Training students to become effective workplace team leaders

Rebecca A. Thacker and Christine A. Yost

The authors
Rebecca A. Thacker (thacker@ohio.edu) is an Associate Professor of Human Resource Management and Christine A. Yost (yostc@ohio.edu) is a Lecturer, both in the College of Business, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, USA.

Keywords
Teams, Team leaders, Trust, Influence

Abstract
Employers often comment on the lack of good team leadership skills exhibited by newly graduated business students. While an understanding of the factors that contribute to effective communication in workplace teams does exist, are we certain that the factors influencing quality of communication between student team leaders and team members are the same as the factors influencing quality of communication in workplace teams? To investigate this issue, students were surveyed. Results indicate that student team leaders mirror workplace team leaders in all but the most important factor: the use of exchange as a tactic of influence. Use of supportive influence tactics and recognition that assertive tactics are not effective was consistent with workplace team leader tactics. As with workplace team leaders, trust was an important determinant with satisfaction with the team leader's communication. Implications and suggestions for training students to become effective team members in the work world are discussed.

Electronic access
The research register for this journal is available at http://www.emeraldinsight.com/research_registers
The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at http://www.emeraldinsight.com/1352-7592.htm

The importance of effective teams
Teamwork has taken on added importance as organizations move to cross-functional teams to improve effectiveness. Cross-functional teams enhance the rapidity with which the
organization innovates and adapts to changes in the marketplace. The advent of sophisticated electronic communication technology has prompted the use of virtual teams to integrate global multi-site operations in a cost and time efficient manner. The ability to function well as a team leader thus becomes an individual productivity issue that ultimately affects an organization’s ability to operate effectively. Although we seem to know this, the reality is that many individuals are thrown into team leader roles without adequate training.

When making the transition from college life to work life, students are also frequently ill-prepared to function effectively as team leaders in work teams. Thus, just as matters of content are taught in a college classroom, process issues such as how to function effectively as a team leader also warrant emphasis.

What we know about satisfaction with quality of team leader communication in workplace groups

Trust and team leader communication
The link between trust and communication in the workplace is well-established (Butler and Cantrell, 1994). The amount of trust team members place in their team leader has a great deal to do with how members perceive the quality of communication with their leader (Muchinsky, 1977; Roberts and O'Reilly, 1974). Trust is enhanced when employees perceive that their managers provide feedback to them, offer sufficient explanations for their (the manager’s) actions (e.g. Konovsky and Cropanzano, 1991; Sapienza and Korsgaard, 1996) and discuss their ideas (e.g. Butler, 1991; Hart et al., 1986). Trust is important also because it allows team members to stay focused on the project or problem on which they are working, as opposed to focusing on inter-group rivalries or personality conflicts, a problem that often arises in student teams.

Trust is affected by the display of obvious and observable behaviors such as the tactics team leaders use to try to influence members to get their work done. Feelings of trust in a team leader can be compromised by the leader’s use of hostile and demanding tactics, likely to be interpreted as lack of concern for the team members. Conversely, supportive tactics can lead to feelings of trust in the team leader (Thacker, 1997). Influence tactics that are particularly well suited to a study of how team leaders attempt to influence team members are:
- assertiveness;
- support; and
- exchange.

Influence tactics
Aggressive and assertive influence tactics are generally found to have negative effects when used to try to influence others. For example, assertive tactics from team leaders were found to block creative efforts in teams (Thacker, 1997). Controlling communication tactics are more likely to decrease individual motivation than are supportive communication tactics (Deci and Ryan, 1987; Deci et al., 1989). Assertive tactics are frequently viewed as confrontational, producing a negative effect on the target of the influence effort. Thus, directing and demanding techniques (e.g. “Do this now”, or “I expect that you will have this done by tomorrow”, or “I require that you do it this way”) have been shown to have negative effects on an individual’s ability to influence others.

On the other hand, influence tactics based upon support have positive benefits. Use of supportive tactics, based on friendliness and ingratiation, have been shown to affect work-related outcomes, such as performance ratings, in a positive manner (Kipnis and Schmidt, 1988). Supportive team leader tactics were more likely to enhance team creativity than were directive tactics (Thacker, 1997). Offering to make a personal sacrifice such as giving up free time to help the team, visibly recognizing the team’s past efforts before making further requests of the team, or presenting the facts, figures and other supporting information when asking the team to begin work on a task are examples of friendly and supportive team leader tactics.

Another tactic of influence that has an effect on the communication quality of team leaders is exchange. The effective use of exchange tactics rests on the notion that the source can offer something of value to the target (Yuki, 1990) and often involves the use of bargaining. Exchange is likely to be used with peers when help or support is needed (Cohen and Bradford, 1989; Kaplan, 1986). Examples of exchange tactics team leaders may use include offering to do something for others if they will in turn do something for
you, or reminding others of what you have done for them in the past, before making a request. Knowledge of how student teams work suggests that exchange would be viewed as a valued tactic because students generally like to divide the group’s tasks among themselves.

In summary, we know that tactics used to influence others affect the quality of team leader communication in the workplace. The tactics of assertiveness, support and exchange have particularly strong effects. Trust between team leader and team members also affects the quality of communication. Trust is affected by the tactics team leaders use to influence team members. Acting in concert with one another, trust and influence tactics are a dynamic duo. A student survey was undertaken to see if these factors are at play in student teams.

Method
Questionnaire data were collected from 304 undergraduate and graduate business students at a midwestern university. To measure trust, students were asked to state their agreement/disagreement with two statements: “If I needed the advice of someone in the group, I would approach the team leader”, and “The team leader’s opinions have an impact on my decisions”. Respondents were asked to respond to items describing the tactics of influence used by a team leader in a group of which the respondent student had been a member (see the Appendix for a list of questions). Influence tactics questions were adapted from the original questionnaire instrument constructed by Kipnis et al. (1980). Communication satisfaction was measured using 11 items selected from Downs and Hazen’s (1977) communication satisfaction scale. Students were asked to indicate their degree of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the communication from the leader of their student team. Examples of items include “Extent to which my team leader listened and paid attention to me”, and “Extent to which my team leader was open to ideas” (see the Appendix for a listing of all “Satisfaction with team leader communication” questions).

Results and discussion

Results of the student survey indicate that trust was consistently reported to have a major effect on satisfaction with the team leader’s communication. The more that the team leader was trusted, the higher the satisfaction with the communication from that team leader. Results also indicated that when the team leader used assertive tactics to try and influence team members, team members were dissatisfied with the quality of communication. Use of supportive tactics by the team leader was viewed more favorably, promoting greater satisfaction with the quality of communication than did assertive tactics. The use of exchange tactics by the team leader did not have a strong effect one way or the other on student team members’ perceptions of the quality of communication with their team leader. To summarize, then, student teams mirror workplace teams in three of four aspects, as categorized in Table I.

Ineffective use of exchange tactics: a training need

The findings on exchange bear further scrutiny, as herein lies a potential explanation for why students fail to function as effectively as they should as team leaders. Perhaps students are not recognizing the benefits of exchange, which are considerable and include the following:

• During the initial stages of team formation, a leader who encourages members to exchange information about themselves, and about the work itself, sets a norm of exchange early on (Stewart et al., 1999).

• An expectation of exchange can help to avoid the “free-rider” effect; that is, some members shirk their responsibilities, frustrating those who end up doing more than their share of the work.

• The team leader who emphasizes exchange can dispel the perception of some team members that being an isolationist is acceptable, thus avoiding the tendency of some to withdraw from the team psychologically, rarely making suggestions or contributing ideas (Rayner, 1996).

• An emphasis on individual goals can foster conflict with team members; conversely, exchange of ideas and collaboration toward achieving team goals enhances productivity.

• An effective leader helps team members to use information and make decisions. Decisions cannot be made without
exchanging information. Exchange fosters open communication.
• Working together toward a collective goal enhances team cohesion.

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) might prove a useful theoretical basis on which to base student team leader training in how to facilitate exchange. Social exchange theory describes exchanges that involve both extrinsic benefits and intrinsic benefits. Many of the benefits that result from successful student team performance are intrinsic in nature (e.g. social interaction, support, friendship). Starting each team project with a social event, such as sharing a pizza and having an “ice breaker” during which each team member must introduce another team member, can lay the social foundation for the team.

Equally as important, exchanging ideas about how to proceed ultimately sets the stage for achievement of the extrinsic reward, a good grade. Thus, asking the team leader to first guide the team in determining an action plan, with deadlines for completion of each item and collaborative delegation for action items, is a productive way to start the exchange process. As well, collaborative determination of team rules, in which each team member exchanges information about something that was bothersome in previous team experiences, sets the tone for constructing team rules to prevent that problem from recurring and also promotes exchange. Figure 1 summarizes these suggestions.

Assertiveness and support tactics: training implications
The results of the survey suggested that student teams resemble workplace teams in the manner in which they use two important influence tactics: assertiveness and support. To reinforce the importance of de-emphasizing assertiveness tactics and increasing the use of supportive tactics, several action steps are suggested below (see Figure 1 for summary):
• Assertive tactics often show up during the middle and latter stages of the student team’s project, as teams rush to meet project deadlines, and one or two team members inevitably shirk their responsibilities. Team leaders often naturally fall into assertive mode. To prevent the team leader from creating tension-filled interactions that escalate into open hostility, students should be trained to request outside (the team) intervention from someone with legitimate or formal power. The professor would be a natural mediator or arbitrator. However, to ensure that the student team leader will take this step, students must be made to feel comfortable with the professor’s intervention. One way to do this is to provide students with a printed list of possible “conflict-reducing” steps, one of which is to call on the professor. Another way is to give student team leaders an incentive to reduce the conflict; for example, student team leaders who solve their conflict using non-assertive tactics will be awarded extra credit points.
• Train student team leaders to emphasize supportive tactics in their dealings with team members. This could be as simple as role playing situations in which the student team leader uses supportive language: “If we all spend an extra half-hour together, proofreading the paper and making changes, we’ll have a much better
product". The supportive tactics role play should be followed by the assertive language role play; for example: "All of you had better stick around and get this done or I am going to mark you down for participation". Discussion ensues, during which the team leader asks teammates for feedback. Which communication tactic was most effective? Which tactic was most likely to motivate the team members to stay and work the extra half-hour? Verbalizing perceptions often highlights the difference in ways that team leaders will remember.

- Reinforce and solidify the link between supportive tactics and the establishment of trust. Results of the survey suggest that supportive tactics will be less useful if student team members do not trust the team leader. Student teams are similar to workplace teams, wherein the more a subordinate trusts a supervisor, the more likely the supervisor’s feedback will have an impact upon the subordinate (Earley, 1986). Trust has been established as an influential factor in affecting cooperation (Axelrod, 1984). With grades at stake, cooperation among team members is important to the team’s success. The ability of a team leader to reduce the risk associated with working as a team is therefore a valuable asset.

One approach for fostering trust between the team leader and team members is to provide a graded assignment of short duration early in the team project, an assignment that is relatively simple for the group to complete successfully. By providing this vehicle for the team leader to use supportive tactics early and in a successful manner, the team leader is more likely to establish a feeling of trust among team members. Some have speculated that being able to trust someone is a way to reduce risk or uncertainty (Jones and George, 1998). Couched in student terms, reducing the risk of receiving a bad grade not only takes the use of supportive tactics, but a willingness to promote trust among team members.

The bottom line is that if colleges and universities are to continue placing students in teams for purposes of earning a grade, some responsibility must rest on the academic institutions to prepare the students to become effective team members and leaders. This study provides some guidelines for initial steps that can be taken. Ultimately, the student team leader’s training will translate into positive benefits for future employers.

References

Appendix

Influence tactics
(1) The team leader went out of the way to make the team feel good before asking the team to do what he/she wanted.
(2) The team leader sympathized with the team about the added problems his/her requests could cause.
(3) The team leader used logical arguments in order to convince the team.
(4) The team leader acted in a friendly manner toward the team before making a request.
(5) The team leader presented facts, figures, and other information to the team in support of his/her position.
(6) The team leader obtained the support and cooperation of the team to back up his/her request.
(7) The team leader offered to make a personal sacrifice such as giving up free time if the team would do what he/she wanted.
(8) The team leader very carefully explained to the team the reasons for his/her request.
(9) The team leader tried to create a team atmosphere, encouraging the team to work together.
(10) The team leader was supportive.

Assertiveness
(1) The team leader acted very humbly and politely while making a request.
(2) The team leader repeatedly reminded the team of what he/she wanted.

Exchange
(1) The team leader offered an exchange in which he/she would do something that the team wanted if the team would do what the team leader wanted.
(2) The team leader became a nuisance by continually bothering the team in order to get what he/she wanted.
(3) The team leader reminded the team of how he/she has helped them in the past and implied that now he/she expected compliance with his/her request.

Satisfaction with communication
(1) Extent to which my team leader listened and paid attention to me.
(2) Extent to which my team leader offered guidance for solving problems.
(3) Extent to which my team leader trusted me.
(4) Extent to which my team leader was open to ideas.
(5) Extent to which the amount of leadership given was about right.
(6) Extent to which my team leader knew and understood the problems faced by team members.
(7) My team leader recognized my efforts.
(8) Extent to which my team leader’s communication motivated and stimulated an enthusiasm for meeting the team’s goals.
(9) Extent to which the team leader had great ability as a communicator.
(10) Extent to which the team leader’s communication made me identify with or feel a vital part of the group.
(11) Extent to which conflicts were handled appropriately by the team leader through proper communication channels.