Ocean’s Eleven: Applying Leadership Concepts

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Introduction

Forming possibly one of the strongest teams, Danny Ocean and his close friend Rusty Ryan develop a maniacal plan to steal $150 million dollars from one of the biggest casinos in Las Vegas owned by the infamous Terry Benedict (Weintraub & Sodenbergh, 2001). With Ocean’s charismatic personality and Ryan’s social networking skills, the two manage to add nine professional con artists to their team, including experts in mechanics, pickpocketing, acrobatics, surveillance, and bombing (Weintraub & Sodenbergh, 2001). Ocean’s eleven as a team performs flawlessly and efficiently, with very minimal time to achieve the envisioned goals.

Unit #1 – Characteristics of Teams

While some view the terms “group” and “team” as synonymous, it is important to distinguish the difference between the two; specifically, that Ocean’s collection of people were a team and not a group. According to Levi (2011), a team includes members that “work together on a common project for which they are all accountable” (p. 4). Since groups are usually under the firm control of an authority figure, a select few people of the group are held accountable. In contrast to this, Ocean’s team was held mutually accountable; if one team member was busted in the act of stealing, they all were in trouble. Ocean’s ten team members also had a smaller number of members, in contrast to groups that can potentially number in the hundreds to thousands (Levi, 2011).

Identifying the six different types of work teams as production, service, management, project, action, and parallel teams, Levi (2011) states that different forms of teams will be used in different situations. Ocean’s team would be considered a project team, meaning the work was typically done within a certain time frame. Danny Ocean’s entire plot was carried out within a
month, with planning only lasting about two weeks. Project teams also involve bringing “experts together to perform a specific task” (p. 6). Each team member’s expertise and skill set was vital to the overall goal of stealing the $150 million dollars.

**Unit #2 – Teamwork Processes**

Just like most teams, Ocean’s team followed Tuckman and Jensen’s stages of group development of forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Levi, 2011, p. 40). As a sort of “orientation” stage, the forming stage consists of team members getting to know one another; after Ocean and Ryan carefully chose individual con artists for talents and skills, all members were brought together at one house to familiarize themselves with fellow member characteristics and personalities over drinks. This led to the storming stage, where Danny Ocean stated the current problem at hand, and fellow team members commented on how ludicrous it was to try to steal money from a famous casino (Levi, 2011). While ideas were tossed around, team members began to become more comfortable with the idea, and slowly transferred to the norming stage of development. In this stage, Ocean’s team began to recognize the strengths of the other members, and learned how they could work together towards the best possible outcome. Rules and guidelines were also set, and Ocean developed a fake safe to practice these procedures and determine how others would communicate efficiently (Levi, 2011). In possibly the most important stage, to Ocean’s team at least, Danny Ocean and his crew performed their carefully planned gimmick and successfully tricked Benedict into sitting there while robbers walked out with the whole $150 million. Celebrating before the night was even over and therefore entering the adjourning stage, the team met in a warehouse where members could finally breathe a sigh of relief for successfully stealing the casino money without getting caught (Levi, 2011).
Without communication and trust, Ocean’s plot would have proved impossible. The communication process is comprised of three factors, including the sender, the receiver, and the message (Levi, 2011, p. 94). Danny Ocean’s expert team followed an open, decentralized model, meaning communication was among all members and not one person, not even Ocean, was at the center. One example includes Livingston Dell, the surveillance expert, communicating to Ocean and Ryan that the coast was clear for route to the safe. After arriving at the safe, Ocean and Ryan communicated to “The Amazing” Yen, the acrobat, to get away from the door so they could open it with explosives (Weintraub & Sodenbergh, 2001). While this is only a small part of the overall performance, it shows that each member must communicate with another in order to keep the plan running smoothly.

Unit #3 – The Emotionally Intelligent Team

In most of today’s situations, the best teams are the emotionally intelligent ones. According to Hughes and Terrel (2007), emotional intelligence is “the ability to recognize and manage your own emotions and to recognize and respond effectively to the emotions of others” (p. 17). One of the best examples from the movie is when Ryan recognizes Ocean’s ulterior motive of attempting to get his wife, Tess, who is currently dating Benedict, back on his side. Ryan cautions Ocean that his goals may be skewed, and suggests dropping the plan to steal the money completely (Weintraub & Sodenbergh, 2001). Ryan shows emotional intelligence by putting his partner’s emotions before the prize of the millions of dollars.

One of the skills of emotional intelligence, motivation, involves time, energy, and intelligence, and begs the question, “What’s in it for me?” (Hughes & Terrel, 2007, p. 57). Considering the risk of many years of prison time, it was hard to rationalize the benefits outweighing the risks. However, with the amount of money on the line, all team members
agreed to the possible risk because of the motivation of splitting the $150 million dollars eleven ways. This was an intelligent tactic of Ocean, because he could have easily given more of the money to himself. Some team members, like Linus Caldwell, had other external motivators, such as living up to his father’s potential (Weintraub & Sodenbergh, 2001).

Unit #4 – Issues Teams Face

In order to create the ultimate team, all members displayed some form of power, and some displayed multiple forms of power. All members displayed expert power, meaning they were perceived as the best in that field; for example, Linus Caldwell was an expert at pickpocketing while Basher Tarr was an expert at bombs. Since they originally devised the plan, Ocean and Ryan were seen as having legitimate power, or the power based on recognition and acceptance. Finally, Ocean and Ryan also displayed referent power in that they were masters at convincing others to join the team through their admiration or likable personalities (Levi, 2011, p.133).

Avoiding all possible security measures, the creativity of Ocean’s eleven proved remarkable. According to Levi (2011), “something is creative if it is novel and it is appropriate, acceptable, and useful” (p. 202). Ocean ran into the problem of once he actually got into the safe, how he was supposed to get it out of the hotel. Together with his team, they came up with the creative solution of using the fake safe they practiced on as a means of tricking Benedict to believing it was the real safe; it ended up serving multiple useful purposes (Weintraub & Sodenbergh, 2001).

Unit #5 – Teams in Modern Organizations

As teams become more important in the workforce, so does diversity. Levi (2011) states that “a group with diverse members performs better on production, problem solving, and
creativity tasks,” and Ocean’s team proved to be diverse (p. 218). While there was minor diversity in the demographic type such as age and race, mostly the diversity in the group was centered on psychological and organizational. In respects to psychological, members varied in knowledge and skill level on subjects, such as the Malloy brothers excelling in mechanics. Similarly, there was organizational diversity split up as department or division, such as Yen in the athletics part of the plan and Dell in the surveillance part of the plan (Levi, 2011).

Different types of teams, such as parallel, process, and project, will required different forms of rewards, some more successful than others. Ocean’s team, which is a project team, proves to be one of the most difficult ones to reward (Levi, 2011, p. 289). Ocean’s eleven, however, exceeded after completing the project, perhaps due to the large reward and profit sharing. Had recognition been the primary reward, and Ocean had received most of the profit, the team would not have been nearly as successful. Because it was such a large amount, giving rewards such as money at milestones was not necessary. The ultimate reward was the vengeance against Benedict and a share of the $150 million dollars.

**Conclusion**

While not the most ethical of teams in regards to goals, Ocean’s team proved to be one of the best nonetheless. With their flawless communication skills, wide array of skill sets, and creative plans, Ocean and his team did the impossible by stealing hundreds of millions of dollars from a safe that was meant to be impenetrable. Perhaps some things are impossible alone, but as this movie proves, nothing is impossible with a team.
References

