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WORKING IN TEAMS: THE INFLUENCE OF RHETORIC - FROM SENSEMAKING TO SADNESS

Abstract

The prevailing wisdom tells us that teams axiomatically bring increases and improvements in effectiveness, productivity and communication. There has been too little critical address of whether these benefits actually accrue, nor what the experience of team members actually is. This paper shares findings from a Heideggerian phenomenological study, where members of teams in organizations were interviewed and asked about their experiences of working in teams. Astonishingly, not only did team members not report these anticipated improvements, their stories tended to highlight the negative influence that the rhetoric surrounding teams might have on individuals. This paper shares the responses of team members to that rhetoric, revealing themes of "Teams, Rhetoric and Sensemaking", a challenge to the notion of "Teams as One Big Happy Family?", and "Teams as Crucibles of Resignation and Sadness". These findings indicate the need for future research into understanding the experience of individuals within various team and organizational structures.

Keywords

Emotions; Rhetoric; Teams

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TO SADNESS**

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Stream: Organizational Behaviour

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TEAMS: CHALLENGING THE PREVAILING WISDOM

Current wisdom regarding teams tells us that teams will axiomatically bring to organizations increases and improvements in effectiveness, productivity and communication. In short, teams are the "magic pill" for modern organizations and current wisdom extols their benefits to the point where not using them is regarded as extreme foolishness. For those of us who have found teams to be less than perfect, we are informed that our "team building" skills are insufficient, that staff have not been adequately trained, that the culture of the organization is problematic - that the problem lies anywhere but with team functioning and structures. To date, there has been very little critical address of whether the accolades routinely surrounding team life are deserved, nor what the personal experience of team members actually is.

This paper shares findings from an exploratory Heideggerian phenomenological study, where members of teams in organizations were interviewed and asked about their experiences of working in teams. Astonishingly, not only did team members not report the anticipated improvements in effectiveness, productivity and communication that underpin the continued and escalating use of teams in organizations, their stories tended to highlight a sense of unease and discomfort with team membership. Indeed, we argue that some of the negative outcomes for people working in teams were in response to the continued use of the rhetoric surrounding teams in organizations. This paper shares the experiences of team members in relation to this rhetoric.

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY: THE EXPERIENCES OF INDIVIDUALS WORKING IN TEAMS

The exploratory nature of this study lent itself to a qualitative methodology, one that sought to understand social life and interaction (Sarantakos, 1998). Heideggerian phenomenology was selected for this research, due to its emphasis on seeking to 'illuminate the richness of individual experience' (Baker, Wuest & Stern, 1992: 1358). The goal of Heideggerian, hermeneutical phenomenology is to understand everyday practices (Benner, 1985: 5; Vickers, 2001b: 34). Phenomenology is essentially about capturing the subjectively experienced life of informants as interpreted by them (Taylor, 1993: 174), and describing lived experience (Oiler, 1982: 178) and the meaning that experience holds for that individual (Drew, 1989: 431; Vickers, 2001b: 33). For this study, the aim was to understand how individuals experienced team membership each day.

The subjective, the authentic and the personal was the focus here. Heidegger's methodological and philosophical maxim is 'to the things themselves' (Heidegger, 1927/1962: 50). As Baker and colleagues remind us, being concerned with the psychological phenomena of lived experience has only one legitimate source of data - informants who have lived the reality being investigated (Baker, Wuest & Stern, 1992: 1357; Vickers, 2001b: 33). The value of a phenomenological approach, then, comes from learning about lived experience from the informant's perspective - to capture lived experience as it is lived and share it with others (Vickers, 2001b: 33).

Theoretical sampling was used to select respondents, with a focus on the potential of each "case" to assist the researcher in developing insights into the chosen area of study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; cited in Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). In selecting potential respondents, the criterion used was that respondents were currently working in a team in an Australian workplace, or had done so within the past twelve months. For this research project, the following definition from Hackman (1990) is paraphrased; highlighting what we believe to be the three essential attributes of organizational 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; and,
- 3) They operate in an *organizational context*. (Hackman, 1990: 4)

Lengthy, in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the eight respondents. Focus areas were developed before the interviews, and included focus on team interaction and development, organizational support, and personal and career impact. As would be expected for an exploratory study, further areas of concern for respondents arose during the course of the research and were then also explored with subsequent respondents. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was conducted, reviewing the transcribed interviews for commonalities (Benner, 1994). Respondents were all allocated pseudonyms to maintain their privacy and confidentiality.

Elsewhere, other themes emerging from this analysis have been reported: an expectation of social support from other team members (Parris, 2003); ambiguity concerning team goals (Parris & Vickers, 2003); and concern for uneven team member participation (Parris & Vickers, 2003). Here we explore other unanticipated emergent themes. We begin with a discussion on the organizational rhetoric that surrounds teams and team membership, as a precursor and to provide context for readers. The themes reported here include: "Teams, Rhetoric and Sensemaking"; a challenge to the notion of "Teams as One Big Happy Family?"; and "Teams as Crucibles of Resignation and Sadness".

RHETORIC AND TEAMS

The use of teams in the workplace has increased markedly over the past twenty years (Guzzo, 1996), often in response to a need for flexibility and responsiveness within organizations (Buchanan, 1994; cited in Lloyd & Newell, 2000). Unsurprisingly, this organizational interest has been matched by an increased research focus, drawing on previous research into group behaviour and the potential benefits of group involvement (Jackson & Ruderman, 1995). It is noted with interest that organizational behaviour texts of the 1980s and 1990s included chapters on groups, group behaviour and groupthink (eg. Vecchio et al, 1992; Robbins, 1998). Chapters previously termed "The Group", which may have included a distinction between groups and team, are now entitled "Team Processes" and talk of the types of teams, team processes, and team building (eg. McShane & Travaglione, 2003). Teams are a major focus for managers and scholars trying to find ways to do things better in organisations. This focus comes with its own language, much of which, we argue, is rhetorical in nature.

Rhetoric is defined as the use of language to persuade or influence others (Oxford Dictionary, 1971). Organizational rhetoric is the expression of arguments about organizational practices in such a manner as to make them attractive to listeners (Grant, 1999), and to persuade others as to their validity (Watson, 1995). Rhetoric can influence one's construction of one's workplace "reality", with the outcome being the deferral of new and important knowledge, ultimately contributing to a personally damaging outcome (Vickers, 2002). It is the insincere or exaggerated use of language calculated to produce some effect (Wilkes, 1979: 316) that is of interest here. Rhetoric is generally intended to enhance, for example, the belief that the organization is in transition, that it is embracing new and exciting techniques, and that the values espoused by the organization will take it forward (Eccles & Nohria, 1992: 18).

We believe that the language surrounding teams is frequently rhetorical, designed to convince those in organizations that teams are good; indeed, that using teams *is the only way* to successfully structure organizations these days. Unfortunately, the fads and the rhetoric are given the status of conventional wisdom. The case is put so simply, forcefully and fashionably that any other view sounds untenable or, even, politically incorrect. The clarity of the message can lull the listener into uncritical acceptance (Hilmer & Donaldson, 1996: 7). We claim that this is what continues to happen in organizations with the use of teams. While recognising that teams can be an effective organizational structure or strategy, it is the uncritical acceptance and promulgation of their use that we question, especially when there is so little evidence to explain the effect on the individual within those teams.

The rhetorical language surrounding teams in the workplace includes terms such as “team player” and “team ideal”, indicating a ‘cooperative, collegial atmosphere’ (Stein, 1998: 32). It is this kind of rhetoric that we believe has acted to shape the respondents’ reality of team membership. Respondents frequently used the rhetoric surrounding teams themselves, for example: aiming for a ‘cohesive’ group (Karen: 4; Lauren: 31) or a ‘close-knit’ team (David: 13; Michelle: 7); team members having ‘a bond’ (Colin: 48); and individuals needing to be ‘team players’ (Lauren: 32; William: 30) and exhibit a ‘team spirit’ (Karen: 5).

We argue that the rhetoric surrounding teams is making the experience of working in a team more difficult. While disguising the actual experience within a team (Parris & Vickers, 2003), teams rhetoric concurrently heightens team members’ expectations of how working in teams “should be”. We argue that the rhetoric surrounding teams and their use is a major factor shaping knowledge and understanding about teams: about how teams work, what teams can achieve, and what the expectations of team members should be. However, when individuals’ actual experience differs from these expectations, the result is a sense of dissonance - of incongruity and inconsistency between the experience and the previously acquired knowledge (McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001:165). When presenting the construct of dissonance theory, Festinger (1957, cited in Elliot & Devine, 1994) argued that individuals experiencing inconsistency and resultant dissonance will seek to alleviate this negative state. The discussion that follows considers respondents’ experiences in light of this claim.

Teams, Rhetoric and Sensemaking

We see and experience events in terms of what has just occurred. It is done retrospectively - it is sensemaking (Weick, 1995; Vickers, 2002). Meaning is attached to these acts (Schutz, 1932/1967: 40). What is good or bad, expensive or cheap, reasonable or unreasonable, is profoundly affected by what we have just experienced (Pfeffer, 1992: 190). Sensemaking is an interpretive process necessary for organizational members to understand such things as what the organization is about, whether it is doing well or poorly, what problems it faces, and how it might go about resolving them. It is a process where individuals develop cognitive maps of their working environment (Weick, 1995: 5). The vulnerabilities of framing can result in a false “reality” being constructed, especially if this framing has been strongly influenced by language or any other slippery symbolism (Vickers, 2002). As Goffman (1974: 440) reminds us, the common assumption is that our interpretive frameworks are more or less adequate. However, and unfortunately, often they are not. We argue that, in organizations, people are not misinterpreting the messages they receive about teams. Instead, many of these messages are rhetorical - inaccurate, persuasive, designed to convince.

The respondents displayed attempts at sensemaking. This was especially so when respondents were trying to make sense of their uncertainty. For example, when discussing the support their

teams received from the organization (which is one of the axiomatic assumptions surrounding "successful" teams), respondents often spoke positively about their experiences of this - initially:

They probably do [provide the tools to work as a team]. I mean they -. There's certainly plenty of time for people to meet and there's sort of certainly time to get together and discuss things, and they *do* talk about all the right things like planning, team-planning, and that type of thing. So, yeah, I think the resources or whatever are there to do things. (Karen: 7)

William saw this support in terms of ensuring all the team members were capable of doing their job:

Yes, they did [provide support to work as a team]. They equipped everybody to do the job that they were supposed to do. The team leaders had training as team leaders, so they were then able to pull their resources together. (William: 22)

However, Karen's initial, positive response was couched in rhetoric itself. She described "them" doing all the "right" things, like team-planning and allowing staff time to get together and talk. While she also mentions that resources were supplied, she doesn't actually tell us how or in what form. When she continued, Karen confirmed that, while lots of talking went on, concrete support for the team as it developed was lacking. Karen also indicated that, at the end of all of their team-building sessions, the team members didn't know one another very well, something that they had all agreed was important:

Karen: Because that's what we thought: 'We're different people coming from different groups, now we're going to be part of this team and we don't know each other and we don't know what each other does.' And actually, I've got to say, that was quite a good start. We did all sit down on the floor together and we did put down ideas. You know, 'Why do we think we need to do this?' 'What should we do?' ... We did identify that we needed to get to know each other better as a group, or as a team, so we could actually work together because, I mean, we didn't really know each other very well. And I'd say we probably still don't now.

Researcher: Because you had that and nothing else really happened with it?

Karen: Yes.

Researcher: And what would you put that down to? The team leader then didn't really drive it, or people didn't want to, or?

Karen: No, I think, like, what often happens, you come back, everyone gets busy, and it kind of gets shoved under the carpet. There's more important things supposedly to do. (Karen: 13)

We now observe Karen beginning to make sense of her situation, having identified, probably for the first time, an element of concern or a surprise that she needed to consider:

Well, that's the thing. They say they want people to [work cohesively] - and I think they think people do - but then there are examples like I said about the team-building weekend just being cancelled [Karen previously noted 'this was the first thing to go' as part of cost-cutting]. And, actually, at the last team-building weekend, the Marketing Manager had just been sacked ... and there were quite a few people, particularly in the Marketing area who were really unclear of ... what was the structure of the Marketing department now and what was going to happen. It just hadn't been communicated. And, yet, our CEO stood up and said that, you know, it was the best team ... And then, after saying that at

that team meeting, three more people got sacked. And he actually made the comment on the team-building: 'And I'm looking forward to seeing you all here at the next building thing'. And then a couple of weeks later, three people were gone. So, it kind of, like, although they say that, you don't -. It's a bit hard to believe. (Karen: 6)

Karen alludes again to other hallmarks of successful teams: effective communication and trust. She clearly has an expectation that communication of central decisions, such as people being terminated, should have been provided to the staff involved in a timely and sensitive manner. She also distinctly indicates a loss of trust in management as a result of these events. Furthermore, we see the use of rhetoric by the CEO to "persuade and influence". He utilises the *team-building weekend* (in itself, a rhetorical term) to tell everyone in the organisation that the Marketing team is "the best team". This *should* have given a feeling of comfort to those team members with respect to their positions in the described situation of uncertainty. Yet, following this meeting, three people were made redundant from this team, resulting in a dissonant and alienating experience for Karen. How does she make sense of the CEO making one assertion, who follows with a completely contradictory action? If the Marketing team was "the best team", and team members were made redundant, what might that mean for *her* position and *her* team?

For Karen, there is a need to make sense of the discrepancy between her understanding of the importance of teams to the organization and her described experience of "the best team" having members made redundant. Weick (1995) argued that organizational sensemaking is created by the words and vocabularies of the organization, and this creates a sense of meaning and understanding of the organization. When an event takes place that does not fit the expected interpretation of the environment, this disrupts the individual's sensemaking (Vickers, 2002). However, it does not immediately cause a change in understanding. Here, Karen's statement – 'it's a bit hard to believe [that the organization wants people to work cohesively]' - could be seen as an understatement, as a beginning of scepticism regarding other statements made about teamwork within the organization.

Teams as One Big Happy Family?

While organizations espouse words such as "teamship", and the phrase "team-based philosophy" has been used to describe organizations which are using teams across various sections and levels of the workplace (Sheard & Kakabadse, 2002), these terms do not recognise the possibility that, in some circumstances, team members may feel quite alienated and disconnected from both the other members of their team and the organization as a whole. Instead, the rhetoric continues:

Some organizations want to emphasize that "we are all in this together". Managers in these organizations say they want togetherness, cooperation – "one big happy family". (Huszczko & Hoffman, 1999: 5)

However, respondents reported, in many instances, an experience quite different from the anticipated togetherness. For example, Karen felt a disparity in the level of support given to different teams across the organisation:

And, actually, there's one little part of our team - three of us, Robert, Lincoln [pseudonyms] and I - were put together, because at the company meeting each month a different team presents it. But the IBS team's a bit big, so we break up into IT team or smaller groups. And Robert, Lincoln and I were considered to be -, not really fit in anywhere, even though we're supposedly in this team, so when the thing came around of

the months, with the different people, groups or teams who will be the company meeting presentation, next to our names, we were called the 'odds and sods' - *that was lovely*. So that's our team. We were just the scum of the earth odds-and-sods team. (Karen: 14)

It is interesting to see here a result of the all-pervading concept of the teams in this organization, one possible example of the "team-based philosophy". As Karen said earlier: 'You're all meant to be part of the same bigger team' (p.1). Not only that, but the organisation is grouped around different layers of teams to the point that each grouping must be called a "team". But what is the impact for individuals being labelled as "odds and sods"? What is the implied meaning for the individuals involved? Karen portrays what it means for her when she states: 'We were just the *scum of the earth* odds-and-sods team.' (p.14; our emphasis). This experience creates a separation from the rest of the organization, a sense of being devalued, of being alienated or marginalized.

Erikson (1985, cited in Heinz, 1991) would describe Karen's alienation as a disconnection or a separation. Kanungo (1992: 414) also argues that individuals' alienation in organizations can be experienced as a separation from their job and other work related contexts; a sense of frustration, even anger. For Colin, there was a perceived lack of organizational support in that, while the organization proclaimed the concept of teams, Colin felt that their actions didn't promote a team atmosphere of equality.

Yes, our director's constantly referring to us as a team ... [but] there's a little bit of animosity when "team" is talked about because the way that the department's now set up, there's been preferential treatment given to a few people in the department. (Colin: 11)

Again, this comment can be viewed in terms of organizational rhetoric. The department is described as a team, giving organizational members an impression of togetherness and fairness in its dealings. Instead, Colin's experience is the opposite, as he believes unequal treatment is given to some department members. This invokes a feeling of anger, and an overall negative response to the workplace environment.

Teams as Crucibles of Resignation and Sadness

Resignation is defined by Wilkes (1979: 1241) as a submissive unresisting attitude; or passive acquiescence. Rosenthal (2002: 3) defines sadness as mental anguish or suffering in the absence of any physical pain. When we are sad, our emotions are expressed through crying, talking or thinking continuously about our sorrow. Sadness is characterised by sad feelings, the opposite of the numbness that is the main feature of depression. Wilkes (1979: 1282), similarly, defines sadness as feeling sorrow or unhappiness. We felt that we heard resignation in these stories, but also sadness. This is not what is generally expected (or desired) from members of work teams.

We argue that there is an emotional response to the juxtaposition of teams-based rhetoric with the reality of working in a team. If the experience has been positive, then positive emotions are likely to follow the sensemaking process (and while we didn't find that in this exploratory study, we acknowledge its possibility). However, if the experience has been negative, as it was for some of our respondents, then the emotional response will be, similarly, negative. We argue that team membership - combined with expectations (fuelled by the continual rhetoric) that teams should be harmonious, cohesive, productive and positive groups of people, working together towards a common goal - may provide a context inviting exactly the opposite experience. We argue that, rather than being always positive and supportive, working in teams can be disappointing and de-motivating, leading to frequent expressions of sadness and resignation.

Karen described how she responds when she feels her team isn't working the way she would expect, when the experience is not what she believes it "should be":

I just ignore it. [Laughter] I just ignore them, and think, you know, it does make you less -. Well, it makes me kind of like my job less. Because I kind of think, 'Oh. It's not that great.' You know, 'What a shame people don't support you.' And then I just tend to do my own thing. You know, and then you get all these people just working on their own type of thing, which is kind of -. Or you don't feel part of it as much. You don't feel part of the whole thing. And get a bit cynical about it all [voice dropped quite low for this sentence]. (Karen: 24) .

We see a shift in Karen's emotions here. From opening her response with a light laugh, there was an air of despondency and sadness at the end. Again, we see Karen comparing her lived experiences with what she has been led to believe working in teams "should" be: that she should be working with others, that she should feel "part of it", that she should feel "part of the whole thing." We can see Karen's response to the alienation she is feeling; the frustration and sadness - 'What a shame people don't support each other' - and her belief that her working experience could be better if there was more organizational support. Resignation and a feeling of powerlessness are also evident in her comment about needing to ignore her colleagues and, especially, about liking her job less as a result.

Lauren also demonstrated a sense of resignation, of sadness, about the organization not providing her team with any real support. She used rhetoric herself, to illustrate her point about support for her team just being "the flavour of the day":

They pay lip service to it [support]. Um, I mean they do, they pay lip service to it. ... There's no real support. It's whatever's the flavour of the day. (Lauren: 33)

With this lack of organizational support for her team and their continued functioning, Lauren's response was similar to Karen's in that she felt she needed to 'start looking after herself' (p. 26). Her sadness surrounding the isolation she felt was addressed by putting her energies into her counselling work, a career that gave her fulfilment:

Yes, just focusing on the work, focusing on the clients, doing what had to be done, and interacting as minimally as possible with the rest of the team. (Lauren: 30)

Here, Lauren's method of coping with the resignation and sadness was to distance herself from her team members, to reduce the opportunity for further disappointment. This experience is far removed from the conventional image of team "togetherness". Here, instead, we found respondents feeling frustrated, alone, and sad.

CONCLUSION

We have explored the juxtaposition of the rhetoric surrounding teams with the reality of individual phenomenological experience of working in a team. We have witnessed discomfort and dissonance as the sensemaking process took place, we believe, because the teams rhetoric did not match respondents' experiences of working in a team. We found that teams, rather than producing a sense of a belonging, can produce a real sense of isolation, disconnection and

alienation. Finally, and unexpectedly, we report respondents' experiences of resignation and sadness.

What has been demonstrated - unequivocally - is that the lived experience for individuals in work teams can be, and often is, far removed from the rhetoric. Sadly, the proliferation of uncritical rhetoric about teams continues to inform and shape the expectations of both team members and others interested in the use of teams in organizations. The expectations about teams, team membership and the value of teams are, unfortunately, based on prevailing wisdom rather than evidence. The respondents in this study confirmed, often, that the rhetoric surrounding teams - rhetoric that they themselves use - is frequently at odds with what they experienced. However, the use of teams, and the associated expectation that teams will solve most, if not all, of management's problems, continues. For organizations to be able to successfully harness teams, understanding the experience of individuals within those teams - at all levels in the organization - is paramount and deserves further enquiry.

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