

## Case Study

**INDUSTRY** International Governance & Peacekeeping  
**LOCATION** Sarajevo, Bosnia  
**SIZE** 1,300 employees

### ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Post-Bosnian War, Bosnia faced physical devastation, political division, and economic struggles, prompting the establishment of an international governance body in Sarajevo to guide reconciliation and address deep-rooted ethnic challenges.

Within this organization, personal conflicts, often rooted in ethical disagreements, further complicated the work environment.

### CHALLENGE

Team Management Amidst Deep-Rooted Ethical Rivalries

### SOLUTION

Inclusive Leadership & Trust-Building Initiatives

### THE RESULTS

Turning Point: To address deep divisions, a comprehensive team management strategy was deployed. Using open dialogues and cultural workshops, the fragmented team transitioned into a cohesive unit, highlighting unity's potential after conflict.

## From Ethical Rivalries to Unified Team Management: Navigating Challenges in High-Stress Environments

### The Context

In the aftermath of the Bosnian War, the nation was scarred not only by the physical devastation, with a staggering 120,000 deaths, but also by the displacement of countless refugees, a dire lack of housing, and the ever-present threat of landmines. Politically, the country was deeply divided, with nepotism and corruption being pervasive.

In 2021, Transparency International's Corruption Index ranked the nation 110th out of 180 countries. Economically, Bosnia and Herzegovina struggled with one of the weakest economies in Europe, widespread poverty, and an unemployment rate hovering around 16%.

To navigate these multifaceted challenges and steer the nation towards a brighter future, an international governance body was established. This body, headquartered in Sarajevo, was endowed with a robust mandate that included the authority to rewrite laws, dismiss elected officials, and terminate civil servants when deemed necessary. Their primary mission was to oversee the implementation of the peace agreement, ensuring the country's stable transition towards reconciliation and reconstruction. They were also responsible for facilitating inter-ethnic dialogue, ensuring compliance with the peace agreement, and guiding Bosnia towards a future marked by peace, cooperation, and mutual respect.

The organization's structure was diverse, comprising diplomats seconded by the governments of the PIC countries, directly hired international staff, and national staff from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Given the deeply entrenched ethnic divisions and the lingering trauma of war, leading a team within this organization, composed of Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, was a formidable challenge.

Leading a team in post-war Sarajevo under the auspices of an international governance body posed a unique challenge. With members from each major ethnic group - Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs - every day was rife with conflict. The challenges were not just professional but deeply personal, rooted in the traumatic experiences of the war. Furthermore, employees contended with emotional challenges arising from engagements with demanding stakeholders, intricate organizational structures, and a rigorous work milieu.

### The Approach

In light of the prevailing challenges, an initial step was taken to evaluate the psychological strain experienced by the employees. The evaluation was conducted methodically, encompassing:

- **Survey Distribution:** Employees received standardized questionnaires to assess various facets of psychological strain, from emotional to cognitive and interpersonal challenges.
- **Individual Interviews:** Selected employees underwent in-depth interviews, providing richer insights into specific concerns.

- **Observational Analysis:** Experts observed team dynamics, communication patterns, and general workplace behaviours, pinpointing areas of strain and potential conflict.
- **Data Compilation and Analysis:** The collected data from surveys and interviews were meticulously analyzed to discern patterns, common stressors, and critical areas of focus.
- **Feedback Sessions:** The initial findings were transparently shared with team leaders and stakeholders, fostering a collective understanding of the challenges faced.

Having gained a comprehensive understanding of the psychological strains and their underlying causes, it became evident that a strategic intervention was imperative. To address the identified challenges and foster a cohesive work environment, a unique leadership approach was crafted, emphasizing:

1. **Building Trust:** Initiatives were rolled out to nurture trust, underscoring the significance of shared goals and collaborative efforts.
2. **Inclusive Communication:** Open dialogue sessions were facilitated, creating a platform for team members to voice concerns, recount war experiences, and discover commonalities.
3. **Cultural Sensitivity Training:** Workshops enlightened team members about the rich tapestry of cultures, histories, and sensitivities intrinsic to each ethnic group.
4. **Conflict Resolution:** Mediation sessions were organized to navigate and resolve interpersonal conflicts, ensuring personal biases remained separate from professional interactions.

## **The Outcome**

As the weeks turned into months, the transformation within the team became increasingly evident. The shadows of ethnic differences, which once loomed large, began to recede, replaced by a growing emphasis on shared objectives and the overarching mission of the governance body. Trust, once fractured, was painstakingly rebuilt, brick by brick, through consistent efforts and mutual respect. This renewed trust laid the foundation for open communication, fostering an environment where ideas were freely exchanged, and collaboration became the norm. The result was a team that not only overcame its initial challenges but emerged as a beacon of unity, strength, and productivity. Their journey from deep-seated mistrust to cohesive collaboration served as a testament to the transformative power of effective leadership and the human spirit's capacity for change and growth.

## **Conclusion**

Leading a team marred by historical and deep-seated rivalries is no small feat. It demands a leader equipped with a unique blend of empathy to understand the pain points, the wisdom to navigate the complexities, and the firmness to set and uphold standards. The Sarajevo experience underscores a vital lesson: while external differences and past grievances can pose significant challenges, with the right approach, it's entirely possible to transcend these barriers. By addressing the root causes of conflict, creating platforms for open dialogue, and consistently fostering an environment of trust and collaboration, organizations can not only overcome adversities but also harness the collective strength of their diverse teams to achieve unparalleled success.