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ACE Research Vignette: Experiments in the MBA Classroom: the Case of Time Frames in Project Teams

This series of research vignettes is aimed at sharing current and interesting research findings from our team of international Entrepreneurship researchers. In this vignette, Dr Rene Bakker considers project team dynamics and how executive education can be enriched by studying them in the classroom.

Background and Research Question

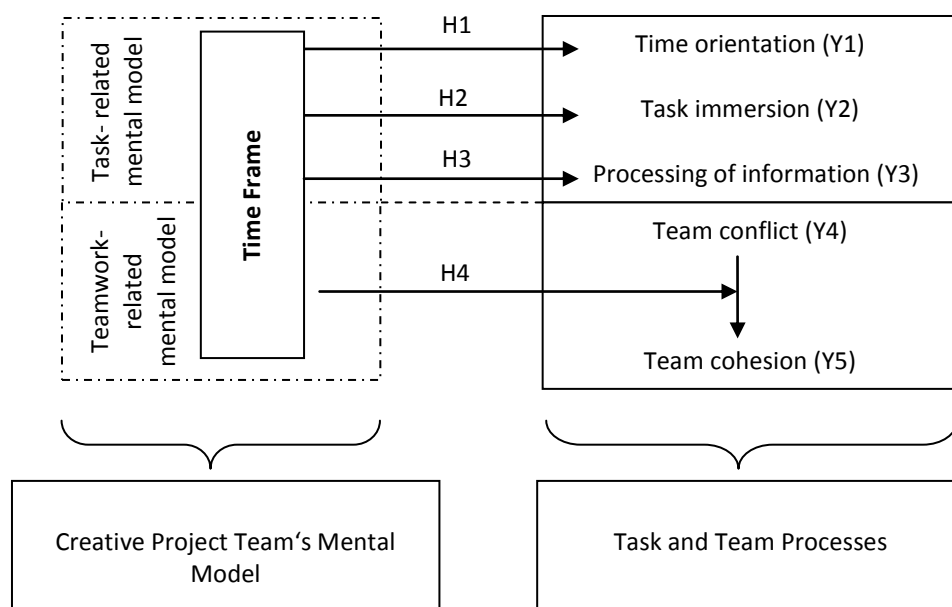
“Everybody knows it’s temporary. We all know the deadline, and then we shut down everything here. The whole thing is built up to be broken down. [...] You become one team, certainly, but through it all, in the back of your mind, you ask: for how long will it stay?”

- Project engineer on major medical innovation project, interviewed on what characterizes being part of a creative project team.

New venture projects tend to be founded by entrepreneurs who work in teams. At the stage of venture creation, such teams tend to closely resemble creative projects in which entrepreneurial opportunities need to be grasped in short, focused periods of time. While there is agreement that this “temporal” aspect of project teams is important, there is surprisingly little research on what time frames “do” to project teams. In this paper, our overall hypothesis is that project teams that expect to keep collaborating for extended periods of time (i.e. that have a long time frame) will behave differently than teams that have a shorter time frame. Specifically, we expect different time frames to impact two categories of variables, task related variables, and team related variables (see Figure 1 below). To help remedy the relative lack of knowledge about time frames and creative project teams, this research focused on the following research question, graphically depicted in Figure 1:

How do different time frames in creative project teams influence their task and team related behaviour?

FIGURE 1. Conceptual model



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How we studied this: bringing research into Executive Education

Arguably the best way to test cause-effect models is by experiments. To enhance the real-world applicability of our research we used people with managerial experience in our research, namely MBAs in business schools. We proceeded as follows:

In the first week of their curriculum, incoming executives enrolled at TiasNimbas Business School (in the Netherlands) executive master programmes were assigned to three-person creative project teams. All teams were instructed that they would work on a creative task, which required a written deliverable. Moreover, they were instructed that throughout the one year programme in which they were enrolled, there would be more of such team assignments. We then systematically varied the teams' expectations as regards the length of time they were expected to work together. Half of the teams received the instruction that they would only work together in that particular group for that particular task. These teams' time frame, therefore, was just one day (i.e. a short time frame). The other half of the teams were instructed that they would work together in the same team composition for the entire program (i.e. a long time frame). All other variables were measured through validated surveys. At the end of the experiment, all participating managers were debriefed.

What we found

The results show an overall pattern that indicates that time is not just an objective dimension, but that it is one of the core elements represented in a project team's behaviour. In fact, our findings suggest that in comparison to creative projects with a relatively longer time frame, creative project teams with a shorter time frame have a time orientation that is more focused toward the present (Hypothesis 1), are immersed less in the task at hand (Hypothesis 2), and employ a more heuristic mode of information processing (Hypothesis 3). Furthermore, time frame was confirmed to moderate the negative effect of team conflict on cohesion (Hypothesis 4).

Apart from these "content" findings, we also collected "process" findings about how executive education can be enriched by scholarly research. We found that the participating managers valued the experiment being part of their curriculum, but mostly because we took big steps to integrate it as such. Findings from the experiment were integrated in class materials, two classes were taught on project teams and project management, and all whom were interested were involved in a brainstorming session about the findings. Overall, the programmes that had the experiment as part of the curriculum, were evaluated by the participants as being above 4.0 on a 5-point scale on all dimensions.

Advice for Business, Policy, and Education

Two major implications can be drawn from this study.

First, time frames matter. Creative project teams with shorter time frames behave differently than those with longer time frames. This is important, for example because especially in organizations that work with many short time frame teams, it is often observed that knowledge developed in these teams is not kept for the organization after the team disbands. Might this be a consequence of our finding that project teams with short time frames tend to be only focused on the present moment?

Second, taking scholarly research into the MBA class room can be a win-win situation, if implemented properly. Students get to see and be involved in cutting edge research that matters, and that informs the textbooks that they read in other classes. Researchers get the opportunity to develop theories on the basis of findings from people which the theories are intended to describe. The crux is that in order to achieve the win-win, such efforts should be thoroughly integrated within the program, rather than a one-shot deal in which researchers "take the data and run".

This research vignette was written by: Dr Rene Bakker, postdoctoral research fellow at ACE <http://staff.qut.edu.au/staff/bakkerr/>
Check the source & learn more from:

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