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Christian Cooperation and Ministry Effectiveness: Insights and Applications from Empirical Research in Group Processes

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Abstract

"Co-operation and the Promotion of Unity" was one the major themes addressed at Edinburgh 1910. The goal was increased cooperation among Christian organizations that would lead to greater ministry effectiveness. Five group processes are presented in light of empirical studies demonstrating their ability to increase group performance: 1) Trust (reciprocal beliefs that the one party will promote the well being of another; 2) Constructive conflict (objective consideration and evaluation of various ways of accomplishing a common goal); 3) Decision commitment (beliefs held by all parties concerning the importance of following through on group decisions); 4) Accountability (the expectation that a party may be called to justify its beliefs and actions to other parties and to accept the consequences); and 5) Group goals (beliefs held by all parties concerning desired outcomes). The application of these processes to Christian organizations desiring to grow in Christian cooperation and ministry effectiveness is discussed.

One of the most important themes of the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910 was "Co-operation and the Promotion of Unity" (Commission VIII, 1910; Gairdner, 1910; World Missionary Conference, 1910). Part of the driving concern came from missionaries and young churches in developing countries where the divisions which found their origins in sixteenth to eighteenth century Europe seemed frivolous and irrelevant. These divisions prevented cooperation in evangelism and this lack of unity was a poor witness to the non-Christian community. The denominations which were the embodiment of these divisions were often foreign in origin and irrelevant to young Christians and their communities in cultures that had little connection to the European context where these divisions arose.

A century later, these problems of division among Christians still exist. Some divisions are based on old European denominations, others on more modern theological controversies, but the consequences are the same: It is difficult for Christians to cooperate and be effective in ministry in countries where Christianity is a minority religion. In light of these problems, modern empirical research concerning group processes may provide useful insights. If phenomena are systematically observed among small groups of individuals in laboratory and organizational settings, some of the conclusions drawn may be applied to larger groups and organizations which desire to cooperate, including Christian ones. These conclusions and insights are potentially useful to missiologists, missionaries, and to all Christian leaders who are concerned about the World Missionary Conference theme of June 21, 1910: "Co-operation and the Promotion of Unity."

Five Group Processes that Influence Cooperation and Unity

Since the end of the Second World War, a growing body of empirical evidence, based on both correlational and experimental studies, points to five critical group processes that are relevant and potentially applicable to Christian missionary efforts throughout the world:

1. Trust: Reciprocal beliefs that the one party will promote the well being of another.

2. Constructive conflict: Objective consideration and evaluation of various ways of accomplishing a common goal.
3. Decision commitment: Personal beliefs held by all parties on the importance of following through on group decisions.
4. Accountability: The expectation that any party may be called to justify its beliefs and actions to other parties and to accept the consequences.
5. Group goals: Beliefs held by all parties concerning desired outcomes.

These processes in small groups have been examined in depth through scientific studies in the fields of psychology, organizational behavior, and administrative sciences. They have all been demonstrated to improve group performance, enabling groups to better perform tasks that they undertake. However, important limitations have been discovered and these processes only lead to increased performance under certain conditions. As these processes are being promoted more and more in popular management literature (e.g., Lencioni, 2002) and are likely to be expected by educated lay members in Christian churches, it is essential for Christian leaders to not only be familiar with these processes and how they can be used for God's glory, but also to understand their limitations. Familiarity with these processes will also allow them to be applied to organizations as a whole which can promote the cooperation and unity that was so desired at Edinburgh in 1905.

Some may doubt the legitimacy of using the empirical results of social sciences which do not explicitly have a Christian foundation. However, the apostle Paul taught that Christian disunity and a lack of cooperation is essentially no different than that of non-Christians (I Cor. 3:3). Similarly, the Bible teaches that unity and cooperation are natural phenomena which occur among all peoples (Matt. 5:46-47; Prov. 1:10-15); unity and cooperation only become uniquely Christian when they are focused upon Jesus Christ and his purposes (I Cor. 1:10-2:20, 3:10-11). It is therefore incumbent upon Christians to use the knowledge available to all people through the common grace bestowed upon mankind by God, who gives such blessings both to those who know him and to those who do not yet know him (Matt. 5:45).

The purpose of this paper is to examine five group processes which predict better group performance and to seek applications to Christian organizations with a missiological focus. In addition, the conditions under which these processes lead to greater cooperation and effectiveness will be examined and summarized. These goals will be accomplished by reviewing and summarizing empirical studies which have focused on group processes. All of these studies have focused on groups which are characterized by interdependence, i.e. "the group members are mutually dependent upon each other to reach a goal" (Stagnor, 2004, p. 19; cf. Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Interdependence is to be characteristic of those

who are concerned about the mission of the church (Matt. 28:18-20; I Cor. 3:1-17, 12:4-30) and therefore we are responsible to the one who is head over all things (Eph. 1:22-23) to use our interdependence in ways that glorify him (I Cor. 10:31).

We will now begin our study of these five group processes that can lead to greater cooperation and ministry effectiveness.

Trust

Interpersonal trust, the belief that another person will act benevolently towards the person holding the belief, has long been studied in social psychology and is usually assumed to be something beneficial to members in a group. In a series of classic Prisoner's Dilemma games, Deutsch (1958) sought to find conditions that would lead to trust. He found that the predictors of one person's trust of another include the person's concern for the other's welfare, the other's clear commitment to a decision made jointly, increased communication among the two parties, the person's ability to influence the other, and a third-party benevolent authority (who can reward trustworthy action) or a common enemy. Thus the behavior of self, other, and third parties all contribute to the creation of trust.

Trust is useful to groups because it can be viewed as a measure of psychological safety, "a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" (Edmonson, 1999, p. 354). Edmonson found that it is a good predictor of learning behavior in teams, such as seeking feedback, discussing mistakes and errors, and seeking information from others; these behaviors then lead to an increase in learning, which in turn leads to better team performance. When Christians and Christian organizations develop trusting relationships, these relationships allow greater learning to occur between parties as they discuss their problems and strategies, leading to increased ministry effectiveness.

Other studies have tested the hypothesis that trust by itself increases group performance (e.g., Kegan & Rubenstein, 1973; see Dirks & Ferrin, 2001, for an overview), but, in general, have found only minor (but sometimes significant) effects. One series of studies (Dirks, 1999; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001) has explored the possibility that trust in itself does not increase group performance, but that it has a positive effect only under certain conditions. Rather than automatically increasing group performance, trust only increases a group's ability to accomplish its task under certain situations. Specifically, trust must be accompanied by motivation to accomplish the groups' goal (Dirks, 1999) or else the group will simply enjoy each other's presence or accomplish other goals. Similarly trust increases group performance when accompanied by constructive conflict (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Olson & Parayitam, 2007; Peterson & Behfar, 2003; Simons & Peterson, 2000) or else the group will simply continue doing the task as it always has.

Using Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman's (1995, p. 712) somewhat more specific definition of trust, "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (a definition which is very close to the trust that one would expect in relationships characterized by Christian love), Dirks (1999) demonstrated that trust in itself does not increase group productivity. In a series of team block stacking experiments, Dirks found that trust was only beneficial when it was accompanied by a motivation to accomplish the group's goal. When participants were low on motivation to accomplish the group goal, trust had little or no effect on their ability to work together to maximize their efficiency. Further analysis indicated the interaction between trust and motivation increased productivity because the combination motivated greater cooperation, better decision making processes, and increased effort. Thus trust between Christians or between Christian organizations will likely lead to greater ministry effectiveness when both parties are motivated to accomplishing a joint task. Without a common goal, trust between organizations might not enable either organization to work more effectively but simply produce an agreeable atmosphere.

Another condition under which trust plays an important role in increasing group effectiveness is when constructive conflict is present (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). Conflict can be classified as task conflict (sometimes called constructive conflict because it focuses on finding the best way to accomplish the task, not the other party) and relationship conflict (sometimes called affective or personal conflict because one or both parties feel threatened or hurt) (Guetzkow & Gyr, 1954). Although task conflict is sometimes positive (as will be discussed in the next section), relationship conflict is almost always detrimental to productivity (Jehn, 1995, 1997; Weingart & Jehn, 2000). Dirks and Ferrin (2001) and Simons and Peterson (2000) found evidence to support the hypothesis that trust prevents task conflict from becoming destructive relationship conflict. Since people's beliefs and evaluations contribute to one's interpretation of reality (Fiske, 1992; Fiske & Taylor, 1991), trust (which is based on a belief about another person) can play a crucial role in defining how one person should respond to another. The experiments demonstrated that when trust was present, task conflict was hindered from being interpreted as relationship conflict; when trust was absent, behaviors that characterize task conflict (e.g. disagreeing with an idea) were often interpreted as relationship conflict, such as a personal attack or a lack of respect. Thus trust creates a situation which is propitious to group productivity. In a Christian context, trust between Christian individuals or organizations can prevent disagreement concerning the best way to accomplish a group goal from being interpreted in a negative light, allowing for free discussion of ideas which may lead to solution which takes into consideration the concerns of both parties.

It is thus in the interest of Christians and Christian organizations to develop trust among themselves since this is likely to lead to greater cooperation and ministry effectiveness. Ways to increase this trust would include increased communication, visible demonstrations of concern for the other, developing joint goals and strategies which are followed by joint action, and voluntary submission to a third party authority which can exert sanctions in case of any untrustworthy behavior (Deutsch, 1958).

Constructive Conflict

Guetzkow and Gyr (1954) were the first to make the distinction between task (which is often constructive) and relationship (emotional) conflict and to experimentally observe that high relationship conflict usually has negative effects on group performance whereas task conflict has positive effects when relationship conflict is low or does not exist (a relationship that has been detected repeatedly; de Dreu & Weingart, 2003). In addition, Guetzkow and Gyr found that task conflict is only beneficial when information is shared among members in the group, enabling the group to come to a conclusion better than could be made without the shared information. Information that is not shared nor made available to others or information presented in high relationship conflict situations does not, in general, lead to increased group productivity.

In a study of 105 groups and teams, Jehn (1995) found that task conflict was usually associated with a reduction of productivity because it is highly correlated with relationship conflict. Most team members find it hard to distinguish between the two, especially in routine tasks. However, in non-routine tasks (such as problem solving), task conflict contributes to group productivity up to a certain point, but too much task conflict hinders group performance, typically transforming itself into relationship conflict.

Amason (1996), in a study of top management teams, found the similar result that task conflict was a negative predictor of group productivity. However, when he controlled group productivity for relationship conflict, he found that task conflict was significantly positively correlated with 4 predictors of group productivity: Discussion quality, commitment to decisions, understanding of decisions, and affective acceptance. Relationship conflict is negatively correlated with these predictors, so he concludes that task conflict tends to contribute to superior performance only under conditions of low relationship conflict, such as occurs when trust is high. This same condition is necessary for task conflict to be constructive in Christian contexts: If two Christians can express differences of ideas concerning the accomplishment of a task (task conflict) without expressing threatening emotions or thinking negatively of the other (relationship conflict), this discussion of the

ideas can lead to refinement and improvement of both sets of ideas, producing a more effective strategy to accomplish the task than either of the original sets of ideas would have produced by themselves. Discussing conflicting ideas in an edifying manner appears to be something valued by God (Eph. 4:29-32).

A meta-analysis of 28 studies comparing the effects of task and relationship conflict on group performance (de Dreu & Weingart, 2003) found that, in general, task conflict is a negative predictor of work performance because it is so closely associated with relationship conflict in most organizations. High levels of conflict (which usually consist of a mixture of task and relationship conflict) tend to push individuals into cognitive overload (Carnevale & Probst, 1998) and create an unsatisfying work environment which interferes with performance (Jehn, 1995). Although task conflict is a very good predictor of relationship conflict and a relatively good negative predictor of group performance, the causal relationship is far from being clear. It is likely that task conflict results from poor performance and dissatisfaction as well as possibly being a cause of poor performance and dissatisfaction; when a group fails, it is likely to disagree about the causes or to blame individual members for the failure thus increasing both task and relationship conflict. The meta-analysis indicated that there were certain conditions which predicted that task conflict was more likely to be constructive: A high level of trust, perceived cooperation between the team members, openness to diverse viewpoints, and communication that is collaborative rather than contentious.

In Christian contexts, this means that task conflict (bringing together various opinions of how to accomplish a task) is likely to be constructive and lead to greater ministry effectiveness when the parties (individuals or organizations) trust each other, are open to new ideas (not a specialty of evangelical Christians; Saroglou, 2002), are willing to spend the time and effort necessary to understand each other, and act in such a way that both parties can see that they are collaborating.

Commitment to Decisions

A third common predictor of group productivity is commitment to decisions that are made in the group. This idea has less empirical support than the others, most likely, not because it is false, but because it has been less studied. Most studies have assumed that commitment to decisions leads to higher productivity (Amason, 1996), and often the focus of research is to discover what factors contribute to commitment to group decisions. Folger (1977), Erez, Earley, and Hulin (1985), and Korsgaard, Schweiger, and Sapienza (1995) demonstrated that participating in the decision making process (exercising "voice") increases decision commitment, a technique used by many managers and Christian leaders to get people to buy into the decision made in a group. Amason (1996) also found that decision commitment was positively correlated to task conflict when controlling for relationship

conflict. Thus it appears that if Christian organizations wish to promote unity among Christians, there must be ample opportunity for discussion on the part of all members of the organizations and openness to understand and debate the various points of view presented.

There are a number of reasons to believe that decision commitment leads to group productivity (Korsgaard et al., 1995). Without it, group members can delay or sabotage the implementation of the decisions (Guth & MacMillan, 1986). Any delay in decision implementation can have dire consequences in quickly changing environments (Eisenhardt, 1989). Decision commitment provides the environment necessary for coordinated and cooperative effort which leads to superior results (Deutsch, 1958). A lack of decision commitment limits the action and options that are available to the group's leader, typically resulting in the inability to enact a decision. Finally, low decision commitment usually has repercussions in an organization beyond the immediate decision in question because group decisions are interlinked with many other aspects of the organization's overall strategy and production.

Although relatively few in number, several empirical studies lend support to the thesis that decision commitment increases group productivity. Hoffman and Maier (1961) studied group member satisfaction with a decided solution, a construct similar to commitment to a decision (Amason, 1996). They found that *satisfaction with solution* was mildly positively correlated with *quality of solution*, but strongly correlated with *satisfaction with influence*. The more group members believed they influenced the decision making process, the more satisfied they were with the group decision, supporting the claim that participation in the decision making process increases decision commitment which in turn yields higher group productivity.

Guth and MacMillan (1986) carried out a study of mid-managers in a variety of organizations. They found that lack of commitment to decisions results in actions that detract from an organization's strategy, delays in implementation of the decisions, and partial or complete sabotaging of the organization's strategy. The lack of commitment often leads to the formation of coalitions among organizational members who have common interests in order to increase the likelihood of successfully redirecting or blocking a decision. Thus if a Christian organization chooses to pursue greater cooperation with other Christian organizations, it needs to make sure that its members are committed to this idea. It cannot be ordered from the top down, but needs to be discussed and debated at all levels to assure the commitment of its members who will implement any decisions concerning this increased cooperation.

Accountability

Accountability may be defined as the "expectation that one may be called on to justify one's beliefs, feelings, and actions to others" (Lerner & Tetlock,

1999, p. 255) with the implication that there will be negative consequences if the justification is not sufficient. For Christians, accountability to God is a central biblical truth (Gal. 6:7). Yet accountability to others appears to be the norm as well (Eph. 4:11-16, II Cor. 10:1-6, James 5:16, Prov. 9:8,9).

There are many positive consequences of accountability that have been demonstrated empirically (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999; Tetlock, 1985): Accountability motivates people to think deeper about the issues when making decisions; it motivates people to be more consistent and stable in their judgments; people held accountable tend to process persuasive messages in more detail; they do a better job of evaluating what evidence is relevant to the task in hand. It seems that these positive results associated with accountability occur because heuristic biases (mental shortcuts) are used less; people use greater processing of social and other information when they know they will have to justify their decisions. Tetlock (1985) found that accountability was much more effective in preventing (rather than correcting) heuristic biases because the information had not yet been processed. By reducing errors and distortion motivated by these biases, accountability can clearly lead to better decisions and improved performance. This could be a very effective strategy to promote unity among Christians and Christian organizations. However, actually finding people or organizations to which individuals or organizations wish to be accountable is another question. For example, this could be accomplished by one organization putting itself under the authority of another or by two (or more organizations) forming a new, overarching organization to which they must all be accountable.

However, not all accountability is profitable. Tetlock and Boettger (1999) found that people who are held accountable in the presence of large quantities of information may get overwhelmed by the pressure to sort through the information, reducing their ability to make good decisions. Learner and Tetlock (1999), in a review of literature, concluded that accountability most likely leads to open minded and critical thinking under certain conditions. If the audience's (whoever will be doing the evaluating) views are known to a person, accountability tends to push people towards to conformity. However, if the audience's views are not known, people tend to perform *preemptive self-criticism* which involves greater critical thinking and evaluation of the choices that they have. Secondly, when people are held accountable before the decision is made (predecisional accountability), they are more open minded and do more critical thinking in order to make the best choice. In postdecisional accountability, most cognitive resources are allocated to justifying one's actions rather than seeking the best option. A third condition that encourages open mindedness and critical thinking is procedural (or process) accountability rather than outcome accountability (Siegel-Jacobs & Yates, 1996; Simonson & Staw, 1992). "Outcome accountability refers to a situation where the end result of

a decision or behavior is compared to some standard. . . . Procedural accountability refers to a situation where individuals are evaluated based on the quality of the process by which a judgment or decision is made, regardless of the quality of the outcome" (Siegel-Jacobs & Yates, 1996, p. 4). Procedural accountability motivates people to look for alternate solutions and seek maximum information to improve their decision making. Outcome accountability, however, increases pressure that people feel and can lead to poorer performance especially on novel and complex tasks. Outcome accountability also encourages people to act in such a way as to improve the audience's perceptions of the outcome rather than to actually improve the outcome, as well as to act unethically to achieve the desired outcomes.

In light of these processes, one way that Christian organizations could use accountability to increase cooperation leading to greater ministry effectiveness would be the creation of sorts of accreditation agencies which would hold them accountable for meeting various standards concerning cooperation and ministry effectiveness. Such a structure would be similar to accreditation agencies which hold academic institutions accountable for the quality of their services and operations, while allowing academic freedom concerning the materials taught. Such agencies would need to be led by representatives of the various member organizations who are highly trusted and highly qualified to deal with extremely complicated issues such as the standards required for operations within Christian organizations and the standards that could be used to evaluate the services that the member organizations provide.

Group Goals

Goal setting is one of the most studied and empirically confirmed strategies for increasing motivation and performance in groups (Latham, 2000). There are four principal empirical findings that support the value of goal setting in groups (Latham, 2000; Latham & Locke, 1991; Weldon & Weingart, 1993). The first is that setting specific goals yields higher performance relative to not setting goals or setting vague, general goals (i.e. "Do your best."). Secondly, among people of the same ability, those with more difficult goals will perform at a higher level relative to those who have easier goals. Thirdly, factors that are known to increase performance (such as praise, feedback, or participation in decision making) do so by the mediation of goal setting (e.g., when people receive feedback on their performance, they adjust their goals in light of the feedback). Finally, goals increase motivation to exert cognitive effort, resulting in greater processing of choices and sustained effort in searching for the most effective ways to reach the goals.

However, not all goals are equally beneficial for group performance. There are several known moderators that affect performance. Goals need to be sufficiently challenging. People adjust their level of effort to achieve

what they believe is success. If the goals are easy, people will work only enough to achieve those goals. If the goals are more difficult, they will increase their efforts to achieve them (Latham, 2000). Goals must also be specific (not "Work hard."). Vague goals do not provide the feedback that motivates people to increase their effort (Latham & Locke, 1991). Group members must also have a sense of goal commitment (Locke, Latham, & Erez, 1988) which is primarily developed through a sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 2000) and outcome expectancies resulting from being accountable (such as rewards, punishments, or evaluation; Latham, 2000; Ronan, Latham, & Kinne, 1973). Similarly, goals increase performance only when the necessary resources are available to accomplish the goals, such as time, money, and group member ability (Locke, Frederick, Buckner, & Bobko, 1984).

A meta-analysis of 12 studies comparing outcomes of groups with and without group goals (O'Leary-Kelly, Martocchio, & Frink, 1994) indicated that setting group goals (vs. no goals) resulted in an increase of group performance of almost one standard deviation. This indicates that setting group goals is among the most important ways of improving group performance. Within a Christian organization, this means that setting challenging and specific goals concerning cooperation with other Christian organizations is likely to actually lead to greater cooperation if members of the organization are personally committed to these goals and have the necessary resources to implement them. Similarly, Christian organizations can increase their ministry effectiveness in their cooperative efforts by setting challenging goals that can only be achieved by cooperation.

Conclusions

This paper has examined five predictors of improved group productivity that are commonly believed to be essential for effective management (Lencioni, 2002): Trust, constructive conflict, decision commitment, accountability, and group goals. Empirical studies show that all five of these factors do, indeed, improve group performance and therefore should be considered by Christian organizations as potential means to increase cooperation and ministry effectiveness. However, not all of these factors improve productivity without qualification. Trust is uniquely beneficial in the presence of motivation and task conflict (diversity of viewpoints). Task conflict is only constructive at low to medium levels and when relationship conflict is at low or very low levels; constructive conflict is especially beneficial in groups that are involved in non-routine problem solving, that are high in trust and openness to new ideas, and that have sufficient time and energy to consider the various options. Commitment to group decisions is probably beneficial without qualification. Accountability most likely contributes to performance when it evaluates procedures (rather than outcomes) and when the judging authority is composed of highly skilled individuals who are able to deal

with the complexity of fixing standards. Group goals are most effective when they are challenging and specific, and when the group is highly committed to the goals and has sufficient resources to attain them.

One of the goals of the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910 was to promote cooperation and unity among mission organizations in order to be a better witness in the various fields and to be more effective in their ministries that God had given them. Just as the divisions among Christians are complex and deeply rooted in history and culture, the solutions leading to greater cooperation and unity are also complex. The results of the empirical studies summarized here provide several new perspectives concerning ways that Christians and their organizations can seek greater cooperation and ministry effectiveness. None of these processes in itself (or any combination of them) is likely to lead to the unity that God desires, but by his grace, advances can be made as Christian leaders seek to listen to his will and try new approaches that may lead Christian organizations beyond the traditional divisions.

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