Dysfunctional Groups: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

In the digital age, teams are becoming the new norm. Many groups become productive over time, but some groups also become dysfunctional over time. This paper examines groups that work together and ultimately become dysfunctional to the extent that they have to be reassigned or dismantled. We use a three stage study to explore why this happens. Groups in face-to-face and online classes mimic diversity that is often related to real life teams and can be used to study dysfunctional groups. A longitudinal experiment involving several dysfunctional groups was conducted and the results are reported. Our research revealed that groups become dysfunctional due to several factors and groups split into sub groups leading to progressively worse performance. We use Lencioni’s five functional characteristics to study dysfunctional teams. Future research areas are also discussed.

1. Introduction

The corporation and its workforce are becoming borderless, which results in more and more teamwork [35]. Many teams work well together, but others fall short. IBM’s Watson is an example of a diverse, productive team that developed (http://www.research.ibm.com/______labs/watson/) intelligent system. On the other hand, the initially unsuccessful Affordable Healthcare website (http://www.businessinsider.com/why-the-healthcaregov-website-failed-at-launch-in-one-slide-2013-11) is an example of a dysfunctional team that did not work out as planned and new groups had to be brought in to make it functional. The question is why some groups succeed and others fail. Productive teams have been studied extensively in the literature, we focus on dysfunctional teams in this paper. There is no acceptable definition of dysfunctional teams, however many authors have defined dysfunctional behavior. Cole et al (2008) defines dysfunctional behavior as “any observable, motivated (but not illegal) behavior by an employee or group of employees that is intended to impair team functioning.” They argue, in accordance with this operational definition, dysfunctional behaviors within teams should encumber team processes and goals [53], violate norms that are necessary for effective team performance [18], and thus, hold strong negative connotations for team members [20]. Using Cole et al (2008) and other authors [18,36,37,38,59] research, we define dysfunctional teams as teams whose members do not behave in a cohesive and normal manner suitable to achieve teams’ goal. These teams may disintegrate and perform poorly and may even disintegrate. Dysfunctional teams typically require intervention from team builder in the form of reconfiguration, sub groups and/or threats in the form of punishment.

The first section describes current literature on dysfunctional groups, followed by the model and experiment, and a discussion of dysfunctional groups. In addition, we provide a summary of the limitations of this study and directions for future research.

2. Literature Survey

Diversity has become a normal way of life and teams are becoming mirror images of the U.S. population. The U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division [61], reports that race, gender and age diversity of U.S. residents are increasing. The modern team may consist of members of different races, nationalities, genders, expertise, religions, etc., creating a heterogeneous environment that can lead to either productive or non productive outcomes. Much work has been done on productive [5,9,14,21,25,40,61,64,67] teams. For non-productive teams, researchers have discussed “bad” behavior in the context of dysfunctional teams [18,36,37,38,39] and how it impacts organizational culture. For example, Griffin and Lopez (2005) define “Dysfunctional behavior as motivated behavior by an employee or group of employees that is intended to have negative consequences for another individual and/or group and/or the organization itself”. Lencioni (1998, 2012) identified the widely accepted
five dysfunctions of a team as: (1) inattention to results, (2) avoidance of accountability, (3) lack of commitment, (4) fear of conflict and (5) absence of trust. He defines inattention results as individuals pursue separate goals and lose focus to achieve collective success. The avoidance of accountability results in the need to evade interpersonal discomfort that prevents team members from holding each other accountable. Consequently, there is a lack of commitment due to lack of clarity or buy-in from team members. Fear of conflict arises in a desire to preserve artificial harmony. An absence of trust results, owing to a fear of being vulnerable with team members, prevents building of trust.

Researchers have also studied why teams become dysfunctional. Several reasons are cited, such as negative affective tone [10], negative behavior and attitude [4,13,18,36] social loafing [6,26,28,34,45,55,66], and diversity [19,34,41,52,58]. Cole et al (2008) studied the association between dysfunctional team behavior and team performance and concluded that, “teams with members who engaged in dysfunctional acts experienced more negative feelings and, subsequently, poorer performance”. Aube et al (2014) studied dysfunctional and counterproductive behaviors and the consequences of those behaviors on the team as a system. Their results suggest “that the presence of counterproductive behaviors may require team-level interventions (e.g. team building) in addition to individual interventions with individuals involved”.

Keytone (1999) noted that, “Ineffective groups, whose members exhibit high interactional tensions, are commonplace in organizational use of teams. Sometimes the source of the dysfunction is one individual.” Social loafing is another factor that can lead to dysfunctional or poor team performance. Karau and Williams (1993) defined social loafing as “…the tendency for individuals to expend less effort when working collectively than when working individually”. Authors conducted a meta-analysis of 78 published and unpublished studies and found a reliable social loafing effect across studies: when working on collective tasks people produce less effort than when working on co-action or individual tasks. Liden et al (2005) investigated social loafing, and their results showed at individual level, “increases in task interdependence and decreases in task visibility and distributive justice were associated with greater occurrence of social loafing.

Researchers also studied the impact of diversity [6,23] in general and on social loafing on dysfunctional teams. Several researchers [34,58] reported that gender played a role in social loafing. Karau and Williams (1993) noted that Asian cultures compared to Western cultures are less inclined to loaf. Kugihara (1999) experimented with males and females and reported that males tend to loaf more in group settings. Glomb et al (2003) studied 149 employees from 25 groups to demonstrate the impact of group social context on individual interpersonal aggression. Their results suggest that both being the target of aggression and the mean level of aggression in a work group (absent the target individual) are predictors of employees' reports of engaging in aggression”. Lowry et al. (2010) discuss trust in the context of a heterogeneous team and concluded that Chinese members were less trusting than the U.S. participants in such groups. They also found a moderating effect of communication quality on the relationship between social presence and trust.

Though some work has been done on dysfunctional teams, research on diverse dysfunctional teams is still emerging. Cole et al (2006) contends that scholars have exerted considerable effort toward understanding the determinants of dysfunctional behavior, but they have not devoted much attention to the associated consequences. There is a continual need for research as to why diverse teams become dysfunctional and the potential costs. This paper is an attempt in that direction. The next section describes the model.

3. The Model

The study was conducted in a three stage model, as follows:

- **Stage 1**: Teams act as swift teams with the emphasis on “getting to know” each other and building trust.
- **Stage 2**: Teams develop trust or distrust resulting in cohesive or dysfunctional teams respectively.
- **Stage 3**: Dysfunctional teams are reconfigured, dismantled or teams develop trust.

**Stage 1**: Initially teams behave like swift teams [2,27,46]. Members do not know each other and they get together to solve a problem. Zijlstra et al (2012) define these swift groups as “...ad hoc teams formed for immediate task performance, such as emergency or rescue teams or aviation crews, with highly trained members who have generally not previously worked together as a team”. Research on swift teams has
focused on trust [17, 43,49,50,65, 68,70] and the level of interaction and roles among team members
[1,16,22,69]. Lionel et al (2009) categorized trust in two different categories--swift and knowledge-based. They argue that swift trust develops initially with a “Category-matching process based on team member characteristics, not on their behavior. Once individuals accumulated sufficient information to assess a team member's trustworthiness, the effects of swift trust declined and knowledge-based trust formed using team members' behaviors (perceived ability, integrity, and benevolence) became dominant.” These studies suggest that in the absence of other external factors, initial swift trust is based on categorization. We call it the “getting to know” or trust building stage.

Stage 2: As teams work together, swift teams tend to evolve as “regular” teams and trust or distrust starts to build. Teams that build trust have been studied extensively by researchers [30,49,50,70]. Our emphasis is on teams that start to distrust and become dysfunctional. As already noted, there are many reasons for this: social loafing, lack of commitment [42], fatigue [24], lack of openness, time constraints [42], etc. Social loafing, for example, has a significant impact on group behavior. Group members can put in extra effort [34,56] or reduce their own contribution to avoid being a “sucker”. Several authors [18,34,36] have argued that it may only take “one” member to spoil the team dynamics. Griffin and Lopez (2005), defined bad employee behavior as “any form of intentional act that has the potential to adversely affect organizations and their employees”. We have modified it to mean a bad member, and the act may be intentional or unintentional based on the five characteristics of the dysfunctional team mentioned above. Under these circumstances, team members tend to exhibit frustration, discontent, conflict and even desperation.

Stage 3: Once teams are identified as dysfunctional, there is an obvious need for improvement. Spoelstra et al (2014) suggest creating project-based learning opportunities and team formation. They propose a model which uses knowledge, personality and preference data to form teams. Teams may have to be reconfigured, dismantled, reassigned or encouraged to work together, and can only transform if they seek assistance from higher ups. Often, teams may put up with a “bad” member and allow a “free ride” to loafers [18,34,36 etc.] in order to avoid conflicts, or with keeping in the spirit of helping a fellow human being. The purpose of this stage is to bring a team back to a “normal” functioning team.

3.1 Research Question

Researchers [10,15,18,34,36] have discussed how negative influences can affect the performance of the group. In the long run, subgroups are formed that create progressively poorer outcomes. It is hypothesized that as teams develop mistrust and become dysfunctional, their performance will ultimately decrease. Based on Cole et al (10) study, we explored the performance of dysfunctional teams over time and explored the following research question:

Dysfunctional teams will perform poorly over time.

4. The Study

The present study was conducted at an urban public university in the Mid-Atlantic area that has a non-traditional, commuter diverse student population. The study was conducted over several semesters. We used MBA students, both web and face-to-face for this study. An introductory information systems course was used that is required of all majors. The course uses cases and teams for learning purposes. Students were divided into groups of 4 or 3. Most groups had 4 but some had 3 due to enrollment numbers. Students were assigned three cases and each case was used as a stage as described in Figure 1.

The first case involved designing a budget using a spreadsheet; the second case involved developing a database using database software; the third case used project management. All three cases required extensive discussions and usage of software (EXCEL, ACCESS and Microsoft Project) for case analysis. The typical student was working full time, has a family and takes online or evening classes. Each group was given a survey after each stage (project) to discuss team dynamics and whether they trusted their group members or not. There were a total of 54 groups and nine dysfunctional groups were identified based on Lencioni’s (2008, 2012) five dimensions. Performance was measured by the team’s ability to carry out each case at each stage. SPSS was used for analysis. It was hypothesized over time as teams develop distrust and become dysfunctional their performance will decrease over time.
summarize the results of three stages for one dysfunctional team.

Figure 1 show the results of the difference between the means of group performance over three stages. Figure 1 shows declining performance of the group from Stage 1 to Stage 2 but increased from stage 2 to stage 3 due to intervention. This involved splitting the group in two cohesive groups. As seen in figure 1, team performance improved from stage 2 to stage 3.

We also tested the difference in means for the nine groups using SPSS. Results are summarized in Tables 1(a) and 1(b).

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pair 1 Score1</td>
<td>44.1662</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.35193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>score2</td>
<td>40.3700</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.73543</td>
</tr>
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Tables 1(a) and 1(b) support our research question at $\alpha = 0.5$, implying dysfunctional groups tend to perform poorly over time. This supports the findings by other researchers [18,34,36 etc.]. The next section discusses the dynamics of these teams and possible factors leading to such behavior, as well as the dynamics of dysfunctional groups throughout the three stages.

5. Discussion

Our results indicate that a team may become dysfunctional for a variety of reasons. We selected one group to explore the nature of the progression toward dysfunction. Following is a discussion of dysfunctional behavior in a team in the context of the five dysfunctional characteristics [43,44], and cultural and diversity [12,29,30,32,33,47,50,54].

Team 1: In Stage 1, Team 1 began optimistically, as individuals were very positive about their fellow group members. The group was diverse with respect to culture and gender, and they expressed a belief that they could learn from each other’s differences. Team 1 started with high trust and no distrust, as members wanted to work with each other at all stages. However, in Stage 2, the team started to disintegrate. Fatigue [24] and personality differences started to emerge. Process conflict [31] started to appear. Two team members wanted to start early while group members did not respond. This started an emotional [10,56] response with the blame game, creating negative feelings. Two sub-groups (2 members each) emerged. Team members asked for intervention. After discussions, the team made a decision and asked for permission to split into two groups based on their sub-groups. In Stage 3, teams were allowed to split based on the sub grouping in Stage 2. Each subgroup became cohesive and worked well together. The team suffered a 13% loss in performance from Stage 1 to Stage 2. While the teams did not fully recover, they were able to cut their rate of loss from 13% to 2.9% in one subgroup, and to 3.4% in the other subgroup from stage 2 to stage 3. The subgroups developed high trust and low distrust. The group progressed from swift to dysfunctional to cohesive.

Team 1 did not become dysfunctional due to social loafing since all members were committed and participated in the first two stages. Team members appeared to have inattention to results and avoidance
of accountability after Stage 1. There was a lack of communication [3, 8,11,29,30,34,56,60] which created distrust among group members. If there is no communication, groups can become dysfunctional, as suggested by several researchers [11, 29, 30]. In addition, it appears team developed process conflict due to cultural and surface diversity. However, once the group reorganized, they reduced their losses [15] due to the dysfunctional nature of the group in the previous stage. The next section summarizes our findings, study limitations and future research.

6. Summary

In this study, we empirically tested dysfunctional group performance over time. We built on the previous research on dysfunctional teams by extending it through several stages. This is the first study, to our knowledge, that examines dysfunctional groups over time. Many current studies look at “one” factor at a time; we have looked at several factors (loafing, culture, fatigue, conflict, etc.) that can result in dysfunctional teams. However, we did not establish any cause and effect relationship at this stage. Our study did show that if there is a dysfunctional team, managers should address issues after the first stage and not wait for it to resolve itself. Over time, most teams will only become progressively worse. Teams are future of organizational decision making and team composition is of importance. Our research indicates that diversity has some impact on group performance, but that may not be the sole factor. This raises an interesting question: should managers create less or more diverse groups to avoid dysfunctional behavior? Our study, though not conclusive, has implications for managers and may provide some guidance on this issue.

7. Limitations

As with any study, the results should be interpreted with caution. The study has several limitations, including the sample size, and should be replicate with larger team sizes. In this experiment, only small groups were considered, but research has shown group size may impact social loafing [34]. It would be interesting to vary group sizes and study the impact. We did not differentiate between “types” of diversity, either surface or functional level. It is possible that surface and functional level diversities may have different impacts on teams. Another limitation is the usage of students for the experiment. Academic teams are there to learn and if they become dysfunctional it is not possible to “fire” the bad apples, which is entirely possible in a real world team. However, commenting on the impossibility of experimenting with real life dysfunctional teams, Felps et al. (2006 ) noted that “...the chances of actually observing a bad apple spoil the barrel is low since such events are infrequent and organizations are not particularly likely to encourage or support such invasive research.” He continues: “A more refined and detailed analysis would usually be most easily accomplished with laboratory research.” We plan to continue our efforts via laboratory settings.

In addition, while we removed the effect of the task (all three tasks were similar in terms of complexity), it is possible that groups become dysfunctional for only certain type of tasks. We are continuing our efforts in this direction, by expanding this experiment to study the effect on group dysfunctional behavior by changing both group size and the nature of the task.

8. Future Research

There are many interesting research areas related to dysfunctional groups. Future research could build upon existing research by replicating it over time across different groups and group sizes. Also, it may be desirable to study the type of diversity and its impact on group behavior. This would help to further validate the experiment. In addition, this experiment should be replicated with different group sizes to study the impact of size and diversity on a group’s dysfunctional behavior. Most of the current research looks at social loafing in isolation. However, it would be challenging to study the cause and effect of multiple factors on the performance of dysfunctional groups. Another interesting area would be to change the nature of the task from structured to semi-structured and to study diversity’s impact on group performance. Some researchers have recently argued that distrust is not all bad [48,56]. It would be interesting to study how distrust can lead to productive teams over time. As long as research produces mixed results, there will be a continuous need for validation and replication of experiments.

9. Conclusions
This longitudinal study of short time duration provides an important step in studying the dysfunctional group’s behavior on its performance. The study confirms the existing literature, which is that one bad apple can spoil the whole barrel. The experiment also revealed that dysfunctional teams evolve into sub groups developing more distrust and conflicts over time. Managers must not wait and allow groups to form a “temporary harmony”, which could eventually lead to resentment and poorer performance over time. This study could also be beneficial to managers who create teams and then have to deal with dysfunctional teams.

Dysfunctional teams are a fact of life. Though not common, they can create damaging outcomes for organizations. It is necessary to study factors that cause this phenomenon and avoid them. This paper studies dysfunctional groups in that context and provides guidelines for future research and areas for further study.

10. References

[52] Ritchie, W., Brantley, B. I., Pattie, M., Swanson, B., &


