Leadership and Teams - Conformity

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An important issue for people leaders to consider is that of group cohesion and its effects on productivity. Group cohesion can have a beneficial or deleterious effect on productivity depending on whether the team’s goals conform to the goals of the organization. (Robbins, Coulter, & De Cenzo, 2017) Asch’s conformity experiment (1956) has shown that individuals are prone to conform to the ideas of the majority of their teammates, even if the ideas are fundamentally incorrect. By demonstrating the individual’s willingness to provide an answer that they themselves know is wrong, but is championed by the majority of the team Asch showed that an individual can be motivated into conforming with group-think even if deep down they know it to be flawed. Building on Asch’s study, further research by Hodges & Geyer (2006) has shown that truth, trust, and solidarity between teammates are the key components that will determine whether or not an individual will conform to the group’s objectives and norms.

**Personality Type and Conformity**

An interesting question arises; what predisposes an individual to conform to the team’s objective and what might predispose an individual to stand by his or her convictions and speak out in disagreement with the group. Normative influences are more effective on some individuals than others (Asch, 1956) and I propose it is differences in personality types that are responsible.

The Myers-Briggs Personality Type questionnaire is one of the most widely used personality inventories in use today. (Lumen, n.d.) Two of the metrics on the Myers-Briggs inventory that are especially relevant in determining whether an individual is prone to group-think are introversion vers extroversion, and thinking versus feeling. In my opinion, individuals who are introverted and have a preference for thinking will be less prone to group-thinking problems. According to the Myers-Briggs foundation, an individual who displays introverted personality characteristics may say:

I like getting my energy from dealing with the ideas, pictures, memories, and reactions that are inside my head, in my inner world. I often prefer doing things alone or with one or two people I feel comfortable with. I take time to reflect so that I have a clear idea of what I'll be doing when I decide to act. Ideas are almost solid things for me. Sometimes I like the idea of something better than the real thing. (Myers-Briggs Foundation, n.d.)

and an individual with a thinking personality type may say:

When I make a decision, I like to find the basic truth or principle to be applied, regardless of the specific situation involved. I like to analyze pros and cons, and then be consistent and logical in deciding. I try to be impersonal, so I won't let my personal wishes--or other people's wishes--influence me. (Myers-Briggs Foundation, n.d.)

It is the unwavering belief in one's self that is the determining factor on whether an individual’s personality will encourage them to conform with the group’s rationale or to trust their own instincts and have the courage to say so.

**Leadership Models**

It is important for good leaders to recognize that they will have a diverse group of personalities under their command. Lewin (1939) proposes three distinct categories of approaches to leadership that are still relevant today. Autocratic leaders hold central power and make decisions regardless of their team’s input. Democratic leaders involve their team in the process however they maintain the final authority to make decisions. Laizzesfairre leaders let the team be, and these teams can be effective when team members are capable of making their own decisions independently without much direction from management. Of the three styles, authoritarian would be the most effective in mitigating the problems that come that arise from conforming to incorrect ideas. Although this style of leadership may not be the most effective overall strategy to improve the quality of work, authoritarian leaders all but eliminate the the problem of teams conforming to misplaced wisdom as the group is simply not encouraged to voice such opinions. Democratic leaders are the most prone to the problem of misplaced conformity, as they give their teams plenty of time and space to debate amongst themselves. Although this may be the employee’s preferred method of management, it may not be the best choice when there is a high degree of either agreeableness or disagreeableness. Too much and constructive criticism takes place too infrequently and not enough can lead to personal conflicts that are not helpful to improve productivity.

I propose a style of leadership based in authoritarianism, yet still has a forum for team members to give suggestions. Although the team knows who’s in charge, they know that the leader will still listen to input from the team and that it will be taken into consideration.

Analyzing this sort of feedback can foster improvements to the team dynamic and also work to reduce instances of misguided conformity by encouraging workers to be more critical with proposed solutions before presenting them to the leader. Although the word authoritarian conjures images of dictators like Sadaam Husien or Muammar Ghadaffi, it is important to recognize the differences between an authoritarian leader and a political dictator:

Authoritarian leaders, also known as autocratic leaders, provide clear expectations for what needs to be done when it should be done, and how it should be done. This style of leadership is strongly focused on both command by the leader and control of the followers. There is also a clear division between the leader and the members. Authoritarian leaders make decisions independently with little or no input from the rest of the group. (Lewin, 1939)

While it is important to make decisions as an autocratic leader, it is clear that Lewin allows for a bit of input from the team and this is the key to improving work quality while limiting the extent of conformity problems that may develop amongst the team members.

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