

# **THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF TEAMS: AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL OF NATIONAL CULTURE, WORK TEAM CHARACTERISTICS, AND TEAM EFFECTIVENESS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Despite the popularity of work teams in the global business environment, not all attempts to implement teams are successful. This paper examines the cultural dimensions underlying team effectiveness, and presents a conceptual model of the relationships between national culture, work team characteristics, and team effectiveness.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The use of teams has become a popular global strategy and a number of multinational corporations (e.g., Motorola, Xerox) have been trying to implement teams in Latin America, Asia, and Europe. Despite the popularity of work teams, not all attempts to implement teams are successful (Verepej, 1990). Empirical studies suggest that teams may have a negative impact in some organizations (Ashley, 1990), and multinational corporations are recognizing that the global implementation of teamwork is fraught with difficulties (Odenwald, 1996). Because problems often develop when interventions applicable to one culture are used in another, the lack of success of team-based organizations in certain countries can be attributed partly to a failure to pay sufficient attention to the cultural context of teams.

This paper develops an integrative model of the relationships between national culture, work team characteristics, and team effectiveness. The model serves several purposes: it bridges the gap between the literature on work teams and the literature on national culture, it moves beyond examining whether teams are more or less effective in different cultures to an understanding of why such differences exist (i.e., the underlying cultural dimensions that explain these differences), and it helps managers in different countries assess the work team characteristics appropriate to their companies, the probable success of implementing teams, and the types of teams to implement.

## **NATIONAL CULTURE**

A number of people have examined dimensions of cultural variations across countries. This paper focuses on five cultural dimensions that can be connected to work team characteristics: uncertainty avoidance, power distance (hierarchy-egalitarianism), orientation toward time, individualism-collectivism, and masculinity-femininity (instrumental-expressive).

### **Uncertainty Avoidance**

The uncertainty avoidance dimension of national culture deals with the extent to which people feel

the need to avoid ambiguous situations and manage such situations by providing explicit rules and regulations; it refers to people's acceptance of varying situational demands, openness to change, and the propensity to take risks (Hofstede, 1980; 1994).

### **Power distance**

Power distance (or hierarchy-egalitarianism) measures the acceptance of unequal distributions of power in institutions and organizations (Hofstede, 1980, 1994). In high power distance or hierarchical cultures, less powerful members of society accept unequal distributions of power and resources. In low power distance or egalitarian cultures, status differences are de-emphasized.

### **Orientation toward Time**

Cultures value time differently; some cultures focus on the past, others on the present, and still others on the future. This tendency to focus on the past, present, or future can be connected to Hofstede's (1994) dimension of long-term versus short-term orientation toward time. Long-term orientation refers to values oriented toward the future, such as perseverance in the face of slow results, thrift, and willingness to subordinate oneself for a purpose. In contrast, short-term orientation refers to values oriented toward the past and present such as the expectation of quick results, respect for tradition, and personal stability.

### **Individualism-Collectivism**

The two ends of the individualism-collectivism dimension reflect the primacy of the individual versus the primacy of the group in social interactions. Individualist cultures emphasize individual goals, autonomy, working alone, individual achievement, and confrontation. Collectivist cultures view their identity and interests as fundamentally interdependent with their family, group, or organization; collectivists are more likely to engage in cooperative strategies and value team work and group decision making (Hofstede, 1980, 1994).

### **Masculinity-Femininity**

Values such as assertiveness, achievement, and material advancement are reflected in the masculinity-femininity cultural dimension (Hofstede, 1980; 1994). Cultures high in masculinity (instrumental cultures) are more likely to emphasize "tough" assertive values and socialize individuals to seek advancement, earnings, and material success, whereas cultures high in femininity (expressive cultures) place a greater emphasis on quality of life and interpersonal needs, and socialize individuals to be nurturing.

## **WORK TEAM CHARACTERISTICS**

Campion, Medsker, and Higgs (1993) identified several primary themes that are related to group effectiveness. This paper examines the relationships between cultural dimensions and four themes: team composition (e.g., flexibility of team assignments), team structure (e.g., self-management), interdependence (e.g., goal interdependence, task interdependence, and reward interdependence), and team process (e.g., workload sharing).

## **Team Composition**

Team composition is mentioned in several models of work teams (e.g., Campion et al., 1993; Campion, Papper, & Medsker, 1996); one characteristic that falls under this theme is flexibility of team assignments, that is, the extent to which team members can fill in for each other when required. Although flexible assignments have been connected to team effectiveness (Campion et al., 1993), this connection may depend on the cultural context. Unexpected changes in team assignments can be threatening to people from high uncertainty avoidance cultures who feel the need to avoid ambiguous situations and prefer the structure of routine assignments; hence, flexible assignments are less likely to be effective in such cultures. In contrast, flexibility in team assignments might be preferred by people from low uncertainty avoidance cultures who are motivated by change and perform better under flexible conditions.

## **Team Structure**

Team structure includes the characteristics of self-management and participation in team decision making. Self-management refers to the authority given to teams to manage themselves (plan, organize, motivate, and control), schedule work (set goals, pace of work), make product-related decisions (inventory, quality control), and select new team members.

The literature is unclear about the connection between team self-management and effectiveness; some researchers (e.g., Campion et al., 1993, 1996) have found that self-management increases effectiveness, whereas others (e.g., Ashley, 1992) found negative outcomes. Kirkman and Shapiro (1997) suggest that the effectiveness of team self-management can be influenced by the cultural context, specifically by the power distance dimension. In high power distance or hierarchical cultures, higher levels of team autonomy may upset existing distributions of real and symbolic power and status. Managers may feel uncomfortable with the perceived lack of respect for authority and teams may feel uncomfortable making decisions without managerial approval. In contrast, low power distance cultures are more likely to decentralize decision-making and empower teams who desire the discretion and authority to make decisions on their own; low power distance may explain the relative success of autonomous work teams in Sweden and the popularity of self-management in the U.S.

## **Team Interdependence**

Campion and his colleagues (Campion et al., 1993, 1996) found that team effectiveness was connected to three aspects of interdependence: goal interdependence, task interdependence, and outcome interdependence. Goal interdependence refers to the extent to which team goals are connected to individual goals and team members are expected to meet both sets of performance goals. Task interdependence refers to the extent to which team members interact and depend upon each other for materials or information to accomplish their work, whereas outcome interdependence refers to the extent to which individual outcomes and rewards are linked to group performance (Campion et al., 1993, 1996).

Although research suggests that interdependence can motivate group-oriented behavior, this moti-

vating effect may be augmented or attenuated by national culture. Since task and outcome interdependence require team members to focus on the welfare of the group rather than the individual, collectivists might be more likely to react positively to interdependence than individualists. Research suggests that people in individualist cultures such as the U.S. prefer individually-based rewards (low outcome interdependence), whereas people in collectivist cultures prefer team-based rewards (high outcome interdependence).

Team members often build social credits by helping the team in times of need (e.g., taking on extra tasks and assignments if a team member is absent or ill). Such “team citizenship” behaviors are not likely to be immediately rewarded, especially when individual rewards are dependent on team performance. In the long term, however, such behaviors are likely to be appreciated and rewarded by the team. Hence, outcome interdependence may also be influenced by the cultural dimension of time orientation; people from long-term orientation cultures are more likely to patiently wait for team rewards compared to people from short-term orientation cultures who desire immediate individual rewards.

### **Team Process**

Campion and his colleagues identified workload sharing as a team process characteristic related to effectiveness (Campion et al., 1993, 1996). Workload sharing makes salient the opposing pulls between the individual’s self-interest and the interests of the team; this concept is closely related to that of social loafing or free-riding in that the lower the level of workload sharing, the higher the level of perceived social loafing. Research indicates that such reduced individual effort in groups (social loafing) is a common organizational problem in the U.S. (Kidwell & Bennett, 1993).

Campion et al. (1993: 830) suggest that workload sharing can be increased if “group members believe that their individual performance can be distinguished from the group’s.” But this may hold true only for individualist cultures, where people put their self-interest above the interests of the team, value autonomy, and feel more efficacious when working alone (Earley, 1993). Collectivists, in contrast, put team interests above self-interest, feel more efficacious in groups, and are more likely to “experience ‘individual loafing’ or reduced performance when working alone than when working in a group” (Earley, 1993: 341). Empirical research suggests that social loafing is less likely to occur in collectivist cultures such as Israel and China than in individualist cultures such as the U.S. (Earley, 1989, 1993); hence, norms concerning workload sharing should be more effective in collectivist than in individualist cultures.

## **DISCUSSION**

Work teams are an integral component of global organizations in the 1990s. This paper examines the influence of national culture on work team characteristics and team effectiveness. Unlike previous work (e.g., Earley, 1989, 1993) that focused on a single cultural dimension (e.g., individualism-collectivism) and/or a single team characteristic (e.g., social loafing, team rewards), this paper presents a multi-dimensional, multi-characteristic approach to culture and teams. The model developed here suggests that the cultural dimensions of uncertainty avoidance, power distance (hierarchy-egalitarianism), orientation toward time, individualism-collectivism, and masculinity-

femininity (instrumental-expressive) can influence the effectiveness of work team characteristics.

Once the model is empirically investigated, it can have several implications for organizations and managers: organizations can gain insight into the work team characteristics that would be effective under different cultures and design teams accordingly, and managers can identify the areas of training that might be required in a specific culture. Ultimately, this paper hopes to raise awareness and understanding of cultural differences in team members' reactions to work team characteristics; this knowledge and understanding can be used to enhance productivity and competitiveness in the global workplace.

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