

What leads to effective team learning performance within university students? The moderating effects of ‘Guanxi’

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ABSTRACT

Although researchers have highlighted that guanxi expedite the flow of resources, their impact on team learning performance is not fully understood. Drawing on data from student teams enrolled in an entrepreneurship program, we established and validated a model exploring interrelationships between guanxi, entrepreneurial leadership and team learning performance, under the mediating effects of team cohesion and team efficacy. Data was collected from forty students in a time-lagged fashion over a period of four and a half months. Results show that guanxi moderated the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and team cohesion negatively during the initial phase of team development. However, during the middle phase, it was found that team cohesion contributed to the development of team efficacy. The results also shed light on the direct impact of team efficacy on team learning performance during the pre-final phase of team development. This paper highlights that guanxi facilitate team learning performance indirectly, even though to different extents, through early entrepreneurial leadership, team cohesion and team efficacy. Taking support of theories such as guanxi theory, leadership theory and group development theory, the main contribution of the study was to bridge the literature gap about guanxi and add new perspectives to the group development theory.

1. Introduction

Recently, collaborative learning activities in education have become a stimulating topic for researchers (van Emmerik, Jawahar, Schreurs, & de Cuyper, 2011). During the process of collaborative learning, a team works together, develops the existing knowledge base and acquires new knowledge (Blazevic & Lievens, 2004; Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Often termed as team learning, it is a multifaceted process that develops and changes over time (Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2017). The implementation of team learning studies has flourished for many years (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). However, educators have overlooked opportunities of using groups as a means to enhance team learning performance (Wölfer, Faber, & Hewstone, 2015). More empirical research is needed to study what makes it more effective.

Also, researchers have become increasingly savvy about levels of analysis, but very little is known about how the level of analysis may influence the conclusions. Teams have characteristics that are discrete from individuals because social systems involve complexities not evident in individual-level phenomena (Bandura, 1997; Klein, Dansereau, & Hall, 1994). Thus, it is not immediately clear whether generalizations can be made from research conducted with individuals to make predictions about what will occur within teams. Research suggests that the level of theory should dictate the level at which a construct is measured and analyzed (Chan,

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1998; Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999; Rousseau, 1985). However, some team constructs exist at the team level apart from individual perceptions. To add to the existing empirical evidence on the level of analysis, this individual level study aims to explore a few team variables and find out whether they impact team learning performance within student teams.

Researchers have long studied ‘guanxi’, the traditional Chinese concept of developing personal relationships, seeking to describe Chinese society from an emic, internal perspective (Yang, 2001). Guanxi expedite the flow of resources within teams and for influential purposes might have some unintended effects on team learning (Cross & Cummings, 2004; Wölfer et al., 2015). However, less effort has been made in preceding research to locate the mechanisms through which they can impact team learning performance. Interestingly, some researchers warn that such relationships can benefit the individuals involved but become detrimental to the team as a whole (Chen, Chen, & Meindl, 2006, 2004; Gold, 1985). On the other hand, some scholars propose that guanxi influence teamwork positively while personalizing relationships and enhance the cooperation needed for task completion (Farh, Tsui, Xin, & Cheng, 1998; Tsang, 1998; Tsui & Farh, 1997; Xin & Pearce, 1996). Using guanxi theory, we aim to explore their impact on team learning performance during the process of team development.

Leadership or lack of it has been identified as one of the primary reasons for failures in implementing a team-based work system (Katzenbach, 1997; Sinclair, 1992; Stewart & Manz, 1994). A significant amount of work has been done on leadership, however, a noticeable gap still exists in the literature as limited attention has been given to specific leadership factors and behaviors that promote team learning. There exist only a few models of team effectiveness (Wheelan, 2005) that have explicitly considered leadership as one of the determinants of team learning and specifically team learning performance. Past research also shows that leadership is associated with a higher level of team cohesiveness (Stashevsky & Koslowsky, 2006). When teams are cohesive, team members are drawn to a group to remain together (Schermerhorn, Hunt, & Osborn, 2002). In this study, we aim to find out, how guanxi moderate the effect of leadership on team cohesion. Previous studies have also provided compelling evidence that team cohesion acts as an emergent state to foregoing team processes (i.e. team efficacy) and is significantly related to team learning (Zhong, Huang, Davison, Yang, & Chen, 2012). An extension of the concept of self-efficacy, team efficacy is the team's shared perception that individual team members hold in its conjoint capabilities (Bandura, 1997). All these constructs have been studied independently in several studies, however, more empirical work is needed to explore these interrelationships together in one framework. The main objective of this study is to provide insights on how to make team learning more effective within student teams by exploring several interrelationships.

To summarize, we aim to answer the following research questions: (1) whether guanxi influence team learning over a period of time? (2) Whether early leadership contributes to team cohesion when moderated by guanxi? (3) Whether team efficacy contributes to team learning directly? (4) Whether the above-mentioned variables act as suitable antecedents to team learning performance? The purpose of the current study was to empirically test the theoretically derived hypotheses regarding the relationships between leadership, team cohesion, team efficacy, and team learning performance and to examine the moderating effects of guanxi between leadership and team cohesion.

First, we provide a theoretical background on all the constructs and derive the hypotheses. Second, we describe the methodology used to carry out the study, which includes sample and procedure, measures for all the constructs, and the data analysis techniques used to empirically evaluate hypotheses. Third, we showcase the results of analysis. Fourth, we discuss the results and findings, highlight theoretical and practical implications and address the limitations and opportunities for future research. Finally, the last section is the conclusion.

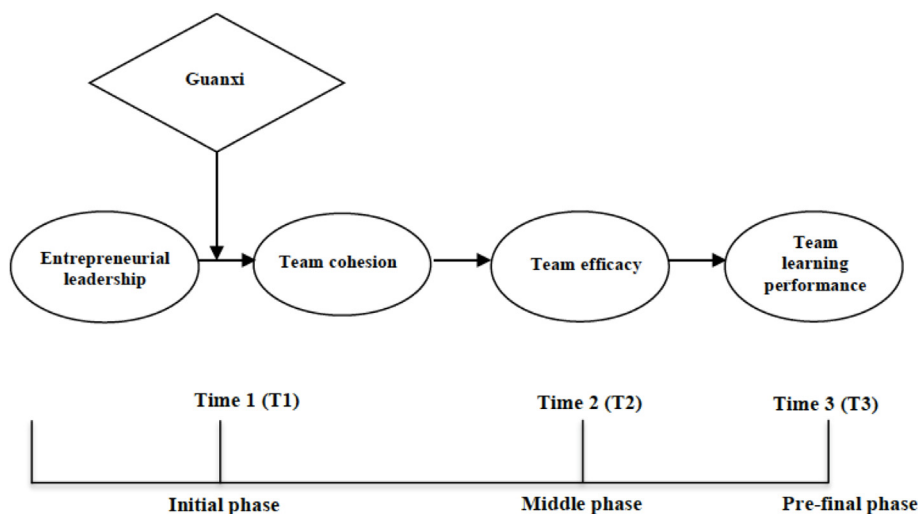


Fig. 1. The hypothesized model.

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