Dissertation Proposal

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1   Research Question

1.1   Introduction

I am fascinated by the groups and the processes therein. What always puzzles me about groups is how decisions are made. There are many myths connected with groups, and one of these is that what the group produces or concludes is the sum of all group member's ideas, opinions, efforts and skills. This approach assumes that group decision making is an additive task (Brown 2000, 178) and thus that the product of the group is the best possible outcome of the problem.

However, in my experience, and also noted in several theories on group processes, this is not always the case. The group's decision tends to be coloured by the "stronger" group members and the "weaker" members opinions are either ignored, not expressed or altered to comply better with the strong members' views.

1.2   The Question

My dissertation focus will be on how decisions are made in a group. How does the strong group members influence the weak members and what kind of skills do the strong members posses that makes them stronger decision makers than the weak group members?

Decision making is a vital part of every organisation and I believe it will be useful to learn more about how the group works in its way to make a decision. How it is initiated and how the group lets its members contribute to the discussion. The topic is interesting both for learning about how groups are put together, how a group with a certain dynamism work and how to

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recruit new employees in order to gain a well rounded group, as described by Belbin (Huczynski & Buchanan 2001, 330).

2 Academic Sources

A lot is written on the topic of group processes and decision making. I found Sigmund Freud's works on group psychology a natural starting point for my reading for this dissertation. Freud uses Le Bon's words when describing the group and the group identity.

Also, when looking at the phenomenon of people finding it easier stick with the majority opinion (Brown 2000, 130-41) we find support in Freud's work where he uses Le Bon's description of the group. He argues that the group is like a herd and claiming

> the intellectual capacity of a group is far below that of an individual
>
> (Freud 1921, 79)

Another work I have used as a starting point for my dissertation research is Rupert Brown's book "Group Processes", which was recommended to me by both Dr Fiona MacCall and Dr Ian MacFarlane at the Department of Psychology at the University of Stirling. It is considered an essential read in the area of group psychology, which is in many ways the fundamental corner stone of my dissertation topic.

In addition to these two books as an introduction to the world of social psychology, I have found a number of books useful from the Human Resource Management shelf. My dissertation is definitely in the Organisational Behaviour genre, and I have therefore read in a selection of books on

this subject. These include Huczynski & Buchanan's book "Organizational Behaviour", Rosenfeld & Wilson's work "Managing Organizations", "Organizational Behaviour – Theory and Practice" by Richard M. Hodgetts and "Organizational Behavior" by Stephen P. Robbins.

I have also found some more general HRM books useful, such as "The Realities of Work" by Noon & Blyton and Makin, Cooper & Cox' book "Managing People at Work".

Furthermore, I have found great help in talking to a number of academics at the University of Stirling, both in the Department of Management (Dr Butts and Mr Phil Taylor) and at the Department of Psychology (Dr Fiona McCall, Dr Ian MacFarlane and PhD student Mark Boydell). They have all been very helpful guiding me in the right direction according to their area of expertise. I will continue to use human resources at the university during my dissertation to get opinions and ideas on my work.

3   Research

3.1   The Group

The initial plan was to do my research at a computer firm in Norway called Opera Software. They are a middle sized company with about 125 employees from all over the world. Opera is an idealistic software firm being the biggest competitor to Microsoft on the web browser market, both on the desktop computer and on mobile and embedded electronic devices.

Each summer Opera takes in 10-15 summer interns to work for them. I have worked there two summers and a spring and had the responsibility for these summer interns last summer. Therefore, I have been in contact with

Opera for repeating this this summer and at the same time use the summer interns as my research group.

The only problem is that Opera at the time of writing is not sure whether or not they will have summer interns this year. There has also been discussion on doing the research on the QA group instead, but as yet there is no definitive answer whether or not this is possible.

Therefore, I have contacted the president of the Stirling University Student Association, SUSA, asking if I could use the SUSA executives board meetings as my research group. This has now been approved by all the SUSA board executives and I have already attended one of their board meetings. The board consists 11 members, four of them are full time, paid employees. These four members of the board have counting votes at the different university boards and committees.

The cases discussed on the SUSA executives board meetings have direct impact on how the whole SUSA organisation is run, including student accommodation, child care, medical services, campus events, the student bar, the student disco and miscellaneous campaigns on campus. Also, the board meetings gives the different representatives responsible for different parts of the SUSA organisation the opinions to bring forward to the university committee and council meetings, including the university academic council and the university court.

The great advantage of doing my research on the SUSA executives board is that I get to do the research throughout the semester, giving me data from several months to work with.

3.2   Methods

The research will be consist of three elements; a personality test, interviews with the group members and observation of the group meetings.

The first step of the research will be a personality test, which will be taken by all the group members. Arrangements have been made with the Careers Advisors office at the University of Stirling for conducting the test. They will both supply me with a suitable test and give me instruction on how to run it. The test will give a measure of how the individuals are in a group setting, thus not strictly a personality test, but a test of how the personality of the individuals will work in a group setting, much like what is outlined by Belbin's description of the different roles in a group (Rosenfeld & Wilson 1999, 191).

The test will be conducted in such a way that I will not know the different members' results when starting my research. This is an advice from Dr MacFarlane, whom argued that this would influence my observation of the group later on and could be subject for criticism when reading my dissertation when finished. Therefore, I will only know what the results are in the group, this way I will know what kind of span exists in the group without knowing what group members are creating the span.

The next step will then be to have an interview with all of the group members to get an idea of their different opinions, ideas and visions the different members have regarding the issues related to SUSA.

I will then start my observation of the group when they have their weekly board meetings. Using different note taking techniques, I will record what it is happening in the meetings, from a perspective of decision making; who

talks the most, who gets best response for his/her ideas, who takes the different group roles as described by Belbin (Huczynski & Buchanan 2001, 330). Also, I will record how people conform to group pressure as seen in Asch's perception of lines experiment (Robbins 1998, 257). The hypothesis about being the deviant is also very interesting. Studies show that the deviant, the one not agreeing to the majority's view, is given far greater social pressure from the other group members (Brown 2000, 135-165).

After approximately a month of observing the group meetings, I will conduct another round of interviews with the members of the SUSA executives board to get updated on the persons' views and ideas on where SUSA is going as an organisation and how the they think the group meetings are working out.

After the second block of interviews, I will continue observing the group for another month before ending my collecting of data with a final round of interviews to get a review on the board meetings from the different group members. At this point, I can reveal the identities of the group members in the personality test conducted earlier and see as a curiosity, how the test results match what I have observed going on in the group meetings.

4 Research Plan

My research plan consists of four milestones. The first is preperation, reading the literature on the topic. This includes both theory on group behaviour and previous experiments done on various aspects of group processes. Also, contacting and learning about the organisation structure of both Opera Software and SUSA have been important steps in the preperation phase.

The second block is the first interaction with my group, conducting the personality test, doing the initial interviews with the group members and starting the observation of the group meetings.

The third block is then a second interview with the board members and a second period of observation of the group.

The last phase will consist of a last interview with the group members, analysing the data I have gotten from the observation period. At this stage I will reveal the identiy of the individuals in the personality test and compare this with my findings in the board meetings. Also, I will look for answers for my dissertation topic questions. Finally, I will complete my writings on the dissertation itself.

task	start	finish
Contact Opera	Jan 13	Mar 17
Reserch topic	Jan 13	Mar 11
Personality test	Mar 11	Mar 11
First interview	Mar 11	Mar 11
First obersvation	Mar 11	Apr 11
Second interview	Apr 12	Apr 12
Second obersvation	Apr 12	May 12
Third interview	May 12	May 12
Data analysis	May 12	Jun 12
Writing dissertation	Jun 12	Aug 12

Table 1: Dissertation tasks

The gant chart shows how long I presume the different tasks will take and which tasks are dependent on the others in order to be carried out. For example, the observation of the group cannot be done before conducting the personality test and interviewing the members.
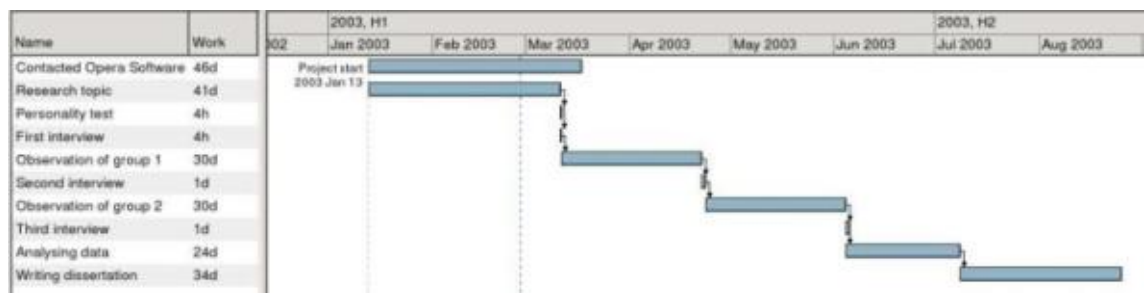
Name	Work		2003, H1						2003, H2	
		02	Jan 2003	Feb 2003	Mar 2003	Apr 2003	May 2003	Jun 2003	Jul 2003	Aug 2003
Contacted Opera Software	46d									
Research topic	41d									
Personality test	4h									
First interview	4h									
Observation of group 1	30d									
Second interview	1d									
Observation of group 2	30d									
Third interview	1d									
Analysing data	24d									
Writing dissertation	34d									

Table 2: Gant chart

References

Brown, Rupert (2000), *Group Processes*, Blackwell.

Freud, Sigmund (1921), *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Vintage.

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Rosenfeld & Wilson (1999), *Managing Organizations*, Mc Graw Hill.