Team Efficacy: Why Goal Orientation Matters

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Abstract

With the performance benefits of team-based structures well established, a key challenge now faced by service organisations is to identify the factors affecting variability in team efficacy among similar teams. In this paper, we identify that a team’s motivation to develop or demonstrate ability, that is the team goal orientation, is influential to team efficacy. Addressing prior research that has shown conflicting results regarding the ability of team goal orientation to predict team behaviours and outcomes, this paper develops a conceptual model illustrating the role of team goal orientation as a moderating variable on team efficacy.

Introduction

Within the services sector frontline service employees continue to face progressively more challenging expectations from both managers and customers. As demands extend beyond the capabilities of individual employees, service organisations have begun to structure their frontline into empowered teams (Salas et al., 1992). Teams, purpose-formed structures with two or more members working interdependently towards the accomplishment of common goals (Hackman, 1990), have emerged as a major component of the modern organisation, with estimates of at least half the workforce participating in empowered teams (e.g., Manz and Sims, 1993). Service organisations in particular are becoming increasingly aware of the performance benefits associated with implementing a team-based structure including: increased profit (Emery and Fredendall, 2002); reduced costs, improved productivity and increased service quality (Cohen and Bailey, 1997); greater flexibility and adaptability in meeting customer service needs and demands (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996); and improved customer service satisfaction (Deeter-Schmelz and Ramsey, 2003). This influence frontline service teams have on key performance indicators demonstrates the crucial role teams play in the success of service organisations. With the benefits of team-based structures well established, the key challenge now faced by service organisations is to identify the factors affecting performance variability among teams with the same resources and training. As such, a comprehensive understanding of team-level determinants of service performance is relevant to researchers and practitioners.

Prior research has suggested that when service employees are operating in empowered team environments, teams will develop beliefs regarding collective service ability (de Jong, de Ruyter and Wetzel, 2006). Two of the key beliefs teams form in regards to ability are efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and goal orientation (Bunderson and Sutcliffe, 2003; DeShon et al., 2004; Porter, 2005).

Team efficacy, defined as the employees’ collective beliefs that the team can perform a specific task successfully (Lindsay, Brass and Thomas, 1995), has been established as a predictor of team performance across a broad range of disciplines. For example, evidence suggests that team efficacy beliefs correlate positively and significantly with performance in creative teams (Prussia and Kinicki, 1996); nursing teams (Gibson, 1999); sporting teams
Goal orientation has emerged as an important construct in organisational research, describing employee motivation, behaviour and performance (e.g. VandeWalle et al., 1999). This construct reflects the internal motivational processes controlling task choice, and establishing performance goals and effort (e.g. Button, Mathieu and Zajac, 1996; VandeWalle, 1997). The literature describes two types of goals that individuals use to interpret and react to events: performance goals and learning goals (Dweck and Leggett, 1988). Individuals with a learning goal orientation believe they are able to increase their ability through mastery behaviours, and thus seek opportunities to foster learning. A performance goal orientation reflects individuals who believe their ability is a fixed entity. These individuals strive to demonstrate their capabilities and gain favourable feedback, or who avoid negative evaluations of their competencies. The literature demonstrates consistent support that individuals with a learning goal orientation outperform those with a performance goal orientation (e.g., Fisher and Ford, 1998; VandeWalle et al., 1999). Although these findings are important in identifying differences in performance variability, research has seldom extended beyond the barrier of the individual employee. However, as service organisations move further away from a model of individual based tasks and performance outcomes, it is important that goal orientation is addressed at varying levels of analysis, such as the team. Currently, only a small number of empirical studies have examined goal orientation at the team level (e.g. Porter, 2005; Bunderson and Sutcliffe, 2003; DeShon et al., 2004). Despite some similarities in the research process between the few team-level goal orientation studies, there are many inconsistencies regarding the best way to operationalise and measure team goal orientation in the organisational context. Consequently, there are conflicting results regarding the ability of team goal orientation in predicting team behaviours and outcomes, including team efficacy (De Shon et al., 2004; Porter, 2005). To address the gap in understanding, we develop a model illustrating the role of team goal orientation as a moderating variable on team efficacy.

Model Rationale and Development

In developing a model of this relationship (Figure 1) we suggest both direct (team learning goal orientation) and moderating (team performance goal orientation) effects on a model of team efficacy. This model includes four antecedents of team efficacy: past performance, team vicarious experience, team motivation and team psychological safety (Robinson, Bucic and de Ruyter, 2006). However, the focus of this paper is not on the antecedents of team-efficacy, but rather on the direct and moderating effects of team goal orientation on team efficacy. These effects are described in the development of hypotheses below.

Team Learning Goal Orientation

A learning goal orientation encompasses the belief that ability can be improved through mastery behaviours. Those who hold this belief actively see opportunities to improve their
skills and capabilities. Thus, a team learning goal orientation can be defined as a desire to develop the self by acquiring new skills, mastering new situations and improving one’s competence (VandeWalle, 1997).

The link between a learning goal orientation and learning related outcomes, such as efficacy, has been supported at both the individual and team level of analysis. Research has shown that high level of learning orientation tend to buffer individuals from the negative effects of failure, thereby helping to increase or maintain self-efficacy (Button, Mathieu and Zajac, 1996; Kozlowski et al., 2001; Phillips and Gully, 1997). The literature shows a general support for a direct relationship between a learning goal orientation and self-efficacy. Similar to individuals, Gully and Phillips (2005) suggest that mistakes and failures that could potentially be interpreted as a sign of inability will instead be interpreted as opportunities for learning and improvement in teams high on learning orientation. Following this, both De Shon et al. (2004) and Porter (2005) hypothesised that high levels of learning orientation among team members should positively affect team efficacy. This direct and positive relationship was empirically supported in both studies. Consistent with prior research at both the team and individual level, we propose:

P1: Team learning goal orientation has a positive effect on team efficacy.

**Figure 1. The Role of Goal Orientation in a Model of Team Efficacy**

**Team Performance Goal Orientation**

Individuals with a performance goal orientation view ability as fixed, and either strive to demonstrate and gain favourable judgements about their abilities, or avoid unfavourable evaluations of their abilities (Dweck and Leggett, 1988; Button, Mathieu and Zajac, 1996; VandeWalle, 1997). Thus, two elements comprise a performance goal orientation: proof, and avoidance. The literature is divided regarding how to best conceptualise the construct. The original Dweck and Leggett (1988) model, as well as the widely used Button, Mathieu and Zajac (1996) model and measurement scales, group these two elements together as a single dimension. VandeWalle (1997) however, argues that in the work domain it is important to distinguish between performance-prove and performance-avoid. These findings are consistent with Elliot’s (1994) who showed that there is utility in differentiating between prove and avoid dimensions, as the desire to gain approval and demonstrate ability constitutes a different goal from the desire to avoid disapproval and the demonstration of low ability.
Whilst the link between a learning goal orientation and efficacy has been supported at both the individual and team levels of analysis, research on performance orientation has resulted in mixed and contradictory findings. For example, Phillips and Gully (1997) found that performance orientation had a negative effect on individuals' self-efficacy, where as Bell and Kozlowski (2002) found there to be no direct relationship between a performance orientation and self-efficacy. At the team level of analysis, De Shon et al. (2004) found a direct positive relationship between a team performance orientation and team efficacy. Porter (2005) on the other hand, hypothesised an interactive effect between team performance orientation and task performance on team efficacy. He suggested that by taking into account task performance, one should be able to understand the effects of performance orientation on efficacy and commitment in teams. Support for the potential interactive effects of task performance comes from Farr, Hofmann and Ringenbach (1993) who stated that the effects of performance feedback information are more likely to be pronounced for those with a performance orientation but nonexistent for those with a learning orientation. However, despite the theoretical support, Porter’s (2005) hypothesis on team performance orientation was only partially supported. For teams who performed poorly, performance orientation was negatively related to team efficacy, and there was no effect for teams that performed well.

The inconsistencies of these results at both the individual and team levels may be attributed to the authors having relied upon Button, Mathieu and Zajac’s (1996) conceptualisation of performance orientation. That is, both the positive and the negative aspects of performance orientation were measured together, thus the competing effects of prove and avoid are unable to be isolated. This strengthens the case for VandeWalle’s approach of measuring performance-prove and performance-avoid as two separate dimensions. This approach would allow the effects of these two different goals on team efficacy to be isolated and identified. Thus, this research adopts VandeWalle’s (1997) two-dimensional mode of performance goal orientation that defines a performance-prove goal orientation as the desire to prove one's competence and to gain favourable judgments about it; and performance-avoid goal orientation is defined as the desire to avoid the disproving of one's competence and to avoid negative judgments about it (VandeWalle, 1997).

Teams with a high performance-prove goal orientation tend to engage in proactive behaviours, such as feedback seeking and task innovation, as they are motivated to take action in order to outperform other teams. For example, we expect those with a greater performance-prove goal orientation to seek feedback more actively than those without such a strong orientation, using the knowledge gained to outperform others, and to proactively initiate behaviours that would give them a competitive advantage (VandeWalle, Cron and Slocum, 2001). Such teams utilise affective and cognitive processes (Elliot and Harackiewicz, 1996), are sensitive to success-relevant information, and are motivated to exhibit emotional control and social competence (Elliot and Church, 1997). These behaviours are analogous to the proposed antecedents of team efficacy: feedback seeking behaviour (past performance); success-relevant information (team vicarious experience, team motivation) and affective processes/emotional control (psychological safety). Thus, we proposed that a performance-prove goal orientation does not directly influence a team’s belief regarding their ability to successfully perform a task, but rather influences team efficacy through the antecedents. Specifically, it is proposed that a team performance-prove goal orientation will positively moderate the relationship between the antecedents and construct of team efficacy (Figure 1).
People with a high performance-avoid goal orientation also focus on performance, but this focus is grounded in trying to avoid negative outcomes (Elliot and Harackiewicz, 1996). Whilst teams with a performance-prove goal orientation actively seek ways to outperform others, teams with a performance-avoid goal orientation engage in anxiety-based, self-protective processes that supersede task concerns and can be detrimental to attaining positive outcomes. Thus, we propose that such anxiety about negative possibilities, and the use of cognitive and affective resources to identify and avoid potentially negative outcomes (Elliot and Sheldon, 1997) in the form of a team performance-avoid goal orientation will weaken the relationships between the antecedents and the construct of team efficacy.

P3: A performance-avoid goal orientation will have a negative moderating effect on the relationship between (a) past performance; (b) team vicarious experience; (c) team motivation; (d) team psychological safety and team efficacy.

Conclusion

Presenting a conceptual model of the relationship between team goal orientation and team efficacy, this paper makes contributions to both theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, the construct of team goal orientation has received little attention in the literature, despite the promising ability in predicting team behaviours and outcomes. The conceptual model developed in this paper is an important step in understanding how implicit theories of ability impact on team-specific behaviours, such as team efficacy. From a practical perspective, this model identifies a driving factor explaining the variance in team efficacy and performance across similar teams. In addition, by identifying the role of team goal orientation in developing team efficacy beliefs, managers of service teams are equipped with a better understanding of how to train, manage and develop teams to achieve team and organisational goals.

The next stage in this research is to further refine and test the model using a two-phase approach, conducted in a high contact services industry. The two phases consist of a pilot study, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative methods, and a large-scale study using a quantitative questionnaire. The exploratory study will encompass two stages: first, a qualitative element in the form of in-depth interviews; and second, a small-scale quantitative survey. The initial interviews will be carried out to gain further insights into the phenomenon not identified in the literature and to guide the development of the survey instrument to be used in the second stage of the exploratory research. The second stage of the exploratory research phase entails the development, refining and testing of a quantitative research instrument by pre-testing the survey instrument with a panel of experts, including practitioners in the field. Following the refinement of the instrument, actual pilot data will be collected from 15 to 20 randomly selected teams. Data for the second phase of this research is to be collected using a quantitative survey of 200 service teams, with multiple respondents per team. Individual respondents will rate their teams on team-level attributes, with these ratings then aggregated to form a team score. This method is suggested as the appropriate methods for measuring team-level phenomena, as the measures will specifically refer to the team as the unit being analysed, and is preferable to teams respond to the survey as a single
unit providing a consensus response where issues of coercion and social desirability bias arise.
Reference List


