

Disruption in the Work Team

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Ligia Escalante formed the work team of the Languages Institutional Program in the City of Mérida (Yucatán, Mexico) in 2006 and she was named head of the team. She initially had a consolidated group of workers, divided in five teams that would be working in each of the campuses of the state *Universidad Metropolitana*. However, she realized there were differences between the members of one of the five groups. The success of the Languages Institutional Program was threatened, as the desired goals in the campus assigned to the “Blue” work team were not being accomplished. Ligia faced a situation she had to solve, she had to act immediately to avoid further problems in the Languages Institutional Program and she wondered: “What can I do to solve the conflict before there is further disruption?”

The Founder

Ligia Escalante was a teacher at the state *Universidad Metropolitana*, with 25 years of service. Throughout her school career, she taught English as a Second Language, as her training and orientation were in that field.

Ligia said, “I always enjoyed my job as I was aware of the important life-changing role I played at the state *Universidad Metropolitana*”. Upon reaching 25 years of service, she had the opportunity to start a project related to the creation of a Languages Institutional Program.

The project came into existence in February 2006 to support the enforcement of the primary objective of the educational and academic model of the *Universidad Metropolitana*. Said goal is the formation of new generations of professionals through mobility and an internationalization component, in the pursuit of academic programs to have access to the right information and the development of communication in a second language.

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The state *Universidad Metropolitana* was made up by five Campuses of Knowledge specialized in different disciplines. That is, Campus of Exact Sciences (which included the undergraduate degrees of Mathematics, Physical Engineering, and Chemical Engineering), Campus of Architecture, Art, and Design (which included the undergraduate degrees of Architecture, Habitat Design, and Latin American Literature), Campus of Biological and Agricultural Sciences (which included the undergraduate degrees of Veterinary and Zoological Medicine, and Marine Biology), Health Campus (which included the undergraduate degrees of Medicine, Dentistry, Nursing, and Rehabilitation), and the Campus of Social Sciences, Economic-Administrative, and Humanities (which included the undergraduate degrees of Law, Economics, Accounting, Psychology, Anthropology, and Education). In all, the *Universidad Metropolitana* had approximately seventeen thousand students.

The Languages Institutional Program

Ligia designed the proposal of the Languages Institutional Program and presented it for approval to Carlos Cisneros, coordinator of the Institutional Relations Department, who had requested it. Once the project was approved, the coordinator asked her to lead it. She replied, "I gladly accept, I have always had a special love for languages".

The first thing she did was to assemble a work team made up by people who were certified in the proficiency in English as a second language. She sought choosing people who were active in the University, as well as hiring external people, so she started by identifying those teachers whose career in the *Universidad Metropolitana* singled them out as possible proactive and visionary elements for the project.

She then hired other teachers who had a certification that demonstrated their proficiency in the English language as a second language, specifically, those who had a Cambridge certificate and at least Teacher's Training studies, qualifications that certified a teacher to give English lessons at an intermediate-higher and higher levels.

Once the work team was complete, the members met throughout several weeks to outline what would be the Languages Institutional Program, as well as to define their mission and vision. Throughout the time they worked on the program, a teacher was of great help for Ligia, Edith Cisneros, also with a 25-year career in the institution teaching English.

From the meetings they had, the Languages Institutional Program obtained its mission:

To offer the students of the state *Universidad Metropolitana* the opportunity to attain the English level demanded by the contemporary world. Additionally, to guide and promote mechanisms that will enable to standardize and increase the quality of teaching and learning English in the institution through an innovative curriculum supported on new technologies and flexible modalities for learning.

The vision was also established: "to be a high academic quality program, recognized at a national level, consistent with the English proficiency standards demanded by the profile of their graduates, and with actions that promote the professional development of the language teachers".

And the main goal: to train students who mastered the English level, at least at a basic level, to be able to read, listen, write, and speak the language related to their profession.

The number of enrolled students of the Languages Institutional Program was of about 200 students at the start, which increased as the work teams in each of the premises set in.

For a correct operation of the Program, Ligia believed it was appropriate to establish the organization structure. She would be in charge of the Languages Institutional Program with the help of teacher Susana Valdivia, who would in turn be in charge of the Technological Access Centers, and Lic. Sandra Aguilera, who would serve as external consultant of the program.

Additionally, five work teams were formed with teachers who were in charge of the teaching of English in a block of schools programmed to that end, that is, in each of the Knowledge Campuses of the *Universidad Metropolitana*, and they reported directly to Ligia Escalante. Ligia was in charge of coordinating the activities, the duties, and responsibilities of each of the members of each work team, while Susana was in charge of checking that all the teams had the right papers to perform their duties, as well as to direct all questions to Ligia. In turn, Sandra monitored the progress of each work team to detect any situation that could be addressed either by Susana or by Ligia.

Seven teachers made up the “Blue” work team of the Languages Institutional Program, and it was assigned to the campus with the largest number of students. Under those circumstances, Ligia requested teacher Edith Cisneros, who had many years of experience, to help her with that team. The other teachers were hired full-time. All the members of the “Blue” work team had the necessary qualifications to have an adequate performance in their job. In fact, the team’s organizational structure was designed to only have Edith Cisneros as head of the team, while the rest of the teachers would be teaching and have some type of administrative work within the team, such as the absences and late arrivals, incidences, development of formats, among others. It was agreed that in time there would be an administrative assistant to release the teachers from these duties.

The team was so well constituted that in the beginning all the members complemented each other, that is, there were teachers with a better proficiency in writing in English while others were more proficient in holding a conversation in that language. They all helped each other to reach the goals of the Languages Institutional Program.

The Conflict

According to Ligia Escalante, at the beginning, the team was working well and they regularly met to design the study programs. They also worked on designing the work sheets of each of the study programs and the activities they would implement. All this time, it was her who assigned the workload and her perception was that “no one felt there was preferential treatment”.

Nonetheless, the problems started two months after the team was formed. It all began when Edith Cisneros requested a meeting with Ligia Escalante to report a situation that she felt

was “unusual”, and which was happening in the group. Ligia Escalante agreed to talk to her, as she had always believed in listening to her employees.

When they met, teacher Edith told Ligia that she had noticed that one of her colleagues, Liliana Ugalde, would sometimes do activities that were different from the ones demanded by her job. For instance, she said she had seen her many times writing invoices of a personal business of clothes from Yucatán during working hours. Ligia told Edith not to worry about it, since Liliana had talked to her and requested permission to do it while she adapted to the job.

Edith Cisneros continued doing her job as usual, but as she said, “I can’t help noticing what Liliana Ugalde does”. Despite their differences, she had not mentioned anything about it, nor had they had any frictions.

Six months after the “Blue” team was formed, it was necessary to appoint someone as the administrative head of the group, and teacher Edith Cisneros immediately requested a meeting with Ligia Escalante to ask for the position. However, Ligia told her that she wanted to assign that responsibility to Liliana Ugalde, namely to get her more involved in her job.

As stated by her, Edith was not happy with Ligia’s decision and as of that day, she decided to confront teacher Liliana Ugalde. She told her she had to engage with the job she had been hired to do, and not with her personal business. Liliana replied she had always committed to her job, and although she had written some invoices during working hours, that had been a temporary situation, while she adapted to being eight hours away from her business.

In any event, Edith Cisneros said she was not satisfied. At a meeting where Ligia invited the teachers of all work teams of the campuses to talk about some agreements that were of everyone’s interest, Edith seized the opportunity and talked about the things that teacher Liliana Ugalde did. She even publicly declared that it was a “shame” for the Languages Institutional Program to have someone like her, as she had started with Ligia Escalante and she was convinced that that was not the program’s spirit. Due to everything that happened in that meeting, teacher Liliana Ugalde requested to talk to Ligia Escalante.

They got together in her office to talk about what was happening. This was the first time that Liliana Ugalde talked about the topic with Ligia Escalante. She said that things in the “Blue” team were not going well. She said that Edith would not talk to her, when they had something to do together, she just would not address her. She had also convinced the team members who they would talk to and who they would not relate to. This situation had affected the spirit of the other teachers, as it was uncomfortable for them not to be able to have a normal conversation during work sessions, or to have to decide for one party or the other.

Liliana told Ligia Escalante that the problems she had had with teacher Edith Cisneros had been many. For instance, Ligia said that one time Edith had shouted at her, which made her feel terrible. She had not responded, but deep down she had felt that her reaction had not been correct.

Ligia Escalante was concerned. She realized that the “Blue” team was about to disintegrate, but not only that, should the problems not be solved, the Languages Institutional Program would be jeopardized: a complete campus would be left without integral service because of the interpersonal conflicts between two team members. She told Liliana Ugalde not to worry, that a decision would have to be made to solve the problem.

Ligia talked to Carlos Cisneros about the situation and asked him for his opinion. Once she explained both versions to the coordinator, he said that it would be to the best interest to lay off one of both employees, nevertheless, Ligia asked him for a last chance to solve the problem, as both were well-trained and valuable professionals for the institution. Carlos Cisneros said there was no problem but that it was essential to solve any friction.

In December of 2006, Ligia Escalante resorted to the Integral Development Coordination of her university to request help to solve the situation that was generating conflicts in the “Blue” team. The Integral Development Coordination agreed to help her through an intervention process, which would be conducted by the psychologist Eric José Gamboa Ruiz, head of the Organizational Diagnostic Department. Both agreed on the date they would meet with the work team regarding the intervention: December 8, 2006.

On the day that had been agreed, Eric Gamboa came to the meeting point to see the “Blue” team members. He had been thinking on how to approach the situation, believing that an intervention would be “appropriate” to improve the interpersonal relationships, the work team, and an adequate conflict management. Ligia Escalante introduced the teachers and then said, “We need an intervention to re-establish harmony in the team”.

Ligia was forced to face reality: Edith Cisneros quit, and in doing so, she had caused frictions among the team members, which made it highly important to re-establish harmony. She wondered: “How could she re-establish it? What should she do to solve the problem? Which problems would she face?”