



Personality and community prevention teams: Dimensions of team leader and member personality predicting team functioning

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ABSTRACT

The predictors and correlates of positive functioning among community prevention teams have been examined in a number of research studies; however, the role of personality has been neglected. In this study, we examined whether team member and leader personality dimensions assessed at the time of team formation predicted local prevention team functioning 2.5–3.5 years later. Participants were 159 prevention team members in 14 communities participating in the PROSPER study of prevention program dissemination. Three aspects of personality, aggregated at the team level, were examined as predictors: *Openness to Experience*, *Conscientiousness*, and *Agreeableness*. A series of multivariate regression analyses were performed that accounted for the interdependency of five categories of team functioning. Results showed that average team member *Openness* was negatively, and *Conscientiousness* was positively linked to team functioning. The findings have implications for decisions about the level and nature of technical assistance support provided to community prevention teams.

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1. Introduction

The diverse community-based organizational forms known as coalitions, partnerships, teams, and collaboratives have become a primary vehicle through which public health programs are organized and delivered at the community level. US government agencies have made a strong investment in community-based coalition approaches through programs such as Safe Schools/Healthy Children (targeting reductions in violence), Communities That Care (adolescent substance use, delinquency, and other problems), and Drug Free Communities (substance use prevention and treatment). Community coalition mechanisms have addressed AIDS, cancer, cardio-vascular disease, physical fitness, literacy, and a number of other areas of health and social problems.

Although coalitions have the potential to enhance coordination among community agencies and actors (Weiss, Anderson, & Lasker, 2002), coalition approaches may suffer from a number of particular problems such as competition among members, insufficient member commitment, and difficulties agreeing on a common vision (e.g., Weiss et al., 2002). These problems may help explain the fact that few evaluations have demonstrated a significant public health impact as a result of coalition-based programs (COMMIT, 1995; Hallfors, Hyunsan, Livert, & Kadushin, 2002; Roussos &

Fawcett, 2000; Saxe et al., 1997). In addition, many coalition approaches have eschewed the use of evidence-based programs; the few coalition approaches that have demonstrated public health impact have more often been those employing evidence-based programs (Feinberg, Greenberg, Osgood, & Sartorius, 2007; Spoth et al., In Press).

In order to help enhance the effectiveness of community coalition-based public health efforts, both evidence-based and community-oriented researchers have examined a number of factors influencing coalition processes and outcomes. Evidence suggests that successful coalitions tend to have competent leaders, articulated self-governance procedures, and high levels of social cohesion and task-focus (Butterfoss, Goodman, & Wandersman, 1996; Feinberg, Greenberg, & Osgood, 2004; Florin, Mitchell, & Stevenson, 1993; Wandersman et al., 1996). A history of positive collaboration in the community, an open and democratic community culture, and adequate training and technical assistance have also been linked to coalition success (Feinberg, Greenberg, Osgood, Anderson, & Babinski, 2002; Greenberg, Feinberg, Meyer-Chilenski, Spoth, & Redmond, In Press).

One area that has been less well researched is the influence of the characteristics of individual coalition members and leaders on coalition effectiveness. This is a logical area of study because the development and sustainability of coalitions depends on interactions among a number of diverse individuals. The quality of interactions among members is particularly important given that coalitions typically operate in a fairly unstructured context,

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without the proscribed role structure, hierarchy, and institutional accountability mechanisms found in other community organizations such as schools (e.g., superintendent, principal, teachers, counselors) or agencies (managers, supervisors, staff).

1.1. Personality and team functioning

Social psychological and organizational factors researchers have devoted substantial attention to the role of individual and organizational influences on work group dynamics and performance, utilizing a number of various conceptual frameworks (e.g., Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). We focus here on the framework of personality traits, which refers to durable patterns of behavior and preferences expressed by individuals across situations. After decades of debate since the beginnings of modern psychological science a century ago, the voluminous study of personality has come to a fair degree of consensus, albeit with some ongoing debate, on a five-factor model of personality traits (e.g., Barrick & Mount, 1991; Costa & McCrae, 1988). Within the so-called Big Five model, each of the five factors represents a superordinate construct incorporating many sub-dimensions and facets. These five factors are: Agreeableness, Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Extraversion.

Many studies and several meta-analyses of the relation of these five factors to individuals' work performance have produced varying results, although a consensus has emerged here as well (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001; Tett, Jackson, & Rothstein, 1991). *Conscientiousness*, reflecting reliability and dependability, has been consistently linked positively to work performance. Findings for *Agreeableness*, which represents cooperation and sympathy, and *Openness to Experiences*, reflecting intelligence and curiosity, are inconsistent. *Agreeableness* has sometimes been linked to positive functioning in certain contexts (e.g., Van Vianen & De Dreu, 2001), such as situations involving a high degree of social interaction and persuasion. However, meta-analyses suggested weak or no links (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Barrick et al., 2001; Tett et al., 1991) for *Agreeableness*. Although the meta-analyses also found no overall influence of *Openness*, the authors note that some studies have found a negative association between *Openness* and team performance.

A complementary perspective is offered by considering the possible influence of personality on the two major functional domains in work-related teams, the social role and task role (Bales, 1950; Stewart, Fulmer, & Barrick, 2005). Individuals engaging in the social role maintain social cohesion by supporting, encouraging, and linking other team members to produce team solidarity. Individuals engaging in the task role contribute to work goals by contributing information, carrying out goal-related tasks, and maintaining accountability. Positive functioning in both typically is necessary for successful team performance. All team members engage in both roles; individuals, however, differ in the attention they give and contribution they make to these domains. Also, it appears that personality traits influence individual engagement in each domain (Stewart et al., 2005). In this study, two associations were particularly strong: Individuals high on *Agreeableness* tend to promote social cohesion whereas those high on *Conscientiousness* tend to engage in goal-oriented work tasks. Other associations are smaller, but one is of interest in this context: Individuals with high levels of *Openness to Experience* tend to be low on engagement in the social role, as well as possibly on the task role. Although individuals with high levels of *Openness* may demonstrate unconventional thinking and independence of judgment that may aid a team, such individuals also may show difficulty in subordinating individual creativity in the context of a collaborative work process.

There are several gaps in the literature on personality and teams. First, we note that a majority of prior research focused on the link between individual personality traits and individual performance in a team context (for exceptions, see Barrick, Stewart, Neubert, & Mount, 1998; Neuman, Wagner, & Christiansen, 1999; van Vianen & De Dreu, 2001). Less is known about the link between the overall level of personality traits on a team and group-level functioning. For example, an individual with higher level of *Conscientiousness* may display better task performance but it may not guarantee that the team will also function well. Studies that have examined team level functioning have found that higher levels of collective *Conscientiousness* and *Agreeableness* are related to higher team performance (Barrick et al., 1998; Neuman et al., 1999). Findings are inconsistent with *Openness to Experience*; the linkage between *Openness* and team performance was negative for student teams, but positive or non-significant for non-student teams (Neuman et al., 1999; van Vianen & De Dreu, 2001). Thus, to further the understanding of the relation between personality and team functioning in a real-world context, we focus on collective team functioning rather than individual performance.

Further, the role of team leader's personality traits may not have the same implication for team functioning as team members' personality traits. Little is known about different roles of team leaders' versus team members' personality traits. However, research indicates that the style and competence of team leadership is an important determinant of team functioning and performance (Kumpfer, Turner, Hopkins, & Librett, 1993). Thus, the influence of leader personality traits on team functioning is an important area for inquiry.

Finally, diversity (i.e., variability) of individual attributes within a team may have important implications for team functioning (Day & Bedeian, 1995; van Vianen & De Dreu, 2001). It is possible that two teams with similar overall levels of a trait, for example *Agreeableness*, will have very different distributions. For example, one team may have some individuals very high and some individuals very low on *Agreeableness*, whereas another team may have individuals who have more similar levels of *Agreeableness*. It may be that individuals who share similar ways of functioning are able to coordinate with each other effectively. On the other hand, it may be that individual styles of functioning serve to complement each other. Day and Bedeian found positive association between diversity in *Agreeableness* and performance. However, Van Vianen and De Dreu did not find any significant associations between team performance and diversity in *Conscientiousness*, *Agreeableness* and *Openness to Experience*.

1.2. PROSPER and domains of team functioning

We extend the research on personality and work teams by examining the relation of personality to the functioning of prevention-oriented community teams in the PROSPER dissemination trial (Spath, Greenberg, Bierman, & Redmond, 2004). PROSPER is an innovative model for the dissemination of evidence-based school and family prevention programs addressing youth substance use. Organizationally, the PROSPER model is comprised of three tiers: local prevention teams, university prevention scientists, and Prevention Coordinators, who serve as liaisons between the teams and scientists by providing technical assistance, guidance, and consultation to the teams and feedback to the scientists. The local prevention teams are catalyzed and led by university Cooperative Extension Service (CES) educators, who are charged with bringing scientific advances to local communities in a wide array of areas (e.g. agriculture, positive youth development, nutrition, and community development). The local teams are comprised of representatives from the school

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