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INNOVATION IN ORGANISATIONS

Published:
27 Jan 2016

Inter-team competition activates information coordination and innovative performance of teams; implication of team members' narcissism

In her recent research, SMU Assistant Professor of Psychology **Grace Park** found that inter-team competition within organisations was positively related to individuals' discussion-facilitating behaviour, which in turn leads to innovation. In simple words: competition is associated with people sharing information with a view to victory, and in the process creating new information leading to creativity and innovation.

She also found that individuals with a high level of narcissistic traits were more likely to exhibit discussion-facilitating behaviour under a high inter-team competition because "these individuals want to get into the flow of group discussions, which is like an information exchange market. Narcissists want to be the main player and they stand up to lead the information exchange and team success."

Extending that line of argument logically, would a team full of narcissists be the most innovative?

"My research showed that as the group's level of narcissism goes up, its viability goes down," referring to the likeliness of a team staying together. "Also, when the level of narcissism goes up, the group is more likely to disagree with each other. That could be the possible negative consequence.

"Management need to be careful when they have narcissistic individuals creating ideas because they could be lowering team viability at the same time. Some team members may leave after just one session and you will lose all the information these members generated."

Therefore, Park suggested that while narcissistic team member may facilitate team innovation through active team information processing, caution is needed as s/he may undermine the sustainability of the team. Having frequent peer evaluation sessions or rotating the role of group discussion facilitator can also minimise the negative influence of the narcissistic team members on team viability while maintaining effective information processing for team innovation.

Learning vs performance

Speaking to *Perspectives@SMU* on the sidelines of the recent SMU Behaviourial Sciences Institute (BSI) seminar "An Information Processing Model of Team Innovation: Implication of Team Structure, Inter-Team Competition, and Member Personality", Park explained that having a learning orientation helps teams actively engage in integrating and coming up with new ideas for team innovation.

She says, "When your team needs to learn something new, having a cross-functional team structure would be helpful to find new perspectives and discoveries." Cross-functional groups consist of members from different backgrounds within an organisation e.g. sales, engineering, human resources. While cross-functional teams impose an information coordination challenge for its members, it also provides a greater potential for creating new sets of knowledge and perspectives.

She adds, "The good thing about cross-functional teams, even though they will have difficulty co-ordinating each other's ideas because their work experience is so different, is that group interaction would be more likely to lead to acquisition of information and knowledge."

Competition might not lead to innovation

In light of the effects of narcissism and group structure, does competition lead to innovation? Park suggests otherwise.

"Competition is not an optimal way to come up with innovation because innovation is about being different and unique," she says. "When you put people in competition with one another, there is an implicit standard to which they are compared against. Instead of having competitions, cultivating a company culture where being different and unique is valued would lead to active information sharing and integration and team innovation.

"Even if a company has a strong conformist culture, a manager can choose, for a specific project, to instill a culture of sharing in which unique and different perspectives are valued. It could be a R&D project or something of that nature."

Inspired by the study findings on narcissistic and team innovation, Park is currently conducting a research on gratitude and team innovation.