

The Application of Theory in Practice

As many of us found out on Thursday when our teams were put together; it is very difficult task to quantify methods in which teams can be distributed in a manner that is 1. feasible and 2. appropriate. I think the volunteers did a great job (regardless of what your opinion is on how well) in splitting us into groups and their time and effort is appreciated nonetheless. Having said that, I encountered the problem we have when we deal with theoretical information about a phenomenon (teamwork) and its implementation in reality. The teams were decided by volunteers who based their decisions on value judgements they themselves undertook during the process. Peter even said that splitting teams using more than 1-2 factors would be impossible of a task for the volunteers. The main issue I had for the team selection criteria was not the selection in of itself, but the questions asked of us to inquire our preferences. Now, I understand that there is limited resources and time to split teams but asking ONE question (what kind of team?) with TWO word answers (fun-loving, grade-orientated etc.) in order to garner the nature of goals a person has is quite misleading. For e.g- A person who loves to have a good time while learning can also be grade-orientated and this can completely overshadow the whole goal orientation process. **My point is that the selection criteria would not effect the type of teams we have encountered if they were picked out of a hat.** The vague manner in which all students were demarcated (using the 25 SHV threshold) was rather symptomatic of society itself. If a group of people are unable to reach a predetermined level, they ought to be among themselves. I do not think the judgement of one student dragging down others has been removed, but in fact amplified by the fact that you have students struggling to come to terms with the course work but now are in groups with other students who are struggling. This is the complete antithesis of learning and seems to be more of a grade fearing response by the volunteers explained through 'lack of effort, finances, time etc' rather than a promotion of mutual learning. Keeping the students with under 25 SHV together not only erodes the whole basis of diverse teams based on one distinguishing factor but reinforces the very same thought process that may have resulted in the low SHV to start with. Why was GPA not the most important factor used? Why were not all students with a GPA below 4.0 kept together, as I would argue- that is a more representative number on EFFORT during their University years, rather than a tacit and false underlying belief that SHV<25 is representative of effort alone.

This above rant is not so much as to my displeasure with my team, in fact I like my team already and I see great potential in working with all of them; but to highlight the efforts we go into digging into theory and then bypassing it by making false and surface level assumptions. And that is the nature of theory and practise, where the most robust guidelines to team building can be overthrown using surface level ambiguity. Relating this to the readings, there is a lot of mention of 'team accountability' and 'goal orientation' and process in which we move from a group to an effective team. What characteristics of teams allow them to achieve accelerated personal growth? (as abstracted by the authors Katzenbach and Smith, 1992) Does growth have an optimal growth rate or what are we supposed to be measuring growth against? Why is 'accelerated' personal growth better than slow but steady growth? These underlying assumptions of the fundamental nature of humans is problematic to me. These words are ambiguous in nature and provide very little information on how to deal with individuals. It provides a guideline on how to deal with group members and how having similar goals decreases tensions and aligns effort levels. It talks about the nature in which we must all be accountable for each other, but at the end of the day the theory is grasping at something much deeper than just teamwork. It alludes to the fundamental nature of collaboration among humans and how one must have the desire to be accountable for other members (Katzenbach and Smith, 1992). This cannot simply be read and understood, as it must be put into practise for each individual and lessons must be learnt in order to make any sense of the information being provided. And in the current environment, with factors such as 'dependency on peer reviews for grades', and 'competition without actual resources' does not allow one to truly test the framework at hand. Even if you are fully trustworthy with team members, you know that you have very little in reality invested in the decisions we are making which removes the significant portion of fear. This fear is an underlying assumption when we read about business theory as one is placing actual resources and reputations on the line in fear of job loss and lower pay. I can see how this is the first step in preparing us for the next 'real' thing but in order to promote information, it must be acknowledged that we are just grasping at tid-bits of theory where we find reasonable and ignore the bits that we don't find to be applicable. To relate this to my last journal, we reflect on what we learn, we learn on what we perceive and we are currently only perceiving a modified version of what the theory talks about. Having worked in teams in real organization, I can safely say that all these factors in the theory are amplified and the our commitments to other aspects are even more concrete (family, second job etc); making things infinitely more complex. So, I have decided to use personal experience rather than theoretical frameworks which are so far removed from my reality to assess day to day decisions within the team. As for personal growth, it should be of no concern of the author to accelerate as they have no evidence to 1. imply accelerated growth is positive in all cases and 2. measure of personal growth is robust using business tools and matrices.

Overall, this week has been very strange, where in class we have talked about goal diversity as the number one issue to teams but then we did nothing to dig deeper than the oversimplified question on our C.V. We talked about the characteristics of a strong team using theory but we hardly talked about the limits and problems students face in teams at Auckland University. Hardly anyone indulges in discussion when Peter asks questions but then suddenly effort becomes the most significant factor in deciding teams. But this is to be expected in a class size of 120 odd with various different attitudes and experiences about University.

References

- Oakley, B., Felder, R. M., Brent, R., & Elhajj, I. (2004). Turning student groups into effective teams. *Journal of student centered learning*, 2(1), 9--34.
- Katzenbach, J. R. & Smith, D. K. (1992). Why teams matter. *McKinsey Quarterly*, (3), 3--27