

Shared Leadership and Team Learning: Roles of Knowledge Sharing and Team Characteristics

Chiung-Hui Huang

National Kaohsiung University of Applied Sciences, Kaohsiung, Taiwan

graceh@cc.kuas.edu.tw

Abstract

Many organizations adopt work teams to increase performance or achieve specific organizational goals. However, there are still many unknown issues in teams' operation although the researches of teams have been concerned by many studies. Previous researches indicated that team learning is an important strategy that organizations could obtain competition advantages. Besides, leadership is thought as the critical factor which could achieve the effectiveness of teams. In addition, knowledge could enhance and maintain the competition advantages of organizations while knowledge sharing could accumulate knowledge, improve capability, and be the important factor of organizational learning. This study included thirty-five work teams to investigate the mutual relationships among shared leadership, knowledge sharing, team characteristics and team learning. The results indicate that shared leadership significantly and positively affects team learning. However, knowledge sharing mediates shared leadership on team learning. In addition, team characteristics moderate the relationship between shared leadership and team learning.

Keywords: Shared Leadership, Team Learning, Knowledge Sharing

Introduction

In highly competitive environment today, many tasks require workers to cooperate and handle in high-speed changing situations. Therefore, work team is more and more popular in practice. Since team learning is an important strategy which could enhance competition advantages of organizations (Banker, Field, Schroeder, & Sinha, 1996), many organizations attend to increasing team learning. Researches indicated that including knowledge management (Mascitelli, 2000), team delegation (Flood, MacCurtain, & West, 2001), and conflict management (Jehn & Manniz, 2001) could effectively promote team learning.

In addition, following the trend and development that work team is widely used by organizations on important matters, the issues of leadership is attracting more attention and has been viewed as a crucial factor on team performance advancement. There are some studies in the past decades which emphasis the collective leadership by team members (Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce, 2006). The importance of shared leadership with members' collective involvement has been highlighted in team-based tasks (Pearce & Manz, 2005). Particularly in team leadership in which there is more involvement of team members on vision, objective and interaction process, this article highlights the perspective of sharing in work teams to investigate shared leadership and knowledge sharing in enhancing team learning in work teams.

Literature Review

Shared leadership and team learning

Shared leadership is not a brand new concept but just receives attention in recent years. Compared with vertical leadership which is formed by individual or formal leadership, shared leadership gives weight to leadership dispersed on team members. Day, Gronn, & Salas (2004) pointed out that shared leadership is a reciprocal and mutual influence through interaction of team members, which could obviously enhance the performance of a team and organization.

In addition, since team learning is critical for a team to effectively operating and achieving goals, many teams pursue the capability of team learning. Team learning is that a team creates knowledge innovation and increases team knowledge/ability via information sharing, question discussion, and new-view searching among the team members (Argote, Ingram, Levine, & Moreland, 2000). Besides, team learning could increase teams' ability in monitoring environment changes, understanding customers' need, and enhancing team members' cognition about situation (Edmondson, 2002). Therefore, team learning is seen as one of the important team outputs. Lesser & Storck (2001) also pointed out that a team could improve its performance while the team members devote to increasing learning and sharing.

Learning is related to not only individuals' cognition but also the interaction between co-workers. In shared leadership teams, the dispersed influence among team members increase the interaction between co-workers. In addition, Kleinman, Siegel, & Eckstein (2002) indicated that the interaction process of team members enhance team learning. Consistent with the inferences, this article suggests one prediction which is stated formally:

H₁: shared leadership relates positively to team learning in work teams.

The role of knowledge sharing

Ensley et al. (2006) suggested that shared leadership is a complete process on leadership and collective knowledge of a team which is worked out through a collaborative process, rather than only by a single designated individual. Bock & Kim (2002) also indicated that employees would have positive attitude to share knowledge if they believed that sharing knowledge could strengthen the relationship between themselves and others. In shared leadership teams, the team members would have more “in-group” perspective while the interactions among them increased via the distributed influence in the teams. In addition, Granitz & Ward (2001) pointed out that individuals would share their knowledge and experience in “in-group” rather than “out -group”. From the above, this study suggests that shared leadership could enhance knowledge sharing in work teams.

Besides, knowledge sharing accumulates organizational knowledge and improves organizational ability (Gold, Malhotra, & Segars, 2001), achieves the learning process of individuals and organizations (Andrews & Delahaye, 2000), and is a critical factor of organizational learning and performance (Bartol & Srivastava, 2002). Moreover, Zellmer-Bruhn & Gibson (2006) also indicated that team learning would be high if the teams adopted knowledge management. As mentioned above, this study suggests that knowledge sharing would increase team learning in work teams.

In shared leadership teams, the interactions among team members would increase while the influence continually distribute among team members. In addition, Crossan, Lane, & White (1999) indicated that the team members’ interactions improved they knowledge/information sharing, and then integrated individual insight and knowledge to achieve the outcomes of learning in teams. Moreover, Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke (2006) suggested that empowering leadership positively connect knowledge sharing, in turn, positively increase team performance. Consistent with the inferences, this article suggests that shared leadership increases knowledge sharing, and then, enhances team learning in work teams. Stated formally:

H₂: Knowledge sharing mediates shared leadership on team learning in work teams

The role of team characteristics

Drawing on the perspective of interaction, the learning dissemination among co-workers is important since team learning is a dynamic process (Collinson & Cook, 2004). Kleinman et al. (2002) indicated that team variety has significantly impact on team effectiveness. Besides, the heterogeneity of team members enhanced the learning ability of

teams (Reagans & Zuckerman, 2001). However, from the viewpoint of communication, team members could experience less barrier and better interactive relationship in small or homogeneity teams. Perry, Pearce, & Sims (1999) suggested that team size should avoid too large to fostering and developing productive relationship between co-workers. Basing on the studies above, it could be inferred that team characteristics (such as team heterogeneity or team size) may be relative with team learning. In addition, this article argues that shared leadership may interact with team characteristics on team learning. In the small teams, the members have frequently interaction with others (Wageman, 1995) and then achieve more team learning via mutual influence. In the other hand, the interaction and communication among co-workers would be decreased in the large teams. Besides, team heterogeneity would increase the difficulty of influence dissemination and interaction among team members, and this would damage team learning. Stated formally:

H₃: Team characteristics (team size or team heterogeneity) moderate the relationship between shared leadership and team learning in work teams.

Methods

Sample

The sample is composed of fourteen Small- and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Taiwan. There are thirty-five work teams and a total of two hundred and fifty-eight respondents completed the investigation. In addition, the independent variables and dependent variable were responded by different sources for avoiding common method variance. The independent variables were collected from team members and the dependent variable was responded by the manager who is the intra-organization cooperative department of the team or human resource department in the company.

Variables

The dependent variable, the team learning, was measured by five items derived from the external team learning questionnaire of Team Learning Survey (TLS) which was developed by Edmondson (1996) and was adopted by Chan, Pearson, & Entrekin (2003). These items measured team learning on a five-point Likert-type scale. The answers ranged from 1 (definitely disagree) to 5 (definitely agree). The internal consistency reliability for the five items is high (Cronbach' s alpha is .82).

In addition, the shared leadership instrument was revised the questionnaire which was developed by Wood & Fields (2007). There are ten items which measure team members' perception of the degree of all members' participation in goal setting, vision formation,

decision making, cooperation, resource allocating, question solving, and information sharing. A five-point Likert-type scale was adopted and a score of '5' indicated that the respondents identified 'very strongly agree' and a score of '1' indicated 'very strongly disagree'. The internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for the ten items is .85. Moreover, the knowledge sharing instrument was derived from the knowledge donating which was developed by Van den Hooff & Van Weenen (2004). There are six items which measure team members' perception of the degree of all members' participation in sharing knowledge. A five-point Likert-type scale was adopted and the answers ranged from 1 (definitely disagree) to 5 (definitely agree). The internal consistency reliability for the six items is also high (Cronbach's alpha is .86).

Besides, team characteristics included two dimensions: team size and team heterogeneity. The team size is calculated by the total amount of employees in the team. Additionally, team heterogeneity is an index which is integrated by the variance of team members' age, tenure year and education year. Moreover, this study controlled sex and position to avoid the impact of the two variables.

Results

As predicted by H₁, shared leadership does have a positive and significant ($p < .000$) effect on team learning in work teams. However, the positive effect of shared leadership on team learning decreases (from $p < .000$ to $p < .1$) when we control knowledge sharing. In addition, there is a significant ($p < .000$) effect of shared leadership on knowledge sharing and a significant ($p < .000$) effect of knowledge sharing on team learning. It could be inferred that knowledge sharing partially mediates the effect of the relationship between shared leadership and team learning. Thus, the H₂ is supported. Moreover, team heterogeneity has a positive and significant ($p < .05$) effect on team learning. Besides, there is interaction between shared leadership and team size ($p < .001$). The H₃ is also supported. As respectively separated team size above from below the means indicate, the positive effect of shared leadership on team learning would be enhanced when the team size is large.

Conclusion and Discussion

This research has several major contributions on literature. First, this study indicates the positive relationship between shared leadership and team learning in work teams. The result provides an empirical study in shared leadership and its outcomes. This fills the shortage of empirical study in shared leadership. Second, this article confirms the partial mediation of knowledge sharing in the relationship between shared leadership and team learning. This

founding indicates a possible team process of shared leadership achieving team learning, and also fills the shortage of the empirical study of team process about shared leadership in previous studies. Third, this article finds that team heterogeneity has a positive and significant effect on team learning. This result is consistent with the study of Reagans & Zuckerman (2001) who indicated that the variety of team members enhanced the learning ability of teams. Fourth, the interaction of team characteristics and shared leadership in team learning is also illustrated. This article indicates that the relationship between shared leadership and team learning would be stronger while the team size is larger. Basing on the finding, this article suggests that the distributed influence (shared leadership) among team members in large teams would make up for the shortage that a single leader's influence could not effectively spread out all team members.

Besides, in managerial implication, organizations could develop shared leadership in work teams in order to enhance the teams learning. In addition, since knowledge sharing has a mediation effect between shared leadership and team learning, it could be inferred that if a team could increase knowledge sharing among team members, it would be effectively increase the impact of shared leadership on team learning. Furthermore, team heterogeneity has a positive effect on team learning so that a team could include variance members as possible to enhance the team learning. Additionally, team size interacts with shared leadership on team learning therefore the team which is large may foster shared leadership for achieving team learning.

One of the limitations of this study is that the sample was obtained via asking the participative willing of the companies therefore it is not the completely random sampling. This would limit the inference to the results. In addition, there are several factors would affect team learning so that this study could not investigate the effects of other factors excluding shared leadership, knowledge sharing and team characteristics.

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