Preface

The effects of team strategic orientation on team process and information search

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ABSTRACT

We tested the effects of team strategic orientation on team member perceptions, work strategy and information search. In Experiment 1, 80 teams worked on a hidden profile decision-making task. A defensive team strategic orientation increased members' perceptions of the problem's scope, leading to a more process-focused work strategy and broader information search compared to an offensive team strategic orientation. When teams needed critical information from the environment, defensive teams outperformed offensive teams; offensive teams performed better when critical information resided within the team. In Experiment 2, these findings were replicated with 92 teams performing a different decision task. When making a second decision, half of the teams were led to change their strategic orientation; teams shifting from offense to defense altered their information search behavior more readily than did teams shifting in the opposite direction, suggesting an asymmetric adaptation effect.

Introduction

We live in an age when more information is available to us more readily than ever before. The literature on strategy and decision making in organizations suggests that the more information groups can use, the better their decisions will be. Many of the documented deficiencies in collective decision making are attributed to a lack of information, or biased processes that lead to an inability to use all of the available information (Kerr & Tindale, 2004; Stasser & Titus, 1985; Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981). However, recent studies have begun to suggest that more information is not always a good thing, and that under some circumstances, groups try to access too much information, to their detriment (Bresman, 2010; Haas & Hansen, 2005; Wong, 2004).

When do groups seek out more information than is useful? And when is that most likely to be detrimental? Team strategic orientation, which is defined as a team's stance in pursuing goals vis-à-vis others in the environment, is one factor that seems to particularly influence information-seeking behaviors in teams. An offensive team strategic orientation involves the pursuit of objectives whose attainment occurs at the expense of an opponent, whereas a defensive team strategic orientation involves the pursuit of goals by preventing loss at the hands of an opponent. In a study of counter-terrorism teams in the U.S. Intelligence community, Woolley (2011) observed that teams with a defensive strategic orientation sought out much more external information than did teams with an offensive strategic orientation. At times, this emphasis on information-seeking led the defensive teams to become overwhelmed and to overlook critical knowledge and skills held by team members. In the studies reported here, we are interested in further understanding this dynamic, as well as exploring the conditions under which offensive or defensive team strategic orientations place teams at an advantage or disadvantage. We test hypotheses predicting that playing offense or defense asserts a causal influence on team members' perceptions of the environment, which, in turn, affect team process and use of information.

Theory and hypotheses

Team strategic orientation

Orientations of various types have been studied in both individuals and collectives. Work on orientations at the individual level focuses mostly on individual interpretation and reactions to events, such as the work on individual goal orientations (Button, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1996; Diener & Dweck, 1978). In extending the idea to collectives (including teams or organizations), it is necessary to think both about how the orientation affects cognition

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at the individual level, as well as how collective perceptions, decisions, and actions evolve as a result (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2003).

Classic work conducted at the organizational level of analysis demonstrates that strategic orientation in organizations focuses the attention of organizational members on particular events or types of activities being carried out by others, and creates a predilection for a certain range of collective responses as a result (Hambrick, 1983; Miles & Snow, 1978). For example, the "prospector" strategic orientation leads organizational members to scan their environment for opportunities to expand their market share and to collectively prioritize innovation activities, particularly innovations that will steal market share from competitors. In contrast, the "defender" orientation directs attention to the activities of competitors to fend off potential losses, and to prioritize efficiency, or practices that will prevent the loss of profit despite pricing pressures and other challenges posed by competition (Rajagopalan & Finkelstein, 1992; Venkatraman, 1989).

More recently, strategic orientation has been explored at the team level. Team strategic orientation influences critical aspects of the problem-solving process, including what information is attended to, how this information is weighted and integrated, and which members exert influence, all of which can affect the group's final solution (Levine, Higgins, & Choi, 2000; Woolley, 2011). Strategic orientations are also theorized to have a lasting influence on how individual members and the group as a whole respond to subsequent problems. In one laboratory study, Levine et al. (2000) examined team strategic orientations related to riskiness and conservatism, and found that group members' responses converged over time and in the direction of the primed strategic orientation, predicting collective decisions in a multi-trial recognition memory task. The development of a shared reality thus became the ongoing basis for collective action.

Our research builds on this work by examining how a team's strategic orientation toward others in their environment (i.e. offensive or defensive strategic orientation) influences team members' perceptions of the size of the problem space and the team work processes that subsequently evolve. More specifically, how does an offensive versus defensive team strategic orientation influence team member perceptions of problem scope, which in turn influences the team's work strategy and information use?

Team strategic orientation and perceived problem scope

As described earlier, orientations in groups or organizations are thought to influence collective behavior first by altering the manner in which individual members perceive their environment. This, in turn, alters collective decisions and actions. To analyze how an offensive or defensive team strategic orientation might alter the perceptions of group members, we draw on existing work on regulatory focus theory (Crowe & Higgins, 1997). That theory distinguishes two motivational systems operating within individuals: promotion focus and prevention focus. Activating one focus or the other has an impact on individuals' attention to different needs (nurturance and achievement in a promotion focus versus safety and security in a prevention focus). A defensive team strategic orientation, characterizing teams whose members seek to attain goals by preventing loss at the hands of an opponent, should invoke prevention-related tendencies in individual team members, whereas an offensive team strategic orientation, characterizing teams whose members seek to attain goals at the expense of an opponent, should invoke promotion-related tendencies. Individuals with different foci also attend to different cues in their environment. Those with a promotion focus tend to take risks, are attentive to opportunities, and are primarily concerned with positive outcomes, whereas those with a prevention focus try to avoid errors and are primarily concerned with negative outcomes (Crowe & Higgins,

1997). Furthermore, promotion goals are associated with perception and reasoning that remains at a less detailed and higher level of abstraction, whereas prevention goals evoke more detail-oriented and concrete thinking (Förster & Higgins, 2005; Pennington & Roese, 2003). Thus, we expect that members of defensively oriented teams will perceive a greater number of obstacles in their environment than members of offensively oriented teams, resulting in a broader perceived problem scope.

Perceived problem scope refers to the number of different information cues to which members believe they must attend, that is, the extent to which team members believe they need to be broad vs. selective in their approach to understanding and planning action in a situation. Problem scope pertains to one of the three elements of task complexity identified by Wood (1986), namely, the number of information cues involved. This is the element most germane to an information-intensive problem situation (Jonassen, 2000; Patel, Groen, & Arocha, 1990; Wood, Mento, & Locke, 1987) and also the element most susceptible to perceptual bias. Woolley (2011) found that teams playing defense in the intelligence community are often unable to rule out any possible sources of danger, so they attempt to address any and all sources, compared to teams playing offense when facing the same threat. Although we know that competitive situations are frequently structured in a manner that does make the defensive position objectively more difficult than the offensive position (McRaven, 1996; Nash, 1951), here we are interested in how these positions assert a causal influence on subjective perception, such that members of teams that are assigned to adopt an offensive or defensive orientation will develop different perceptions of the same environment, even when provided with the very same information.

Because members of defensive teams will be highly alert to potential danger, and take a highly concrete and detail-oriented approach to examining their environment, defensive teams will collectively notice many sources of opposition and feel compelled to address them, resulting in perceptions of a broad problem scope. By comparison, offensive team members will be more attentive to the presence or absence of rewards and desirable outcomes, giving less attention to sources of opposition. This focus, coupled with the tendency of promotion-focused goals to elicit more abstract and less detail-oriented thinking and reasoning, should result in reduced perceptions of problem scope within offensive teams.

Hypothesis 1. Members of teams adopting a defensive orientation will perceive a broader problem scope than members of teams adopting an offensive orientation.

Team strategic orientation and team process

We contend that adopting an offensive or defensive strategic orientation, and the associated effects of that orientation on team members' perceptions of problem scope, will have implications for the team processes that evolve. Hackman (1987, 2002; see also Wageman, Hackman, & Lehman, 2005) identified team performance strategy and use of knowledge and skill as two critical components of team process. Here we briefly review what is known about each of these areas and develop hypotheses predicting how team strategic orientation affects team strategies, which in turn affects the use of member knowledge and skills.

Team performance strategy

A team's strategy is a framework for guiding member attention toward key priorities and activities to accomplish goals, as evidenced by a pattern in a stream of important decisions (Ericksen & Dyer, 2004; Hackman, 1987; Hambrick, 1981; Miles & Snow, 1978; Mintzberg, 1978). Whereas team strategic orientation