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Exploring Team Growth and Fixed Mindsets in Work Teams at a Large Korean Corporation

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Abstract: We conducted a qualitative study to understand how team mindsets can be manifested in work teams. We interviewed 21 participants from seven departments in one of the big corporations in Korea.

Keywords: growth mindset, fixed mindset, team mindset, implicit person theory

Increasing numbers of teams in organizations are putting in more effort to develop a growth mindset to individuals and teams. A growth mindset, based on implicit person theory (Dweck, 2012), assumes that people always have the potential to develop their intellect and to increase talent. On the other hand, entity theorists believe that abilities and intellect are fixed or inherent (Dweck, 2006). These mindsets are related to how individuals and teams view their growth and learning in their organizations. Several researchers found that individuals' growth mindsets were positively associated with reviewing feedback (Forsythe & Johnson, 2017), enhancing creativity (Holm, 2015), and improving relationships (Dweck, 2012). Likewise, researchers have shown positive outcomes of a growth mindset in adult learning settings; however, more in-depth research with a qualitative lens is needed to explore characteristics of mindsets in workplace settings.

A few researchers have stressed the importance of team mindsets (Heslin, & VandeWalle, 2008; Özduran & Tanova, 2017). For example, managers' assumptions about the rigidity or malleability of personal attributes (e.g., ability and personality) can impact their performance in personnel management tasks (Heslin, & VandeWalle, 2008). Previous studies indicate that leaders can influence others' mindsets; therefore, more attempts should be made to look at team dynamics among leaders and members. Our interest is to investigate team mindsets in workplaces. Our research questions is: What are the characteristics of team mindsets (growth vs. fixed) shared by team members at the workplace?

Literature Review

We provided an overview of individual and team mindsets to support our research questions. The conceptual framework that underlies this study is implicit theory, which consists of entity implicit and incremental implicit theories (Dweck, 2000).

Mindset Research. Dweck (2014) argued that a growth mindset hold some promise in helping organizations better manage hiring, training, performance appraisal, interpersonal relations, and business innovation. Researchers empirically found that a growth mindset positively enhances employees' work engagement at a high-tech organization (Caniëls et al., 2018). Mindset research can be connected to employee evaluation (Gutshal, 2013; Heslin et al., 2005; Heslin & VandeWalle, 2008 & 2011), employee coaching (Heslin et al., 2005), leadership effectiveness (Hoyt et al., 2012; Özduran & Tanova, 2017), resilience (Yeager & Dweck, 2012), creativity (Hass et al., 2016), mindfulness (Holm, 2015; Lindsay et al., 2015), and work engagement (Caniëls et al., 2018).

Team Mindsets. Not many researchers have focused on a team mindset, which conveys a collective expression of the individual mindset definitions. However, there have been attempts to extend the benefits of growth mindset in organizations, recognizing its critical role in promoting job performance and learning organization (Payne et al., 2007). A growth mindset was found to increase employees' enthusiasm, perseverance, and attentiveness in a learning orientation (Keating & Heslin, 2015). Cultivating a growth mindset is helpful for employees to thrive on challenges, prioritize learning opportunities, and overcome failures as a means of growth (Murphy & Dweck, 2010; Rigolizzo & Amabile, 2015). These studies suggest a relationship between individual and team mindsets through findings that leaders can influence others' thoughts and outcomes. One research team suggested the possibility to expand individual mindsets to team mindsets based on focus group interview results (Han et al., 2019). Han et al. (2019) defined the concept of team growth mindset as the belief shared by team members that they can develop each other's capacity through sharing knowledge, learning from failure, and managing challenges through joint effort.

Methods

To investigate managers' and team members' mindsets on different department teams, we conducted an exploratory study. Our research design is based on a qualitative study that analyzed data from interviews with seven teams: one manager and two subordinates of the manager from each team, for a total of 21 participants.

Participant and Selection Criteria. Research participants included seven managers and 14 team members of seven different teams at a Korean corporation. The participants were recruited through email invitations and selection criteria included: (a) worked in the industry for more than five years, (b) involved in more than three team projects, and (c) currently work in a project team at the workplace.

Data Collection and Analysis. The first author interviewed seven teams in 2018. The general interview questions covered the following aspects: general teamwork experience, evaluation of their leadership skills, and perceptions about the new type of team leadership. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and double-checked for accuracy. We used an inductive approach to identify themes from the data by allowing the categories and names of the categories to emerge from the interview transcription (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). We adopted content analysis (CA) and collaborative qualitative analysis (CQA). As we were all actively involved in the data analyzing, we also employed a CQA in response to a need to balance rigor, transparency, and trustworthiness in data analysis (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). We extracted the direct language of participants, identified a unit of analysis, recorded condensed meaning units, and created categories based on the participants' statements. All researchers reviewed the thematic structure and checked the original transcripts for accuracy. To ensure trustworthiness, we included triangulation, an audit trail, and thick descriptions. We addressed the issues of coder agreement by creating a protocol and codebook (Gibbert et al., 2008).

Findings

The results, representing the 21 participants' responses, present the characteristics of team mindsets. The interview data yielded 24 lower-order themes which were abstracted into eight higher-order themes. We categorize the higher-order themes into four general dimensions to represent the team mindsets of work teams: evaluating others, facing challenges, exchanging feedback, and dealing with change. A frequency analysis is provided to illustrate the number of statements mentioning each theme and dimension. The characteristics of a team growth mindset include *postponed judgement and continued reflection, taking on challenges, openness to*

feedback and critique, and openness to change. The characteristics of a team fixed mindset include *rapid judgement about others, talent, and situations, fear of failure, negative reactions to feedback, and passive reactions to change.*

Evaluating Others. When working as a team, most interviewees made a quick determination in understanding situation and other people. Perceptions about others refer to cognitive biases, prediction, or judgement about a group of people with either positive or negative attributes. A fixed team mindset appeared most frequently in the form of rapid and negative judgement about other team members, as most respondents made rapid assumptions about peers and situations. Most respondents did not change their initial negative judgements. Respondents used assertive language like “impossible” or “never” when explaining certain situations. The following is an example of quick judgement about talent and expecting similar outcomes for different situations in the future:

I don't think my team members have any knowledge in this subject area; therefore, I do not assign important work to them. The reason is that we have to move quickly to finish multiple tasks, but due to members' low-quality work, I thought it would be better not to assign important work to them, as we don't have the available time. (Manager in Team 4)

On the other hand, about half of the respondents revealed a team growth mindset by being mindful when making decisions or evaluating others' competencies. A manager in Team 2 stated: “[If employees] bring me a terrible idea, I tried to listen to them for a while. Next, I also try to be thoughtful, so that I could logically decide what's wrong or right”. A team member, who demonstrated a team growth mindset, put it this way:

As in the military, most people tried to be different from their superiors, who do not exhibit good leadership, but eventually, and unconsciously, they replicate and resemble their superiors. So, we need to consciously learn and reflect on ourselves. If you don't learn, you can't catch up. So, to me, there is no way but learning. (Member in Team 3)

Facing Challenges. Our respondents viewed challenges differently. Respondents with more of a team growth mindset undertook challenges, engaged in experiments, and learned from mistakes. A manager in Team 1 demonstrated willingness to take risks, bounce back from adversity, and learn from mistakes as she did not find “any female executive leaders” that she can follow as a role model. Undertaking challenges and learning about the unknown world seems to be important, as exemplified by this manager's comment, “Training is necessary. Because, eventually, in order for toddlers to walk, they need to practice. Likewise, designating spare time effectively greatly matters in dealing with new and unfamiliar tasks” (Manager in Team 4).

Respondents with a team fixed mindset tended to avoid failures and setbacks as they feared unsuccessful results. The manager in Team 1 expressed fear in taking on challenges due to this reason: “As we are doing new business, I don't think anyone on our team has any relevant experience. Therefore, we have some fear of failure or fear taking on responsibility, as we have never done this task”.

Exchanging Feedback. Feedback seeking in teams refers to shared attitudes and behaviors that promote an active exchange of knowledge and ideas. Almost every team discussed the importance of providing and accepting feedback. A team growth mindset toward feedback includes characteristics such as seeking useful diagnostic feedback, accepting criticism, and

supporting each one's learning by sharing opinions. A member in Team 7 addressed the usefulness of exchanging feedback: "When mistakes are found, I think it's more important to solve something, point out what went wrong, and make sure it would not happen again... rather than looking back to the past mistakes".

Regarding a team fixed mindset toward feedback, some respondents spoke about the difficulty they had providing feedback or asking for feedback. A member in Team 4 suffered with a manager, who demonstrated a team fixed mindset: "Whenever I ask for feedback to my manager, he repeats his answer, saying "Do I need to explain A to Z all the time? Why don't you think and act by yourself?". That makes me feel discouraged". Another characteristic of a team fixed mindset was fear of providing feedback. A manager in Team 1 shared how she does not feel comfortable providing feedback because the younger generation tends to receive feedback in a negative way.

Dealing with Change. Most participants stressed the importance of a team's ability to sense and respond to change. As industries are fast-moving, interviewees have demonstrated a team growth mindset, which include acceptance of change and openness to learning from change. About half of the participants felt that responding actively to change matters as a team tries to move forward. One member in Team 3 expressed his team's responsiveness to change in this quote: "To be a kind of creative and innovative team, I think it would be better to work on what never has been done before".

Alternatively, a few respondents viewed change as an obstacle. A manager in Team 4 noted: "Mentoring can help figure out a better way. Given a situation where we need to create a quick and precise output, it works better with skilled persons. When it comes to performance, less skilled workers are just...just an obstacle".

Discussion

We found that many employees and managers tended to figure people out quite quickly, even if the interactions are on a fairly superficial level. Some may rely on an initial and intuitive impression heavily, leading to a quick judgement about others. Scholars support that cognitive biases or judgements at work hinder team diversity and appropriate decision making (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). Aligned with other study findings on managerial perspectives on others (Foley & Williamson, 2019), our finding also noted that the implicit biases can shape manager's and employees' decisions about others' capabilities in the workplace. Interestingly, respondents tend to have an individual growth mindset about themselves, but they had a team fixed mindset when evaluating others.

When it comes to facing challenges, team resilience literature may be connected because team resilience is the ability of teams to bounce back and continue on in the face of adverse conditions (Sharma, & Sharma, 2016). Resilience requires teams to develop an ability to persist in the face of challenges and bounce back from adversity (Reivich et al., 2011).

Fear of feedback is not a new topic and several scholars have provided guidance for adapting to feedback (Jackman & Strober, 2003). Many scholars have provided reasons that people avoid feedback, such as the fact that people hate being criticized. In our findings, one interesting aspect was about fear of providing feedback. As younger generations are often used to receiving positive praises from teachers and parents, managers found it difficult to provide any negative feedback, as team members can be discouraged or negatively affected, rather than finding a way to absorb and learn from feedback. As scholars have found differences in feedback reaction based on age (Wang et al., 2015), more investigation is warranted.

As a business needs to quickly execute tasks and follow strategic goals, our interviewees frequently mentioned the importance of team readiness and change management capabilities for the organization. This concept is supported by previous literature, and scholars have defined team agility as the continual readiness of a team to “rapidly or inherently create change, proactively or reactively embrace change, and learn from change while contributing to perceived customer value (economy, quality, and simplicity) through its collective components and relationships with its environment” (Conboy, 2009, p. 340).

We suggest implications for theory and practice of mindset research. Our study expanded the scope of mindset research by building evidence of team mindsets, especially in organizational contexts. While individual mindset research expands in workplace settings, limited research has focused on team-level mindsets; thus, this study contributes to exploring the potential in team mindsets in the organizational settings through empirical evidence.

Our study has also practical implications. Organizations can develop interventions (e.g., case study training or hiring orientations) to encourage their leaders and employees to embrace a growth mindset and incorporate a team growth mindset into a performance evaluation system and appraisal. Practitioners can create a mindful culture when working with others, utilize two-way feedback, undertake challenges, and learn from change as a team.

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