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Team Feedback Based on Dialogue: Implications for Change Management

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***Abstract** Recent work in change management has emphasized the role of feedback in creating a readiness for, and contributing to acceptance of, the need for change. This article illustrates the development and application of an intervention protocol where differences in perceptual location among team members of an R&D team were used as a springboard for inducing them to talk more openly about their differences and to help them see how change could be constructed through dialogue as a medium. To the extent that team members were willing to create shared meaning, rather than gaining agreement on one meaning, they were more able to learn from each other and to 'criss-cross' their views with each other, and thus enhance their understanding of the sorts of issues that are impeding their ability to perform.*

Introduction

The use of team feedback has traditionally focused on inducing individual members to describe their individual perceptions of the team situation. These perceptions are then usually averaged (aggregated) to the team level. Change agents have generally come to accept the methodological convenience of relying on the notion that the averaged perception at the team (group) level has a sufficiently useful 'collective' meaning for feedback purposes.

However, recent advances in the management of team development have questioned the wisdom of averaging individual responses to the aggregate level—on the basis that the use of this technique conceals wide variations in individual perceptions, and that this often results in the masking of important profile differences among team members (Jabri, 1997a; Patterson, Payne and West, 1996).

To deal with the problem of masking individual differences, a possible refinement required for the accurate delivery of team feedback involves the development of intervention protocols through which group members can come to 'dialogize' differences in perceptions. That is, to capitalize on differences and to use them to encourage conversations among team members as part of the means by which reality is constructed through communication. Rather than averaging perceptions into some sort of an aggregated figure, which purports to represent the grouped perception of members, it is of benefit to use these differences in perceptions to advance members' construction of their situation and to act as a *springboard* for them to learn from the feedback itself.

At the same time, the development of such intervention protocols needs to be driven by relational frames of inquiry aimed at promoting conversations among the individuals receiving feedback (McNamme, Gergen and associates, 1999; Isaacs, 1999). 'Dialogue' represents one such frame whereby people can be encouraged to think of ways that would

sustain interdependence and relational responsibility (McNamme, Gergen and associates, 1999), thus transforming members' understanding of the change situation that confronts them.

According to Isaacs, (1994, p. 353) the word 'dialogue' has two Greek roots—*dia* (meaning 'through' or 'with each other') and *logos* (meaning 'the word'). For Isaacs (1994, p. 353), dialogue is "the art of thinking together" and is a "a sustained collective inquiry" into everyday experience and what we take for granted. For Ellinor and Gerard (1998, p. 21), dialogue involves "seeing the whole rather than breaking it into parts; seeing connections rather than distinctions; inquiring into assumptions rather than justifying or defending them; learning through inquiry and disclosure rather than persuading, selling or telling; and creating shared meanings rather than gaining agreement on one meaning".

Weisbord (1987) noted that dialogue, as a form of communication, involves becoming mindful of each other's intentions and experiences. Schein (1993, p. 44) wrote that "dialogue aims to build a group that can think generatively, creatively, and most importantly, together". Schein (1993) argued that dialogue is discovered when the interpretation that someone else puts on a concept is recognized as being different from one's own. That is, a willingness to accept differences in the way that people reason and act under conditions of high uncertainty and high task interdependence can lead to greater levels of understanding of alternative ways of thinking and 'dedication' to a particular 'world view' or *Weltanschauung*.

The objective of the present article is to illustrate the development and application of an intervention protocol where differences in perceptual location among members of an R&D team were used as a *springboard* for inducing them to talk more openly about their differences and to help them see how change could be constructed through communication as a medium. To the extent that team members were willing to create shared meaning, rather than gaining agreement on one meaning, they were more able to learn from each other and to

‘criss-cross’ their views with each other, and thus enhance their understanding of the sorts of issues that are impeding their ability to perform.

The paper is divided into three sections. Section one presents the development of an approach, which was used as part and parcel of the intervention protocol, for depicting differences in perceptions, rather than averaging perceptions into some sort of an aggregated figure, which purports to represent the grouped perception of members. The choice of the approach was largely determined by its potential for depicting the perceptual location of various members relative to each other. Section two illustrates the application of the approach in the context of an intervention protocol applied to a cross-functional research and development (R&D) team of scientists. Section three describes how the approach was used for intervening at the situation and for encouraging team members to ‘dialogize’ and to criss-cross their views and utterances with each other. A mathematical description of the approach that was used as the basis for the conduct of the intervention is presented in the Appendix. Implications for creating readiness for change in team settings are discussed.

Perceptual location and feedback

A desire for linking team feedback with the management of change prompted the author to conduct an extensive search of the humanities and social sciences (including cultural studies and political science) for an approach in which differences in perception had been used as a basis for promoting dialogue among members. The outcome of this search led to the adoption of an approach based on the work of Mokken (1970)—an approach that had originally been proposed for analyses of opposition and agreement in the United Nations General Assembly. Mokken’s approach was rooted in the body of knowledge encompassed by theories and

methods of roll-call analysis. Its objective was to cluster perceptions into subgroups to identify patterns of perceptions of members relative to each other.

Given the potential of Mokken's approach for analysing perceptual location of members among each other, a decision was made to adapt it as a medium for depicting differences in perceptions to be used for inducing members to become more aware of their ways of thinking, and as an intervention through which they might be enabled to see reality as constructed rather than discovered through some pre-given set of fully aggregated perceptions and averages (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Clusters of perceptions could then be used as a springboard for getting them to discuss issues impacting on individual and team performances. That is, differences in perceptions were viewed to be a way of creating a greater awareness of the sorts of issues affecting their performance as individuals working in a team in which high levels of interdependence is characteristic of the job at hand.

Intervention site and application

The chosen site for the application was a team of eight scientists, including the team leader. The team was working in a leading multinational pharmaceutical organization on the development of a completely new compound for the treatment of a cardiovascular disease. The team had been in existence for almost four years with no change in membership. All members possessed advanced post-doctoral qualifications in various fields, including pharmacology, haematology, toxicology, and organic chemistry.

After several meetings with the team leader and individual members it was agreed that an important issue lies in creating shared meaning and for the leader and team members to communicate more openly with each other. Almost every member hinted at the need for a reduced level of ambiguity surrounding his or her role in the team, as a prerequisite deemed

necessary for increased levels and openness in communication. One person indicated that “we rarely rely on each other ... rather we rely on the technical staff working for the other members to obtain information for us to continue with the next test”. Another member noted that: “I circumvent the direct approach and talk to a member of the technical staff and get what I want”. Based on content analysis of statements made during these meetings, an eight-item instrument tapping levels of perceived ambiguity, based on the work of King and King (1990) was used to get the team leader and members to describe their team situation. This instrument has been found to possess high validity and reliability (King and King, 1990). Examples of statements’ included: “I have to do things that should be done differently”; and “I have to break a rule in order to carry out an additional test”.

The format of the items, the response categories, and the layout of the instrument itself were all evaluated and revised for clarity, conciseness, and ease of administration. The opinions of two independent judges were sought, both of whom were knowledgeable in the management of R&D teams. The task of the individual respondent was to read a statement and then to endorse a response alternative (measured using five-point Likert type items) which most closely reflected the extent to which a statement applied to his or her job as it is now, and the way in which it affected the person’s job performance in the team.

Briefly, the analysis used was based on an adaptation (to a team-level analysis) of the sequence described in Mokken (1970). The full mathematical basis of the analysis is presented in the Appendix. In brief, it consists of a matrix of squared Euclidean distances (differences in perception) based on individual responses to items. Table I shows the matrix of differences based on squared Euclidean distances. It shows how some members emerged as being relatively similar in their perceptions to each other, whereas others were different in their responses.

Insert Table I about here

Based on the perceptual similarity of members among each other, the team was divided into two subgroups. Subgroup A consisted of the team leader and members 1, 2, 4, and 7. This subgroup was in agreement that the team situation was acceptable, and that it did not hinder them to any great extent. Subgroup B consisted of members 3, 5, and 6, which emerged as a 'faction' distinct from subgroup A, in the sense that subgroup B perceived the team situation to be more of a hindrance to their work, and to lack the coordination required. The disagreement between the two subgroups was used to trigger comments, views, and other utterances relating to the working of the team.

Team feedback intervention

The sequence of feedback was conducted in the following way. First, each team member, including the team leader, was provided with a printout of the results, based on Table I. The location of each individual recipient was highlighted, and signified with the phrase 'I am here'. All other names were excluded. A brief description of the two subgroups was included. In a covering letter, it was emphasized that each person was not looking at a preferred or non-preferred position, or a right or wrong opinion. Rather, they were looking at patterns of individual and group perceptions which indicated the ways in which individuals perceived the characteristics of their work situation differently.

Second, a one-to-one meeting was conducted with each team member, including the team leader. The one-to-one meetings were held three days after the delivery of the feedback contained in Table I. The purpose of each meeting was to encourage the particular member to see where his or her perception was located in relation to other team members, and to encourage the member to talk freely about his or her own conception of the team situation.

During the meeting, every member, including the team leader, was asked to focus on the following themes:

- The first theme dealt with the individual's opinion as to whether his or her perceptual location relative to other members surprised him or her.
- The second theme dealt with the perceived levels of job demands, supports, and constraints as factors influencing levels of perceived team performance (Payne, Jabri, and Pearson, 1988). Individual members were encouraged to talk about their own descriptions of job demands (such as levels of urgency, time schedules), levels of perceived supports (such as recognition, greater levels of discretion), and levels of perceived constraints (such as shortage of trained technical staff, and so on). For each individual, discourse was analysed under the following headings:

1. Job demands,
2. Supports, and
3. Constraints.

Then, all job demands, supports, and constraints were then cross-analysed and presented to all team members, including the team leader, in the context of a general team meeting that was especially held for that purpose. As an introduction to the meeting, the work of Schein (1993) on the notion of dialogue and the importance of one's own conception of reality were highlighted. It was emphasized that, with dialogue, the aim is centred more on understanding the utterances of the 'Other' as a prerequisite for creating shared meaning, rather than gaining agreement on one meaning. Accepting differences in the discourse of another person was emphasized as being crucial for gaining an appreciation of the voice of the other (McNamme, Gergen and associates, 1999).

Examples of job demands, supports, and constraints were presented by writing them on a flip chart. Team members were asked to group and regroup them as part and parcel of their experience and the way with which they impact on their situation of their own team. The protocol was facilitated by progressing it through three phases for conducting dialogue, as suggested by Isaacs (1994):

- * first, by using the demands, supports, and constraints for getting members to listen to the viewpoints of each other;
- * secondly, by getting members to discuss how, in their opinion, job demands and constraints should to be moderated, and the type of supports needed for that moderation to take place.

As the conversations progressed, members became more aware of each other's construction of their own situation. It was through dialogue that members were more able to make sense of the situation of their team as they were confronted with a range of views and became more aware of the intentions and experiences of one another. A criss-crossing of views ensued where team members began to listen to the experiences of each other as they attempted to relate job demands and the level of proposed support required for these demands to be fulfilled.

Evaluation and progress

Many members commented that seeing *connections* between their work, rather than *distinctions*, gave them an opportunity to discuss things that they had never previously discussed. People were able to see that feedback can present an opportunity for people to interanimate their experiences in a way that helps them cope better with the demands of their work environment and reflect on the situation of their team by creating a space for them to think about their assumptions regarding their team. In particular, they were given an

opportunity to reflect on the importance of probing their own assumptions in relation to the assumptions held by other team members.

An understanding emerged that the time was ripe for team members to create shared meaning rather than distinctions. One member noted that “clearly there is an enormous dependence among us, although each one of us may be seen as a specialist in his or her area, most of us are good in following the work and developments of other members and so we should be able to work more closely with each other”. Another member noted that “although we have been working with each other, these meeting gave us an opportunity to recognize that we do need each other”.

A major issue uncovered during the session was that of perceived rewards. Rewards had been based on an individually differentiated system of bonus payments as a percentage of annual salary, and it was therefore normal for team members to work on their own to maximize their individual chances of being rewarded at the end of the year. Such differential rewards imposed severe constraints on the prospects of collaboration among team members. As noted by one member: “... the promotion system inhibits individual members from sharing things and so, frankly, it prevents us from divulging the results. As a result we don't divulge the results ... we keep them to ourselves and write them in our own reports.”

Other issues included the need for: (i) more time to pursue individual research interests; (ii) more time for social and informal occasions for members to share their problems; (iii) better procedures for managing task interdependency, monitoring better experimentation policies, and testing of prototypes; and (iv) more efficient procedures for completing drug applications and documentation. Process-related matters included a need for ongoing sharing of the results of various testing methods, and more appropriate methods for dealing with conflicts regarding the assessment and assigning of job priorities.

Discussion and implications

The present article has demonstrated how team feedback can be used to induce members to be better equipped for work and change. The article furthers our understanding of change management as a process. Most importantly, it illustrates the need for reversing the reductionist tendency that is inherent in any simplistic aggregation of responses. The prevailing practice in the conduct of team feedback sessions has been largely based on averaging perceptions to the level of the team (Jabri, 1997a), and this has resulted in masking important differences between members.

Change agents need to adopt a more involved approach in the conduct of interventions in which subgroup profiling of responses is used as a stepping stone for creating shared meaning. Rather than relying on the methodological convenience of simply aggregating perceptions, it must be recognized that such aggregated patterns of perceptions are insufficient in assessing both individual meaning and collective meaning. This is to encourage exploration of individual perceptual differences regarding job demands, supports, and constraints, how these affect the performance of the team, and what might be done to address these issues.

The conversational style in which the intervention was conducted facilitated the identification of the various response patterns of members. It encouraged members to 'criss-cross' their views as an important means of creating readiness for change. It helped to promote understanding among team members, and provided a basis for a common language and sense of purpose, thus inducing members to re-examine assumptions about levels of perceived collaboration among members. This helped them to overcome the hurdles impeding their willingness to work with each other, and enabled them to understand some of the more difficult assumptions often held by various members.

In summary, the development and application of the intervention protocol not only brought issues to discussion, but also made the prospects for collaboration more realistic and

practical. Conversations play an important role in shaping new interventions (Dixon 1997; Senge, 1990), and in articulating new operational realities (Ford and Ford, 1995). The work of Ford and Backoff (1988) and Jabri (1997b), which portrayed change as a recursive process of social construction, has prepared the way for the development of thinking about conversations, narratives, dialogues, and other ways of relating change to language.

Limitations

No claim is made that the proposed protocol is better than, or superior to, any other protocol—except to the extent that it is easy to explain and follow. There are, however, two limitations to its application. First, the team size was relatively small. Secondly, further research is needed to compare and contrast subgroups under different conditions and with different disciplinary compositions. It would be interesting to test these issues in a wider study involving a larger number and diversity of teams.

Research implications

To a large extent, success in sharing team feedback hinges on using patterns of perceptions as a *springboard* for inducing individual members to comment on how they see their situation in relation to each other. The more we dedicate ourselves to the use of simple aggregation, the less we provide an opportunity for respondents to reflect creatively on the goals they should be pursuing in constructing change for themselves. Aggregation techniques in the conduct of interventions need to be refined such that every individual is given an opportunity to see how his or her perceptions stand in relation to others in the team.

In the present study, rather than relying on aggregated perceptions, the breaking-down of the profiles into subgroups emerged as a useful strategy for getting people to discuss their views. For research, such a strategy could be used to rekindle interest in studying modes of effective feedback. It might be that only a limited number of patterns occur with any

frequency—for example, high consensus, low consensus, leader versus followers, bi-modal or tri-modal patterns of subgroups, and so on. Subgroups can be used to see if they relate to personality and process variables (such as communication), and whether they relate to differences in such skills as innovativeness and problem-solving (Jabri, 1991). For example, do teams with high consensus patterns demonstrate higher degrees of effectiveness than teams with low consensus patterns? Bureaucratic groups might produce a high consensus pattern, or a team leader versus followers pattern, whereas matrix structures might produce bi-modal or tri-modal patterns. Such patterns can be related to measures of performance.

As noted by Schaufeli (1996) intervention protocols that are aimed at increasing readiness for change remain rare, and new ways for working on collaboration among group members are urgently needed to create more positive climates in which people are willing to share and participate in the promotion of team effort. Do innovative teams require a lack of consensus? How far will the approach contribute to our understanding of these and other questions? As with any other method, a long-term commitment to its use in various types of teams is needed. In addition, further refinements of the interviewing and the intervention protocol remain to be investigated. Further details of the adaptation of the approach used for depicting perceptual location and the development of its package are available upon request from the author.

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Table I. Perceptual locations of members

	Leader	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Leader	0.00							
Member 1	0.00	0.00						
Member 2	0.00	0.00	0.00					
Member 3	0.93	0.93	0.93	0.00				
Member 4	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.93	0.00			
Member 5	2.78	2.78	2.78	1.85	2.78	0.00		
Member 6	0.93	0.93	0.93	1.85	0.93	3.70	0.00	
Member 7	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.93	0.00	2.78	0.93	0.00

Appendix

In this appendix we consider the presence of M team members, responding to a set of n items, where n is the number of items comprising a perceptual measure, or a scale, with acceptable psychometric properties (Nunally, 1967). The items are designated by the index ($i = 1, 2, \dots, n$). Members are denoted by A, B, C, \dots, M and their response to item i by the corresponding lower case symbols $a_i, b_i, c_i, \dots, n_i$. Every member is characterized by a set of responses to the items comprising the scale. This set is called the response array on n number of items.

The absolute distances of all pairs of team members are computed using a relevant metric, such as the *squared Euclidean* distance (Attneave, 1950) and represented in a distance matrix D of order ($m \times m$) with zero elements on the principal diagonal. The vectors \underline{a} and \underline{b} represent the response vectors of two team members A and B in a team consisting of m individuals.

$$D = ||d(\underline{a}, \underline{b})|| \quad (\text{of order } m \times m) \dots (1)$$

Based on the assumption of random response, Mokken (1970) operationalized the notion of the *expected distance* $\varepsilon\{d(\underline{a}, \underline{b})\}$ in terms of the ratio of the absolute distance to the frequency of responses with which the items have been selected. The *reduced distance* (Mokken, 1970) is therefore defined as the ratio of the absolute $d(\underline{a}, \underline{b})$ to the expected $\varepsilon\{d(\underline{a}, \underline{b})\}$. The *reduced distance ratio* (ibid.) is used to scale 'how far' or 'how near' every individual is located to every other individual in the team. It has all the properties of a distance, because it is obtained by dividing the absolute distances by a positive constant (the frequency of responses) and so is obtained by a transformation that does not change the character of the distance function.