Leadership and team cohesiveness across cultures ☆

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relation between leadership and team cohesiveness in different societal cultures. We expect direct effects of societal culture on leadership and team cohesiveness, as well as a moderating effect of culture on the relationship between leadership and cohesiveness. Data were collected from 29,868 managers and 138,270 corresponding team members in 80 countries. Multilevel analysis was used to test the hypotheses, relating societal individualism–collectivism (IC), with directive and supportive leadership, and with team cohesiveness. In individualistic societies managers use less directive and less supportive behavior, compared with collectivistic societies. Team cohesiveness is not directly related with IC. Directive leadership and supportive leadership are negatively and positively related with team cohesiveness respectively and these relations are stronger in individualistic societies. Implications for managerial education and practices are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The rise of team-based work structures is perhaps one of the most salient characteristics of contemporary work places and the shift from individualized work structures to teamwork has spread throughout the organization (NRC, 1999; West, 2004). This shift has implications for leadership, as modern management is primarily about managing groups, and leadership behavior should thus be evaluated in relation to team effectiveness (Burke et al., 2006; Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2006). An important correlate of effective teamwork is cohesiveness of the group. Therefore, development of cohesiveness among team members is an important part of team management (Druskat & Wheeler, 2003). Exploration of a leader's effect on group cohesiveness is necessary to understand how the latter can be managed and maintained. House (1966) summarized this theme over forty years ago by stating that the productive capacity of the group depends on its degree of cohesiveness, and cohesiveness demands effective leadership.

Theoretical work and empirical studies in this field draw heavily on western ideas and data and it is assumed that these ideas are relevant for western and non-western cultures alike. However, the last decade has shown a rapid increase on international comparative studies to gain a better understanding of effective leadership in different contexts and cultures (Dickson, Den Hartog, & Mitchelson, 2003; Hofstede, 2001; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004).

The goal of the present study is to contribute further to this growing body of knowledge by examining the relations between societal culture, leadership behavior, and team cohesiveness. More specifically, we explore the direct effects of culture on directive and supportive leadership behavior, and on team cohesiveness, as well as the moderating influence of societal culture on the relation between leadership behavior and cohesiveness. We focus on "individualism/collectivism", which is the cultural dimension that has received most attention and recognition in many domains and also is seen as highly relevant for organizational practices, leadership and team work (Gelfand, Bhawuk, Nishii, & Bechtold, 2004; Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007; Hofstede, 2001). We use a

large sample of managers and their direct reports from 80 countries, as this sample offers unique insights into managerial behavior as perceived by direct reports around the globe and the relation of these behaviors to cohesiveness of the work group.

We will begin by discussing the relevance of team cohesiveness and the relation with directive and supportive leadership, followed by an exploration of the possible direct and moderating effects of societal culture.

1.1. Team cohesiveness and leadership styles

Team or group cohesiveness is the degree to which members are attracted to a group and motivated to remain part of it (Schermerhorn, Hunt, & Osborn, 2002); it thereby refers to both "forces that attract members to the group," as well as to "the incentives to remain within the group" (Man & Lam, 2003). Employees in cohesive groups value their membership and strive to maintain positive relationships with other group members (Schermerhorn et al., 2002). Team cohesiveness is strongly related with organizational citizenship at individual and team levels (Chen, Lam, Schaubroeck, & Naumann, 2002; Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006; Paine & Organ, 2000; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000), reduction of destructive conflicts (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Nibler & Harris, 2003), and improved performance at the individual level (Chang & Bordia, 2001; Langfred, 1998), and at the team level (Dion, 2000; Mullen & Copper, 1994; Shields & Gardner, 1997), as well as with innovation in teams and organizations (Mumford & Hunter, 2005).

Leadership styles refer to how leaders express specific behaviors (House & Aditya, 1997). Many leadership models differentiate two main types of leadership behaviors: task oriented and relationship oriented behavior, also referred to as initiating structure and consideration (Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004), concern for production vs. concern for people (Blake & McCanse, 1991), or as directive and supportive leadership (Northouse, 2004; Yukl, 2002). According to Marta, Leritz, and Mumford (2005) few scholars question the substantive meaningfulness of consideration and initiating structure as a basis for describing leadership behavior. These two leadership dimensions also have received considerable attention in team leadership (Burke et al., 2006) and cross-cultural leadership studies (Peterson & Hunt, 1997). Dorfman, Hanges, and Brodbeck (2004) conclude that the differentiation in task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership is a relevant distinction for managerial research around the globe, not limited to the United States. We therefore believe that the concepts of directive and supportive behavior offer a good starting point in exploring the effects on group processes, and more specifically, team cohesiveness, across cultures. Before discussing the cultural influence, we begin by evaluating the relation between these two styles and team cohesiveness.

Directive leadership. This style is usually defined as task-oriented behavior, with a strong tendency to control discussions, dominate interactions and personally direct task completion (Cruz, Henningsen, & Smith, 1999). In addition, time management, pressure to realize targets and close supervision on details are seen as characteristic of this style (Schmidt & Yeh, 1992). Initiating structure and directive behavior can contribute to productivity both at the individual and team level, depending on several contingencies (Burke et al., 2006) and the skills of the leader (Mumford & Hunter, 2005). In this study, we define *directive leadership* as task-oriented behavior, with a strong focus on targets, close supervision and control of subordinate actions. Directive leader behavior puts employees in a dependent role, facilitating them to wait for the manager before acting, showing less initiative and fewer extra-role activities. In terms of process execution, a directive leader specifies how subordinates should accomplish their tasks and supervises them closely on all stages of the actual execution as well as the end results. Non-directive leaders hold subordinates responsible for the end results as well, however, they leave the subordinates free to execute their assignments in the way they choose to do it (Muczyk & Reimann, 1987).

Directive behavior, particularly autocratic behavior, includes close supervision of team actions and a dominating position of a leader in team discussions and decision making (Burke et al., 2006). The subordinates apparently are less united around common goals during task completion, have weaker self-perception of themselves as a group, and weaker mutually positive group members attitudes (Tjosvold & Tjosvold, 1991). In line with this, several studies report a negative relation between directive leadership and open communication, as well as with group organizational citizenship (Cruz et al., 1999; Paine & Organ, 2000). Most studies see reduced team cohesion and satisfaction as a function of directive leadership (Antonuccio, Davis, Lewinsohn, & Breckenridge, 1987; Mael & Alderks, 1993). Others, for example, Muczyk and Reimann (1987), argue that directive behavior is required when employees and teams are less mature in terms of their motivation and performance, when the team is not cohesive and not productive. In these cases, directive leadership is inevitable and might contribute to the development of employees (Hersey & Blanchard, 1993). This is also documented in starting teams, who often benefit from a directive leader. However, when the team leader continues this behavior, the team develops a strong dependency of the leader (Wheelan, 2005). Team development is not the focus of this paper but we can conclude that all previously mentioned theoretical notions observe a negative relation between directive leadership and team cohesiveness.

Supportive leadership is a leadership style that is directed toward the satisfaction of subordinates' needs and preferences, such as displaying concern for subordinates' welfare and creating a friendly and psychologically supportive work environment (House, 1996). It includes sensitivity to team member needs, expressed in a focus on harmonic working relations, sensitivity to individual and group needs, care for group tensions, and positive feedback, thus creating a friendly climate in the work unit.

Showing support and care for employees as a leader facilitates a caring and open group climate and cohesive relations among team members (Chen et al., 2002; Hurst, Stein, Korchin, & Soskin, 1978; Wester & Weiss, 1991). Through facilitating discussions, stimulating subordinates to participate in the decision-making process, and caring for conflict resolution, a leader contributes into maintaining the favorable climate within a group and positive attitudes between its members (Tjosvold & Tjosvold, 1991). Under such conditions we expect that employees will reveal more cohesive behavior in task completion and interpersonal communication. Therefore, supportive leadership is expected to facilitate team cohesiveness.