

CASE 3.1

A Strained Research Team

Dr. Adam Wood is the principal investigator on a 3-year, \$1 million federally funded research grant to study health education programs for older populations, called the Elder Care Project. Unlike previous projects, in which Dr. Wood worked alone or with one or two other investigators, on this project Dr. Wood has 11 colleagues. His project team is made up of two co-investigators (with PhDs), four intervention staff (with MAs), and five general staff members (with BAs). One year into the project, it has become apparent to Dr. Wood and the team that the project is underbudgeted and has too few resources. Team members are spending 20%–30% more time on the project than has been budgeted to pay



Training Skills

them. Regardless of the resource strain, all team members are committed to the project; they believe in its goals and the importance of its outcomes. Dr. Wood is known throughout the country as the foremost scholar in this area of health education research. He is often asked to serve on national review and advisory boards. His publication record is second to none. In addition, his colleagues in the university know Dr. Wood as a very competent researcher. People come to Dr. Wood for advice on research design and methodology questions. They also come to him for questions about theoretical formulations. He has a reputation as someone who can see the big picture on research projects.

Despite his research competence, there are problems on Dr. Wood's research team. Dr. Wood worries there is a great deal of work to be done but that the members of the team are not devoting sufficient time to the Elder Care Project. He is frustrated because many of the day-to-day research tasks of the project are falling into his lap. He enters a research meeting, throws his notebook down on the table, and says, "I wish I'd never taken this project on. It's taking way too much of my time. The rest of you aren't pulling your fair share." Team members feel exasperated at Dr. Wood's comments. Although they respect his competence, they find his leadership style frustrating. His negative comments at staff meetings are having a demoralizing effect on the research team. Despite their hard work and devotion to the project, Dr. Wood seldom compliments or praises their efforts. Team members believe that they have spent more time than anticipated on the project and have received less pay or credit than expected. The project is sucking away a lot of staff energy, yet Dr. Wood does not seem to understand the pressures confronting his staff.

The research staff is starting to feel burned out, but members realize they need to keep trying because they are under time constraints from the federal government to do the work promised. The team needs to develop a pamphlet for the participants in the Elder Care Project, but the pamphlet costs are significantly more than budgeted in the grant. Dr. Wood has been very adept at finding out where they might find small pockets of money to help cover those costs.

Although team members are pleased that he is able to obtain the money, they are sure he will use this as just another example of how he was the one doing most of the work on the project.

Questions

1. Based on the skills approach, how would you assess Dr. Wood's leadership and his relationship to the members of the Elder Care Project team? Will the project be successful?

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2. Does Dr. Wood have the skills necessary to be an effective leader of this research team?
3. The skills model describes three important competencies for leaders: problem-solving skills, social judgment skills, and knowledge. If you were to coach Dr. Wood using this model, what competencies would you address with him? What changes would you suggest that he make in his leadership?