

Paper Topic: What is group effectiveness? How would you know it if you saw it?
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Defining and identifying team effectiveness is a complex task. Initially this task appears deceptively simple. Establish a measure of effectiveness and determine how different teams compare in regard to this measure. This approach however is confounded by the very notion of the study of team dynamics. Perhaps similar to the task of classifying a family to be functional or dysfunctional, only extreme behaviors in teams supersede the contextualizing influences of multiple levels of culture, time, location, and institutional environment.

Cohen and Bailey's review of the team effectiveness literature defines four types of teams that have different measures of effectiveness as reflected in the concerns of researchers and industry. Work teams are described as stable, well-defined and ongoing teams; parallel teams as limited teams that engage in generally consultative activities parallel to the organizational hierarchy, such as task forces and quality circles; project teams as time-limited cross functional teams that are organized around a project; and management teams as top executives responsible for the overall performance of a business unit. Effectiveness of work teams and parallel teams in the literature has been defined by objective measures of output quality and quantity, group member and manager perceptions, and behavioral outcomes such as job satisfaction and turnover. In contrast, measures of project team effectiveness rely almost solely on manager and supervisor perceptions and internal team perceptions. Effectiveness in management teams is based on firm performance. Differentiation of findings by team type is necessary in part because the teams and researchers have different objectives, but also in part because the selection of data represented makes it difficult to generalize findings across team types.

The majority of the research cited in this literature review relies on cross-sectional survey data and objective measures. This methodological focus has the potential weakness of allowing researchers to take a given context for granted and thereby embed unquestioned assumptions into the defined measures for effectiveness. The authors introduce a heuristic model of group effectiveness that reflects the interaction of task, group, and organizational design with environmental factors, internal and external processes, group psychological traits and effectiveness in terms of performance, attitudinal and behavior outcomes. In the case of most research cited, different team types represent only subsets of data associated with the heuristic model. For example, research on management teams relies primarily on archival sources for firm performance, team definition, and team demographic composition. Findings must assume that the other identified traits of group effectiveness are held constant or can be subsumed within existing measures.

Difficulty with measures absorbing context becomes apparent in Straw's challenge to researchers making causal inferences from cross-sectional survey data. Straw cites two empirical studies that seek to illuminate this problem by demonstrating a causal reversal to a previously established theory. In the first experimental study, Lowin and Craig show that "closeness of supervision may be a function of subordinate performance rather than a causal determinant of performance, as previously believed" (p. 415, Straw) In the second study, Farris and Lim reveal a Pygmalion effect, showing that "for [randomly designated] high performing groups, the foreman was perceived to be more supportive of workers, higher in goal emphasis, and more facilitative of interaction than the foreman of [randomly designated] low performing groups." Straw uses these two studies to show that previously believed causes may in fact be effects. The relevance of

these examples to how team effectiveness is determined and explained is in the demonstration of the significant role contextual features play in describing and understanding team phenomena.

Utilizing primarily ethnographic methods that focus on contextualizing team efficiency, Sutton and Hargadon investigate a one-dimensional finding that brainstorming in groups is less productive than when the brainstorming of individuals is aggregated. The single measure this finding is based on is quantity of ideas generated. Sutton and Hargadon challenge this measure of productiveness by locating brainstorming practices within the context of an operating organization. At IDEO, a product design firm, researchers found that brainstorming is effective in fulfilling six functions within the organization. These functions include:

- (1) supporting the organizational memory of design solutions
- (2) providing skill variety for designers
- (3) supporting an attitude of wisdom
- (4) creating a status auction
- (5) impressing clients
- (6) providing income for the firm

(p. 685, Sutton & Hargadon)

These six functions represent emergent qualities of brainstorming that are utilized as criteria for assessing the productivity of brainstorming by the researchers and informally used by IDEO and IDEO clients. What is interesting about these measures of productivity is that they vary significantly from the types of measures identified in Cohen and Bailey. Diverging from a model of effectiveness based on quality and quantity of output, team member attitudes, and behavioral outcomes, this model emphasizes the role that brainstorming plays within the culture of IDEO, effecting people, projects, the organization, and clients over time. This is not to say that behavioral outcomes such as turnover are not considered, but rather that they are not a priority to

this framework. The authors of this work raise concerns with regards to the generalizability of their findings, describing IDEO as a unique environment with an equally unique relationship to brainstorming. While the findings of this study may not be generalizable to the all brainstorming groups, the study provides a strong argument for the contextualization of team efficiency research.

In contrast to the IDEO study, Stasser and Titus utilize experimental methods with randomly assigned undergraduate students to draw conclusions about how information is pooled during group decision making. They find “that group members often fail to effectively pool their information because discussion tends to be dominated by (a) information that members hold in common before discussion and (b) information that supports members’ existent preference.” (p. 1467, Stasser & Titus) While Cohen and Bailey have concerns regarding the generalizability of their findings, in part due to the methods they have utilized, Stasser and Titus’s findings suffer from an extreme decontextualization. While it may be accurate to say that people that don’t know each other who have a limited amount of time to decide something do not share information with each other, it is difficult to see how this finding will play out in work teams.

Defining and identifying team effectiveness requires understanding the contextual framework in which the team operates. Individual members, the group as a whole, managers, the organization, the direction of a business or business unit, clients, shareholders and the larger culture all are potential data sources in determining the goals, objectives and success criteria for team activities. This is not to say that team effectiveness is so diffuse that it cannot be captured, but rather that every determination of effectiveness requires perspective taking.

References

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