IMPACT BRIEF

Group Success Depends on Giving Individuals Credit Where Credit Is Due

Research question: Does the tendency of groups to take credit for their success without acknowledging the input of specific group members affect subsequent group performance?

Conclusion: In a word, yes. This "group-serving bias" may cause groups to ignore or underestimate the potentially unique contributions made by each individual member, a common practice that can lead to inferior outcomes. When groups ascribe their success to individuals, they are more likely to explore a wide range of divergent alternatives before reaching consensus. Attribution to individuals also facilitates the sharing of information that is known to only one member of the group but is critical to making the right, or best, decision.

Workplace impact: As teamwork becomes increasingly common and rewarded in the workplace, group leaders may correct for group-serving bias by reorienting team members toward a focus on individual contributions. Groups that attribute their past success to specific individuals are less likely to engage in "groupthink" and more likely to perform at a higher level.

Abstract: Groups exert a strong hold on their members. Research has shown that groups internalize success because doing so generates positive emotions that promote cohesion and camaraderie. However, the literature confuses two types of attributions for success: the

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shared properties of the group as a whole and the unique contributions made by each individual in the group. Both are internal to the group but represent different ways to explain the cause of a collective outcome.

The distinction between these attributions is important because each may lead to different performance outcomes. Attributions focused on the group may send the subtle but important message that individuals may not be accountable for their contributions, or lack thereof. This perceived absence of accountability may reduce the motivation to expend effort on future team-related assignments. It may also create conformity pressure by highlighting how everyone behaved prior to achieving a successful outcome, which in turn intensifies the pressure to behave like everyone else on subsequent tasks. Individual attributions for success, on the other hand, may make team members feel accountable for their efforts and, more importantly, may signal the value of making contributions that are unique and perhaps even at odds with the group consensus.

To illuminate the route between attributions for success and group performance, the researchers conducted two experiments using undergraduate students as test subjects. The first involved a simple group problem-solving task followed by a group decision-making process that drew on the facts surrounding the 2002 merger between Hewlett-Packard and Compaq. At issue were the number and variety of alternative solutions group members considered prior to reaching consensus about support for, or opposition to, the merger. In other words, the researchers wanted to measure the extent to which members
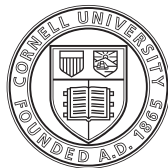
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succumbed to conformity pressure given the outcome of, and attributions made about, the first group task.

The results supported the researchers' original hypotheses. Groups that attributed their initial success to specific individuals explored more diverse and a greater number of possible solutions before deciding whether to recommend the merger. Videotape analysis of each group's discussion suggested that conformity pressure affected the outcome: crediting prior success to the group seemed to inhibit dissident opinions whereas giving credit to individuals seemed to free group members to express doubts about proposed options and slowed what might otherwise have been a rush to agreement.

Experiment two also involved a group problem-solving task followed by a group decision-making process. This time the researchers were interested in the group's ability to share data needed to reach the right conclusion. Research has found that group decisionmaking tends to rely on information known by all (common knowledge) while ignoring critical data that only one group member possesses, a propensity that can lead groups to wrong, or inferior, decisions.

In this case, each group was asked to identify the correct suspect in a fictional homicide investigation. Some clues were common knowledge within the groups, but others that were needed to solve the crime were exclusive to individual members of the group. Indeed, the experiment showed that correctly identifying the guilty party depended on the use of clues available to the entire group in addition to the clues held by individuals. Groups that attributed their success on the initial problem-solving task to the group as a whole were less likely to identify the correct suspect than groups that credited their past success to individuals. Analysis of the groups' videotaped discussions revealed that more of the critical but not-commonly-known clues were expressed in groups that made individually-focused attributions.

In sum, attributing success to individuals positively affects group decision-making processes and performance.

Methodology: The first experiment involved 168 undergraduates at a large public university and the second involved 132 students at another large university. Students were divided into groups and asked to perform tasks in a controlled environment. They supplied their own attributions for success or failure and were videotaped while discussing how to complete the assigned task; coders who were unaware of the hypotheses rated the interactions. The researchers used statistical techniques to analyze the data.

Source publication: "Hidden Consequences of the Group-Serving Bias: Causal Attributions and the Quality of Group Decision Making" is forthcoming in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.

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