Personality traits influence on team cohesiveness and performance: The moderating effect of leadership

Khudaykulov Akmal (Corresponding author)

School of Management, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China, 430070

E-mail: ahudaykulov@live.com

Abstract

Performance within teams is of vital importance for organization. The influence of personality in general and traits on particular team is evident. However, it is not clear how the relationship between personality and team cohesiveness works that leads to team performance. This study helps to find a better insight of that relationship by exhibiting that certain personality traits can change team environment. To this end, an understanding of how personality impacts team setting in organization will help team leaders and managers to facilitate and improve team success. Herein, we describe the four personality traits (competitiveness, openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness) and identify which of these are critical to team cohesiveness and performance.

Keywords: Personality, team, leadership, team performance, organization

1. Introduction

In recent years, team performance has been a theme widely explored in the management domain. Various individual and team characteristics together with processes and management initiatives if appropriate may lead to positive team outcomes, and in turn to organizational success. Leadership is an important factor in moderating behavior of employees. Adequate leadership positively affects team performance (Srivastava et al., 2006). Through constantly focusing on developing followers' potential a leader will generate climate and norm of helping where workers will learn from each other and develop (Avolio & Bernard, 1995). A climate that is generated by a style of leadership will affect employees to adjust their behavior, which reflects their personality and attitude. This may in turn influence their team performance.

During the last decades, organizational structures of firms (and in many aspects of life have) changed: competition toughened, the half-life of knowledge decreased, job specialization increased, pressure to be innovative augmented, and companies expanded internationally. As a result, conditions to survive in the market changed and the concept of teamwork emerged to meet the new requirements, and enable flexible and efficient working. Teams are seen as an ideal organizational entity because knowledge can be shared which improves (or might improve) performance (Tannenbaum et al., 1996).

Today, teams are an important cornerstone of organizations and most organizations rely on teams to fulfill their work and to obtain their goals (Tannenbaum et al., 1996). Thus, many of us already worked together for a longer period in a team and accomplished tasks in a work group. From our own experience, we all know that teamwork can be joyful and productive. However, it might also happen that a collaboration among co-workers was rather unproductive and unpleasant leading us to the conclusion that we would have been more productive alone.

Despite such negative experiences, teams are considered a "mainstay of organizational life". However, not all teams are high performing teams and often the benefits of teamwork are attenuated by conflicts or problematic cooperation. Therefore, it is of interest for researchers and practitioners to know more about the mechanisms of teamwork. In particular, it is interesting to know, how team performance can be promoted and what factors are associated with productive cooperation between team members.

According to Peter and Liz (2000), Mullins (1996) defines leadership as a relationship through which one person influences the behavior of other people. Leaders must not only be able to define departmental, unit or organizational missions, but they must also be able to coordinate the activities of others and motivate them to meet mission requirements.

Additionally, they must circumvent or resolve issues impeding progress towards accomplishing organizational goals. Selection and implementation of actions to bring about goal attainment represents a form of problem solving which makes the generation, evaluation, and implementation of proactive and reactive solutions key to leader effectiveness (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs & Fleishman, 2000). With respect to understanding

effective leadership in organizational settings however, the nature of the problems at hand and their associated performance demands have another remarkable set of implications. Specifically, they provide us with some important clues about the type of knowledge and skills likely to underlie effective performance in organizational settings (Mumford et al., 2000). Leaders must not only be able to formulate a plan that works within the context of organization, they must also be able to implement this plan within a distinctly social context, marshaling support, communicating a vision, guiding subordinates, and motivating others. Thus, leaders must be able to understand and work with others, another point that underscores the need for social skills (Mumford, et al., 2000).

2. Teams

Today, a growing number of organizations are turning to teams as a way to develop and deploy their human capital in search of peak operational performance (Salas, StagI & Burke, 2004). Teams and coordinated teamwork are believed to provide significant business advantages including productivity, innovation, flexibility, job satisfaction, customer focus, and bottom-line business results (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). Martin and Bal (2007) employed a survey related to the growing proliferation of teams in organizations where respondents overwhelmingly agreed (91%) that teams were central to their success. The 118 respondents were from a wide variety of industries, and were executives who had previously attended one of the Center for Creative Leadership's executive programs. Executives from industries as diverse as healthcare, finance, manufacturing, and high-tech, have embraced team organization and teamwork as central to organizational success (Martin & Bal, 2007). Yet is this interest and investment paying off? Are these companies putting their focus in the right place? Are teams more effective in achieving the goals of the business and does the current research support and validate the confidence the survey respondents have? If the answers to these critical questions are yes - what does an effective team look like and what part does the team leader play in influencing the effectiveness of the team? This dissertation seeks to address these questions by investigating work teams in a manufacturing environment.

The characteristics of team leaders, team members, team interactions and processes will be explored to gain a better understanding of the factors that influence team effectiveness. The influence of the broader organizational context on these other team effectiveness factors will also be analyzed to assist a Global 500 manufacturing company in evaluating their current deployment of an empowered team framework. The role of the leader in this transition toward self-managing teams is an important question for the company.

3. Team Leadership

The role that leaders play in developing and maintaining effective teams is considered to be a critical factor in overall team success. Some studies have focused on leadership functions (Fleishman, Mumford, Zaccaro, Levin, Korotkin & Hein, 1991; Luthans, Rosenkrantz & Hennessey, 1985; Moregeson, DeRue & Karam, 2010; Zaccaro, Rittman & Marks, 2001) to identify the key tasks of a leader in facilitating development of successful teams. Alternately, Hackman (2002) has proposed that creating the right enabling conditions is key to leading an effective team. Hackman's research suggests that leadership is not the sole domain of a single individual leader, but rather anyone who is involved with establishing the conditions to enhance team performance. Although there have been a number of studies conducted to better understand the leader-team interface (Day, Gronn & Salas, 2004; Morgeson, Lindoerfer & Loring, 2010; Pagell & LePine, 2002), a meta-analysis on leadership behaviors in teams by Burke, Stagl, Klien, Goodwin, Salas, and Halpin (2006), suggests that there has been "a lack of integration concerning the relationship between specific leader behaviors and team performance outcomes" (p. 288). Bass (1990) shares this assessment in his update of StogdilPs Handbook of Leadership by pointing out that the overwhelming majority of studies on team leadership focus on the leader's influence on individual members of the team rather than on overall team performance. The lack of empirical research, on the influence that leaders have on the performance of their teams as a whole, is a critical gap in understanding team effectiveness (Morgeson, DeRue & Karam, 2010). This study seeks to fill in this gap by investigating team leader and team perspectives on leader influence. Leader-Team interactions for effective teams and for less effective teams will be explored using a qualitative interview protocol to build a framework of understanding of factors affecting performance. Luthans (1988) adds another dimension to the question of the leader's influence on the team. He postulates from his studies of service organizations that leaders who have achieved success in their careers, as measured by their rate of promotions, have very little in common with managers who have been responsible for leading effective teams. This astonishing finding leads Luthans to suggest that the activities of managers who are successful in their personal careers are actually different than those who are effective in leading teams. Luthans' research shows that career success is associated with socializing, politicking, and networking with outsiders,

whereas effective team leadership is related to communicating, motivating, and disciplining, managing conflict, staffing, and training subordinates. The findings of these studies highlight the need to better understand the leader-team interface and the key components involved with a leader's influence on overall team success.

4. Personality traits

Personality has received much attention from the research community in many contexts. In recent decades research on personality traits and its exploration in the context of work behavior has been revitalized (Funder, 2001), especially in the domain of personality traits of leaders and followers. A recent meta-analysis of the trait-leadership relationship found leadership to be positively correlated with extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, and negatively related to neuroticism (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002).

Personality trait is relatively stable and enduring individual tendency of reacting emotionally or engaging in a behavior in a certain way (Tosi & Mero, 2003). Personality as a determinant of human behavior has been questioned considerably, often not yielding significant relationship due to poor conceptualization and the lack of standardization of personality traits. However, recent advancements in the theories of personality provide genetic and neurological insights into personality, which help, explain the origins and the content of apparent individual dissimilarities between people (Bouchard & Loehlin, 2001; Zuckerman, 2005). Therefore, a foundation for a common framework of personality traits has been built, leading to the creation of the "Big Five" theory research, and giving a research on personality a huge boost. Five most salient (Goldberg, 1990) dimensions of personality belonging to the Big Five, that are considered hereditary ,stable over time and across cultures (McCrae & Costa, 1997) are: extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience, conscientiousness and agreeableness (Costa & McCrae, 1991). Extraverted people are usually outgoing, sociable, assertive and energetic. Agreeableness is a disposition to be caring, good-natured and cooperative. Neurotic individuals tend to experience insecurity, anxiety and are not emotionally stable. Conscientiousness is the tendency to be tenacious, responsible, reliable, and orderly. Finally, people who are open to experience are likely to be independent, nonconforming, unconventional and have a strong imagination.

In many studies "big-five" personality traits demonstrated influence in general aspects of living such as longevity (Friedman *et al.,* 1995) and cultural intelligence (Ang, Van Dyne, & Koh, 2006),   Furthermore personality was found to be a significant factor in the context of job satisfaction (Judge, Bono, & Locke, 2000), job performance, (G. Anderson & Viswesvaran, 1998; work attitudes (Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002), and behavior (Barrick & Mount, 1991). At the same time, many researches have argued that mere existence of five personality traits is not sufficient for explaining behavior. Despite the fact that some personality traits of the big five have exhibited a stronger relationship to behavior then the others, in order to achieve "an adequate understanding of personality, it is necessary to think and measure more specifically than at this global level if behaviors and their mediating variables are to be sufficiently, incisively represented" p. Block (1995) 208). Therefore, each of these major personality traits' context-specific facets, which are more related to the actual observable behavior (Paunonen, Haddock, Forsterling, & Keinonen, 2003), should be taken into consideration when examining effects on behavior.

5. Context a Key

The broader context of a team's operating environment has been shown by research to be a critical factor in influencing team effectiveness. Cohen and Bailey (1997) point to over 50 studies, in their review of team research between 1990 and 1996, which highlight external factors impacting team performance. Organizational structures, such as reward or communication systems, the level of supervisory control and autonomy within the broader organization, the stability of the overall business environment, availability of resources, or level of training, all can influence team performance (Ancona, 1990). McGrath (1986) emphasizes this point in his observational studies of teams as a part of a larger organization. McGrath argues that teams are not stand alone entities and therefore they must be studied as part of broader social systems. These systems often have significant influence on overall team performance. He further suggests that the context in which a team operates can significantly impact the behavior and processes of the team. For example, organizational goals and team goals may not be well aligned. In this case, the team may perform at a high level and meet all of their objectives, yet not have a positive impact on the achievement of goals by the parent organization. The importance of context to the investigation of team effectiveness adds an additional level of complexity to the evaluation of teams.

As Hackman (1987) points out, contextual variables are rarely the same when teams are studied in laboratory

settings, and often are different from one real world setting to another. Thus, it becomes extremely important to examine influences on team effectiveness in the context of the specific organizational setting.

6. The aim and significance of research

The growing use and coordination of self-managing teams, combined with the complexities involved with establishing appropriate leadership structures capable of operating within the varied contexts of today's business environments, is a significant challenge to many organizations. As indicated in this brief introduction, further investigation into the factors influencing team success is needed to build a framework of understanding for establishing and coordinating high performing teams. First, we need to better understand the links between leader behavior and team performance. Second, questions remain in the literature about which attributes and leadership behaviors are truly needed to lead effective teams. Finally, research shows that the specific organizational and business environment in which a team operates may significantly impact the answers to questions about team effectiveness factors. To further examine these questions, this study explores team effectiveness in the specific context of teams operating in manufacturing company (the company has requested that their name be withheld for confidentiality reasons).

This investigation will use a qualitative approach to explore the perspectives of team leaders and team members on four fundamental research questions:

1) How do leader characteristics influence team effectiveness in the specific context of this company?

2) How do team characteristics influence team effectiveness in the specific context of this company?

3) How do leader-team interactions (behaviors) influence team effectiveness in the specific context of this

company?

4) How do organizational and other contextual factors influence team effectiveness in the specific context of this company?
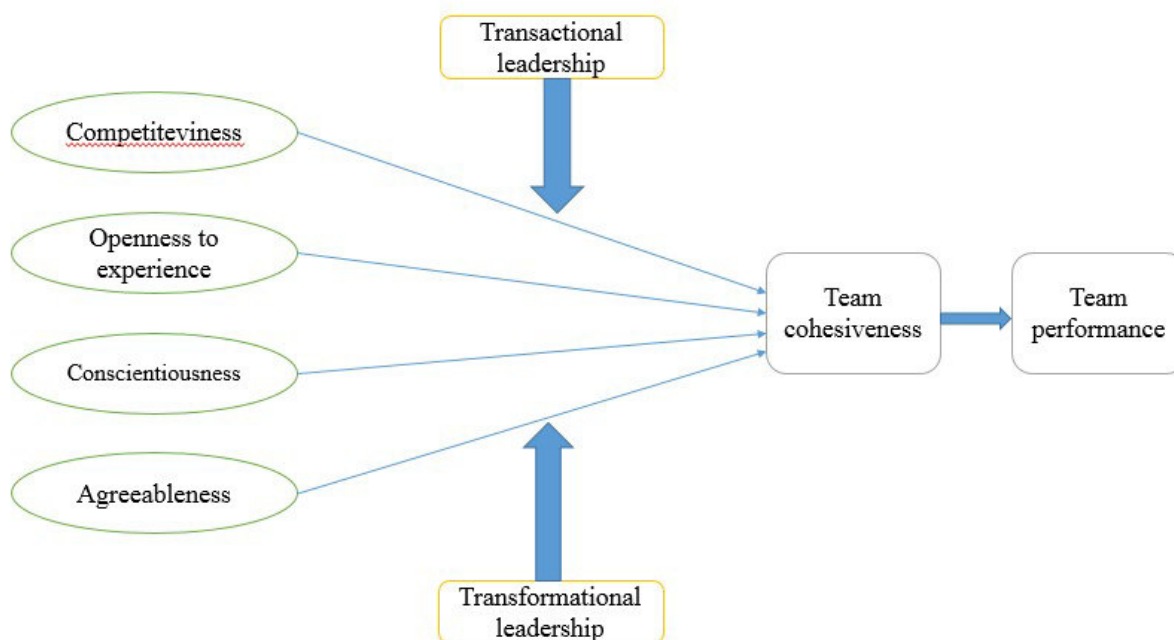

Figure 1. Research model

The definition of a "team leader" includes individuals at the first management level in the organization, who generally manage individual contributors (Company Chief Learning Officer, 2011). The four research questions are sufficiently broad to investigate the link between leader influence and team effectiveness, yet focused enough in scope to be studied in a one-year timeframe (Stake, 2010). The research questions will also serve as a guide to

concentrate the research on what the company specifically wants to understand about developing effective team leaders (Stake, 2010; Maxwell, 2005). Since the research questions emphasize the process rather than objective measures or comparisons of individual leaders and teams, a qualitative approach will primarily be used for the investigation (Maxwell, 2005). This approach will focus the research on collection and analysis of leader and team perceptions, interactions and experiences (Patton, 2002). The information developed will be used to gain a better understanding of the key factors influencing team effectiveness in the specific context of the company's manufacturing facilities. The ultimate goal of the study is to ensure that team leaders are being equipped to effectively lead their teams.

Conclusion

Although cohesiveness is a crucial and determinant factor for team effectiveness, cohesiveness alone will not guarantee success without organizational commitment. Team members can feel cohesion with their teammates but be completely detached from organizational values and vice versa.

Teams drive organizational success, though developing and leading high-performance teams is one of the most complex tasks facing any leader in the current competitive work environment. Cohesiveness is the key factor in implementing effective, high-performance teams. Emotional intelligence also plays a key role in building high-performance teams in that emotional intelligence fosters cohesiveness. Managing emotions is how you build a team, an organization. It is the ability to get team members inspired. Leaders must understand how team cohesiveness works and how bonding in a team will build energy. Leaders must inspire team members through reinforcing the sense of belonging, empathy in bonding and mutual respect, in addition to giving people choice and power over what they can do. Once that sense of support, that foundation, is created, the result is limitless creativity.

Further study conducted in different settings, such as in workplaces, could shed light on the generalizability of our study onto a greater population. Moreover, examining other facets of personality, such as agreeableness and openness, could provide future evidence of personality, and more specifically, extraversion on team cohesion. Lastly, a study that looks at multigenerational teams could explain changing trends in team cohesion dynamics. Organizations that desire to develop effective teams need to analyze the personality-type compositions of these groups and help team members understand their own personal attributes as well as appreciate the contribution of the other team members.

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