



All for one, one for all: Coopetition and virtual team performance

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 February 2011

Received in revised form 16 December 2011

Accepted 18 January 2012

Available online 19 February 2012

Keywords:

Competition

Cooperation

Emotional intelligence

Knowledge sharing

Performance

Team politics

ABSTRACT

This study establishes a model based on coopetition theory to explain the formation of team performance in virtual teams. We tested the model in information technology (IT) organizations, and found applicability of coopetition in influencing team performance and knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing is indirectly influenced by team politics and social capital (i.e., trust, social interaction and shared vision) via the mediation of cooperation and competition, while team performance is indirectly affected by team politics and social capital via the mediation of cooperation, team emotional intelligence and team competence.

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1. Introduction

Virtual teams represent interdependent groups of individuals who work across space, time, and geographical boundaries with communication links that are heavily dependent upon advanced information technologies [1]. Virtual teams have become basic units in business organizations, and their activities are ubiquitous and have received considerable attention from social and organizational psychologists [2,3]. Specifically, team performance and knowledge sharing remain perennial and important issues for interpersonal relationships within virtual teams [4]. Whereas team performance is defined as the extent to which a team accomplishes its goals or mission [5], knowledge sharing is defined as individuals' sharing organizationally relevant experiences and information with one another, increasing the resources of a team (or an organization) and reducing time wasted in trial-and-error [6].

The interpersonal relationships within a team or virtual team are comprised of two elements: cooperation and competition. If both the elements co-exist, then the relationship between the members is considered coopetition [7]. Many organizations use teaming arrangements to push team members to both compete and cooperate with each other, leading to a major challenge for organizations that seek to manage their team workflows and performance [8]. The basic philosophy underlying cooperative relationships in teams is that all teaming activities should aim for the establishment of a beneficial partnership with one another in the team, including the coworkers who may be considered as a competitor [9]. The question posed in this study is concerned with whether cooperation and competition represent a trade-off for team outcomes such as team performance and team knowledge sharing.

In addition to competition, team emotional intelligence (EQ) and team competence (IQ) are critical in influencing team outcomes such as knowledge sharing and team performance (e.g., Margerison [10]). Team EQ includes the abilities to perceive and regulate emotions in oneself and in others, to understand emotions and to possess emotional knowledge [11–13]. Team IQ indicates team competence which is regarded as the sum of the professional knowledge and skills of a team. Previous research indicates that EQ and IQ are likely to complement each other and are important for explaining “success” when taken together

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[12]. This suggests that team emotional intelligence and team competence are positively related to teaming consequences such as knowledge sharing and team performance.

This study differs from previous research in certain important ways. First, a majority of previous research related to interactions among team members focuses on either competition or cooperation, which often resulted in a one-sided understanding of team members and their team outcomes. The cooperative relationship between team members is worth studying to avoid managerial misunderstanding because simultaneous cooperation and competition among the members substantially complicate teaming and its outcomes. This study examining the team outcomes based on cooperation generates further in-depth understanding regarding critical determinants in the context of cooperation.

Second, many previous studies of cooperation or competition (i.e., cooperation) emphasize face-to-face interaction styles among team members without taking the contexts of communication technology into consideration (e.g., Kent et al. [14]; Thomas and Bostrom [15]; Townsend et al. [16,17]). Virtual teams work collaboratively in geographically dispersed locations but still share the same interests, goals, needs and practices that define face-to-face teams (e.g., Chiu, Hsu, and Wang [18]). Due to advances in information technology facilitating communication and information sharing, more companies are moving towards using virtual teams. Regrettably, few theoretical attempts to integrate the cooperation literature in the settings of virtual teams have emerged. For that reason, examining the applicability of cooperation among virtual team members is a necessary and essential complement to previous studies given the abundant research on face-to-face teams.

Third, while some prior empirical studies have examined cooperation at the firm level (e.g., Tiessen and Linton [19]), this study is one of the few to use primary survey data collected from team members to test the determinants and outcomes of cooperation based on teams. Research supports and extends the notion that cooperation is not only important among intra-organizational partners, but also among inter-team parties (or inter-organizational parties) and these interactions are key for a team's or firm's long-term viability [20].

Last, this study pioneers the expansion of cooperation by including team EQ/IQ as critical variables influencing team outcomes. Most previous research related to cooperation considers cooperation and competition to the neglect of other factors (e.g., Bouncken and Fredrich [22]; Lin et al. [21]; Luo et al. [20]). This study aims at filling a gap in the literature of cooperation by demonstrating how team EQ/IQ and cooperation jointly influence team outcomes. While previous literature has so far privileged a focus on inter-firm relationships [23], little attention has been paid to intra-team relationships, which is examined by this study.

2. Theory and hypotheses

This study establishes a model based on cooperation to explain the relations among team performance and knowledge sharing across virtual teams. In the proposed model (see Fig. 1), knowledge sharing and team performance are indirectly affected by team politics through the mediation of cooperation and by social capital (i.e., trust, social interaction and shared vision) via the mediation of cooperation, team emotional intelligence and team competence. The rationale and justification about the proposed model and its figure are provided in the following section.

2.1. Cooperation and knowledge sharing

Knowledge sharing across team members can be both competitive and cooperative in nature [20], resulting in an interesting paradox. The competitive nature often happens since the acquisition of knowledge can generate private gains for individuals,

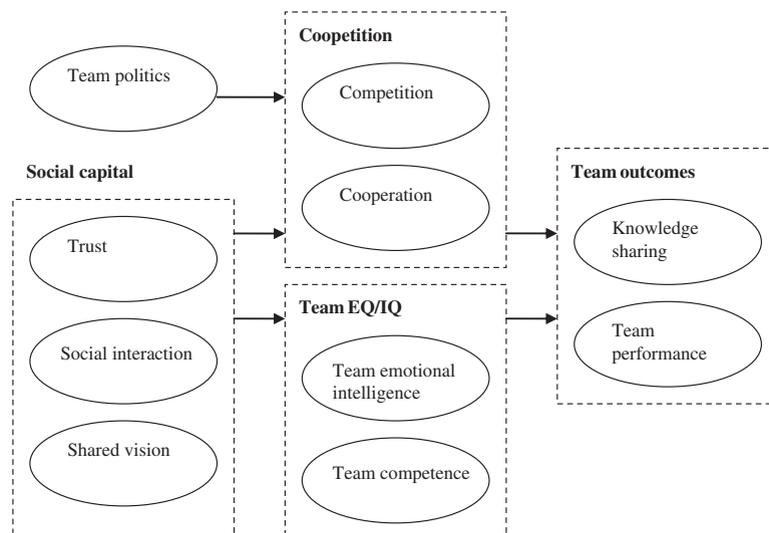


Fig. 1. Research model.

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