



Are Five Heads Better Than One?

Evan, Corner, Alexis, Derek, and Judy had been team members for only one week, but they felt that they were already working well together. Upper management at their company, Advert, a medium-sized marketing firm, picked the five employees for a special project: the development of a commercial promoting the launch of a client's 60-inch plasma flat-screen television. The project was especially critical because the television company was one of Advert's most important clients, and the firm's revenues had been slipping lately due to a few poor ad campaigns. Needless to say, upper management at Advert wanted the team to hit a home run with the project.

Upper management didn't have any trouble picking the five employees. All were bright, talented individuals who came up with creative ideas. More important, reasoned the top managers, the employees were similar on a number of characteristics. Evan, Conner, Alexis, Derek, and Judy were around the same age, had worked for the company for about the same amount of time, and because they all tended to be sociable, friendly, and valued getting along with others, their personalities seemed to mesh as well.

To give the team creative room, management allowed them as much autonomy as possible. It gave the team the freedom to see the project through from start to finish—coming up with their own ideas, hiring someone to film the commercial once the idea was in place, creating and maintaining a budget, and presenting the final commercial to the client. Advert's top managers had already met with and assured the client that it was in good hands with this team.

Excited to begin working, the team decided to meet in person to discuss ideas for the commercial. Conner, who was used to leading others in his previous work groups, took the head seat at the group's table. Immediately, he told the group his idea for the commercial.

"I've been thinking about this a lot since I was first told about the project," he said. "I know our client well, and I think they want us to do something out of the box—something that will grab people's attention."

Conner proceeded to explain his idea for the commercial, which centered on a college student "loser" trying to get a date. After one particularly attractive female turns him down, and she and her friends ridicule him, the student returns sullenly to his dorm, plunks down on an old sofa, and turns on his small, black-and-white "loser" television.



But in the next shot, the student is setting up a 60-inch plasma television in his dorm room, door ajar. While he's doing this, the group of attractive females walks by. In the final shot, the student is in his dorm room watching his new television, with the group of attractive females around him.

Following his explanation, Conner leaned back in his seat and folded his arms across his chest. Grinning proudly, he asked, "Well, what do you think?"

Alexis was the first to speak up. "Um, I don't know." She paused. "I think it's a pretty good start." Hesitantly, she added, "The only thing that I worry about is that our client won't like it. They pride themselves on being more sophisticated than their competitors. To them, this television is both an electronics device and a work of art." But then Alexis quickly added, "But I don't know, maybe you're right that we need to do something different."

Conner, with a slight frown on his face, asked the other group members, "What do the rest of you think?"

Evan responded, "Yeah, I think it's a pretty good idea."

"Judy?" asked Conner.

"I agree. It has potential."

"Well, everyone else seems to agree with me. What do you think Derek?" Conner asked, with the other three members staring at Derek.

Derek paused for a moment. He had his own ideas as well, and because he had worked with the client, perhaps more than any of the other team members, he wasn't sure about Conner's idea. Derek had pictured a commercial that placed the television in a stylish, contemporary Manhattan apartment, with a couple in their 30s enjoying a classic movie, a bottle of red wine on the coffee table.

Feeling the heat from his teammates' gazes, reluctantly Derek said, "Yeah, that sounds good."

"Great, it's settled then," beamed Conner. "We'll have this commercial to them in no time if we stay at this pace."

So the team fleshed out the commercial over the next month. Everyone got along, and the feeling of camaraderie strengthened. Once on board with Conner's idea, the team members became more confident that they would be successful, so much so that they made the commercial even racier than the original idea. The



attractive girls would be dressed provocatively, and instead of watching the television, the student and the girls would be laughing and drinking, with the television on in the background. There were a few hesitations here and there as members expressed other ideas, but each team member, enjoying the group's solidarity, decided that it would be better to keep the team in good spirits rather than risk losing the team's morale.

The team quickly decided on a company to shoot the commercial and approved the actors. In a short time, they had completed their commercial. The next step was to present the commercial to their client. Conner took it upon himself to alert management that the team was ready to present the commercial.

"Impressive. Your team is a month ahead of the deadline," said one of the top managers. "We have a lot riding on this, so I hope that it's good. I presume everything went well then?"

Conner nodded. "Yes, very well. No problems or disagreements at all. I think we worked really well together."

On the day of the presentation, the team waited anxiously in a meeting room for their client to arrive. Advert's top managers took their seats in the meeting room. Soon after, three of the client's manager, dressed in professional attire, walked into the meeting room and sat down quietly. After welcoming the clients to the presentation, Conner and his teammates began the presentation, with Conner leading the way. He explained that the idea had come to the team almost instantly, and that given that everyone thought it was a good idea, he was sure that their company would feel the same. Then he dimmed the lights, pressed play, and let the commercial run.

It did not take long for the team to realize that the commercial was not having the effect they had wanted in their clients or their managers. The clients exchanged several sideways glances with one another, and the managers shifted nervously in their seats. After what seemed like an eternity, the commercial ended and the lights came back on. An awkward silence filled the room. The clients began murmuring among themselves.

"That was, um, interesting," said one of the clients, finally.

Conner replied that the thought the idea was "out of the box," and that, therefore, audiences would easily remember it.

"Oh, they'll remember it all right," smirked one of the clients. She then turned to Advert's top managers and stated, "This is not at all what we were looking for. The



commercial doesn't fit our needs and doesn't portray the image that we are trying to obtain. Given that you told us that we would be in good hands with this team, my colleagues and I fear that your company will not be able to meet our goals. We appreciate the time that this took, but we will likely employ another advertising firm to film our commercial." With that, she and her colleagues left the room.

After a thorough lecturing from Advert's top managers, the team was disbanded. One month later, Derek was at home watching television when a commercial came on. Classical music played in the background as the camera swept through a modern home. The camera slowly rose up behind a tan leather sofa seating a couple enjoying a bottle of wine and watching a new 60-inch plasma television. In the bottom corner of the screen, in small writing, was the name of one of Advert's competitors. Apparently, Advert's former clients got what they were looking for in the end, but from a competitor. Derek shook his head and vowed to speak up next time he had an idea.

Questions for Discussion

- What factors contributed to the poor performance of the Advert team? As a manager, what could you have done to help the team perform better?
- According to the case, the Advert team was given a relatively high degree of autonomy. How might this autonomy have contributed to the presence of groupthink?
- Teams can be either homogeneous or heterogeneous. How could you characterize the Advert team, and how did this affect the team's creativity and performance?
- What are some group decision-making techniques that could have helped reduce conformity pressures and groupthink among the Advert team?
- How would you describe Conner's leadership style? Why do you think his style wasn't effective? In what situations might Conner be an effective leader?