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Integrating information and making effective decisions in teams

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Abstract

In this information age, organizations have come to realize that they can no longer rely on employees to have all the knowledge necessary to make quick, well-informed, and competitive decisions. Consequently, most of today's organizations structure work around teams, which enable workers to share, discuss, and integrate information, thereby increasing the speed with which informed decisions can be made while boosting employee learning. Research has long shown that, when there is no clear "right" or "wrong" answer, teams make significantly better and more innovative decisions than individuals do when working alone. Whether you are studying engineering, nursing, education, management, accounting, or any other field, you will find yourself working in teams. However, team decision making only works well when team members solicit information and ideas from every team member, listen to one another, and then build on or integrate ideas to make a decision. Although this may sound easy, it isn't, as many of the behaviors that get in the way are either unconscious or outside one's awareness. Thus, this essay discusses what can go wrong and what must go right for a team to use its members' information effectively and make the best possible decision.

For the past two decades, businesses that hire college students have rated "teamwork skills" as one of the most important skills they look for when hiring new employees. Organizations now commonly structure work around teams for a number of reasons, most of which are related to the fact that the amount of information required to make competitive decisions is greater and the competition is tougher than ever before. The increase in information means that employees must now be more specialized in their knowledge, making it necessary for specialists to meet and talk (either face-to-face or virtually) in order to see the full-picture necessary for creating ideas, solving problems, and making decisions. Tougher competition means that the decisions and ideas coming out of these teams need to be more innovative, smarter, and faster than those of competitors. Consequently, employees need to know how to work well in teams.

Teamwork skills are also high on the list for employers because—believe it or not—they are rare. Effective teamwork involves soliciting information and ideas from every team member and then building on or integrating the shared information. Theoretically, this sounds simple, but many factors impede team members' ability to listen, participate, and be heard. For example, most people do not have the self-awareness to realize when they are not listening or the open-mind and self-control essential to attending to ideas that are different from or opposed to their own. Yet, many work teams are designed so that no two people have the same background or specialty, meaning that competing ideas and priorities are standard; indeed, the purpose of using teams is to bring together diverse information and ideas. Moreover, information is rarely objective or presented in an impartial manner. Status differences influence how well a member is listened to and, since information is often the source of power in organizations, not everyone is willing to give away his or her power by sharing information (i.e., if everyone knows what I know, I am not needed). This is the reality of human behavior in work teams. It underscores why working well in teams requires that members attend to and manage predictable obstacles that can lead to ineffective information processing and poor decision making. The following section reviews a few of the most predictable obstacles.

Teamwork Requires Effective Information Processing

Obstacle #1: The common information problem.
For three decades, researchers have struggled to solve what has been labeled as the "common information problem." Team members prefer to discuss and work with information that is common (i.e., shared or known to most team members) rather than information held by one or a few members.[1] This unconscious preference leads team members to easily ignore or miss new or different information and favor information that most team members knew before the meeting started. Such

an approach restricts the information used to make decisions and defeats the key purpose of using team decision making. In addition, it reduces the effectiveness of decisions because integrating unique information into decisions is critical to making innovative and high-quality decisions. Research suggests that even when unique information is not correct or perfectly relevant it expands members' thinking and opens up a more creative decision-making process.[2]

Researchers have revealed several reasons for the bias toward discussing common information.[3] First, people prefer to present and receive information that is shared. Those who present information that is already known by others are perceived to be more competent, knowledgeable, and credible than those who present unique information. Another reason for the bias is that common information is usually discussed early in a meeting; according to the research findings, team members like to formulate their preferences and decisions early in team discussions. Finally, once team members formulate initial preferences, they rarely change their minds. This final point is a key reason why team members should hold off on evaluating information until the end of discussions.

Obstacle #2: Fear of conflict. People have different tolerance levels for disagreement and debate, and most people fear unbridled conflict. This fear often keeps team members from initiating healthy disagreements or debates, particularly when members are fond of one another. High levels of social cohesion in a team reduce members' willingness to "rock the boat" and openly disagree. Yet research shows that disagreement, debate, and limited levels of conflict stimulate thinking, improve the quality of team decisions, and are necessary for innovation. Disagreements and debates force team members to be clear about their positions, collect additional information, and listen carefully to one another. Team members have been found to be more flexible in their thinking and more creative in their problem solutions when they anticipate low levels of cooperative disagreement and conflict.[4] It is important to note that this occurs with low levels of conflict; when conflict becomes hostile or tense, the ability to process information and solve problems is reduced.

Research also suggests that conflict focused on the decision or the information being discussed is generally productive.[5] Such "task conflict" focuses on the effective completion of the task. Conflict reduces decision quality when it is focused on members' personal issues that are unrelated to the task. Meanwhile, personal conflict—or "relationship conflict"—focuses on personal or relationship issues. Relationship conflict increases team member anxiety and decreases individuals' willingness to listen to other perspectives. The problem facing teams is that task conflict easily converts into relationship conflict. For example, when one member vehemently disagrees with the ideas of another, the disagreement can easily become personal (e.g., "You disagree with me now because you are always disagreeable.")

Obstacle #3: The influence of status and conformity. Although theoretically feasible, it is practically impossible to compose a team whose members are perceived to be of equal status—especially in the workplace. Human beings seem to have a need to create status hierarchies even when formal titles do not exist. In work organizations, status is commonly granted based on one's hierarchical level in the organization, seniority, specialty, level of education, status in society (e.g., as a result of physical appearance, gender, age, race, socioeconomic status), and popularity among team members, which ultimately causes problems because the information shared by higher status team members carries more influence than that shared by lower status members. This occurs partly because members listen more carefully to higher status members, leading high-status members to feel entitled to share more information and carry more influence. Yet higher status members and members who speak and are heard more often frequently do not have the most relevant information to share,[6] so their excessive influence hinders teamwork and reduces the effectiveness of team decisions.

A problem closely related to the status issue is the pervasiveness of conformity in teams. For more than half a century, team specialists have recorded extensive conformity in teams—a phenomenon that became labeled "group-think"[7] in the 1970s. Members usually conform to the ideas held by the majority of members in the team (who, as you may have surmised, are often most influenced by common information and high-status members). Yet research consistently shows that the most innovative ideas come when members disagree with the majority, pushing them to understand the value of nonobvious information or ideas. As agreeing with the majority is so common, researchers label efforts to push for understanding of less evident ideas as "minority dissent." The majority typically does not embrace dissenters. Thus, minority dissent involves confronting the idea of conflict, fighting to get heard, and ostracism. It is important to note that minority dissent is rare in teams because most people prefer to go along with the majority. The strong desire to "fit in" and "just get along" perpetuates conformity.

The most famous study on conformity in groups was conducted by Solomon Asch in the 1950s.[8] Asch found that, even when the majority in a group was obviously incorrect (the majority worked with Asch and gave grossly incorrect answers), 74 percent of group members conformed to the majority at least once. Most people do not consider themselves to be conformists; consequently, many were skeptical about the initial results. Thus, the study was replicated many times in many contexts with groups around the world, consistently demonstrating that approximately 74 percent conformed at least once. More recently, research has revealed that conformity seems to involve an unconscious process. Researchers long assumed that conformity was intentional. However, when the Asch study was conducted while group members were wearing fMRI machines (i.e., brain scans), it was found that the strong influence of the majority caused members' brains to slowly change their interpretations to be consistent with those of the majority, despite the fact that the majority was objectively incorrect.[9] In other words, conformity does not appear to be a conscious choice; rather, the majority opinion convinces us to rethink and perceive information differently than we did before hearing the majority opinion. If this can happen when the ideas of the majority are blatantly incorrect, imagine how easily people conform to the majority when the task is more ambiguous, which is true for most decisions that teams make.

Improving Information Processing in Teams

Based on the discussion thus far, good teamwork undoubtedly requires much more than knowing how to be friendly and get along in a small group of people. Effective teamwork requires developing a plan and a set of norms or ground rules to ensure that team members' information, knowledge, and ideas—no matter how seemingly insignificant—are shared and discussed (even poor ideas often have a positive effect on discussions and final decisions). The best and most innovative team decisions are those that grow from integrating or building upon shared information. Working in teams is time consuming, challenging, and costly. Decisions that can be made by individuals should be. However, when teams process information well, they almost always make more effective and more innovative decisions than individuals do.[10] Teamwork also increases team-member learning and can even be good fun.

A number of actions can help a team improve its information processing. First, the goal or problem the team is to solve must be very clear and agreed upon by all team members. Without a clear and well-understood goal or problem, information sharing easily becomes disjointed and inefficient. Furthermore, misunderstandings increase the opportunity for dysfunctional relationship conflict. Second, it is helpful when team members know something about one another, such as individual members' specialty, strengths, interests, and backgrounds, as this enables members to know and respect the type of information held by different members and can be used to draw information out of quiet members. It also leads to greater understanding and trust among team members, which helps increase information sharing and debate. However, when social cohesion is high, team members may stifle disagreements; team norms or ground rules can help address the need for cooperative disagreement and debate.

Finally, a team leader or team facilitator who keeps an eye out for the obstacles discussed herein can benefit the team. This individual should be considered the team's "information manager" and should ensure that all members share information and listen to one another. This person should also ensure that shared information is recorded so that all information is recognized and discussed, especially information shared by lower status members or ideas that are not initially favored by the majority. The information manager also needs to ensure that individuals feel safe disagreeing, debating, and engaging in task conflict in this team as such vigorous discussions help clarify and enhance ideas. To this end, the team should have a ground rule that forbids relationship conflict, which enables the information manager to more easily step in and say "Didn't we agree to ban personal judgments and attacks?"

Most UNH graduates will at some point in their careers find themselves working in teams. What behaviors or ground rules have you found to be effective in teams on which you have already participated? What challenges have you faced? Can you imagine yourself as the "information manager" of a team? Although good teamwork is rarely easy, knowing what can go wrong and what must go right for a team to effectively process information and make good decisions can make teamwork far more enjoyable.

Endnotes

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