Collaboration Theory

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Abstract

Theories of collaboration exist at the interfirm and intergroup level, but not the intragroup or team level. Team interactions are often framed in terms of leadership and followership, a categorization which may, or may not, accurately reflect the dynamics of intragroup interactions. To create a grounded theory of collaboration, the Farmer's Exercise was given to groups of students, their interactions were recorded and post-exercise interviews of participants and observers were done. From a detailed analysis of the recordings and interviews a grounded theory of collaboration was developed. Two broad categories of collaborative behavior formed the frame of the theory that we call Collaborative Theory (CT). The first category, *Individual First*, is composed of three causal themes: turn-taking, observing or doing, and status seeking. The second category, *Team First*, also has three causal themes: influencing others, organizing work, and building group cohesion. This second theme can be identified with managerial and leadership action but we argue that it need not. Although this is a preliminary study subject to further validation and testing, CT already identifies collaborative behaviors that shed new light on intragroup interactions.

Keywords: collaboration, leadership, followership, collaboration theory, grounded theory

Introduction

In 1980, 20% of work was team-based whereas, by 2010, 80% of work was team-based (Hollenbeck, Beersma, & Shouten, 2012). This change in the nature of work – from individual to collaborative – is likely to be with us for the foreseeable future as knowledge increases, specializations narrow, and the need for the integration of expertise across multiple areas grows. While there is some foundational work on collaboration as a leadership tool, especially to support the study of ethics and justice (Badaracco, 2002; Covey, 1991; Greenleaf, 1977), the broader construct of collaboration has been less studied than, say, leadership or teams. Collaboration can be investigated from an interpersonal, intraorganizational, or interorganizational level. Of these three levels, the most has been written about interorganizational and intergroup collaborations (Gray & Wood, 1991; Ring & Van De Ven, 1994; Thomson & Perry, 2006; Wood & Gray, 1991). Patel, Pettitt, & Wilson (2012), for example, identify seven factors – context, support, tasks, interaction processes, teams, individuals, and general (as an overarching factor) – along with 36 sub-factors associated with the development and maintenance of collaborative interactions. Some of these might apply to interpersonal collaborations but, in general, these factors are at the interorganizational and intergroup levels.

At the interpersonal level, collaboration has been described as an influence tactic for garnering cooperation (Yukl, Chavez, & Seifert, 2005). As an influence tactic, collaboration was most likely to engender commitment while exchange was most likely to result in compliance. There are other rubrics under which interpersonal collaboration has been studied such as *leadership*, *followership*, *teamwork*, *shared leadership*, or *social exchange*, but we know of no direct studies on collaboration at the interpersonal level. The purpose of this paper, then, is to

begin developing an interpersonal theory of collaboration, what we call *collaboration theory* (CT). CT is meant to encompass how collaboration works irrespective of whether the formal structure is between a manager-with-subordinate, subordinate-with-subordinate, or some other permutation. This differs from leadership theories such as leader-member exchange (LMX) in a number of respects. First, even though LMX assumes that "both members of the vertical dyad become the foci of investigation into the leadership process" (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975, p. 47) and that both members have active relationship power (Uhl-Bien, Graen, & Scandura, 2000), it treats power as concentrated in the manager role (Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014). Next, leadership (and followership) theories focus on manager-to-subordinate dynamics rather than other dyadic types or on broader group-centric interactions (Dansereau, et al., 1975; Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982). Much collaboration, on the other hand, involves groups without a hierarchical authority structure. For these reasons and more, including differences in intent, research methods, and applicability, we believe CT deserves consideration separate from leadership, followership, or team theories.

Differences Between Leadership/Followership Theories and CT

Colloquially, and certainly within most organizations, middle and senior managers are called leaders. This choice of word – using the term leader to connote position in a hierarchy (Katz & Kahn, 1978) – is unfortunate because it implies that the sole responsibility of a middle or senior manager is to lead (Kupers, 2007). As Mintzberg (1973) and others have observed, there is much more to the management role than leadership. Shamir (2012) considers leadership as a social phenomenon where one person "at least in a certain… time, exert(s) more influence than others on the group or the process" (p. 487). Of course, it need not be the case that influence flows in one direction only (Oc & Bashshur, 2013) or that other definitions of leadership are

infeasible, but every definition that reinterprets positional power as leadership is problematic. For instance, if a middle manager has followers then the manager should be called a leader and everything they do is leadership. But leadership cannot exist without followership (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012) and middle managers report to senior managers: middle managers must be followers. This paradox – managers are both leaders and followers – is more than a semantic challenge; because manager actions are exclusively identified as leadership behaviors, it has resulted in identifying some followership behaviors as leadership while minimizing the impact of followership and ignoring effects that might best be categorized as neither leadership nor followership.

Leader-only models are incomplete, just as follower-only models are incomplete. Both are needed to define the situation. For example, one perspective of a dyadic or multi-party relationship gives a leader authority only as *assigned* to them by followers. Leaders have various levers to encourage followers to comply; but followers are *inherently* endowed with the power to either perform or not perform to the best of their abilities (Adair, 2008). To get work done, then, leaders and followers must first agree as to how much of each currency (assigned vs. inherent) each has. This interaction defines the extent of leadership and followership in the relationship. It is also why collaborative activities that facilitate this initial agreement such as cooperation, exhibiting courage, taking turns, honesty, and humility support collaboration. It also accounts for why behaviors such as commanding, gossiping, restricting communication, work slowdowns, and retaliation take more from the collaboration than they give back. What is socially constructed, then, is not leadership or followership but agreed-upon interactions.

These agreements are collaborative understandings, not leadership. And such agreements need not fix roles. Is communication, for example, a leadership responsibility? If so, does that

mean that when a staff member responds to her supervisor's inquiry, she becomes the leader?

We argue that behaviors and interactions can be studied without assuming that either leadership

or followership are suitable frameworks.

Towards a Grounded Theory of Collaborations

Grounded theory is used to develop a theory of CT, where collaboration is defined as any

on-going interpersonal interaction not characterized by a significant power imbalance with the

express purpose of achieving common goals. The goal of a grounded approach as a research

method is to generate a theory or model from data through a rigorous and systematic approach.

Grounded theory employs qualitative research procedures (Creswell, 2007, 2013) that are not

prefigured. Research questions change, are refined, or developed after or during the data

collection process as the researcher learns the central phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2007,

2013). The grounded theory approach contrasts other research methods that require the

verification of an existing theory or deductive approach (Glaser, 1978, 1992). Instead, theory is

derived from discerning process, action, behaviors or interaction based on the observation of

participants (Creswell, 2007, 2013; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1976; Maxwell, 2005;

Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006). More informal grounded theory uses clear practices of

theoretical sampling, gathering data, memoing, and coding the data that support the generation of

a theory (Creswell, 2013).

Experiment

As adapted from Kuperman (1981), the Farmer's Exercise is a team logic puzzle that

requires deductive reasoning and group interaction to arrive at a solution.

Each participant was given a single slip of paper with three statements on it such as: *Mr.*

Newman raises cats; The apple trees are behind the bungalow; Mr. Keeler grows tomatoes. Each

statement referred to two of five aspects of the situation: the farmer involved, a vehicle, a type of produce, a type of house, or a farm animal. Assembling all the statements given to a group created a unique set of relationships between each famer-vehicle-house-produce-animal. Without any further instructions, including the purpose of the exercise or what to do with the information on the slips, participants were allowed to interact freely for 45 minutes. Groups were composed of eight people sitting in a semi-circle with additional students sitting outside the circle as observers. A total of 100 graduate students participated, all of whom worked within the business or education sectors. The Farmer's Exercise was video-recorded for three groups and all participants completed semi-structured interviews after the group session.

To ensure rigor, the researchers applied categories and codes for the data based on shared experiences (Charmaz, 2006). To validate and confirm the data collected, the researchers corroborated through memoing, writing and sharing emergent categories and themes. To ensure validity, a process for generating substantive theory was employed in accordance to the guidelines outlined by Creswell (2013). Through the grounded coding process, we identified 26 axial codes and, from these, six causal themes: *turn-taking*, *observing or doing*, *building group cohesion*, *influencing others*, *organizing work*, and *status seeking*. Identified themes, along with meanings derived from secondary literature, were used to create a substantive theory (CT).

Discussion

The six causal themes of CT – turn-taking, observing or doing, status seeking, building group cohesion, influencing others, and organizing work – cluster into two categories: *Individual First* and *Team First.* The Individual First category includes three causal themes: turn-taking, observing or doing, and status seeking. This category is the individual's perceived influence upon the team or themselves. The second category, Team First, collects the themes of building

group cohesion, influencing others, and organizing work. In other words, the Team First category is suggestive of leadership (and/or management); however, based on participant feedback and the original, axial coding, this category is more accurately characterized as the team's influence upon its members.

Individual First Category, *Theme 1: Turn-taking*

Turn-taking is an agreement involving the acknowledgement of others. It can be formal (e.g., a talking stick, or Robert's Rules of Order) or informal such as raising one's hand. Turn-taking is common in social situations and has been associated with positive higher collective intelligence (Woolley, Chabris, Pentland, Hashmi, & Malone, 2010) but also with more errors in collective memory than from consensus groups (Harris, Barnier, & Sutton, 2012). Participants described turn-taking as a personal choice to participate although, in many cases, turn-taking appeared to be as much a result of social forces as personal choice. Turn-taking was most often described in terms of claiming leadership (taking a turn) or assuming followership (passing on a turn), but it was also apparent during information exchange, clarification, and other communication processes. As one participant said, "When I listened to others I became the follower, but there were other moments when I led the group." Turn-taking has not been identified previously as a management or a collaboration skill (Patel et al., 2010).

Individual First Category, *Theme 2: Observing or doing*

Observing and doing are two ends of a passive-active dimension (Kelley, 1992). Participants came up with a variety of reasons for taking an observational stance such as wanting to give focus to another, personal preference, or for the overall benefit of the group. As one participant noted, "Group dynamics are challenging to understand at times; however, there are moments where you need to observe and moments when you need to accomplish the task to

move the group forward." Similarly, others expressed a frustration with the speed of the process, or a desire to reach a specific end-state. Another participant reflected, "I am absolutely a doer, and find it challenging to observe without contributing my thoughts." There is little in the experimental setup that would preference either observing or doing. It is likely, then, that participant behavior was guided more by personality than situational factors in their choice.

Individual First Category, *Theme 3: Status seeking*

Status seekers evaluate their contributions, communications, interactions and collaborations based on how they will be perceived by others on the team and outside the team. This is evidenced by one participant's statement, "Why should I care about the impact of this task when it has no impact on my grade for the course? I did, however, feel I needed to continue the task to maintain my social status as being an open leader in the class."

Team First Category, *Theme 4: Building group cohesion*

Typically, group cohesiveness is thought of as a leadership responsibility (for example, Curphy, 1992). Is this attribution valid or useful? One study participant thought not: "The task provided was not specific with exception to the rules provided, requiring us *as a team* to step up together" (emphasis added). While much has been made of leadership and the role of the leader in team effectiveness, it is equally true that other team members can either increase or decrease group cohesion (Corey & Corey, 2006).

Team First Category, *Theme 5: Influencing others*

Influencing others is central to transformational leadership (Bass, 1991; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; Yukl, 1999). Indeed, most definitions of leadership include influence although there is no *a priori* reason to do so; influence exists as an outcome of team members seeking to

define and maintain the integrity of the team's purpose. As one study participant described it, "To keep on task, it remains important for us to influence the directions of others; otherwise, things remain static." We observed that team members influenced each other continually, covertly, and dynamically, regardless of who was taking on a leadership role at any given time.

Team First Category, *Theme 6: Organizing work*

Mintzberg (1973) identified organizing work as a managerial task. However, neither a manager nor a leader was needed in our experiment to organize the work. As summarized by one of the study participants, "There was no chosen leader, so we were all followers of a larger task which needed to be accomplished." What is less obvious is how members of a team organize work in the absence of a manager. Is the role given to one person? Can it be shared? If so, what is the mechanism? We observed a variety of behavioral responses to these questions, even within a given group. Some members were comfortable accomplishing tasks in the absence of an identified leader while others were less able to do so. As one participant in this latter category explained to us, "It was difficult to take part in the activity when roles were not well defined." Problems only arose when there was no consensus on what to do or who should do it. As one participant complained, "I became quite frustrated when no one else seemed to care about the task at hand."

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Conclusions and Future Directions

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This was a preliminary exploration of collaboration and development of a theory (CT) from a grounded perspective. The process identified six themes collected into two categories. Some of the themes in the Team First category could have been identified as leadership although we suggest that is not the best interpretation. The other category, Individual First, suggested both a self-centric and team-centric set of behaviors based on personal initiative. Importantly,

individual behavior shifted from category to category, and theme to theme. For example, a participant engaged in observing others at one moment took on an organizational role the next. This raises questions we hope to address in future studies: 1) the extent to which switching from theme-to-theme occurs; 2) the extent to which switching from category-to-category occurs; and, 3) the extent to which some other individual pattern can be observed. There were also significant limitations to this exploratory study such as the size of the data set, the nature of the task, and the lack of confirmatory studies. As such, we see the current CT framework as preliminary and subject to modification in the future but still useful as a starting point from which to investigate interpersonal collaborations.

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Marc Hurwitz - Marc mentors and teaches young entrepreneurs at the Conrad Centre for Business, Entrepreneurship, and Technology at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada. In addition, he has taught leadership and followership at university and through his company, FLIPskills - Followership, Leadership, Innovation, and Partnerships - for the last 10 years. His first book, *Leadership is Half the Story* (University of Toronto-Rotman Press) is due out in early 2015. Previously, Marc was a consulting partner with Thinkx, one of the top creativity firms in North America. With its founder, Tim Hurson (author of *Think Better*), he co-developed techniques that have been adopted by companies and consultants in America, Mexico, Europe, and Africa. In total, he has 20 years of corporate and entrepreneurial experience with core areas of expertise in creativity, team building, leadership, talent management, performance management, and partnership development.

Rodger Adair - Currently an assistant professor of business and management for the Keller Graduate School of Management, DeVry University, Rodger has spent the past 20 years focusing on teaching leadership and followership in organizational development, corporate training and higher education. A former Arizona state Malcolm Baldrige Examiner, he also works with non-profits as a professional business consultant through AZ LeaderForce. He conducts independent research on followership and contributed a chapter to *The Art of Followership: How Great Followers Create Great Leaders and Organizations* edited by Ron Riggio, Ira Chaleff, and Jean Lipman-Blumen. He has also served on the Board of Directors for the Valley of the Sun (ASTD-VOS) chapter of the American Society of Training and Development and as the former Chair of the Scholarship Member Interest Group for the International Leadership Association (ILA). He now serves as Chair of Community Development for ILA's Followership Learning Community.