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Trust and Collaboration in "Zero-History" Administrative Teams

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ABSTRACT

Traditions of shared governance and the complexity of problems faced by colleges and universities suggest the need for effective collective action. This study examined leadership teams in two sites: a new two-year public institution formed by merger and a new four-year private institution. Research hypotheses were developed from the perspective of structuration theory. Structuration theory attempts to explain how structures emerge through group interaction. Findings suggest that higher education leaders can take several steps to improve prospects for the development of trust and collaboration in their administrative teams: (1) articulate behavioral norms that endorse systemic thinking; (2) develop and support cross-functional planning groups; (3) make clear that team behaviors are supposed to further institutional goals, not advocate for departmental- or self-interest; and (4) provide frequent opportunities for interpersonal interaction among team members, especially during early stages of team development.

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Trust and Collaboration in "Zero-History" Administrative Teams

Higher education institutions have recognized that the completion of many tasks requires the combined effort and expertise of people working together in teams. Teams are useful for mediating disagreements and for dealing with exceptional as well as permanent tasks, especially where the latter involve creative, innovative, and problem-solving processes (Donnellon, 1996; Larson & LaFasto, 1989). Traditions of shared governance and the complexity of problems faced by colleges suggest the need for effective collective action. The current empirical literature, however, provides little guidance about how administrators and others can build effective teams in higher education organizations. Since Bensimon and Neumann's (1993) ground-breaking study of collaborative leadership in presidential cabinets, few researchers have heeded their call for additional research on teams in higher education. As Robbins and Fredendall (2001, p. 135) noted, most of the information about teams and teamwork in higher education "is piecemeal, speculative, or based on descriptive research about the success of groups or teams in other environments."

The limited literature, however, does provide some insights about how teams in higher education function (Bensimon & Neumann, 1993; Eckel, 1998; Lucas, 1994). Conventional ideas about teams as neat sets of structured, coordinated role relationships do not capture the functional reality of higher education teams. Higher education administrative teams are fluid structures; seldom do the same people make decisions on the same issue over time. Since many college presidents and upper-level administrators leave their positions on average after five years, the need for powerful management teams that can collaborate and produce outcomes within a short period of time is critical.

One of the critical challenges in building an effective team is the development and maintenance of trust among members (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Mintzberg, Dougherty, Jorgensen, & Westley, 1996). "Trust is a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another" (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998, p. 395). As trust develops, team members become increasingly confident that they can reveal aspects of themselves, share personal information, and discuss their ideas without fear of repercussion or embarrassment. The quality of team performance is often mediated by a willingness to trust others, to take risks, and to explore new and innovative solutions to complex problems. Thus, the level of trust among team members may determine, in large part, the effectiveness of collective action (Elster, 1989).

Decisions about the trustworthiness of another team member often depend on prior observation and experience with the other person's behavior (Donnellon, 1996). Members of newly-formed, "zero-history" teams, however, lack the knowledge base for determining whether other members of the team may be trusted. In the absence of prior guiding experience, there is no way for a team member to know, with any degree of certainty, if other members are dependable, knowledgeable about the work to be done, dedicated to the goals and tasks of the team, or able to maintain a confidence. Put simply, how do administrative teams comprised of people who do not know each other well learn to trust each other and work collaboratively?

The purpose of this study was to examine trust and collaboration in zero-history administrative teams in higher education institutions. We explored these phenomena in two sites: a new two-year public institution formed by merger and a new four-year

private institution. These sites were selected due to their "newness" and for the potential of locating zero-history teams in action. In the two-year institution, we studied the college's coordinating council – a 12-member policy-making body composed of the president and senior administrators from each of the institution's three campuses. In the four-year institution, we studied the president's leadership team, a seven-member policy-making group composed of the president and senior administrators from each functional division of the college. The coordinating council at the two-year institution met every other week at alternating campus sites. The president's council at the four-year institution met formally twice each month and informally once a month over dinner. Thus, the purpose, composition, and meeting frequency of the teams were similar.

Research hypotheses were developed from the perspective of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). Structuration theory attempts to explain how structures emerge through group activity (Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1996). This perspective is appropriate for exploring issues of trust development and collaboration in zero-history teams, since these entities are beginning to appropriate (i.e., borrow, adapt) their own set of structures to guide group behavior.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Structuration Theory

Traditional notions of structural-functionalism suggest that organizational structures determine individual and group behaviors (Bess, 1988; Blau, 1973; Parsons, 1951). For example, the degree of centralization in an organization will affect individual levels of innovation (Hage & Aiken, 1970). Structuration theory, on the other hand,

provides an alternative to structural determinism, and suggests that individuals and groups are active agents who create the structures within which they operate (Giddens, 1984). Behavior, in this case, determines structure; however, behaviors are constrained by structures previously created. In other words, people enact structures in their daily organizational interactions, but these interactions are conditioned by the structural context that members have created over time (Hatch, 1997).

Interaction processes within and between groups are central to structuration theory and help inform organizational behavior. The theory suggests that a *social system* (e.g., an administrative team) is defined by the relational and communication patterns that emerge within the group and between the group and other social systems. *Structures* are the rules and resources group members use to sustain the social system. *Rules* are the decision modalities adopted by the group (e.g., consensus decision making, collaborative problem analysis). *Resources* are the knowledge frameworks and legitimization modalities (e.g., status, ethics) utilized in group interaction. *Structuration* is the process by which social systems are produced and continually redefined through members' use of structures (i.e., rules and resources).

Each social group creates and continually enacts its own structural mix. Although structures appear to be created anew by each group, Poole, Seibold, and McPhee (1996) assert that groups often appropriate these structures from historic and enduring social institutions (e.g., norms for participatory democracy in decision making). Groups tend to appropriate these structural features for their own purposes and specific contexts. For example, a group that defines itself as a deliberative body (e.g., a faculty senate) will appropriate structures that differ from those appropriated by a more purely decisional

group (e.g., a board of trustees). These structures, in turn, provide and establish patterns for group interaction.

The manner in which structures are appropriated contributes to and may be largely responsible for the degree of organizational stability as well as the way in which change is manifested. When members appropriate rules and resources in a consistent manner, reproduction is similar over time and is responsible for maintaining a stable environment. On the other hand, "reproduction does not necessarily imply replication" (Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, p. 123). As certain features in the team are modified, structures may change gradually or be totally eliminated.

Structuration theory attempts to identify links between global and local issues (micro and macro concerns) by noting that (1) groups and teams are generally the result of larger patterns of social interaction within the organization, (2) despite an attempt for groups to maintain their own boundaries, there is generally an overlap of roles and responsibilities with other groups both within and external to the organization, and (3) group processes themselves are the properties of social systems that have evolved and been learned throughout one's life (e.g., work experience and individual frames of reference). Thus, the types of structures that groups appropriate depend upon:

- historical and situational context
- differential distributions of resources (e.g., knowledge, power) among group members
- tasks, roles, and membership determined by the larger social system (e.g., organizational expectations for the team)
- boundary issues between the group and the larger social system (e.g., overlapping responsibilities with other groups or teams).

Structuration and Team Trust

The types of structures appropriated by team members may affect the development and degree of trust in teams. We explored the theoretical and empirical literature to identify structures that may affect trust development. Historically, rational and social models of trust have guided theory and research. The rational model suggests that trust may be viewed as a subjective probability of performance or as a threshold point located on a probabilistic distribution. "When we say we trust someone or that someone is trustworthy, we implicitly mean that the probability that he will perform an action that is beneficial, or at least not detrimental, to us is high enough for us to consider engaging in some form of cooperation with him" (Gambetta, 1988, p. 217). Many of the assumptions about trust in organizations appear to support a rational perspective where the decision to trust others is predicated on an estimate of the likelihood that others will reciprocate (Hardin, 1993).

In contrast, the social model suggests that trust is a significant element in organizations only where there are close interpersonal relationships (Tyler & Degoey, 1996). Here, affective dimensions of trust are paramount. Social trust in colleges and other organizations may be found within sets of "shared principles that frame core organizational aims, and is enlivened through daily social relations that embody a genuine regard for others" (Bryk & Schneider, 1996, p. 33).

Research on rational and social models of trust in teams suggests the validity of the tenet that decisions about trust turn to some degree upon calculation (Kramer, Brewer, & Hanna, 1996). Nonetheless, there is also convincing support that successful collective action depends at least partially on trust among individuals engaged in voluntary activities targeted toward achieving common goals (Elster, 1989). These

models suggest the need to examine how teams appropriate both instrumental (rational) and non-instrumental (social) structures as we seek to better understand trust in teams. Thus, we focused our research on two instrumental structures – individual roles and authority patterns – which have potential to explain the relationship between team structuration processes and team trust. We also examined interpersonal relationships as a non-instrumental social structure with potential to affect trust in teams.

Roles: Instrumental Structures

Roles are often conceptualized as sets of task expectations that are performed by individuals; for example, the president's role in fund raising or the department chair's role in curriculum development. These formalized, job-related expectations are known as functional roles. Alternatively, roles may be viewed as enacted among people; in other words, role is a group process. Group process roles include a range of interactive behaviors, including synthesizing, analyzing, and emotional monitoring (Bensimon & Neumann, 1993). Thus, there is a distinction between functional roles and group process roles.

Performance in one's functional role may define success in autonomous, task-centered work. For example, a researcher's performance in a grant-writing role is likely to affect whether she is successful in obtaining external support. Team members, on the other hand, are challenged to consider the needs and interests of multiple constituencies and assess competing demands in terms of collective, rather than functional, goals. The ability to transcend one's functional role, however, is often difficult. "When team members encounter conflicts between their functional identities and their team identities,

the functional identity – being older, more reinforced, and more familiar – is likelier to win out" (Donnellon, 1996, p. 16).

Structuration theory suggests that roles are resources (knowledge frameworks) that team members appropriate from their larger social systems. Team members may replicate existing functional roles in the team context, or they may appropriate group process roles as they develop their patterns of interaction.

Hypothesis: Appropriation of functional roles will be an inhibitor of collaboration and trust development in administrative teams.

Authority Patterns: Instrumental Structures

Researchers who utilize a traditional structural-functionalist approach suggest than an organization's structure is defined by the authority relationships among its component parts; for example, the relationship between the provost's office and the faculty senate or the connections between academic affairs and student affairs (Bess, 1988; Blau, 1973). These authority relationships are clearly specified in organizational charts and policy statements, which leaders can adjust in order to change behavior in desired directions.

Researchers who utilize structuration theory, on the other hand, suggest that authority relationships in organizations are created through daily interactions among organizational members. To get a sense of authority relationships in an organization, it is less important to examine organizational charts and policies than to observe who interacts with whom and for what purpose.

Structuration theory suggests that authority relationships are rules (guidelines for decision making) that team members appropriate from their larger social systems. Team

members may replicate existing authority relationships from their larger social systems. Here, the most powerful people in the organization set the agenda for the team. Alternatively, the team may appropriate a different rule for establishing authority relationships such as voting for a team leader or rotating leadership among members.

Replication of organizational authority patterns by the team may constrain the open communication needed to develop trust. Power imbalances, imported into the work of the team, may inhibit free expression, given the potential for retribution outside the team context. Lower-level employees may edit what they say so as not to offend higher-ranking individuals. Such power imbalances on teams can lead to groupthink and premature consensus (Janis, 1983).

Alternative forms of structuration, however, may yield trusting team climates. A rotational approach, for example, gives each member a stake in team leadership and redresses power imbalances that may exist in the team's larger social system.

Hypothesis: Appropriation of existing organizational authority relationships will be an inhibitor of collaboration and trust development in administrative teams.

Interpersonal Relationships: Non-Instrumental Structures

Interpersonal relationships are critical non-instrumental social structures in groups and teams. They are non-instrumental because they do not fulfill a particular task function. Instead, they serve as the "social glue" that holds the team together. Interpersonal relationships can enable the development of a common team identity, as interests, beliefs, and values are shared through interaction (Bormann, 1996).

Norms associated with interpersonal communication are likely to affect the development and maintenance of trust in teams. Members of zero-history teams are

challenged, initially, to develop the spontaneity of communication that characterizes teams with high levels of trust (Drexler, Sibbit, & Forrester, 1988). Open communication may be facilitated through self-disclosure – the sharing of personal information with others (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Self-disclosure helps team members initiate and maintain conversations; when one member self-discloses, the tendency is for other members to reciprocate with personal information of their own (Gouldner, 1960).

Team members, over time, can discover the process of trusting and strengthen collaborative relationships in the group so that they feel trustable (Smith & Berg, 1987). Frequent personal interaction among team members over extended periods of time can facilitate individual and team adaptation to unforeseen contingencies by allowing for an easier exchange of information (Lorenz, 1988). Frequent opportunities for interaction among team members can foster trust by providing members with information about people's behavior in different circumstances. This information can be used, in turn, to predict what their actions will be in future situations (Doney & Cannon, 1997).

Hypothesis: The types of communication norms appropriated by a team will affect the development and degree of trust. Norms of self-disclosure and reciprocity will be positively associated with trust development.

Method

Kvale (1996, p. 6) suggested that the purpose of the semi-structured interview "is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena." This perspective is suitable for our study, as we are attempting to determine how perceptions of the organization and perceptions of self are associated with the development and degree of trust in zero-history administrative

teams. A quantitative survey tool would not have been appropriate in this case, as it would be difficult, if not impossible, to determine the nuances and implications of each subject's perceptions.

We engaged in 18 semi-structured interviews with 10 subjects – 5 from each institution – over the course of six months. Eight subjects were interviewed twice, and the period of time between interviews averaged five months. Interviews in the four-year institution were conducted during the year prior to admission of its first class of students; it was the first year that a complete administrative team was in place. Interviews in the two-year institution were conducted during the first year of operation of a new coordinating council, which was created as part of a new governance structure. The merger that created this institution, however, occurred four years before this study began. Therefore, although the administrative group was a zero-history team (they had not worked together as a unit prior to the new governance structure), institutional members had four years of shared history as a merged institution. Thus, the interview protocols for each institution varied so that we could ask members of the two-year institution to reflect on their experiences in the merged institution over the past four years.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Immediately after the interviews, members of the research team spent time debriefing. At that point, we were confident that the data we collected could be examined within our conceptual framework that included roles, authority patterns, and interpersonal relationships. Data analysis began by developing condensed statements of meaning to reflect the content of natural meaning units. We used an iterative process of open and axial coding to organize the meaning

statements. Open coding is an inductive process of category development; axial coding is a deductive process of "fitting" data to categories (Lee, 1999).

Findings

Structuration and Role

Findings support the first hypothesis. Adherence to functional roles interfered with the development of trust. In the two-year institution, for example, subjects' interaction histories revealed that individuals connected primarily with people who shared their functional role. For example, financial aid officers communicated frequently with other financial aid officers, but seldom interacted with people in other functional roles. The result of this adherence to functional role appeared to be "turf" battles, especially when decisions about resource allocation were made.

Team members in the two-year institution also adhered to their pre-merger institutional affiliations. Members talked about bringing resources "home" to their campus. They also revealed suspicions about team members from other campuses, implying that others were not doing their fair share. The level of trust appeared to be so low that members wanted visual verification of others' work to make sure that they were complying with team decisions. For example, if one member did not see another member working on her particular campus, she raised doubts about that member's commitment to the institution. Functional and campus-based role behaviors, perhaps acceptable prior to the merger, hindered the development and degree of trust within the administrative team.

In the four-year institution, team members made deliberate efforts to transcend their functional roles. Members routinely used team meetings to consult with each other about proposed changes in their units. Members from the student affairs staff, for

example, were consulted on issues of curriculum and enrollment management. Respondents tended not to view their team role as being the representative of their functional unit. Instead, they conceptualized their team role as a group process; they appropriated cross-functional interaction as a resource for the structuration of group decision making.

Structuration and Authority Patterns

Findings partially support the second hypothesis. The second hypothesis predicted that appropriation of existing organizational authority patterns into the team would inhibit trust. Instead, what we found were conflicting interpretations of the team's authority structure. The administrative team in the four-year institution had difficulty distinguishing between lines of authority in the organization and authority patterns in the team. One individual stated that "everyone knows where they are in the hierarchy and who they report to," while another stated that "we are attempting to run much flatter than most organizations." There was tension between the formal structure shown in organizational charts and the individual perceptions of structure in the team. This tension resulted in members not knowing whether to bring issues to the team or to address those issues outside the team in the context of the existing organizational chart. These types of jurisdictional issues may constitute a key challenge to teams that appropriate authority structures that differ from the dominant organizational pattern.

In the two-year institution, members resolved this conflict by ignoring the authority structure of the team and relying on political behavior in the larger social system. Members reported that they and others attempted to make "deals" outside the

context of team meetings. They did not appear to trust one another enough to engage openly in discussion, conflict, and negotiation.

Structuration and Interpersonal Relationships

Results support the third hypothesis. Norms of self-disclosure and reciprocity facilitated the development and enhanced the degree of trust in teams. Frequent team meetings and informal social interaction characterized interpersonal relationships among team members in the four-year institution. Members talked about how these communication opportunities enabled them to learn about each other's interpersonal styles – how and when they work best, how and when they want to be consulted about proposed changes in other units. They also used informal interactions to talk through and test out ideas on each other – an indicator of trust and willingness to take risks. In the two-year institution, however, communication frequency among members was primarily associated with increased levels of backdoor negotiation. This team appropriated norms of secrecy and political negotiation, rather than self-disclosure and reciprocity.

Conclusion

Although every higher education institution is unique to some degree – both in regard to its structures as well as to the talents and temperaments of its members – we nonetheless believe that our study offers some useful insights to college leaders who seek to develop effective administrative teams on their campuses. In particular, we gleaned several insights on how structure affects the development of trust and collaboration within an administrative team. One insight is that the skillful appropriation of administrative structures within a new or evolving higher education institution can play

an important role in building trust and collaboration among members of the college community. While many people are conditioned to believe that there is a right way of setting up an organizational structure, there is always room for experimentation and innovation. At the same time, there are models of organizational structures in colleges and universities that have endured precisely because they have proven useful to the realization of the missions of these institutions.

The way teams appropriate structures from their larger social systems appears to affect the development and degree of trust established among the members. Teams that appropriate functional roles as guidelines for behavior reinforce a group dynamic where team members serve as representatives of their particular interest groups. The team becomes an arena to advocate positions and compete for scarce resources. Here, group dynamics reflect competition, rather than collaboration. The appropriation of group process roles, in contrast, encourages collaborative thinking and cross-functional deliberation.

Teams may appropriate the same authority structures present in their organizations. The people at the top of the hierarchy control the team's agenda. Alternatively, teams may appropriate different authority structures, such as leadership rotation. Non-hierarchical forms of agenda setting and task allocation are likely to enhance trust development among team members by creating an environment where risks can be taken without fear of reprisal. However, if a team appropriates an authority structure that differs from its larger social system, members may encounter conflicting expectations between the team and the organization.

The types of social structures appropriated by the team also affect the development of trust. Norms of reciprocity and self-disclosure enhance trust by creating a team climate that welcomes and respects personal experiences and diverse perspectives. Norms of secrecy and coalition building – though effective in other contexts – appear detrimental to trust development in teams.

Findings suggest that higher education leaders can take several steps to improve prospects for the development of trust and collaboration in their teams: (1) articulate behavioral norms that endorse thinking beyond one's functional area; (2) develop and support cross-functional planning groups; (3) make clear that team role behaviors are supposed to advance institutional goals, not advocate for departmental- or self-interest; (4) provide frequent opportunities for interpersonal interaction among team members, especially during early stages of team development; and (5) periodically examine organizational structures and members' interpretations of those structures, and address lack of congruence when it arises.

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