

Full Length Research Paper

Nepotism and tribalism in teams: An initial investigation

Eugene Okyere-Kwakye^{1*}, Khalil Md Nor¹ and Nor Ghani Md Nor²

¹Faculty of Management and Human Resource Development, Management Department, Universiti Teknologi, Malaysia.

²Faculty of Economics and Management, School of Economics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Accepted 18 October, 2019

Teamwork is recognized as one of the key strategies for the success of today's business organizations. While organizations invest in building strong and cohesive teams, individual employees on the other hand may feel reluctant to participate in them. Their act of unwillingness to participate in the activities of teams is subject to investigation. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine employees' perception on team and their willingness to participate in teamwork. Questionnaire was used to collect the data from 50 officers in the Ghana police service. The findings of the study indicate that respondents recognized team as the most applicable professional techniques for the success of the police operation. However, the results of the actual perception on teamwork interestingly reveal that, there might be a gap between the officers' perceptions about teams and their actual intentions to participate in team. The results show that the respondents may be opposed to the idea of joining teams due to the rampant problems of conflicts, nepotism and tribalism in teams. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Key words: Teams, conflicts, nepotism, tribalism, diversity.

INTRODUCTION

Teamwork has been suggested as one of the very important interventions that help organizations to clinch success in today's business arena (Bennis, 1969). Organizations such as Xerox, IBM, Federal Express, Honda and others have made a spontaneous paradigm shift from individuality to team based structure, which has seen them to the top (Hult and Nichols, 1999). According to French and Bell (1990), current organizations are reaping the benefit of using teamwork design structure as it increases the efficiency and the effectiveness of the organization. These amount to a Ghanaian axiom which states that "a broom can be broken singularly but difficult when put together". This adage suggests that collectively, individuals' performance is higher than working separately.

In order to formulate a formidable team and increase their performance, barriers have to be identified and removed accordingly. These barriers may be caused by cultural values and norms that contradict the team concept.

For instance, in the African context, the issues of nepotism and tribalism are the main factors that would disrupt the effectiveness of team performance. Nepotism and tribalism are the greatest mild light of Africanism. Even though, there is no clear distinctive race in Africa, in particular Ghana, it may be found that individuals make a conscious effort to segregate and stereotype themselves where others from different tribal backgrounds are alienate and ostracized. Religious connotations may have its own effect on social stratus but nepotism and tribalism in Africa is nothing but a cancan that may result in lower productivity and slower development to a nation. Even though researchers have extensively reviewed the issue of teamwork, few studies have looked at the gap between perception of team and the actual willingness of individuals to participate in team. A study on this gap may throw more light on the reasons why sometimes employees feel reluctant to participate in the activities of team work. This study attempts to shed more light this

gap. In particular, this study investigates individuals' perceptions of the benefits of working in teams and the problems in teams. The results of the study may suggest reasons why individuals are reluctant to participate in teams. This study was conducted among police officers

*Corresponding author. E-mail: eokyerekwakye2@gmail.com.
Tel: +60127768367.

at the Koforidua District Police Station, Ghana.

Definitions of teams

Bubshait and Farooq (1999) define team as a collection of individual with different needs, background and expertise. According to Harris and Harris (1996), a team is a workgroup or unit with a common purpose, developing mutual relationship with the achievement of goals or task. Another definition suggests team as a collection of employee i.e., (managerial and non-managerial) who share certain norms and strive to satisfy their needs through the attainment of group goals (Donnelly et al., 1985). Drawing from a psychological perspective, Schein (1980) defines team as any number of people who interact with one another, are psychologically aware of one another and perceive themselves to be teams. A literature reviewed by Rubin et al. (1994), seems to indicate four themes that are usually used in defining team. They are goal, procedure, role and relationship. Goal refers to individuals' acceptance and understanding of the goals of the group. Procedure means that all members must know how to get work done together. Role suggests that team members must know what others want and expect from them. Finally, relationships which mean people who like and respect one another usually work together more effectively than people who do not.

Previous literature indicates that researchers sometimes used teams and groups interchangeably. However, some make an effort to deduce the difference between these concepts. A team is described as a collection of individuals with interrelated skills, who work towards a common goal. On the other hand, a group is defined as two or more individuals, interacting and interdependent who come together to achieve a particular objectives. Group can be formal or informal while teamwork normally has formal structure. However, it should be noted that in this study the term team and group would be used interchangeably as we feel teams and groups are quite indistinguishable. Guzzo and Dickson (1996) denote that "it is pointless or in any case more or less impossible to distinguish between groups and teams".

Impact of teams in the organization

According to Honey (2007), organizations will not succeed without teams. Sowell (1998) posits that top managers in an organization used teams in order to fully utilize the knowledge, skills, and ability of their employees. Teamwork is recognized as the life wire of organizations today. Teams bring in a strong sense of belonging within members of the organization. As members share their ideas, expertise and knowledge towards the achievement of common goal, they tend to develop feelings for each other. According to King and Anderson

(1990), teams enhanced creativity and innovation. For instance in a cross functional teams individual members possess varied skills and perspectives. The interplay of the skills and perspectives in the team may lead to innovative solutions in terms of new ways of doing things, products or services. Another benefit of teamwork is that it lowers the rate of absenteeism and turnover within the organization. Emery (2010) suggests that a high level of absenteeism and turnover in Australian organizations is due to lack of teams. In addition, researchers such as Granovetter (1973); Fong et al. (2007) posit that teams within an organization increase the level of socialization which leads to the process of sharing and creating new knowledge. This happens in a way that, as the members make an effort to solve the organizational problems, they tend to share their varied knowledge, ideas and experience.

Barriers of teams

As sturdy as any team may be, there would be certain issues that may eat away its effectiveness. In a conceptual study, Sewell (2005) suggests that teamwork may be greatly affected by the practice of free riding and social loafing. In another study, Cox (1993) indicates that the success of a team is influenced by the existence of racial diversity within the team. In order to give more detail account on the influence of diversity in teams, it is imperative that a brief explanation of diversity has to be given. Milliken and Martins (1996) define diversity according to language and ethnicity. Carte and Chidambaram (2004) classified diversity into two types, i.e., deep level and surface level diversity. Deep level diversity is a group of people with indistinguishable characteristics. The similarities are mostly not physical. The surface level diversity is based on mostly conspicuous characteristics. These characteristics can be skin colour, gender, age and language. Literatures reveal that diversity has an impact on team performance. In a study investigating the effect of diversity on team performance, Liang et al. (1995) found that diversity has an influence on team performance. In another study conducted by Staples and Zhao (2006) investigating the effect of cultural diversity on virtual teams, suggests that performance of face- to-face virtual team was low due to factors such as trust, personalities and diversity.

Howard and Brakefield (2000), examining the effect of diversity on performance for a specific task type, found that diversity has an influence on how effective a team may execute a specific task. In addition, an exploratory study conducted by Saji (2004) indicates that diversity lower the performance of a team but increases it in the long run. Employees may pose varied skills, ideas, experiences, ideologies and personalities which would help them to achieve work targets. On the contrary, diversity may inhibit the progress of the organization because differences in personality, culture and ethnicity, breeds

stereotyping which may lead to conflict. Some researchers also posit that size or number of members in a team influence group's performance. Robbins (1993) denotes that a group with a larger size or number has a low level of cohesion. A conceptual study conducted by Hoegl (2005) investigating how large size affect teamwork, concludes that large number of members in the team affect the level of cohesion in the team. This is because members within large size teams may tend to form smaller teams within the team which will weaken the strength of the cohesion within the group or team.

An exploratory study conducted by Hoigaard and Ingvaldsen (2006) to investigate social loafing in interactive teams concludes that social loafing may have a significant effect on team cohesion. Members may feel cheated by the others who are not participating. Moreover, a study conducted by Luca and Tarricone (2001) investigating emotional intelligent and teamwork has found that individuals level of emotional intelligent affect the role he/she plays in the team. Emotions are quiet complicated to handle and as such teams containing individuals with different culture, personality and ideologies sometimes may find it difficult to understand themselves since they are of varied background which could trigger emotional issues.

Related studies on teams

Many researchers conducted their studies to investigate some of the general problems of teams in the organization. Cox (1993) denotes that frictions in teams exist in a country with diverse race. Research conducted by Ziaei et al. (2010) investigating knowledge sharing in ethno/lingo race suggests that in a multi-racial country like Malaysia, interactions between individuals in a diversified or heterogeneous group is very low as compared to the level of interactions within a homogenous group. In the case of Africans where people are homogenous without a distinct diversified race or groups as can be found in the United States, Malaysia and other countries, we could assume that teamwork and unity is supposed to be the main pursuance. Individuals in Africa may rather feel reluctant to participate in teamwork due to the problem of nepotism, tribalism and conflict. It can be asserted that even though the citizens are similar in appearance, yet the people stereotype and categorize themselves based on their tribes, ethnicity or clans.

Hofstede (1983) indicates that individual in the western and the far eastern countries are individualistic. However, it can be observed that the cultural dimension of Africa is collectivism where individuals only see themselves performing better when in a group or tribe. A study conducted by Barbosa and Cabral-Cardoso (2010), conclude that competition, and collectivism are found in teams in South African organizations.

Relationship between tribalism, nepotism and teams

Only few literatures can be found on the relationships between teamwork, tribalism and nepotism. Tribalism is referred to as the provision of a distinct group of people with similar culture and identity (Jowhar, 2005; Nauta et al., 2001). Tribalism emanates from the word tribe which denotes a group of people with the same appearance who share the same culture and identity. Price and Cybulski (2005) argue that due to the sharing of similar appearance, culture and other identities, members of the tribe may exhibit certain common behaviors. Tribalism affects the effectiveness of team in that, in a team when two or more members share a common tribe they would form a cleavage within the team which would lead to ethnocentrism where other members of the group will feel isolated. Hilder (2004) denotes that tribalism controls the behavior and attitude of people within the organization. Thus, individuals team members who possess the same tribal behavior may attract each other and as such the cohesion in the team will be weakened since there would be "teams within team"

According to Hanekom and Thornhill (1983), nepotism is the act of awarding a gratuitous offer or position to someone in close relation. Nepotism may not only be seen under positions within the organization but also in terms of contracts, scholarships, payments and others. Nepotism from the above definition has a relationship with tribalism which in a way affects organizational teamwork. Due to the fact that as team members share the same tribe, they would make a conscious effort to give favours to others members even when it is not due to them. For instance a team member would apportion recognition positions, bonuses, quality uniforms and other benefits to tribal colleague withstanding the other ones who are due but because they do not hail from the same tribe. Nepotism within team creates a lot of agony within members who are sidelined, which weakens the cohesion within the team. In general, tribalism and nepotism cause conflicts within teams which would disrupt the activities of the team.

METHODOLOGY

The respondents

The targeted population for this study was officers of the Ghana police service in the Koforidua Central District Station. Police officers were selected for this research because they are recognized to be an organization which uses teams as its main operational set-up. The police officers consist of inspectors, sergeant, corporals, and constable. We used convenience sampling in the data collection process.

Measurement

In this study, questionnaires were used to measure the perceptions

Table 1. Perceptions of team benefits.

Items	Mean
Team enhances development and productivity	4.42
Team makes you loyal.	4.02
Team increase cooperation	4.34
Team enhances communication.	4.32
Team facilitates goal achievement.	4.32
Team motivate employees	4.10
Team builds strong relationship.	4.16
Team reduces bureaucracy and red-tapism.	4.26

Table 2. Perceptions on team.

Items	Mean value
Teams lead to conflict within the organization	3.56
Nepotism is found within teams	3.68
Tribalism is found within teams	3.68

of the officers on teams. The first part of the questionnaire solicits data on the demographic profile of the respondents using open ended questions. The second part solicits individual perceptions on team. The response to the items in the second part of the questionnaire were posted on a five point Likert scale, 1=strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Neutral, 4=Disagree, and 5=strongly Disagree.

Analysis

One hundred and ten questionnaires were distributed to the respondent of which 50 were returned within two weeks which represents 45% of the total response rate. Of the 50 respondents, majority of them were male (64%). 22% has a tertiary education, and the remaining 78% has a kind of high school or vocational training education. A total of 25% were in the upper rank while the remaining 75% comprises of the lower rank such as corporal and constables. Respondents were asked eight items that intended to measure their perception on the benefits of team (Table 1). The results show that the respondents acknowledged the benefits of teams. They indicate that team enhances cooperation, productivity, loyalty, communication and motivation (Table1). Respondent were also asked three items that intend to measure their perception on the problems in teams. As shown in Table 2, the respondents indicate that team will lead to conflict within the organization, and also indicate existence of nepotism and tribalism in teams.

These results (Table 1) seem to indicate that the respondents see the benefits of teamwork. However, at the same time acknowledged the existence of problems in teams (Table 2). Given these facts, we may postulate that, if there is a reluctant among respondents to join teams, it might be due to their concern on nepotism or tribalism. The result may also suggest that the benefit of teamwork might not be fully realized due to the presence of problems (that is, nepotism, tribalism). Until these problems are resolved or minimized, the organization will not fully realize the benefit of teams. This has practical implication which will be discussed in the next section.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATION

Administrators at the Police Department specifically and managers in African organization generally need to

understand that tribes and clans brings in conflicts within teams. Recruitment and training strategies are needed to curtail these problems. In addition, strategies such as introduction of a strong organizational culture through a common language and dress code may help to curtail the problem of tribalism, conflict and nepotism. Common language brings a kind of equal identity which makes people see themselves as one.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that the respondents agree to all the benefits of team but at the same time suggest the existence of conflict, nepotism and tribalism in teams. In other culture, team diversity may be due to race, language barrier, and orientation to time but for African team, diversity is due to conflict, nepotism and tribalism. Even though, statistical test was not conducted in analyzing the data, we conclude from the outcome of this research that nepotism, tribalism and conflict do exist in the population studied. Although generalization should be taken cautiously, we feel the phenomenon might not be limited to the population under studied but may exist in other organizations in Africa as well. As everything has its Achilles' heel so does this study. Firstly, the respondents for this study were only 50, which is quiet small. Secondly, the results were not tested using more complex statistical technique which allows concrete conclusion. We recommend a replication of the study, utilizing better statistical inferential technique and on a larger scope.

REFERENCES

Barbosa I, Cabral-Cardoso C (2010). Equality and diversity rhetoric: one size fits all? Globalization and the Portuguese context. Equality,

- Diversity and Inclusion: *Int. J.*, 29(1): 97-112.
- Bennis W (1969). *Organization development: Its nature, origin and prospects*. Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA.
- Bubshait AA, Farooq G (1999). Team building and project success. *Cost Engineering. Am. Assoc. Cost Engineers*, 41(7): 34-38.
- Carte T, Chidambaram L (2004). A capabilities- based theory of technology deployment in diverse teams: Leapfrogging the pitfalls of diversity and leveraging its potential with collaborative technology. *J. Assoc. Inf. Syst.*, 5(11-12): 448-471.
- Cox T Jr (1993). *Cultural diversity in organizations: Theory, research and practice*. San Francisco: Berret-Koehler.
- Donnelly JH, Berry LL, Thompson TW (1985). *Marketing financial services: A strategic vision*. Irwin: Homewood, IL.
- Emery M (2010). When the cure is the cause: The turnover and the absenteeism problems. *The Innovation Journal: Public Sect. Innov. J.*, 15 (1), Article 6, 1-17.
- French W, Bell C Jr (1990). *Organization development: Behavioral science interventions for organizational improvement (4th ed.)*, Prentice-Hall: Eaglewood Cliffs, N.J.
- Fong PSW, Hills MJ, Hayles, CS (2007). Dynamic knowledge creation through value management teams. *J. Manage. Engine.*, 23(1), 40-9.
- Granovetter M (1973). The Strength of weak ties. *Am. J. Sociol.*, 78(6), 1360-1380.
- Guzzo RA, Dickson, MW (1996). Teams in organizations: Recent research on performance and effectiveness. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 47, 307-338.
- Harris PR, Harris KG (1996). Managing effectively through teams. *Team Performance Management: Int. J.*, 2(3), 23-36.
- Hanekom SX, Thornhill C (1983). *Public Administration in contemporary society: A South African perspective*. Halfway House: Southern Book Publishers (Pty) Ltd.
- Hilder T (2004). Viability versus tribalism. *Kybernetes*, 33(3/4), 632-646.
- Hoegl M (2005). Smaller teams-better teamwork: How to keep project teams small. *Bus. Horiz.*, 48(3), 209-214.
- Hofstede G (1983). The cultural relativity of organizational practices and theories. *J. Int. Bus. Stud.*, 14(1), 75-89.
- Hoigaard R, Ingvaldsen RP (2006). Social loafing in interactive groups: The effects of identifiability on effort and individual performance in floorball. *Athletic Insight. J. Sport Psychol.*, 8(2).
- Honey P (2007). *Team and teamwork*. Peter Honey Publications Ltd. http://www.peterhoney.com/documents/Teams-and-Teamwork_QuickPeek.pdf.
- Howard JL, Brakefield JT (2000). Why should diversity have any effect on performance? Examination of the issues from a scientific perspective. *The Association of Employment Practices and Principles, Proceedings of the 2000 National Conference*, October 18-20, San Francisco, CA, 53-57.
- Hult GTM, Nichols EL Jr (1999). A study of team orientation in global purchasing. *J. Bus. Ind. Mark.*, 14(3): 194-212.
- Jowhar DA (2005). Part v: Essentials of tribal psychology.
- King N, Anderson N (1990). Innovation and creativity in working groups. In M. A. West & J. L. Farr (Eds.). *Innovation and creativity at work: 81-100*, John Wiley and Sons: Chichester, UK.
- Liang DW, Moreland RL, Argote L (1995). Group versus individual training and group performance: The mediating role of transactive memory. *Pers. Soc. Psychol. Bull.*, 21, 384-393.
- Luca J, Tarricone P (2001). Does emotional intelligence affect successful teamwork? *Proceedings of the 18th Annual Conference of the Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education at the ASCILITE*, Melbourne: University of Melbourne.
- Milliken FJ, Martins LL (1996). Searching for common threads: Understanding the multiple effects of diversity in organization groups. *Acad. Manage. Rev.*, 21: 402-433.
- Nauta A, De Vries J, Wijngaard J (2001). Power and biased perceptions of interdepartmental negotiation behaviour. *Group Processes Intergroup Relat.*, 4 (3): 263-270.
- Price J, Cybulski J (2005). Stakeholder bargaining behavior - The social backbone of communication, negotiation and consensus as used for information system requirements elicitation. *The Tenth Annual Australian Workshop on Requirements Engineering (AWRE)*, Melbourne, Australia.
- Robbins S (1993). *Organizational Behavior: Concepts, Controversies and Applications*. (6th ed.) Prentice Hall: New Jersey.
- Rubin JZ, Pruitt DG, Kim S.H (1994). *Social conflict: Escalation, stalemate and settlement (2nd ed.)*, McGraw-Hill: New York, NY.
- Saji B (2004). Workforce diversity, temporal dimensions and team performance. *Cross Cultural Manage.*, 11 (4): 40-51.
- Sewell G (2005). Doing what comes naturally? Why we need a practical ethics of teamwork. *Int. J. Hum. Resour. Manage.*, 16(2), 202-218.
- Schein EH (1980). *Organizational Psychology*, (3rd ed.). Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Sowell T (1998). *Race, culture and equality*. Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace. Stanford University.
- Staples DS, Zhao L (2006). The Effects of Cultural Diversity in Virtual Teams Versus Face-to-Face Teams. *Group Decis. Negotiation*, 15: 389-406.
- Ziaei S, Md Nor K, Walczak S (2010). The Effect of Ethno/Lingo Diversity on Knowledge Sharing in Groups. *5th Knowledge Management International Conference (KMICe)*, 25-27 May 2010, Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia.