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Work Teams: Perceptions of a Ready-Made Support System?

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Abstract

Much research on work teams has been focused at the team-level, considering such issues as effectiveness, productivity and overall interaction. Using qualitative in-depth interviews, the author has asked the question: what is the experience of the individual working within a team? This paper discusses one theme to have emerged, that of perceived emotional support being provided within the team. Respondents' descriptions of emotional support are discussed in terms of acceptance and respect, and of caring. The discussion shows how the provision of this support has implications for how individuals view teams in general, and indicates areas for future research.

Keywords: Individual experience, Perception, Support, Teams.

Introduction: The individual within a work team

The last twenty years have seen an increasing movement towards the use of teams in organisations (Guzzo 1996; Morgeson et al 1997). This is commonly viewed as being driven by intensified competition, which requires flexibility and responsiveness within organisations (Buchanan 1994, cited in Lloyd and Newell 2000). Teams are seen as a way to gain commitment of organisational members to this new working environment (Tjosvold 1991).

At the same time, there has been increased research focus on work teams. Building on the previous research into group behaviour and the potential benefits of group involvement, recent research has focused on the operation of these groups within the workplace (Jackson and Ruderman, 1995). Much of this research is concentrated on how the team performs as a unit, looking at various aspects of team functioning such as effectiveness (eg. Fortune 1999), productivity (eg. Hallam & Campbell 1997) and overall interaction (eg. Hartley 1996). Consideration of individual team members predominantly focuses on such issues as motivation and job satisfaction, both of which have been extensively researched within organisations (eg. Maslow 1954; Herzberg et al 1959; McGregor 1960; Alderfer 1969). Much of this knowledge is repeated in the literature on teams, suggesting that a “motivated individual” will work to increase team effectiveness (eg. Stott & Walker 1995; Blair & Meadows 1999).

Little research has focused on the individual’s experience within a work team. Beyond the measurement of motivation and job satisfaction, there is a need to understand how working within a work team impacts the individual. This limitation in the literature led to
the author's current research project, asking the question "what is the experience of the individual working within a team"? One theme to have emerged, that of perceived emotional support, will be discussed in this paper.

Methodology & Method: Drawing on Heideggerian phenomenology

The qualitative methodology used for this study was that of Heideggerian phenomenology. This choice of methodology follows from the research question, with phenomenology seeking to 'illuminate the richness of individual experience' (Baker et al 1992, p.1358). It is ontological, with its concern for the nature and relations of being (Cohen & Omery 1994; Walters 1994), and interpretive, with its emphasis on 'the situatedness of human reality in the world' (Stewart & Mickunas 1990, p. 70). Understanding comes from the descriptions respondents give of their experiences, and in-depth interviews were conducted to 'listen to what people themselves tell about their lived world [and] hear them express their views and opinions in their own words' (Kvale 1999, p.1).

Theoretical sampling was used in the selection of respondents, with the focus not being the number of 'cases' studied, but the potential of each 'case' to assist the researcher in developing insights into their area of study (Glaser & Strauss 1967, cited in Taylor & Bogdan 1984). In total, eight respondents participated in the research study. These respondents have been given pseudonyms in the following discussion.

In selecting potential respondents, the criterion used was that they were currently working, or had worked within the past twelve months, within a team in the workplace. For this research project, the following definition from Hackman (1990) was used, outlining three attributes of organisational work teams:

1) They are real, that is, they are intact social systems complete with boundaries, interdependence among members and differentiated member roles.

2) They have one or more tasks to perform, that is, there is some outcome for which members have collective responsibility and whose acceptability is potentially assessable.

3) They operate in an organisational context. (p.4, paraphrased)

Discussion – Emotional Support

The construct of social support has been widely researched, investigating the connection between interpersonal relationships and individuals' health and well-being (Kelly et al 1999). This research is ongoing, considering the role and mediating affects of this support in many facets of our lives such as aging (eg. Resnick et al, 2002), family life (eg. Graham et al, 2000) and illness recovery (eg. Lugton, 1997), to name but a few. Interest in the impact of social support in the workplace has gained some prominence over the past decade, mainly in research investigating its potential relationship with
organisational stress (eg. Jayarante et al 1988; Cummings 1990). It has been argued that
social support can provide a moderating effect to how stress is experienced within an
organisation (Ganster et al 1991). However, little investigation has occurred into the
meaning of this social support for other areas of individuals’ working lives, although
recent research has begun to investigate the role of team support in team effectiveness
(Drach-Zahavy & Somech 2002).

Langford et al (1997) identified a typology of four attributes which can be assigned to
social support, namely, emotional support, instrumental support, informational support
and appraisal support. This paper considers the attribute of emotional support, which
involves the provision of caring, empathy, love and trust (Langford et al 1997). Moss
(1973) describes this support as a ‘subjective feeling of belonging, of being accepted, of
being loved, of being needed all for oneself and not for what one can do’ (p.237). The
respondents’ concerns with emotional support have been grouped by the author into those
of acceptance and respect, and of caring.

In this discussion, it is also important to consider the difference between perceived and
received support. Perceived support is described as a belief that support will be available
if it is needed (Sarason et al 1994). In contrast, received support is considered to be an
assessment of the social support actually given by others during a particular interaction
(Sarason et al 1994). Put simply, perceived support is when we believe we will be
supported; received support is when this actually happens.

Acceptance and Respect

Respondents described a concern for treating their other team members well, being nice
to others. This behaviour was seen as one of the aspects of team membership.

You need to be nice, you need to be professional. Just simple things . . . You
need to treat people the way you want to be treated, and treat them with respect.
(Michelle, p. 27)

This treatment of other team members carried with it an expectation of reciprocity, which
ties in with Cobb’s (1976) argument that the communication of emotional support lets the
individual know they belong to a network of mutual obligation.

Because I would always go and ask people for help, and expect them to be flexible
and nice and pleasant. And support each other. (Michelle, p. 23, my emphasis)

This concern with ‘respecting’ other team members, of wanting to be ‘nice and pleasant’,
is of interest in light of the increasing recognition of abusiveness and harassment in the
workplace (Einarsen 1999). Employees’ experiences can range from the extremes of
encountering incivility and rudeness (eg. Johnson & Indvick 2001) to being subjected to
acts of assault and violence (eg. Hannabuss 1998). Here, team membership is viewed as
a buffer to this behaviour with the expectation that team members will not act in such a manner towards each other, that within a team can be found an environment of respect.

However, what is experienced if this reciprocal situation is not observed? Lauren described how a number of people in her team felt strongly about respecting the positions of others in the team, and their right to voice their opinions. However, she didn’t always feel this was returned, a situation which distressed her:

I’m very much a team player, and that’s why I get so upset when it starts to go astray, because I do believe in helping each other and supporting each other and working through stuff. (p. 32)

Here, the perceived breakdown in respect being given to others is seen as the team ‘going astray’, of not supporting each other as they should be.

Caring

Another form of emotional support described is that of caring, of having concern for the feelings and well-being of other team members. Michelle expressed this as ‘we’re always thinking of the other person, we’re always thinking of the implications for the other person’ (p. 27). This dimension incorporates a sense of empathy for other team members, an awareness and acknowledgment of their particular situation. This form of support can provide a safe place for team members, where they can be comfortable. Karen says ‘you’ve got a team to fall back on who’ll support you . . . if you get tired, there’s people there to buoy you up and keep you going’ (p. 11). Here, the team is viewed as providing the moderating affects of social support described above. When employees are experiencing difficulties or pressure in their work, the other team members are seen as providing assistance to relieve stress and fatigue.

Again, the lack of this element of emotional support is perceived as reducing the sense of ‘team’, of removing some of the ‘togetherness’. In the last twelve months, Karen has moved within the same organisation from a team which she perceived as providing this care and empathy to one in which it is lacking. It was with an air of resignation that she said:

Whereas now you’re doing things, and everyone in the team really is doing their own thing, but nobody really cares what the other people are doing anyway. So there isn’t even that team spirit, I guess, or whatever there was before. (p. 5)

Conclusion

These findings are of importance to our understanding of work teams, particularly the experience of individuals within these teams. For some individuals, team membership means more than a structure in which to work together. Here we see descriptions of a concern with the social support which can be provided by other team members. Of
particular interest is the impact that a perceived lack of this support has on individuals’ impressions of their team as a whole. Further research is required into the area of social support in relation to work teams, including investigation into any differences between perceived and received support.

Reference List


Interview with Karen, 16 March 2002.

Interview with Lauren, 3 November 2001.

Interview with Michelle, 9 August 2001.


