



Cutthroat cooperation: The effects of team role decisions on adaptation to alternative reward structures [☆]

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ABSTRACT

Structural Adaptation Theory proposes that it is more difficult for teams to change from competitive to cooperative reward conditions than it is for them to change in the opposite direction, and this has been labeled the cutthroat cooperation effect [Johnson, M. D., Hollenbeck, J. R., Ilgen, D. R., Humphrey, S. E., Meyer, C. J., & Jundt, D. K. (2006). Cutthroat cooperation: Asymmetrical adaptation of team reward structures. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49, 103–120]. The current study investigated whether team role discussion can neutralize this effect and promote successful adaptation from competitive to cooperative reward structures. Consistent with our predictions, in a study that involved 75 four-person teams performing a complex task under cooperative reward conditions, we found that teams with a history of competitive rewards performed worse than teams with a history of cooperative rewards in a control condition. However, this effect was neutralized when teams allocated their roles in a team role discussion. This neutralization effect was driven by behavioral coordination and unmet expectations regarding conflict.

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Introduction

In the last two decades, many organizations have restructured their workforce around work teams (Hackman, 1998; Ilgen, 1999), defined as “small groups of interdependent individuals who share responsibility for specific outcomes” (Sundstrom, DeMeuse, & Futrell, 1990, p. 120). In the literature on teams, consensus is emerging that teams are not static entities that perform in single-cycle contexts, but instead, are complex, adaptive, and dynamic systems that perform across time (McGrath, Arrow, & Berdahl, 2000). Teams often operate in turbulent environments, where they are confronted with dynamic tasks and work

situations, and adaptation is crucial (Burke, Stagl, Salas, Pierce, & Kendall, 2006; LePine, 2003, 2005).

Structural changes are one example of changes requiring team adaptation. The current trend in organizations is toward using more flexible, team-based structures marked by increased interdependence. For example, companies such as GE, Yahoo, Ford Motor Company, Dow Chemical and Goodyear Tire and Rubber have scaled back or abandoned “rank and yank” evaluation and reward systems that make fine-grained within unit differentiations, and replaced these with systems that focus on broader, team-based outcomes (Bates, 2003; Boyle, 2001; Lowery, 2003; McGregor, 2006; Meisler, 2003). Indeed, the use of team-based incentives is on the rise, and longitudinal surveys of Fortune 1000 firms indicate that in the year 2000, close to 80% of these firms employed some form of team-based pay, up from 59% in 1990, and less than 20% in 1980 (Garvey, 2002). For example, Unisys, Lockheed Martin, Marriott, General Motors, 3M and Carrier Corporation have moved from individual-based pay raises to team-level bonuses in order to promote coordination of efforts and shared focus on team goals (Gross, 1995).

Recent research has started to explore the questions of how teams adapt to changes like those described above over time, and how certain variables affect their performance and adaptability (cf. Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005; Johnson et al.,

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2006). One theory that has been developed to understand how teams react to changes is Structural Adaptation Theory (SAT, Johnson et al., 2006). SAT suggests that like physical systems, social systems can be differentiated by their degree of complexity and that more energy is required to maintain the structure of complex systems relative to simpler ones. Moreover, in line with the second law of thermodynamics, SAT proposes that there is a natural tendency for complex and organized systems to break down over time into structures that are increasingly simple and chaotic. If this is the case, in the absence of any formal, external intervention, more complex systems that are highly ordered—in the sense of being hierarchical, specialized and collective—may inherently drift toward more disordered and chaotic systems that are decentralized, undifferentiated, and individualistic.

This is precisely what Johnson et al. (2006) observed when they examined SAT with respect to how teams react to changes in reward structures. Under stable conditions, they found that teams working under a cooperative reward structure coordinated their efforts better and performed more accurately than teams working under a competitive structure, just as had been demonstrated in earlier research (Beersma et al., 2003). However, Johnson et al. (2006) found that when teams had to adapt to new reward structures, their history affected their interaction patterns and performance. Specifically, whereas teams that changed from a cooperative to a competitive reward structure behaved like they had always been competitive, and thus adapted successfully to the new situation, this was not the case for teams that switched from competitive to cooperative rewards (which Johnson et al. labeled “cutthroat cooperation” teams). These teams failed to act like teams that had always been cooperative, and continued to engage in their habitual interaction patterns, leading to suboptimal coordination and poor performance.

The Johnson et al. (2006) study thus showed that static predictions about which processes and outcomes are associated with various reward structures do not generalize to dynamic contexts where reward structures change. Instead, “history matters” and “direction matters” when it comes to predicting team adaptation. This is an important discovery for theories of adaptation because most theories tend to be “direction free” (i.e., teams are adaptable or not adaptable), but these results also have important practical implications. SAT and the results associated with the “cutthroat cooperation effect” demonstrate that organizations may need to do more than just change rewards in contexts where the goal is to change group dynamics. One important question is therefore which organizational procedures can facilitate reward structure changes. In the current paper, we examine whether or not adapting the role allocation procedure that is employed when teams make the transition from a competitive to cooperative reward system can facilitate reward structure change.¹ Specifically, we propose that having team members allocate their own roles in their upcoming new tasks in a team discussion (versus being assigned roles by a supervisor) can help reduce conflict and further behavioral coordination and performance in teams with a history of competitive rewards, but that the opposite will be true for teams that have a history of cooperative rewards.

Role allocation in teams

Team members’ roles can be viewed as subsets of the behaviors exhibited within the team processes; they manifest individual le-

vel contributions to these team processes (Mumford, 2002, see also: Bales, 1950; Belbin, 1993; Benne & Sheats, 1948; Fisher, Hunter, & Macrosson, 1998; Mudrack & Farrell, 1994, 1995; Senior, 1997). An important decision that needs to be made when adapting to a structural change is how team members will reallocate tasks and take on new and different roles (Edmondson, Bohmer, & Pisano, 2001; Gersick & Hackman, 1990).

One way to reallocate roles when a team goes through a structural change would be to have the team’s supervisor autocratically impose new roles. As such, teams transitioning from a competitive to a cooperative reward structure are not helped in any way to deal with the change. Therefore, it is likely that in this situation, their habitual pattern of interaction, characterized by a lack of coordination and inaccurate performance, continues into the future. Thus, under circumstances where role reallocation is implemented autocratically, this is likely to result in cutthroat cooperation, as was indeed observed by Johnson et al. (2006).

Alternatively, management could opt to have team members discuss their new roles among themselves. This approach fits the trend of using self-management procedures to manage teams, which has shown a tremendous increase in recent years (Manz & Sims, 1987). Granting team members more discretion in the role building process has been shown to provide a number of structural benefits to organizations, such as adapting to important but idiosyncratic local contingencies and conditions (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991). In addition to the structural benefits, team self-management of role decisions also creates a form of “voice” or process control (Lind & Tyler, 1988). The justice literature has documented the positive effects of this process control in terms of enhancing satisfaction and commitment (c.f., Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; Lind & Tyler, 1988). Based on this, one might conclude that having members allocate roles themselves might facilitate the change process.

However, in a team context, process control may not have the same positive effects as have been found for individuals, and as emphasized in SAT, changes in directions of a higher order of complexity such as the change from a competitive to a cooperative structure reduce autonomy for some individuals and create interdependence requirements that were formally absent. One team member’s exercise of process control can easily lead to the support of outcomes that are not in other members’ best interests or may threaten others’ status within the team. In this case, process control or voice might not always lead to a personally better outcome because of the influence of other members’ voice. Instead of leading to improved coordination and performance, intra-team role discussions could therefore lead to disagreements and process losses.

The question is therefore whether having team members decide about their roles themselves would help or hinder teams to adapt to a change from a competitive to a cooperative reward structure. On the one hand, SAT would suggest that role discussion would only increase conflict (defined as perceived incompatibilities, or perceptions by parties that they hold discrepant views or have interpersonal incompatibilities, Jehn, 1995), and impair behavioral coordination (defined as the process of orchestrating the sequence and timing of interdependent actions, Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001). On the other hand, theories of self-managing teams would suggest that role discussion could be the starting point for increased future coordination (Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994), and therefore help teams with a history of competitive rewards make the change to a cooperative structure.

In order to understand whether role discussion would help or hinder teams undergoing reward structure changes and thus to attenuate the cutthroat cooperation effect, it is crucial to take a closer look at what the discussion process entails for teams with different histories in terms of reward structure. When team members

¹ In the current study, we only examined the change from competitive to cooperative reward structures, not the change from cooperative to competitive structures. We chose not to investigate this condition, because earlier research (Johnson et al., 2006) has shown that the transition from cooperation to competition is not problematic for teams, whereas the competition-cooperation transition is.

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