

Critical Review of Professional Practice in SMART Engineering Case Study

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Introduction

This report provides a critical evaluation of professional practice within the SMART Engineering case study, focusing on the organisational, behavioural, and ethical challenges that emerged during the development of a new electric car. The case centres on Dr. Alice Parker, a senior engineer and project lead, who, alongside other female colleagues, faced gender bias, exclusion, and a lack of professional recognition within a cross-functional team. As deadlines approached, poor communication, ineffective management, and a lack of accountability resulted in team conflict, missed milestones, and ultimately the resignation of Dr. Parker and her wife, who was also employed within the department.

The purpose of this report is to critically analyse what happened, why it happened, who was affected, and how these behaviours impacted both individuals and the wider organisation. It applies five key areas of professional practice (self-management, personal, cognitive, and unconscious bias, accountability and authentic behaviour, interpersonal relationships, and professional integrity) to assess the situation. The analysis draws upon recognised management and leadership theories such as Goleman's (2013) Emotional Intelligence model, Covey's (2020) Eisenhower Matrix, Avolio and Gardner's (2005) Authentic Leadership theory, and Kaptein's (2019) model of integrity, among others.

These theoretical frameworks are used to interpret the causes and consequences of professional conduct displayed in the case, highlighting where poor management practices and bias undermined collaboration and trust. Furthermore, this review explores how evidence-based tools such as the RACI Matrix for accountability (PMI, 2021) and Harrity's (2019) Inclusion Framework could have improved equity and communication across the team. The analysis also aims to identify lessons applicable to future professional practice, demonstrating how reflective application of theory can lead to ethical, inclusive, and high-performing teams.

Self-Management

Self-management refers to an individual's ability to regulate emotions, maintain motivation, and prioritise tasks effectively, particularly under pressure. In this case, both management and team members demonstrated weak self-management skills as the project deadline approached. Senior managers appeared to lose composure when progress fell behind schedule, resorting to micromanagement and bypassing Dr. Parker's authority by speaking directly to her team. This reactive behaviour not only disrupted the chain of command but also reflected a lack of structured prioritisation and planning.

One useful framework for understanding these shortcomings is the Eisenhower Matrix, which distinguishes between tasks that are urgent and those that are important (Covey, 2020). Applying this model could have helped managers focus on resolving key structural issues - such as resource allocation and communication - rather than reacting to short-term pressures. Instead, by concentrating solely on the approaching deadline, leaders prioritised urgency over importance, leading to disorganisation and heightened stress within the team. Effective prioritisation has been linked to improved productivity and reduced burnout in project environments (Macan, 1994).

Dr. Parker also faced self-management challenges. As tensions increased, she became increasingly guarded and hesitant to share information for fear that others would take credit for her work. Although her reaction was an understandable response to bias and exclusion, it ultimately restricted collaboration and trust among colleagues. This behaviour illustrates how emotional strain can lead to defensive coping strategies that, while self-protective, can inadvertently harm teamwork and performance (Luthans, et al, 2017).

According to Goleman's (2013) Emotional Intelligence theory, emotionally intelligent leaders demonstrate self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy, which help them manage conflict effectively and maintain morale. A leader's ability to recognise and control their emotional responses directly influences the team's motivation and cohesion. Had management applied these principles - remaining calm, communicating transparently, and acknowledging team frustrations - they could have modelled stability rather than panic. Similarly, Dr. Parker might have benefited from self-regulation techniques such as mindfulness, reflection journals, or stress-management workshops to maintain composure and confidence despite workplace challenges. Mindfulness interventions, for example, have been shown to improve attention control and reduce workplace stress (Good, et al, 2016).

Moreover, frameworks like Locke and Latham's Goal-Setting Theory (2002) highlight that setting clear, challenging, yet achievable goals enhances focus and productivity. Regular review meetings and clearly defined milestones could have supported better

self-management for the entire team. Implementing resilience strategies and time-management tools - such as time-blocking or the Eisenhower Matrix - would also help maintain a sense of control and direction (Claessens, et al, 2007).

Personal, Cognitive, and Unconscious Bias

Bias - both conscious and unconscious - strongly influenced professional practice in the SMART Engineering case. Female engineers, including Dr Parker and her wife, were frequently overlooked in meetings and denied recognition for their work. This pattern demonstrates gender bias, a form of prejudice that undervalues women's competence in technical fields (Heilman, et al, 2018). Such bias can become self-reinforcing: once an individual's credibility is questioned, subsequent contributions are judged more harshly, a phenomenon known as the "lack-of-fit" effect (Heilman, 2001).

The team also displayed affinity bias, where members gravitated toward colleagues with similar professional or cultural backgrounds. This is consistent with social identity theory, which posits that individuals form in-groups to enhance self-esteem and predictability (Tajfel, et al, 1979). While social cohesion can aid morale, it also breeds exclusion and stifles innovation when diversity is ignored (Robbins, et al, 2019).

Cognitive biases such as confirmation bias (Tversky, et al, 1974) likely led team members to favour information that confirmed their assumptions about who was competent. As a result, experienced professionals like Dr Parker, coming from different sectors, were perceived as "outsiders." Harrity's (2019) Inclusion Framework argues that psychological safety and trust are essential for dismantling such bias. However, SMART Engineering's culture lacked both. Gossip and silence replaced open discussion, signalling to minority voices that dissent was risky.

Unconscious bias training and structured participation could have reduced these disparities. For example, rotating meeting chairs and assigning each engineer a brief update segment, irrespective of gender or seniority, would promote equal airtime. Klev, Dobbin, and Kelly (2006) found that accountability mechanisms such as diversity task forces significantly improved representation and fairness. Embedding bias awareness into performance appraisals could further reinforce equitable behaviour.

Overall, unchecked bias damaged morale, eroded trust, and led to the loss of skilled employees. Addressing cognitive and social biases through structured inclusion policies would therefore have been essential to the project's success and ethical integrity.

Accountability and Authentic Behaviour

Accountability and authenticity were severely lacking throughout the case. Senior management failed to deliver promised resources, yet deflected responsibility by placing pressure on Dr Parker's team. This behaviour undermined both trust and organisational transparency. In effective teams, accountability ensures that responsibilities and consequences are clearly defined and shared (Kaptein, 2019).

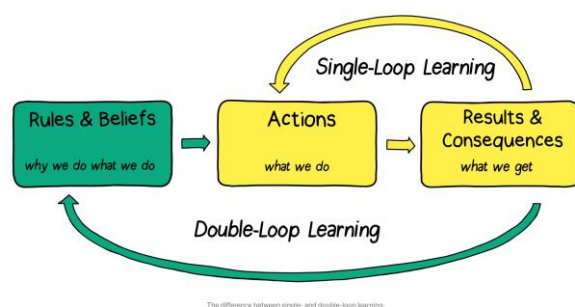
A useful tool for clarifying these dynamics is the RACI Matrix, identifying who is Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed (PMI, 2021). Had SMART Engineering implemented this framework, Dr Parker's leadership role and management's obligations would have been explicit, preventing boundary-crossing and micromanagement. Clear documentation of decision-making lines can reduce ambiguity and protect team autonomy (Meredith, et al, 2017).

The absence of accountability extended beyond leadership. Colleagues who recognised unfair treatment of female engineers remained silent, demonstrating bystander apathy (Latané, et al, 1970). According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), individuals model the behaviour they observe; thus, management's avoidance of responsibility likely normalised passivity across the team. Over time, this culture of silence perpetuated inequality and prevented constructive feedback loops.

Authentic leadership theory provides further insight. Avolio and Gardner (2005) define authentic leaders as transparent, ethical, and self-aware individuals who act in accordance with their values. In this case, managers lacked authenticity by making empty promises and avoiding honest communication about project constraints. Research links authentic leadership to increased psychological safety and team performance (Walumbwa, et al., 2008).

Furthermore, Argyris and Schön's (1978) concept of double-loop learning suggests that genuine accountability requires questioning the underlying assumptions driving behaviour, not just correcting surface errors. Management's focus on meeting the deadline (single-loop) ignored systemic issues like bias and unclear roles. Encouraging reflection on these deeper causes (double-loop) could have led to lasting cultural improvement.

Implementing regular review meetings, transparent feedback systems, and a RACI chart would have reinforced accountability at all levels. Equally, modelling authenticity (admitting mistakes, communicating clearly, and aligning actions with stated values)



would have rebuilt trust. Without these, the team's morale and productivity deteriorated, culminating in the resignation of key staff and reputational damage to SMART Engineering.

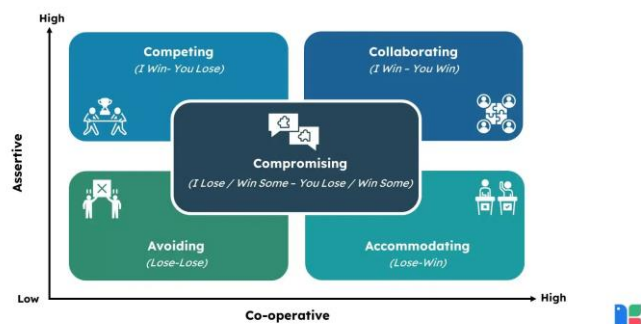
Interpersonal Relationships

Strong interpersonal relationships are essential to effective collaboration and knowledge sharing, particularly in cross-functional teams. In the SMART Engineering case, these relationships deteriorated rapidly due to gender and affinity bias, lack of trust, and communication breakdowns. Team members divided into subgroups based on similarity, leaving female engineers feeling marginalised and invisible. Such division is explained by social identity theory, which states that individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups, often leading to in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination (Tajfel, et al, 1979).

Cross-functional teams depend heavily on psychological safety (the belief that one can express opinions without fear of embarrassment or retaliation (Edmondson, 1999)). In this case, gossip, exclusion, and management's inconsistent communication eroded that safety. The absence of open dialogue prevented the team from resolving conflict or learning from mistakes. Research shows that teams with strong psychological safety perform better and experience fewer interpersonal conflicts (Newman, et al, 2017).

The conflict dynamics in the case also align with Thomas and Kilmann's (1974) Conflict Mode Instrument, which identifies five conflict-handling styles: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. Most team members appeared to adopt avoidance or accommodation, ignoring bias rather than addressing it. While such approaches may preserve surface-level harmony, they often allow resentment to grow unchecked. Dr Parker's choice to withhold information can be seen as a protective but isolating response within this conflict environment.

Five Modes Of The Thomas Kilmann Model



Effective relationship-building also requires strong communication channels. The Shannon-Weaver communication model (1949) emphasises the importance of clear message transmission and feedback to prevent misunderstanding. However, in this scenario, the “noise” created by bias, mistrust, and management interference disrupted message clarity. Open communication practices, such as structured meeting

agendas, feedback summaries, and transparent reporting lines, could have rebuilt clarity and inclusiveness (Robbins, et al, 2019).

Finally, the case reveals a failure to practice empathy, a key component of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2013). Male colleagues who recognised the unfair treatment of their female peers but remained silent showed emotional disengagement. Empathy-driven communication could have strengthened trust and encouraged collaborative problem-solving. Research consistently links empathy and prosocial behaviour with improved cooperation and team satisfaction (Clark, et al, 2019).

Overall, ineffective relationship management and lack of psychological safety prevented the team from capitalising on its diversity. The result was decreased morale, reduced innovation, and eventual resignation of key team members, demonstrating the high cost of neglecting interpersonal dynamics in professional practice.

Professional Integrity

Professional integrity forms the foundation of ethical and effective practice. It encompasses honesty, fairness, respect, and accountability in decision-making and interpersonal conduct (Kaptein, 2019). Within the SMART Engineering case, integrity was repeatedly compromised: promises of resources were broken, discriminatory behaviour went unaddressed, and credit for work was misattributed. This erosion of ethical standards undermined both individual and organisational credibility.

Integrity is closely tied to the concept of ethical leadership, which involves aligning actions with moral values and setting an example for others (Brown, et al, 2006). Senior management at SMART Engineering failed in this respect. Their willingness to overlook gender bias and prioritise deadlines over fairness demonstrates a focus on short-term performance rather than ethical sustainability. According to the Engineering Council's (2017) Statement of Ethical Principles, engineers must act with honesty and integrity, respect for life, law, the environment, and the public good. Management's behaviour violated these core expectations, thereby endangering both internal culture and external reputation.

Allowing bias to persist also breached principles of organisational justice. Greenberg's (1990) organisational justice theory identifies three key forms of fairness: distributive (fair outcomes), procedural (fair processes), and interactional (fair treatment). All three were neglected in this case. Female engineers were denied equal recognition (distributive), decision-making processes excluded their input (procedural), and interpersonal interactions were dismissive (interactional). Such inequities are strongly linked to decreased job satisfaction and increased turnover intentions (Colquitt, et al, 2001).

Furthermore, integrity demands courage to confront unethical behaviour. The silence of bystanders within the team, as explained by Latané and Darley's (1970) bystander effect, perpetuated injustice. In contrast, Treviño, et al, (2003) argue that ethical leaders foster open discussion about wrongdoing, encouraging staff to voice concerns without fear. Dr Parker's resignation, along with her wife's, symbolised a loss of faith in the organisation's moral framework.

Promoting integrity requires embedding ethical reflection into leadership practice. Tools such as ethical decision-making models (Rest, 1986) can help professionals evaluate the moral implications of their actions. Regular ethics workshops, transparent communication policies, and reinforcement of company values could have prevented the deterioration seen in SMART Engineering. By neglecting these principles, the organisation sacrificed long-term credibility for short-term convenience.

Reflection on Own Practice

To reflect on my own professional behaviour and development, I am using Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988), a six-stage model that promotes learning through structured reflection: Description, Feelings, Evaluation, Analysis, Conclusion, and Action Plan. It helps examine experiences critically, identify lessons, and apply improvements to future practice.

Description: In my current workplace at Amazon, I have observed patterns of bias and hierarchy that, while different from the SMART Engineering case, have similar consequences. Age and seniority appear to carry more weight than gender, although there are still very few female managers outside of HR. A situation that stood out was when I applied for an internal leadership role. Before my interview, a colleague told me the interviewer might be "extra hard" on me once he realised I had been with the company longer and had more leadership experience than newer candidates. I felt confident during the interview and followed the STAR model, but the feedback stated that I had not used the structure properly. The tone was somewhat condescending, focusing on "missed" details that I had considered obvious.

Feelings: I felt disappointed and frustrated, as the feedback did not seem to reflect my performance. I suspected that the interviewer's judgement might have been influenced by bias or hierarchy rather than my actual responses. It was discouraging to realise that my experience might have been viewed as a threat rather than an advantage.

Evaluation: Although the experience was demoralising, it increased my self-awareness and empathy for others who face similar treatment. Like Dr Parker in the case study, I recognised how subtle forms of bias can prevent fair recognition. Positively, the experience encouraged me to seek broader feedback from trusted peers and managers, and to reflect on how I could create fairer spaces for others.

Analysis: Through Goleman's (2013) concept of emotional intelligence, I recognised that staying calm and professional during and after the feedback showed good self-regulation. Adams' (1965) Equity Theory also explains my reaction: perceived unfairness naturally leads to frustration and lower motivation. Bias at Amazon may not always be gender-based, but hierarchy and tenure still affect inclusion. I try to counter this by ensuring quieter team members are heard during meetings; when I sense someone hesitant to speak up, I often raise their questions myself and make sure they receive credit. This supports Edmondson's (1999) idea of psychological safety, allowing others to contribute without fear of judgement.

Conclusion: Reflecting through Gibbs' model has helped me understand that while I cannot always control others' biases, I can control how I respond to them. Maintaining professionalism, seeking constructive feedback, and advocating for inclusivity are all ways I can influence a more positive environment. The experience reinforced my belief that fairness, respect, and psychological safety are essential to effective teamwork and leadership.

Action Plan: Moving forward, I intend to continue building confidence in challenging bias constructively and requesting clearer feedback during evaluations. I also plan to complete internal training on inclusive communication and bias awareness. Finally, I will keep supporting inclusivity in my team by encouraging participation from everyone, especially those who might otherwise go unheard.

Personal Development Plan

This Personal Development Plan (PDP) has been developed based on the key insights from the analysis of the SMART Engineering case study and my own reflection using Gibbs' Reflective Cycle. It highlights specific areas where I aim to improve my professional practice, particularly in managing stress, communicating effectively, addressing unconscious bias, and maintaining accountability and ethical behaviour. The plan focuses on realistic, measurable actions that align with both personal growth and workplace expectations.

Development Area	Objective (What I want to achieve)	Actions (How I will achieve it)	Resources / Support Needed	Target Date	Success Measure / Evidence
1. Bias Awareness and Inclusive Practice	Strengthen awareness of unconscious bias and improve inclusion in team interactions.	Complete the annual DEI (Diversity, Equity & Inclusion) training; request feedback from team members about inclusivity during meetings.	Amazon learning platform; peer and manager feedback.	Within 3 months	Completion of DEI module and evidence of inclusive input in team discussions.
2. Communication and Feedback Skills	Improve my ability to give and receive constructive feedback confidently.	Attend an internal or online workshop on communication and feedback; use the SBI (Situation–Behaviour–Impact) model when providing feedback.	HR learning hub; feedback from line manager.	4 months	Improved peer feedback; increased clarity and engagement in meetings.
3. Self-Management and Emotional Regulation	Develop stronger control over stress and maintain focus under pressure.	Use time-management tools like the Eisenhower Matrix; practise mindfulness techniques before or after shifts; continue reflective journaling weekly.	Mindfulness app; journal or notes app.	Ongoing (review after 6 months)	Lower stress levels; journal entries showing consistent reflection.
4. Professional Integrity and Accountability	Show reliability and responsibility in daily work decisions.	Keep a personal record of commitments and follow through consistently; communicate progress clearly with team leaders.	Supervisor support; digital task tracker.	6 months	Positive feedback from supervisors and successful completion of assigned goals.
5. Leadership and Team Inclusion	Build confidence in supporting quieter or less experienced colleagues during meetings.	Encourage contributions from all team members; help others voice questions or ideas by acknowledging their input publicly.	Team meetings; informal peer feedback.	Immediate and ongoing	Noticeable increase in team participation; recognition from peers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the SMART Engineering case study demonstrates the significant impact that ineffective leadership, poor communication, and unchecked bias can have on both individuals and organisational outcomes. The case revealed how weak self-management, the presence of personal and cognitive biases, a lack of accountability, damaged interpersonal relationships, and compromised professional integrity combined to create a toxic environment where talented employees felt undervalued and excluded. These behaviours ultimately led to low morale, conflict, and the loss of experienced professionals.

The evaluation of the five professional practice areas emphasised the need for emotional intelligence, fairness, and transparent communication in modern workplaces. Theories such as Goleman’s Emotional Intelligence, the Eisenhower Matrix, the RACI framework, and Harrity’s Inclusion Model highlighted that effective professional practice relies on structure, self-awareness, and ethical consistency. When these principles are applied, teams are more likely to collaborate productively and uphold organisational values.

The reflection and subsequent Personal Development Plan demonstrated how the lessons from the case can inform ongoing professional growth. By addressing areas such as bias awareness, communication, and emotional regulation, professionals can build inclusive and accountable work environments that value every individual’s contribution. The findings of this report underline that professional integrity, inclusivity, and emotional self-management are not only ethical imperatives but also essential components of long-term organisational success.

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