



Leader behaviors, conflict and member commitment to team-generated decisions

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ABSTRACT

Regardless of the quality of the decisions, teams that fail to effectively implement their decisions have accomplished nothing. Teams that derive decisions through a conflictual process may find that their members lack commitment to their decision due to the nature of the conflict the team experienced. This is where a team leader can play a critical role. The central aim of this laboratory study was to examine how leader behaviors can influence member commitment to team generated decisions via their impact on group conflict. Our study examined teams led by individuals who displayed charismatic-oriented behaviors, teams led by individuals who acted simply as pragmatic leaders, and teams whose members shared leadership. Consistent with our assertions, our findings indicate that pragmatic leaders were most effective at encouraging the highest levels of member commitment to team generated decisions through their restraint of dysfunctional forms of conflict during the decision-making process.

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In participative decision-making groups, members have the freedom and the responsibility to contribute their own ideas and to challenge those of others during the decision-making process. The utility of team decision-making is not simply a function of the quality of the decision made. Effective team decision making also requires member commitment to the decision (Amason, 1996), where commitment reflects the degree to which members accept the decision reached and intend to cooperate in its implementation (Korsgaard, Schweiger, & Sapienza, 1995).

Decision making is successful only to the extent that the solution reached can be successfully put into practice. Group members who are not committed to their decision are unenthusiastic about seeing those decisions implemented. Lack of decision commitment can surface in the form of delays or even purposeful sabotage of implementation efforts (Guth & MacMillan, 1986). Although delays may seem to be a trivial concern, delays can constitute a potent tactic for killing an initiative (Pfeffer, 1992) and even slight delays can be detrimental in highly competitive and dynamic environments (Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, & Bourgeois, 1997). Consequently, team commitment to the implementation of the solution is of critical importance (Hitt & Tyler, 1991).

There is evidence that team conflict can play a powerful role in influencing commitment to team decisions. Specifically, relationship conflict (relationship conflict), which involves member disagreement over personal or emotional issues, generates member animosity and can detract from the quality of the decision process (Jehn, 1995; Mooney, Holahan, & Amason, 2007; Simons & Peterson, 2000). This, in turn, can reduce group members' commitment to group decisions (Janssen, Van de Vliert, & Veenstra, 1999). Regardless of the quality of the decision, members may simply not be committed to a decision that arose amidst a flurry of emotional conflict. Thus, the central question for group decision-making research is how group interaction should be

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managed during the decision-making process so that it simultaneously produces decisions of high quality and high commitment (Amason & Sapienza, 1997; Dooley & Fryxell, 1999).

Group leaders are in the best position to manage team conflict and, therefore, to improve the effectiveness of decision-making groups (Amason, Thompson, Hochwarter, & Harrison, 1995), as well as to ensure member commitment to team decisions. Our study investigates how team leader behaviors can ultimately impact member commitment to team-generated decisions. We wanted to explore the impact of charismatic-related behaviors or behaviors that aroused emotion in the decision-making process. We also observed the impact of leader behaviors that focused solely on setting ground rules for conflict—what we refer to as pragmatic leader behavior (Mumford, 2006; Mumford, Antes, Caughron, & Freidrich, 2008). Finally we examined teams where no specific leader was designated to lead the team through the decision-making process. The aim was to assess the kinds of leader behaviors that functioned to engage teams in group decision making while constraining conflict that could harm member commitment to the decision that the team generated. Below we provide the theoretical background for our research, present our hypotheses and report the details of our study along with the results.

1. Theoretical background and framework

The proper use of the decision-making process requires dialectical interaction or conflict among the members of the group. The literature recognizes a conceptual distinction between two types of conflict. Task conflict arises through the discussion and debate of member preferences or opinions regarding the tasks at hand. If managed properly, this kind of conflict can be potentially productive in the sense that it can encourage exploration of many possible solutions before a final decision is reached (Amason, 1996). On the other hand, relationship conflict is most typically counterproductive given that its focus is on people rather than ideas (Jehn, 1995). That is, disagreements become personalized which damages trust and communication among team members (Janssen et al., 1999). The challenge then for decision-making teams is to manage productive levels of task conflict without triggering relationship conflict (Mooney et al., 2007).

It is important to note that while the researched has delineated these two types of conflict and have generally concurred that emotional conflict is negative, less agreement has been reached on the nature of task conflict. For example, in their meta-analysis, De Dreu and Weingart (2003) found that both task conflict and relationship conflict were negatively associated with team performance. This is in line with scholars who have suggested that the initial benefits of conflict quickly diminish as it intensifies and reduces group cohesion (cf., Tekleab, Quigley, and Tesluk (2009). On the other hand, a second view espouses the positive side of task conflict. According to this view, task conflict has a positive association with group outcomes like cohesion via the exercise of voice in team decision making (cf., Tekleab et al., 2009). However, it is acknowledged that this relationship exists only when emotional conflict is constrained and does not spill over from task conflict (Amason, 1996).

Several researchers have suggested that task conflict can trigger relationship conflict when task disagreements are perceived as personal criticism or disrespect (Amason, 1996; Medina, Munduate, Dorado, Martínez, & Guerra, 2005). Relationship conflict can also arise as a result of behavioral manifestations of negative emotions. In other words, this occurs when, in response to aroused anger, individual group members engage in aggressive behavior, ranging from slightly cynical comments to direct personal attacks (Wall & Callister, 1995). Of course relationship conflict can escalate when anger and aggressive behavior are reciprocated (Brett, Shapiro, & Lytle, 1998). The question of concern to this study is—how might different styles of leader behavior differ in their ability to manage conflict and ultimately maximize commitment to team generated decisions?

1.1. Leadership behaviors, conflict and decision commitment

Charismatic leadership theories (Bass, 1985) propose that a leader can achieve superior performance by modifying followers' needs and values. One particular element associated with charismatic leader behavior relates to the role of emotion. The role of emotion is connected to the ability of charisma to make esteem needs salient among the group. Under a charismatic leader, the followers' self-concepts are linked to the leader, the group's task and the group. This has the effect of harnessing the motivational force of self-esteem, self-worth and self-enhancement which make followers' efforts and goals more meaningful (Shamir, Zakay, Breinin, & Popper, 2000).

In addition to engaging followers' self-concepts (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993), charismatic leaders can also impact followers through the emotional attachment they build with followers (Gardner & Avolio, 1998). Consistent with Bass's (1985) observation, while pragmatic leaders focus on the rational or exchange basis of the leader–follower relationship, charismatic leaders emphasize the emotional basis of this relationship.

In line with that aspect, behaviors are aimed at increasing the intrinsic value of follower effort and goal accomplishment. Specific behaviors include expressing high expectations for followers to raise their self-esteem as well as expressing positive emotions to motivate followers (cf., Johnson, 2008; Connelly, Gaddis, & Helton-Fauth, 2002). Such positive affect can be communicated through the content of the leader's speech as well as through nonverbal leader behavior (Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000) and can facilitate the spread of affect to followers through emotional contagion (Johnson, 2008).

Emotional contagion has been investigated as one method by which leader affect can impact follower affect (Johnson, 2008; Sy, Cote, & Saavedra, 2005). Emotional contagion has been defined as the automatic and unconscious transfer of emotion between individuals (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1992) that can occur as a result of the target individual mimicking the expressions or behaviors of others and subsequently experiencing the emotion that is being mimicked (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999). A number of recent research studies have found evidence that emotional contagion is the conduit through which leader affect can impact follower affect. For example, in her recent field study, Johnson (2008) found that leader affect at work was associated with follower

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