

# Case Study 5: From Collaborative to Combative

## Background

Janelle, Oliver, Omar, and Tabitha were working on a business plan for a house painting business for their entrepreneurship course. As business administration students nearing graduation, they were to research, write, edit, and present a business plan for a plausible company in their community.

## Current Situation

The team received the parameters for their business plan project from their professor, Dr. Yusef Khanamadi. As the business plan included so many different sections, most requiring extensive research (the majority of the time involved in the project), and because they all had many assignments to be completed concurrently, they decided to use a collaborative writing approach. This meant assigning different sections to each person and having one person pull all the written sections together into one plan. This person would also conduct a final content edit and proofread to ensure a unified voice, style, and tone, and to double-check that documentation was included. Finally, each team member would present the sections they wrote for the plan when the time came for the required oral presentation.

Janelle, Oliver, Omar, and Tabitha wrote a team contract to help them define research, writing, editing, and oral presentation responsibilities, a meeting schedule, and deadlines leading up to the time when they would present the plan to their class. They also agreed on some consequences for work that was not completed on time, or within agreed-to parameters. However, once they handed the contract to their professor, it was promptly forgotten.

## The Problem

Team leader Janelle had difficulty getting everyone together for meetings. Something always came up, whether it was Omar's bronchitis (a legitimate reason) or Tabitha's making excuses at the last minute (likely because she wanted to spend time with her new boyfriend). Janelle resorted to emailing, and when that didn't work well, texting everyone with reminders of individual deadlines for completing plan sections. She implored the others to meet two weeks before the assignment deadline to deal with final details.

Two weeks before the assignment due date, Janelle, Oliver, and Omar met and exchanged their assigned plan parts. Oliver and Omar's sections were not copy edited and appeared to need major work to bring these sections up to the standards expected in a business plan—and the level of professional communication expected by their professor. Tabitha didn't show up, nor did she call or text the other team members. Worse still, Tabitha was responsible for the market analysis section of the plan, examining customer demographics, and describing and assessing the threat of the competition. Her section was also to include the critically important competitive strategy, so that the company could address threats posed by the competition. Without market analysis and a competitive

strategy, the business plan would not make the strong business case expected by their professor. Dr. Khanamadi expected not just a complete plan, but one that would go above and beyond in proving a business case for the suggested venture; the business case would rely heavily on the quality of market analysis and a well thought-out competitive strategy to manage threats to success.

Fuming, Janelle began to write the market analysis section of the plan on her own, as Tabitha didn't return anyone's phone calls or emails. Without the hard copy research sources the group had painstakingly vetted—but passed on to Tabitha for her work on the market analysis section—Janelle was forced to work with what she could remember of group research sessions to fill in information about customers and competition. Because she didn't have the original sources, she could not include any citations for the statistics and facts—an omission for which Dr. Khanamadi would definitely dock many marks.

Janelle, in her agreed-to role of final editor, also found herself completing that task the night before the presentation. Exhausted by work on other assignments and studying for exams, Janelle merely copied and pasted the sections supplied by other team members into the plan, without any attention to unifying the voice, tone, and style of the document. While documentation was missing in the market analysis and competitive strategy sections, it was included in all other parts of the plan, so Janelle resigned herself to accepting that Dr. Khanamadi would likely dock some marks. At midnight, slumped over her computer, she decided it was good enough. There was no time to do a copy edit, much less a content or style edit.

On the day of the presentation, Janelle, Oliver, and Omar got into a heated argument in the hallway outside the seminar room. Adding to this tension, Tabitha finally showed up minutes before the seminar, expecting to present the plan along with the other team members to earn her portion of marks. Resentful and feeling she had done the bulk of the project herself, Janelle shut out the other team members, and made the presentation on her own. The business plan was handed in and received a zero, due to there being no citations in the market analysis section (indicating plagiarism). While the professor did not have to provide any further feedback beyond the charge of plagiarism, he did read the rest of the plan, and noted, in scathing terms, how each section did not flow well into the next, and that major blocks of information were missing. Dr. Khanamadi considered the grammar and spelling in two sections “atrocious”—which he wrote in large, red letters.

## Activities and Discussion

1. What went wrong in this collaborative writing project? List the factors that contributed to the breakdown of the group and, consequently, of the written project and presentation.
2. Should members of a group ever write parts of a major plan, proposal, or report on their own instead of as a group? If so, how can a team unify their writing so that the final written product clearly communicates with one voice, in the appropriate style and tone for the demands of the project?
3. Could you suggest a step-by-step approach for this group to research, write, and edit the business plan, and then deliver the presentation? How could the group members have gotten their project done properly, even if they had differences?

4. How much time do you think this team should have allocated to completing an entire business plan, considering the amount of market research and evaluation involved to establish a clear business case for the proposed enterprise? Think about the time involved in meetings, research, drafting, rewriting, editing, and production of the plan, and then meetings, review of the plan, and development of an oral presentation of the plan to peers and a professor.
5. Why is it important to have one person on a collaborative writing team conduct a final content edit and proofread? What should this person be looking for as he or she pulls all the pieces written by others into one document, and conducts a content edit and proofread to unify the document?