills – pre and post team assignments.

Hence, when collaborating with stakeholders it requires transparency and a willingness to address perceived, in this instance, gaps in time management skills. To authenticate learning from these sources, this instructor moved coverage of time management skills to weeks (1 &2) of the semester. Arguably, this might be "perceived" as a small-scale tactic; however, as Moore (2024) suggested could have larger-scale outcomes.

> "Through small focus groups and interviews with stakeholders, an institution can gather rich, qualitative insights into an academic program's quality and its alignment with industry demands. In these conversations, stakeholders will discuss the relevancy of the curriculum, the effectiveness of the school's teaching methods, and the experiences these stakeholders have had when interacting with students or faculty. Such discussions frequently reveal the competencies graduates need when entering the job market or progressing through their careers. These conversations also might highlight potential gaps in the school's curriculum" (p.3).

In an effort to bridge potential gaps, prior to graduating, the author purports these stakeholders' discussions provided "*fertile*" resources for designing coursework to improve (transfer of learning) for undergraduate students to "understand the soft skills employers seek." As previously noted, the assignment in this discussion derived from collaborating with stakeholders. Thus, when planning coverage of time management skills spanning teamwork during weeks (1 & 2), it was essential to create an environment to foster students' participation, i.e., *authentic engagement.* The initial in-class discussions were designed to prompt "reflecting" on prior experiences – what was learned about time management and teamwork. These interactions included students sharing negative experiences which impacted learning outcomes, such as: ineffective plan for meetings, lack of a team agreement/charter, nonparticipating team members, handling members' difficult opinions, impact on other coursework and grades (individual and team assignments). The lively discussions allowed opportunities for elements of the "bad apple" phenomenon, i.e., trust in the team deteriorates, to be examined using students' prior experiences. The goal was to help students identify how to use this prior knowledge in this current assignment, i.e., explore elements such as barriers to effective time management skills inclusive of teamwork. In doing so, students should be able to gain meaningful insight about soft skills employers seek. Especially, given students prior experiences mirrored one of the challenges experienced by "bad apple team members."

> "*Withholders of effort* intentionally dodge their responsibilities to the group and free ride off the efforts of others. Behavioral examples of withholding effort consist largely of not doing something – of not completing tasks or contributing adequate time, not taking on risks or responsibilities, or not disclosing aptitudes in the hope that others will compensate" (Felps, Mitchell and Byington, 2006, p. 182).

Implications from the results of this information (*harvested*) from stakeholders and other above-mentioned pertinent resources provided business students with *contextual awareness* to lessen disconnect of perceptions about career readiness. The following ideas are shared to facilitate (planting) this *authentic assignment.*

Storyline

The author used learner mind-set stories created to stimulate and help students lessen prejudgment during listening when sharing reasonings for managing/resolving smaller teamwork issues before working on major team assignments. These stories derived from a business practice referred to as the *low hanging fruit principle*. Suitable to this discussion, "tasks that are easy to accomplish, only involve a basic level of effort and provide immediate rewards. The idea of low-hanging fruit comes from the idea that fruit growing on the lowest branches of a tree is the easiest for you to pick" (Indeed Editorial Team, 2022, p. 2).

In this storyline, a description of a smaller task/assignment, such as creating a team charter to form shared purpose, could serve as an example of a (low branch). The charter is essential for teamwork and useful for engaging students to participate in low-stakes assignments (Aaron, McDowell, & Herdman (2014). Explaining what is meant by low-stakes assignments, frequent assessments with low grade impact, engaged students' interest in (picking) low-hanging fruit. For instance, low-stakes assignments could involve; use of clickers for short surveys, quizzes on various topics to assess students' conceptual understanding, frequent short informal writing assignments, summarizing the main points in a lecture and researching databases on main course's themes (Elbow & Sorcinelli, 2006; Kenney & Bailey, 2021; Sorcinelli & Elbow, 2005; Stewart-Mailhiot, 2014).

To illustrate, during discussions about time management skills, develop short surveys which allow use of clickers to respond to self-assessment then extend to gather information about experiences with teamwork. Then ask students to write a short memorandum – audience instructor and potential employer- describing their findings (personal and teamwork) about their time management skills. After providing graded feedback, ask students to identify from their findings, two skills (one personal/one teamwork) they want to improve. The goal here is to help students research applicable time management strategies linked to their identified skills requiring development. This is an example noted by the author about making modifications to this assignment. It seems obvious, but it is important to emphasis here, when planning these low-stake assignments make sure to take into consideration a timeline to facilitate completing these assignments (before) teamwork. This will allow students to write a short memorandum describing specific steps to develop and track continuous improvement of the two-time management skills. Reflecting on Schlechry (2002) achieving authentic assignments, providing students with feedback during this self-assessment should improve understanding of continuous improvement.

It is important to acknowledge here *different perspectives* about assessments. The author respectfully suggests a teachable moment here for my audience to (use a learner mind-set) and reflect on their own findings and other stakeholders' perceptions about (our) students' employability skills as described in the above business literature. After this teachable moment, stakeholders (team members) should be able to (avoid) the "bad apple" phenomenon. Thus, the following citation is used to promote teamwork among readers/stakeholders. "It is clear that assessment of student learning will be an important part of higher education for the foreseeable future, as various stakeholders continue to demand educators be held accountable for the outcomes of their educational programs" (Kelley, Tong, & Choi, 2010, p. 304).

Similar to creating a team charter, members should agree to have a learner mind-set, i.e., listening without prejudgment to meaningful discussions (pros/cons) to identify common grounds to formulate new thinking. For instance, as previously noted, this assignment originated in an article by Snyder, 2009; it was suggested "to practice successful collaboration, teams should be coached in the areas that best support the assigned collaborative project. A simple survey or class discussion about what students' dislike about group work can reveal specific weaknesses" (p.76). The suggestion guided this author's "new thinking" for assessment purposes, about gathering initial data to gain insight into students' demographics, perceived knowledge or gaps in skills. In so doing, the author continuously focuses on creating assignments that have *meaning and value* to business students. Such as described in this article, "low-stake assignments" with frequent opportunities, in this case, for students' to develop, practice and receive feedback about gaps in soft skills linked to teamwork and time management.

As Cherem (2011) stated, "Providing such effective assessment practices eliminates the element of uncertainty and, consequently, lowers the likelihood that failure-driven anxiety will negatively impact students' learning experience" (p. 47). During the semester other short assessments are used as interventions with students to "grow collaborations" when comparing and measuring improvements. These findings are also useful for modifying teamwork. The goal is to minimize concerns about the impact of teamwork on their grades by explaining to students scaffolding/preparing them before higher stake teamwork. It is important to note here: the tendency for students receiving this type of transparent information, help with improving their understanding about the "intent" of learning from "mistakes/faux pas" before graduation by identifying gaps in soft skills linked to teamwork. "Through indirect assessment, a school can discover if students are engaged with program content and if the curriculum aligns with industry demands" (Moore, 2024, p.2). Findings from these assessments should prompt

academicians to collaborate with industry representatives and design coursework to address … "we have observed how unprepared some of our students seem to be for the careers they are working so hard to achieve" (Abston & Soter, 2020, p. 266).

Question

Are (we/stakeholders) experiencing the "bad apple" phenomenon? As prior stated in this article, the author suggested perusing literature about soft skills varying definitions to glean contextual relevance interrelated to each stakeholders' perceptions. The key takeaway here – in reviewing literature, notice the "historical timeline" used to glean insight about stakeholders' perceptions. Then, notice Felps, Mitchell and Byington (2006), mention of (time) linked to the, "bad apple" phenomenon, …"We have presented a model that captures how the effects of the behaviors of a negative group member unfold over time and across conceptual levels" (p. 210).

Germinate

A consistent theme in literature, decades, continue to highlight "different perceptions" among stakeholders about career readiness. The author proposed exploring bridging stakeholders' perceptions about soft skills, i.e., teamwork, by discussing the saying "one bad apple spoils the barrel." This discussion shared elements for designing an authentic assignment with in-class activities embedding stakeholders' input. The author illustrated how a memorable storyline using the business practice, low hanging fruit principle, could be used to create a team charter. This low-stake assignment has the potential for yielding – high-stake outcomes useful for bridging the gaps between stakeholders' perceptions about career readiness. Hopefully, when reading and reflecting on this article – stakeholders consider a key component of a team charter - *shared responsibility*.

References

Abston, K. & Soter, H. (2020). A Professionalism Conundrum: Development of Business Students' Career Readiness. Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, 47, 266- 271.

Aaron, J., McDowell, W. & Herdman, A. (2014). The Effects of a Team Charter on Student Team Behaviors. Journal of Education for Business, 89 (2), 90–97.

Cherem, B. (2011). Using Online Formative Assessments for Improved Learning. Currents In Teaching And Learning, 3 (2), 42–48.

Danao, M. & Main, K. (2024). 11 Essential Soft Skills In 2024 (With Examples). Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/advisor/business/soft-skills- examples/#what_are_soft_skills_section 13/

Dean, S. & East, J. (2019). Soft Skills Needed for the 21st-Century Workforce. International Journal of Applied Management and Technology, 18 (1), 17-32.

Elbow, P., & Sorcinelli, M. (2006). How to Enhance Learning by Using High Stakes and Low -Stakes Writing. In W. McKeachie (Ed.), McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers (pp. 192-212). Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin.

Fletcher, S. & Thornton, K. (2023). The Top 10 Soft Skills in Business Today Compared to 2012. Business and Professional Communication Quarterly, 86 (4), 411 - 423.

Felps, W., Mitchell, T. & Byington, E. (2006), How, When, and Why Bad Apples Spoil the Barrel: Negative Group Members and Dysfunctional Groups. Research in Organizational Behavior, 27, 175-222.

Gardner, N. (2007). Rotten to the core: How workplace 'bad apples' spoil barrels of good employees. Retrieved from https://www.washington.edu/news/2007/02/12/rotten-to-the-core-how-workplace-bad-apples-spoil-barrels-of-good-employees/

Indeed Editorial Team (2022). What Is Low-Hanging Fruit and How Can It Help Your Career? Retrieved from https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/low-hanging-fruit

Kenney, K. & Bailey, H. (2021). Low-Stakes Quizzes Improve Learning and Reduce Overconfidence in College Students. Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 21 (2), 79-92.

Kelley, C., Tong, P. & Choi, B. (2010) A Review of Assessment of Student Learning Programs at AACSB Schools: A Dean's Perspective, Journal of Education for Business, 85 (5), 299-306.

Nealy, C. (2005). Integrating Soft Skills through Active Learning In The Management Classroom. Journal of College Teaching and Learning, 2 (4), 1-6.

Robles, M. (2012). Executive Perceptions of the Top 10 Soft Skills Needed in Today's Workplace. Business Communication Quarterly, 75 (4), 453–465.

Rockwood, K. (2021). The Hard Facts About Soft Skills. Retrieved from https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/hr-magazine/hard-facts-soft-skills

MacDermott, C. & Ortiz, L. (2017). Beyond the Business Communication Course: A Historical Perspective of the Where, Why, and How of Soft Skills Development and Job Readiness for Business Graduates. The IUP Journal of Soft Skills, XI (2), 1-18.

Moore, D. (2024). How Indirect Assessment Shapes Business Education. Retrieved from https://www.aacsb.edu/insights/articles/2024/05/how-indirect-assessment-shapes-business-education

Schlechty, P. (2002). Working on the work. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Smith, L. (2007). Teaching the Intangibles. T+D, 61(10), 23-25.

Snyder, L. (2009). Teaching Teams About Teamwork: Preparation, Practice, And Performance Review. Business Communication Quarterly, 72 (1), 74-79.

Sorcinelli, M. & Elbow, Peter. (2005). How to Enhance Learning by Using High-Stakes and Low-Stakes Writing.

Stewart, C., Wall, A. & Marciniec, S. (2016). Mixed Signals: Do College Graduates Have the Soft Skills That Employers Want? Competition Forum, 14, 276-281.

Stewart-Mailhiot, A. (2014). Same Song, Different Verse: Developing Research Skills with Low Stakes Assignments., Communications In Information Literacy, 8 (1), 7-29.

Wright, C. & Hall, A. (2019). Communication Skills In The Workplace: An Investigation Into Student Perceptions. The Journal of Research in Business Education, 59 (2), 55-63