

Leader Coaching and Contentious Communication in Teams

Intervening to Enable Team Learning and Innovation Effectiveness

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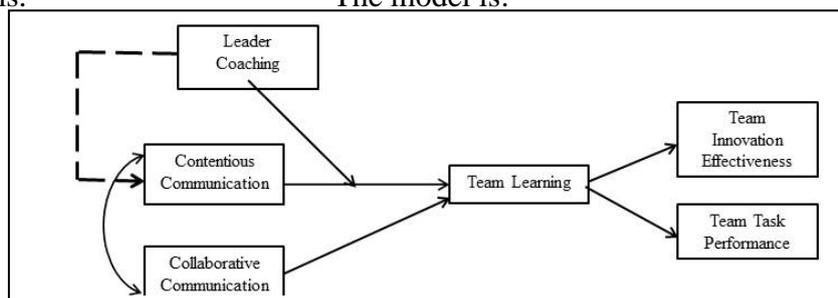
Abstract

Communication patterns among team members influence the ability of the team to exhibit a high level of innovation and function effectively. While collaborative communication is desirable for learning and productive outcomes, contentious communication patterns are often inevitable and thus need to be wisely managed. A key question is how contentious communication can be transmuted into positive outcomes. We argue that while contentious communication patterns can undermine the capacity of groups to learn and perform at higher levels, team leaders' coaching behaviors can reduce the adverse influences of members' contentious communications on team learning and thereby drive team innovation and effectiveness.

The increasing prevalence of teams in organizations has precipitated an upsurge of research interest in team processes and how they impact critical team outcomes such as learning and performance (e.g. 33, 40, 51). Several studies have examined the role of leaders in shaping the dynamics that underlie the learning processes and performance of their teams (e.g. 28, 41, 61). Conflict management is an important part of this process, as team leaders must strive to prevent interpersonal conflicts from creating dysfunction in the team. However, more importantly is not the mere presence of conflicts but rather how people approach and manage their conflicts that greatly affects whether conflict is constructive or destructive. Thus encouraging members to discuss their differences and varied views about group processes and products is essential for teams to develop innovative processes and outcomes and perform effectively.

We collected data from 338 employees representing work teams in nine organizations in Israel. The data were collected in two waves. First, during participants' work time we distributed and collected a questionnaire from team members. This administration excluded the team leader, who in each case was the formal leader and was not performing the same tasks as team members. Six weeks later, we administered a survey to the team leaders seeking their ratings of team performance. We randomly selected 150 teams and obtained usable data from 82 teams.

The model is:



Hypothesis 1: Team leader coaching moderates the relationship between contentious communication and team learning, such that contentious communication is negatively related to team learning only among teams which are led by leaders who exhibit a low level of coaching

Hypothesis 2: Team leader coaching moderates the mediated relationship between contentious communication and team innovation effectiveness, such that there is a significant indirect relationship between contentious communication and team innovation effectiveness through team learning only among teams with leaders who exhibit a low level of coaching.

Hypothesis 3: Team leader coaching moderates the mediated relationship between contentious communication and team performance, such that there is a significant indirect relationship between contentious communication and team task performance through team learning only among teams with leaders who exhibit a low level of coaching.

In this paper, we described and tested the role of team leader behaviors in mitigating the negative effect of conflicts and contentious communication on team learning and performance. The findings of this study indicate that contentious communication has a negative relationship with team effectiveness because it inhibits team learning. We observed these adverse direct (with team learning) and indirect (with team effectiveness) relationships only among teams with leaders perceived to exhibit relatively low levels of coaching behavior.

Despite the benefits that evolve over time in coordinating the pace and timing of activities [3], all teams experience interpersonal misunderstandings and conflicts. An emergent state of contentious communication exists when members are unable to resolve such differences and interpersonal bitterness gives rise to a cycle of petty bickering and one-upmanship. Our study emphasizes the potential role of contentious communication in undermining team effectiveness. The primary contribution of this study concerns the buffering influence of team leader coaching behavior on the relationship between contentious communication and team outcomes. Whereas previous research suggests that leadership should play a key role in diagnosing and managing conflictual dynamics in teams [14] it has not become clear what role leaders might play in this regard.

Our study focused on a specific leader behavior pattern that serves to prevent interpersonal friction from undermining team effectiveness. Team leader coaching behaviors facilitate team interaction so that members are able to focus on better ways to work as a team and identify new task strategies instead of falling into a spiral of destructive communication.

Team leader coaching serves a crucial role. Without a team leader who directs the team's attention toward learning, contentious communication processes can precipitate an escalating dynamic impedes performance. To our knowledge, this study is the first to demonstrate ways in which team leaders can blunt the connection between interpersonal discord and team effectiveness. Our approach to investigating interpersonal tension on the team focused on contentious communication. Contentious communication represents observable friction among members rather than global attributions of interpersonal incompatibility and disrespect as is assessed by measures of relationship conflict.

Contentious communication represents behavior that team leaders can directly observe. When team leaders observe that contentious communication is a distraction from productive pursuits, they can choose to employ coaching strategies that encourage members to view one another's inputs in a more favorable light and redirect members' attention toward shared task priorities. Our findings show that team leader coaching matters most when teams are in danger of allowing interpersonal friction to undermine the potential advantages of working together. This model can help organizations determine the conditions in which it is

most essential to assign a team leader with strong coaching skills. Teams that do not experience much deleterious conflict or negative forms of communication may be self-directed or experience a form of shared leadership [43]. Yet formal team leaders must take a more active role and engage coaching behaviors when a pattern of contentious communication emerges. Using this model, leaders have a better idea of how to help teams perform better when problems arise. Organizations can place leaders who exhibit effective coaching behaviors into positions as leaders of teams in which contentious communication already prevails, or when there is high potential for contentious communication. They can also train leaders to be more effective in these coaching behaviors and provide incentives for successfully managing difficult teams, such as by positioning them for higher management.

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