

## Teams for Performance

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### Abstract

Performance of study project teams is an important issue to both educators and students. While much of the literature centres on the processes and outcomes of teamwork and team behaviours, more insight is needed into the factors contributing to the motivation of student teams to achieve high performance. This study integrates the concept of goal orientation and empirically examines the role of individual and climate goal orientations as influencing team goal orientation. Specifically, data from 51 student project teams in a simulated work setting are used to examine the three-dimensional goal orientation model for identifying dominant goals in the complex team situation where there are at least three levels of goals at play.

Keywords: team goal orientation, team performance

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### Introduction

The benefits of students working together in teams on marketing projects is widely recognised by many educators and researchers (e.g. Bacon, Stewart and Stewart-Belle, 1998), however many student teams fail to realise their full potential. Previous research has focused on identifying factors that correlate with student team performance, such as the effects of individual ability, team characteristics and team size (Pfaff and Huddleston, 2003; Bacon, Stewart and Stewart-Belle, 1998), yet the motivation of teams to perform has attracted little attention. At the individual level, behavioural theory conceptualises performance to be a function of ability and motivation (Ambrose and Kulik 1999), where motivation impacts subsequent effort and achievement (Shamir, 1990). Transposing this to the team level of analysis, this research identifies goal theory, in particular the construct of team goal orientation, as important to understanding the role of motivation in team performance (Austin and Vancouver, 1996; Slocum, Cron and Brown, 2002).

What makes a student team motivated to achieve high performance is a question that has not yet been fully investigated. That is, the motivation of student teams and the goal orientation of work teams have attracted some research, yet an important question remains; *which is more prevalent for a team in a working scenario – individual goal orientation, team goal orientation or climate goal orientation?* In our study, we adopt a holistic approach to investigating this scenario by considering all three goal orientations simultaneously. First, we establish the importance of teams and teamwork in both the education and work setting. Next, we empirically examine the interaction of goal orientations in student project teams, and preliminary findings are reported in this paper.

### The importance of teams

The ability of employees to collaboratively create, perform and manage tasks and projects is becoming increasingly important in the business world (Pfaff and Huddleston, 2003). Companies are increasingly relying on teams to deliver value through greater efficiencies and effectiveness than can be achieved by individuals working alone. With this in mind, educators have recognised the importance for students to experience the challenges of group work and to be better prepared for the team-oriented business culture commonplace in organisations today (Chapman and Van Auken, 2001). It is believed that by participating in a team project, students develop a better understanding of the complexities, challenges, and advantages of working effectively in a team (Chapman and Van Auken, 2001). Other advantages for students who work in teams include persistence when facing adversity, willingness to perform difficult tasks, ability to translate knowledge from one task to another, greater social skills, and intrinsic motivation (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1998; Feichtner and Davis, 1984; Boyer, Weiner, and Diamond, 1985). Thus, it is clear that teamwork is a crucial part of a contemporary marketing education, and is essential to developing work-ready skills applicable to modern organisations.

By definition, teams are a collective of individuals who have been brought together for a specific purpose, a series of tasks and who are inter-reliant (Hackman, 1990). A team has common goals for members, each member has a role and tasks may be span across roles. Teams are required to achieve beyond the scope of individuals operating separately and is considered a superior organizational structure (e.g., Hackman, 1990). However, being relatively new, teams also have unique management challenges in relation to handling,

assessment and reward. For example, many large companies who incorporate teamwork rely on traditional management approaches that focus on individuals rather than the team as an entity (e.g., Tarricone and Luca, 2002). This is problematic as the team must be fostered in all aspects in order to promote cohesion and achievement. A part-solution to this inadequate approach is a product of our research. That is, by understanding the interplay between various goal orientations at play and challenging a team in action, management (and educators) can better understand what is most prevalent to the team and by understanding this, will be enabled to make more effective use of resources in order to make the most of the team and enhance performance.

### **Individual, team and climate goal orientation**

Goal orientation is based on an integrated pattern of beliefs, attributions and affects that guide behavioural intentions and is manifest through approach, commitment and responses to achievement activities (Valle et al., 2003). Goal orientation is defined as either a *state*, whereby situational variables are of prime influence; or a *trait*, where disposition is key. *Traits* are relatively stable whereas *states* are malleable. In a recent meta-analysis, Payne and co-authors (2007) found that state goal orientation has a stronger relationship with outcomes such as task performance, self-efficacy and learning strategy than trait goal orientation. This findings allows researchers scope to theorize about the value of better understanding malleable goal orientation for the purpose of team management through manipulation of antecedent variables in order to achieve superior performance achievement such as better customer care, higher sales, greater staff retention and more effective and efficient teams. Existing research is largely concentrated in the domain of the individual, however, this presents a problem for direct application to team management. As such, there is a gap in understanding this construct of goal orientation at the team level as well as in specific contextualized settings.

In the existing literature two predominant models of goal orientation can be identified: performance orientation and learning orientation (Button *et al*, 1996). Following much debate and investigations by various researchers, it is considered more robust to use Vandewalle's (1997) three-part model of the construct featuring *performance-prove*, *performance-avoid* and *learning* goal orientations. This three-part model allows researchers to observe effects of each of the different goal orientations instead of having results confounded by the measurement of performance goal orientation as a unidimensional measure.

Each of the goal orientations has an underlying purpose for involvement in achievement tasks and is manifest through different cognitive, affective and behavioural outcomes (e.g., Elliot and Dweck, 1988; Ames, 1992). A learning goal orientation (Dweck, 1986) is otherwise referred to as mastery goal (Ames and Archer, 1988) or task involvement (Nicholls, 1984) and represents a desire to enhance competence by developing new skills and mastering new situations (Bell, 2002). This is also characterized by the use of complex learning strategies, persistence and seeking challenge (Bell, 2002; Button *et. al.*, 1996; Vandewalle, 2001). A performance goal orientation is often referred to as an ability goal (Midgley et al., 1996) or an ego goal (Nicholls, 1984). This is characterized by a desire to demonstrate competence to others and to be positively evaluated. Withdrawal from challenge, seeking less challenging tasks and those tasks that guarantee success are also common behaviours (Bell, 2002; Button, 1996; Vandewalle, 2001). Vandewalle (2001) makes a further distinction in the performance goal orientation construct by breaking this into performance-prove and performance-avoid goal orientations. Performance-prove orientation encourages seeking of positive judgments of competence relative to others, while performance-avoid orientation leads to the avoidance of negative judgments of competence.

The goal orientations featured in this study are at three levels in order to appropriately reflect the natural setting in which teams operate. Firstly, at the individual team member level there are goal orientations of learning, performance-prove and performance-avoid. Secondly, at the climatic level we consider the management pre-set goals including mastery and performance-prove and performance-avoid. Thirdly, at the team level we consider mastery, performance-prove and performance-avoid goal orientations as possible outcome choices– but these are an outcome of a combination of individual and climate goal orientations.

### **Research hypotheses**

Goal orientation has been empirically proven to impact on performance achievement. A simultaneous effect of various goal orientations at multiple levels may cause a challenging situation for the team. For instance, individual team members must learn so that they can develop their skills, heed past experiences and combine new and old skills in order to advance their own careers paths and to benefit the team through more effective contribution. This represents the learning goal orientation. Hence, we hypothesize that learners will be eager to engage in learning in order to make ongoing contributions to the team.

*H1: Individual learning goal orientation has a positive impact on team goal orientation.*

Coincidentally, it is not uncommon for team members to feel so pressured to achieve performance targets and to match high-achieving peers that they tend to adopt a performance-avoid goal orientation to avoid negative or sub-optimal performance. Given this situation, we expect that individuals will be eager to avoid “failing the team” and will seek to avoid behaviour that can be negatively perceived by the team. Thus,

*H2: Individual performance-avoid orientation has a positive impact on team goal orientation.*

Concurrently, individuals must perform to achieve team goals – often in pressured scenarios with limited time and resources, and being externally measured to performance benchmarks. This situation opens the channels for performance-prove goal orientations. Along these lines, individuals will also seek not only to avoid negative behaviours but they will seek to prove their knowledge and their contribution to the team. Thus,

*H3: Individual performance-prove orientation has a positive impact on team goal orientation.*

Climatic goal orientation is disclosed by management and implemented via operational guidelines and evaluation criteria. Similar to the above orientations, climatic goals can be classified as mastery or performance inclined (Barron and Harackiewicz, 2003). Researchers suggest that mastery goals relate to individual interest in the course and that performance goals relate to individual performance at task conclusion, and that it is important to have a combination of both mastery and performance goal orientations. Hence,

*H4: Climate performance goal orientation has a positive impact on team goal orientation.*

*H5: Climate mastery goal orientation has a positive impact on team goal orientation.*

### **Research setting and data collection**

This research was undertaken in a scenario involving 51 student project teams each consisting of 5-6 members. The scenario emulated the workplace setting by creating a work-like environment where tertiary students were responsible for unpaid conduct of market research for a real client. The climate goal orientation was set by the instructor, while team goal orientations were set by the teams and individual goal orientations by the individual team

members. Teams were briefed by the client about the scope of the research project and had eight weeks to complete the entire task. The task complexity and duration were equivalent to a company setting, making this situation ideal for study as a parallel to the work environment.

The data was collected using an 8-page questionnaire designed for empirical testing. The questionnaires were administered four weeks after groups had been formed and had knowledge of their project's requirements, had allocated roles and responsibilities, and had commenced thinking as a group but had not yet received any supervisory progress-related feedback. Respondents were asked to consider their current team situation, their own goals and objectives relating to the subject and their teams, their team goals and their perceptions of the classroom climate and goals. Participation was optional and upon explaining the nature of this study and the potential benefits that could be gained for team research, the response rate was 94%, comprising 51 teams yielding 273 useable responses. The instrument was designed using established scales where possible and new scales developed based on theory and primary discussions. For example, individual goal orientation was measured using Vandewalle's (1997) scale which features six learning orientation items, five performance-prove items and five performance-avoid items. Climate scales were borrowed from Barron and Harackiewicz (2003) and included a total of 15 items.

Team goal orientation was measured using a 17-item scale based on past research relating to multiple goals, collaborative learning and goal orientation (Pintrich *et al.*, 2003; Pintrich, 2000; Blumenfeld, 1992; Ames, 1992).

### **Data analysis and preliminary findings**

Initially, all reflective scales, most of which were 7-point Likert-type scales, were tested and refined for reliability where necessary in terms of Cronbach alpha scores using SPSS. Once all scales were above 0.9 the conceptual model was empirically estimated using Partial Least Squares Analysis with SmartPLS (Ringle *et al.*, 2005). Our choice of structural equation modelling follows trends in usage within marketing and management research for the ability of researchers to make explicit assumptions regarding constructs and relationships (e.g., Hulland, 1999; Bagozzi, 1980; Fornell, 1982). Furthermore, PLS is known for its strengths in analysing complex issues in social and behavioural sciences (Joreskog and Sorbom, 1982), accounting for multiple relationships among variables (Bearden *et al.*, 1982) and applicability in situations of high complexity and low theoretical knowledge (Wold, 1982).

The preliminary estimations of this model yielded interesting results, several of which support the hypotheses and some which are contrary to our hypotheses. To begin, the team goal orientation variance explained is 98% ( $R^2=0.98$ ) indicating a good level of explanatory power. Upon examining the path coefficients and corresponding *t*-statistics generated by the resampling method of bootstrapping (Lohmoller, 1984), we were able to collect evidence supporting H2, H3, H4, H5. More specifically, H2 regarding individual performance-avoid goal orientation has a positive impact on team goal orientation ( $t=1.285^*$ ), H3 individual performance-prove goal orientation also has a positive impact on team goal orientation ( $t=2.348^{**}$ ). Thus, individual performance-prove is stronger in effect than performance-avoid for the formation of team goal orientation. H4 and H5 relating to climate performance and mastery goals respectively, indicate that these also have a positive impact on team goal orientation ( $t=3.3739^{**}$  and  $t=1.7758^*$  respectively) but suggest that climate goals of performance are stronger in effect than mastery goal orientations in terms of the formation of team goal orientation.

The hypothesis not supported in our study is H1 relating to individual level learning goal orientation impacting positively on team goal orientation ( $t=0.0513$ ). The non-significant effect indicates that in this model, an individual's prerogative of learning does not translate to a learning goal orientation at the team level.

### **Discussion and tentative conclusions**

The findings from our analyses thus far show a series of facts that are worthy of attention for their theoretical and practical importance. In particular, the finding that shows individual goals being overpowered by team goals but not by climatic goals is intriguing. Suggestions from the literature broadly indicate individual goals are most important to the individual, yet this does not seem to hold in a complex team situation where there are at least three levels of goals at play along with the pressures of tasks that must be completed and a client who demands value and timeliness. In this scenario, the goal orientation that is strongest at the individual level is *performance-avoid*. Perhaps the reason for this is attributable to the individual being aware of his/her role as a team member and does not want to fail the team through a negative action in such a pressured situation. Thus, the concentration is on not failing, not performing poorly, not "letting the team down". At the team level, the overpowering goal orientation is *performance-prove*. In light of the pressures the student team faces, it is reasonable to understand how it may be the case that the team is eager to meet project requirements, to meet the client's needs and to perform to the best of their collective ability. This suggests that the team collectively perceives the reward for their joint efforts and as being superior performance achievement, rather than learning oriented goals. This is an important finding for marketing education as study was conducted in the tertiary setting where student's primary goal should be to learn. Indeed, the finding is even more remarkable considering that the effort of the instructor was focused explicitly on a learning goal orientation and constantly reinforced this to teams.

The findings generate much scope for further research and discussion into the area of teamwork and the value of teams. At this preliminary stage, it is reasonable to suggest that the use of teams in situations where achievement of high performance objectives is appropriate and likely to be the most effective means of achieving high performance in an effective and efficient manner. This type of situation would aid students in developing teamwork skills applicable to most workplaces, worldwide.

For educational institutions however, the clear choices made by teams and oversight of learning goals presents a potential problem. Surely in an educational institution there must be room to learn, yet this research shows that despite instructor efforts and the engagement of the contemporary recommendation of project-based learning, students prefer to hide their shortcomings (performance-avoid orientation) and focus on proving their existing skills and knowledge through the preferred performance-prove goal orientation. From a business perspective, the findings from this project support the use of teams for efficiency and superior performance whether this is in consulting, services or customer care. From an educational perspective, these issues require further attention. Teams appear to be highly suitable for performance but not necessarily for learning.

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