Collaboration

Introduction

In an age when companies are downsizing and resources are scarce, scholars from a wide-range of disciplines are becoming increasingly interested in uncovering the factors affecting successful collaboration and coalition-building. While collaborations are likely to be comprised of contributors that possess different overall goals, collaborators pool their resources to advance specific overlapping goals (Gupta, 2003). In order to work together successfully, members of collaborations must confront conflicts that arise from the endorsement of different ideologies, values, and goals of each person or group involved in the collaboration. Research has yielded models to enhance inter-and intragroup dynamics within a collaborations while ensuring maximum outcome or benefit.

Definition

In the past, the terms collaboration, coalition, and team were often used synonymously within the literature on group behavior and intergroup relations; however, contemporary research provides greater insight into the varied goals and functions of each (Aamodt, 2013). Collaborations, in their many forms, are defined as a group of people in pursuit of a common and articulated goal, who pool their relevant resources, engage in shared decision making, and agree on the distribution of the payoff or benefits received via the collaborative efforts (Cook, 2002).

Keywords

Group behavior, Transcommunality, social identity, intergroup relations.

Traditional Debates

There are two basic approaches to studying collaborations: resource mobilization theories and theories based on group or social identification (Bystydzienki & Schact, 2001). The resource mobilization approach is dependent upon assets, taking into account structural opportunities, leadership, networks and generally omits subjective perspectives (Bystydzienki & Schact, 2001). Theories of social or collective identification describe the internal dynamics of collaborative social movements (Bettencourt, Dillman, & Wollman, 1996). For example, when an identity is shared, there is a sense of common fate within a group which motivates action to protect group interests (Simon & Klandermans, 2001).

Most research in business and industrial-organizational psychology focus on mobilizing individual human resources (e.g., one’s intellectual specialization), providing models to encourage successful team (i.e., individuals collaborating on a shared task) functioning. One model, Lombardo and Eichinger’s (1995) T7 Model of Team Effectiveness, emphasizes the major factors believed to influence collaboration within and among teams: internal team factors (i.e., thrust, trust, talent, teaming skills and task skills) and external team factors (i.e., team-leader fit and team support from the organization; De Meuse, 2009). The researchers suggests that in order to perform at their peak any given group must maintain the five internal team
factors, while simultaneously receiving external support (De Meuse, 2009). In lieu of looking at the specific factors affecting collaborative efforts, the Rubin, Plovnivk, and Fry (1977) GRPI Model of Team Effectiveness specifies the best way for team members to approach collaboration in order to maximize efficiency (De Meuse, 2009). Their model suggests a specific sequence of concentration when developing collaborations; that is, group members should first define a goal and determine member roles and responsibilities prior to focusing on determining processes and ensuring positive interpersonal relationships.

Critical Debates

Engagement in collaborative endeavors typically requires a high degree of personal commitment; thus, social identity is often the driving force for engagement (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). In justice-based collaborations (i.e., coalitions pooling resources to dismantle illegitimate power structures) social identities are especially salient. Hence, collaborations across difference have often been fraught with tension or conflict based on real or imagined intergroup difference (Rosenthal & Mizrahi, 1994). This tension seems to be due in part to the fact that groups are likely to engage in intergroup comparisons that elicit competition, serving to make societal power differentials salient (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Comparisons generate an “us vs. them” mentality that highlights the difference between the groups; the salience of those group differences can interfere with intra- and intergroup functioning (Bystydzienski & Schact, 2001).

In order to counteract conflict based on social identity processes, a variety of suggestions have been offered. Several researchers have argued that the development of an overarching collective identity can alleviate intergroup tension and counteract negative perceptions based on power and status (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). A contradictory approach advocates for collaborations that pay heed to group differences (Childs, 2003). For example, Childs (2003) asserts that collaborations that do not first set out to acknowledge and respect difference based on “rooted affiliations” could be subject to “artificial harmony.” In “transcommunal” collaborations differences are perceived to be the source from which alliances draw their greatest strength and ingenuity. Disagreement between members of collaborations is best addressed via “constructive disputing;” that is, respectfully attending to and sharing divergent perspectives in order to advance the goals of the entire collaborative (Childs, 2003). A shared respect for intergroup difference allows for the articulation of dissenting opinions and the ensuing constructive discussions (Childs, 2003). This approach counteracts groupthink (Janus, 1972), which often inhibits progressive dialogue and action.

As with any prevalent issue, debates exist over the best methods to use and ways to use them. When considering approaches to organizing collaborative efforts, a leader’s personality or individual group choices might affect the approach more than anything (Aamodt, 2010). Within collaborations, challenges occur on both the interpersonal and group level. Given that group members have multiple identities and varied interests and goals, it is crucial to understand how coalition members perceive their alliances, experience tension, and respond to intergroup differences in opinion.

References


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