



The positive effect of expressing negative emotions on knowledge creation capability and performance of project teams

John Paul Stephens ^{a,1}, Abraham Carmeli ^{b,c,*}

^a Department of Organizational Behavior, Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University, 11119 Bellflower Rd., Peter B. Lewis Bldg., Rm. 428, Cleveland, OH 44113, USA

^b Faculty of Management, Ramat-Aviv, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv 69978, Israel

^c University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom

Received 25 August 2015; received in revised form 12 March 2016; accepted 21 March 2016
Available online 19 April 2016

Abstract

Organizations are built around teams as a way to better manage complex work, such as technological projects. However, complex teamwork presents challenges that can often generate positive and negative emotions, as well as demand efforts to generate new knowledge. We examine whether and how the capacity of technological product development teams to constructively express negative emotions facilitates knowledge creation capabilities and thereby enhances project outcomes. Results indicate that with greater capacity for constructively expressing negative emotions, teams enhance their capability to access crucial knowledge and exchange and integrate that knowledge in ways that enhance both project performance outcomes and project budget adherence. In so doing, we hope to open up new avenues for research on how expressing negative emotions in project teams can help in building knowledge creation capabilities and drive multiple performance outcomes.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. APM and IPMA. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Emotional expression; Negative emotions; Knowledge creation capability; Project team performance

1. Introduction

Technological projects in organizations that develop new applications and enhance extant operations tend to be complex and thus demand effective teamwork (Hoegl and Gemuenden, 2001). Teamwork, or the set of interactions that align work contributions (Marks et al., 2001), is difficult to build (Hackman, 1990), requiring elements such as shared understandings among team members (Bechky, 2003; Klimoski and Mohammed, 1994), and structural elements, such as the provision of routines,

spaces, and rewards for collaboration (Dougherty, 1992; Hargadon and Bechky, 2006).

The interactions and communications that occur in the relationships among members enhances the team's capability for developing new, team-level knowledge that is crucial to the success of the project (Bartsch et al., 2013). Teams developing sophisticated methodologies and products are often functionally diverse, in order to draw on the different knowledge bases of their members. In such cases, challenging others' opinions or expressing doubts is necessary for knowledge creation (e.g., Leonard and Sensiper, 1998). Such interactions involve affective experiences, or felt reactions to stimuli that can be positive or negative (Watson et al., 1988). Emotions are one form of affective experience and refer to short-lived, intense feelings that can be linked to specific events (Elfenbein, 2007), such as anger and joy. They may influence group processes and

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +972 3 640 6335 (office); fax: +972 3 640 9983.

E-mail addresses: john.p.stephens@case.edu (J.P. Stephens), avic@post.tau.ac.il (A. Carmeli).

¹ Tel.: +1 216 368 1710 (office); fax: +1 216 368 6228.

outcomes (Bartel and Saavedra, 2000; Kelly and Barsade, 2001), and thus teams benefit from promoting and recognizing a range of emotions (e.g., Chang et al., 2012; Druskat and Wolff, 2001; Elfenbein, 2006). However, research on team knowledge creation has mostly focused on the exchange or transformation of pieces of specialized knowledge (e.g., Hargadon and Bechky, 2006), and less on the expression of emotions (see Aarrestad et al. (2015) for a recent exception).

Learning more about the usefulness of expressing negative emotions is of broad significance for project teams since repressing the constructive expression of negative emotion may very well limit the capability to create new knowledge. Uncertainty and ambiguity accompany challenging project work, so project failure is a common occurrence. Learning from these failures is aided by negative emotions signaling the importance of the loss and prompting the search for plausible causes of the loss/failure (see Shepherd et al., 2011). Repressing negative emotions can paralyze useful project team action (Lüscher and Lewis, 2008; Smircich and Morgan, 1982, as cited by Shepherd et al., 2011). Yet, on the other hand, team processes can be “hijacked” by “barrages” of negative emotions (e.g., Liu and Maitlis, 2014). This leaves project team leaders and members in a quandary over how expressing the negative emotions that arise in daily disappointments and frustrations can effectively influence information elaboration and knowledge creation. Here, we address how project team members can avoid the negative effects of either effortfully repressing or unconstructively expressing negative emotions (Shepherd et al., 2011) and instead reap the informational benefits of negative emotional expressions.

To examine the role of emotional expression in the knowledge creation capability of project teams, we conducted a study of how a team’s capacity to constructively express negative emotions (hereafter, expression of negative emotions [ENE]) is related to knowledge creation capabilities and drives team project outcomes. ENE describes a particular facet of high-quality relationships, in which the capacity of the connection between people allows them to achieve more enduring and expansive outcomes (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003; Stephens et al., 2011). In high-quality relationships among team members, “it is acceptable for people to display a range of emotions in the relationship, increasing the probability that [they] will be understood” (Carmeli et al., 2009: 84). Following this line of thinking, we theorize about the importance of ENE in developing knowledge creation capability and driving project team outcomes. Our findings indicate that ENE positively predicted knowledge creation capability, which in turn enhances project performance. These findings first contribute specificity to our understanding of how the quality (and not just the incidence) of intra-team communications, as manifested in ENE, enables team knowledge creation capabilities. We know more about the instrumental nature of what is exchanged in knowledge-creating relationships (e.g., help seeking and help giving; Hargadon and Bechky, 2006) rather than the emotional substrate that may be necessary for resource generation (Dutton, 2003). Second, our study highlights the importance of non-rational aspects of knowledge creation. The way people feel and how it is expressed

has consequences for their motivation to coordinate with others in meaningful ways (Quinn and Dutton, 2005). While in the following sections we emphasize their informational aspects, the sense of connection derived from sharing negative emotions among team members is also foregrounded (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003), suggesting a complementary rather than competing role alongside the cognitive processes typically highlighted in research on knowledge creation.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Project team processes and emotionality

Communication among team members is essential to team success and often filled with emotion. Technical knowledge work often involves research and development or engineering teams comprised of members from different specialties. It is assumed that members’ diversity in strengths, knowledge, skills, and abilities reduces decision-making biases such as the escalation of commitment and overconfidence (Burke and Steensma, 1998, as cited by Bunderson and Sutcliffe, 2002) or groupthink that stifles discussion and prevents sound evaluation of alternatives (Janis, 1972). Team members use teamwork processes (Marks et al., 2001) such as coordination, balance of member contributions, mutual support, effort, and cohesion (Hoegl and Gemuenden, 2001) to integrate their diverse efforts and perspectives. These processes are all ultimately driven by communication and its quality.

Project team members’ communications involve emotional expressions (e.g., of liking) that influence important outcomes such as commitment to each other and to the task (Hoegl and Gemuenden, 2001). Although there is a range of perspectives about emotions in organizations, we take an interpretivist view of emotions (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995) that strikes a “middle ground” between the positivist view, in which certain stimuli reliably lead to certain emotional responses (e.g., getting fired makes one sad), and the social constructionist view (Fineman, 1993), in which individuals learn how to respond from others (e.g., learning from others’ responses whether it is permissible to cry at work). We further suggest that this interpretivist view incorporates a third, psychoanalytic perspective that characterizes emotions as variable and sometimes unconscious (Gabriel, 1998). In short, we expect that certain emotions will indeed be elicited by certain stimuli (positivist view), but emotions can change, and their sources may be unclear even to the focal person (psychoanalytic view). Thus, some emotions may elicit explicit expression, and developing and sharing interpretations with others (social constructionist view). From this perspective, communications among team members have potential to be rife with emotional expression.

2.2. The capacity to express negative emotions and knowledge creation capability

Intra-team communication is important for team members to make sense of what they feel and what they know.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/275509>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/275509>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)