Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 113 (2010) 13–24

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdp

Can confidence come too soon? Collective efficacy, conflict and group performance over time

Jack A. Goncalo [a,*], Evan Polman [b], Christina Maslach [c]

[a] Cornell University, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, 391 Ives Hall, Ithaca NY 14853, United States
[b] New York University, Stern School of Business, 44 West Fourth Street, New York NY 10012, United States
[c] University of California, Berkeley, Office of the Chancellor, 200 California Hall, Berkeley CA 94720, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 1 March 2006
Accepted 20 May 2010
Available online 7 July 2010

Accepted by Dave Harrison

Keywords:
Collective efficacy
Process conflict
Group performance

ABSTRACT

Groups with a strong sense of collective efficacy set more challenging goals, persist in the face of difficulty, and are ultimately more likely to succeed than groups who do not share this belief. Given the many advantages that may accrue to groups who are confident, it would be logical to advise groups to build a high level of collective efficacy as early as possible. However, we draw on Whyte's (1998) theory of collective efficacy and groupthink, to predict that when confidence emerges at a high level toward the beginning of a group's existence, group members may be less likely to engage in process conflict; a form of conflict that may be beneficial in the early phase of a group project. We found support for this prediction in two longitudinal studies of classroom project teams.

Introduction

Collective efficacy, defined as a group's shared belief that it can execute a task successfully, is fundamental to group motivation, performance, and effectiveness (Bandura, 1997; Gully, Incalcaterra, Joshi, & Beaubien, 2002). With a strong sense of collective efficacy, groups set more challenging goals, persist in the face of difficulty, and are ultimately more likely to succeed (Bandura, 2000). Given the many advantages that may accrue to groups who are confident, it might be logical to advise groups to build a high level of collective efficacy as early as possible. After all, groups who set more difficult goals at the beginning of a project, and have the confidence necessary to overcome challenges that arise over time, should be more likely to ultimately achieve success.

As logical as this advice sounds, however, there may be a significant downside to high levels of early collective efficacy that has not been considered in current research. Drawing on and extending Whyte's (1998) theory of collective efficacy and groupthink, we propose that high levels of collective efficacy may attenuate certain forms of conflict that are beneficial for group performance. We focus specifically on process conflict, an important but understudied form of conflict related to controversies over *how* a group should go about completing a shared task (Jehn, 1995, 1997). Although process conflict was first identified more than a decade ago, there was not enough research on it to be included in De Dreu and Weingart's (2003) meta-analysis and relatively little is known about the antecedents and consequences of process conflict over time (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Here we suggest that reduced process conflict might be particularly problematic in the early stages of a group project at which time consequential, long-term, strategic decisions are made regarding the division of labor, task deadlines and other issues related to the process of working as a group (Gersick, 1988; Hackman, 1987; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Therefore, in this paper we investigate the antecedents and consequences of early collective efficacy, that is, collective efficacy assessed prior to the mid-point of a group project (Gersick, 1988).

We begin by tracing the origins of early collective efficacy and propose that group members use surface level diversity in the early stages of a group project as an easily observable cue to predict the likelihood that their group will succeed (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998). We then theorize that high levels of early collective efficacy may constrain a group's ability to fully consider conflicting strategies or procedures for completing tasks (Audia, Locke, & Smith, 2001; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984; Vancouver & Kendall, 2006) and that the failure to engage in these procedural conflicts may, in turn, be detrimental to subsequent group performance (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). We tested these predictions in two longitudinal studies of classroom project teams.

The antecedents and consequences of collective efficacy beliefs

Collective efficacy is defined as group members' shared belief that they can execute a specific task successfully (Bandura, 1997). This construct was first proposed by Bandura as a direct extension of self-efficacy to larger aggregations such as groups

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 607 255 2261.
E-mail address: jag97@cornell.edu (J.A. Goncalo).

0749-5978/$ - see front matter © 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.obhdp.2010.05.001

and organizations (Bandura, 1986). Research has demonstrated that groups may share a belief in their ability to perform a task, therefore collective efficacy has typically been examined at the group level of analysis (Gibson, Randel, & Earley, 2000). Collective efficacy is related to, but distinct from group potency, because the latter reflects more generalized beliefs about a group's capability across tasks and situations (Guzzo, Yost, Campbell, & Shea, 1993). The existing literature on collective efficacy converges on the conclusion that groups who are confident in their ability to succeed are more effective than those who doubt themselves (Bandura, 1997, 2000; Gully et al., 2002). For instance, a recent meta-analysis showed that collective efficacy has a strong positive relationship with group performance ($r = .35$) (Stajkovic, Lee, & Nyberg, 2009) replicating the results of an earlier meta-analysis (Gully et al., 2002).

Given the importance of collective efficacy for group performance, recent research has investigated the antecedents of collective efficacy (e.g., Tasa, Taggar, & Seijts, 2007) and the related construct of group potency (Lester, Meglino, & Korsgaard, 2002). At the individual level, efficacy may emerge as the result of vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, or enactive mastery experience (Bandura, 1997). At the group level, research has focused almost exclusively on the role of enactive mastery experience in which confidence builds over time as groups receive feedback about their performance on a particular task (Gibson & Earley, 2007; Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Lester et al., 2002; Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001; Tasa et al., 2007). In-groups, enactive mastery experiences may build through a series of performance episodes, defined as "distinguishable periods of time over which performance accrues and feedback is available (Marks et al., 2001, p. 359; Mathieu & Button, 1992). Therefore, the relationship between past performance and collective efficacy is recursive—the receipt of positive feedback on challenging tasks leads to stronger efficacy beliefs, which in turn lead to greater success (Gist & Mitchell, 1992).

From the perspective of performance episodes (Marks et al., 2001), a focus on the emergence and effects of collective efficacy in the later stages of groups' development is appropriate because groups need time to receive and assimilate feedback about their performance (Gibson & Earley, 2007). It is probably for this reason that longitudinal studies have measured collective efficacy only after groups have received explicit performance feedback (e.g., Tasa et al., 2007) or have completed tasks that provide the basis for a preliminary assessment of performance (e.g. Lester et al., 2002).

Yet, this does not preclude high levels of collective efficacy beliefs emerging in the early stages of a project, even in the absence of performance feedback; indeed we consider the possibility that they do. For example, project teams can be convened for a specific purpose and their performance cycles may begin and end before tasks are completed or any objective feedback is available (Ericksen & Dyer, 2004; Keller, 2001). Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests that project teams may begin with high levels of collective efficacy (Whyte, 1998). However, in order to predict levels of early collective efficacy, it may be useful to consider factors that might give rise to strong efficacy beliefs *other* than discrete performance episodes.

Surface-level demographic diversity as an antecedent to early collective efficacy

In any investigation of groups over time, the question of what distinguishes "early" from "late" in a group's interaction is important (Mannix & Jehn, 2004). Perhaps the simplest way to distinguish the early from the late stage is simply by the mid-point of the allotted time: The early stage occurs prior to the mid-point and the late stage occurs after the mid-point. Indeed, groups undergo a critical transition at the mid-point during which time they may stop work, notice that the deadline is near and complete tasks at a more urgent pace (Gersick, 1988, 1989). In other words, although the dynamic passage of time is a continuous experience, there are certain events that may distinguish an "early" from a "late" phase (McGrath, Arrow, & Berdahl, 2000).

According to Tuckman's (1965) model, groups go through an initial forming stage in which they get to know each other, test inter-personal boundaries and orient themselves to the task. During the early phase, effective teams may also reach explicit agreements about how the group will work together to complete tasks in a timely manner (Mathieu & Rapp, 2009). The development of these agreements may prompt the group to clarify important issues such as group members' roles and responsibilities as well as their task related abilities and work styles (Mathieu & Rapp, 2009). If such agreements are reached during the early formative stage, they can facilitate subsequent collective action (Mathieu & Rapp, 2009). In other words, during the early stages groups may be concerned primarily with planning for the future while in the later stage they may focus more intently on task execution as the deadline nears (Okhuysen & Waller, 2002). Distinguishing between these stages is important because the consequences of a high level of collective efficacy in the early stage may be quite different from the later stage given the different types of activities that may take place at each point in time. However, we know very little about the antecedents and consequences of collective efficacy at the early stage of a group's development.

There is evidence that collective efficacy beliefs emerge over time as a result of performance feedback, but there may be other inputs into the process of developing collective efficacy beliefs, particularly in the early stages of a project. For instance, collective efficacy may be influenced by characteristics of the group itself such as the knowledge, skills and abilities of other group members (Gibson & Earley, 2007). But such characteristics might not have much of an immediate impact because some time must pass in order for the group to learn its teammates' expertise (Harrison, Price, Gavin, & Florey, 2002; Harrison et al., 1998). Here we investigate surface level diversity (Harrison et al., 1998; Jackson, Mary, & Whitney, 1995; Riordan, 2000) as an important cue that is unique to groups and may contribute to the level of collective efficacy in the early stages of a project. surface level diversity may be particularly important when thinking about the earliest stages of a group's interaction because these characteristics are by definition what people bring to the group right from the start (Mannix & Jehn, 2004). We argue that the surface level characteristics of other group members provide salient and easily observable information (Mannix & Neale, 2005) that may, in turn, have an immediate influence on perceptions of group capability. In other words, people may have implicit theories about the consequences of diversity for group performance that they bring with them into team settings and these implicit beliefs may influence feelings of confidence in the group.

Diversity has been defined as "the distribution of differences among the members of a unit with respect to a common attribute, X" (Harrison & Klein, 2007, p. 1199). Beyond this very general definition, researchers have further distinguished between *surface* level diversity which refers to differences among team members on overt demographic characteristics, and *deep* level diversity which refers to differences among team members on underlying psychological characteristics such as personalities, values and attitudes (Harrison et al., 1998; Milliken & Martins, 1996). Harrison and his colleagues have shown that surface level diversity has negative effects on teams' social integration in the early stages of a project, but that over time these effects diminish as team members interact with each other (Harrison et al., 2002). Surface level differences are particularly consequential when a group has just formed, because