

Research of Note

“Expertness diversity and interpersonal helping in teams: Why those who need the most help end up getting the least” by Gerben S. Van Der Vegt, J. Stuart Bunderson, & Aad Oosterhof in *Academy of Management Journal*, 2006, 49 (5), 800-893.

Summarized and interpreted by

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The power of the team comes from the potential to pool resources, specialize and divide the work, and build motivating camaraderie. However, harnessing these benefits of teaming to achieve the goals of the organization may challenge the way individual members are disposed to organize their interrelationships. As Singleterry (2006) observed in an earlier Recent Research of Note, researchers have been busy identifying factors that confound group performance including demographics, skill sets, organizational affiliations, and geographical location. Members come to teams with a diversity of knowledge, experience, team skills, and personal agendas. Interdependence theory says that members of the relationship themselves are the source of good to poor outcomes for one another (Kelley & Thibault, 1978). External situational factors also can influence team performance.

The authors propose a model in which teams develop a hierarchy of power, status, and dependence that reflects the perceived expertness of members. They ask if the hierarchy established on the basis of perceived member expertise influences interpersonal commitment and interpersonal helping to the detriment of the least expert and to team performance. Organizations wrongly, the authors think, have sought to create teams with members of varying expertness under the assumption that the less expert will learn from the more expert and that this will increase group goal achievement. However, members with greater expertise may counter that effort expended on assisting, communicating, and coordinating with less expert members drains time and energy that could be better expended on the goal. Or humans simply may not be wired to help the benighted.

The team is examined as a multilayered social system. There is the member (the perceiver), the target (another member of the team), the dyad (the relationship between the two members) and the group. Members of the team have a diversity of expertness, measured as skills for achieving the team relevant goals. Members gain social status on the basis of their perceived expertise. (The authors find strong agreement on the expertness hierarchy among the four members of their teams.) The theory is that the hierarchy of expertise sets in motion a dynamic of commitment—feelings of attachment to another member—and helping behavior that in turn determines group performance outcomes.

The authors proffer that interpersonal commitment will be greater among the more expert because there is mutuality of dependence when expertise is more balanced. When expertise is unbalanced or extremely asymmetric commitment fades. Commitment, in turn, leads to helping behavior. Individuals who are more committed to a relationship are more likely to behave in ways that will maintain the relationship. Thus members who are perceived as most expert will be helped most and by the most expert. There being no commitment to the least expert, they get no help.

The study design employed 24 four-person groups. Respondents were Dutch college students, with a mean age of 22.7, 68 percent female. The groups worked on projects that lasted 10 to 12 months. Data were collected at three different times. Key measures included perceived expertness, interpersonal commitment, helping, and performance.

Expertness was based on rating fellow team members on six general competencies deemed relevant to the project. The ratings were stable over time and team members showed high agreement. Interpersonal commitment was based on agreement with statements expressing commitment to individual team members. Interpersonal helping was based on agreement with statements that describe helping behaviors to individual team members. Team performance was graded by three supervisory faculty using criteria of quality and quantity of work, meeting deadlines and goals, and by overall performance.

Results

- Team members felt more committed to and were more likely to help other team members perceived to have greater expertness. (The largest amount of variance explained (66 percent) in commitment was attributable to dyadic differences. Second most variance explained (13 percent) was attributable to group differences.) This tendency was most pronounced among the most expert. The relationship between team member A's commitment to a more expert team member B was stronger when A's perceived expertness was high than when it was low. Thus, first and second tier experts helped each other and commitment appears to drive helping behavior.
- Team members with least expertise were reduced to receiving help from less expert team members.
- Team members showed high levels of dyadic reciprocation. Least expert members were sometimes successful at using commitment and helping to get reciprocation from the most expert.
- Teams that that did exhibit helping of less expert by more expert members were judged more effective.
- The largest amount of variance explained (46 percent) in helping behavior was attributable to a perceiver effect. Second most variance explained (30 percent) was

attributable to group differences. Thus 76 percent of helping behavior was attributable to the individual and the group—not dyadic relationships.

Implications for Managers

As Billie Holiday sings in the song “God Bless the Child,” it is as old as the Bible that “Them that’s got shall get” and that the “weak ones fade.” So it may surprise few to learn that when left to their own predilections and when given a choice among whom to commit and to assist, people look up rather than down. What may surprise, however, is the finding of large variance among groups and the 30 percent variance explained by group differences that suggest that group level culture is influencing individual helping behaviors. This finding serves to highlight that many individual such choices are circumscribed by situational and organizational contingencies. Thus, it is too soon for pessimism among those with a desire to have the stronger help the weaker when they assemble teams.

While it may be human nature to give commitment and help to the more expert, the key situational contingency is getting the work done and achieving a goal. Leaders need followers to get the work done and coaches need athletes to play the game. These asymmetric interdependencies often force the more expert to look down. Commitment up the hierarchy, as the authors note, can be a powerful tool for encouraging reciprocity. The relationship of athlete and coach is one of the best examples of asymmetry in which commitment is exchanged for expert helping (Jowett, 2007).

Further, teams don’t simply arise out of primordial soup and members are far from left to their own devices. Teams are embedded in organizations, share the organization’s culture and respond to the organization’s rules. Recognizing that we have entered the information age, many public corporations, as well as private ones, have taken on the perspective of “learning organizations” that look to increase the thinking and knowledge of members and the organization as a whole (Senge, 1990).

Additionally, companies have adopted the “balanced scorecard” (Kaplan & Norton, 2000), a management system that explicitly defines how the company will grow its workers. Increasingly, managers are held responsible for developing their subordinates in addition to the usual bottom line metrics. Supervisory responsibility for employee learning and mentoring is incorporated and measured in evaluations. Thus, commitment and helping are not left to individual perceptions among team members.

Organization leaders should be encouraged to learn that factors at the group level rather than at the dyadic level explain helping behavior.

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Leigh Stelzer has published articles on trade negotiations, joint ventures, and cross-cultural problems related to doing business in the Peoples Republic of China. As Seton Hall integrated computing into the curriculum, he expanded the knowledge base of this phenomenon with his article "Learning and Teaching Management on the Web: What Do We Know?" (2003) Additional research addressed issues of the match of technology to pedagogy and the employment of technology in the development of higher-order critical thinking skills. Recently, Leigh has turned his attention to the effectiveness of public incentive policies to encourage small business development and entrepreneurship. He can be reached at stelzele@shu.edu.