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Executive Summary

The role of trust in training and building teams

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The importance of trust within teams

Over the last 30 years, scientists have conducted hundreds of studies exploring the role of trust in teams. This huge research effort has led to almost universal consensus about the important role trust plays in team performance.

A main finding from the literature is that trust is one of the critical factors considered to underpin both effective team behaviours and effectiveness outcomes. Other notable conclusions include:

- The greater the interdependence between team members (i.e. the more they have to rely on others to get the job done because they share common goals) the more trust matters.
- Where team members have high autonomy and can complete a task without input from other team members (i.e. they can do the job themselves) then trust matters a lot less.
- When there is a lack of trust in a team (i.e. feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty are high), personal interests are much more likely to be a focus and a priority for individual team members.
- If trust is high, teams are far more likely to share feelings of vulnerability and work through any differences they have – resulting in higher quality outputs.
- Mutual trust within a team is essential for mutual team monitoring and for overall team effectiveness.

Trust is equally important for virtual teams. A pre-COVID-19 meta-analysis of 52 studies which investigated the role of trust in virtual teams found a strong and positive relationship between trust and virtual team effectiveness, particularly in the level of willingness to share knowledge and information.

Types of teams and the differing challenges they face

Ad-hoc team members (sometimes labelled Swift Starting Action Teams or STATs) are typically completely unfamiliar with each other, whereas hybrid teams are defined by their fluid membership, with a partial, or a complete variation in their composition and size across (and during) different organisational tasks.

Ad-hoc and hybrid teams can face significant challenges in working together effectively. Team members may be unaware of others' knowledge, attitudes and ways-of-working, resulting in misunderstandings of roles and responsibilities, communication breakdowns, and differences in situation awareness. Inevitably, this lack of team familiarity and cohesion can lead to difficulties in developing trust, and create gaps in understanding about how team members can best co-ordinate and support one another.

Within multinational teams, individuals may sometimes hold preconceptions about diverse groups – or in-group / out-group biases. They may also have mistaken, shared perceptions and assumptions for anticipated ways of working – triggering further failures in core teamwork activities.

Where a team is composed of multiple sub-teams – each bringing their own organisational culture, processes and expectations – these trust-challenges are exacerbated. A number of team-trust misunderstandings can also occur when virtual teams are linked to culturally diverse approaches to 'implicit' versus 'explicit' communication styles.

Creating trust within teams

The best way to build trust quickly between team members is to hold events that provoke 'deep fun,' and lead to lasting relationships and meaningful connections (i.e. where people trust one another). 'Deep fun' occurs when people try to solve hard problems with high stakes. This type of activity precludes small talk, allowing team members to get to know each other on a deeper and more authentic level. They are also given shared problems to solve, helping to build shared mental models that will support effective teamwork and the development of deeper levels of trust.

A study looking at international capacity-building teams found that strong trust culture in these teams came from early successful practice of particular behaviours, including: demonstrating technical competence; openness with information; reciprocity of support; and perceived integrity in decision-making and other actions. Later, deeper trust came from actions around benevolence and inclusion. These highlight potential themes to incorporate into teamwork training that could be of relevance across other examples of cross-cultural teams.

Teams become increasingly integrated as they travel through forming, storming and norming phases. Trust plays a key role during each of these. As team members get to know one another, trust-development facilitates the shared understanding of team goals, roles, responsibilities, and individual styles and preferences. This makes it easier to support essential co-ordination; monitor and back-up behaviours; and reinforce effective leadership and followership relations.

As the team matures, by focusing teamwork training at the specific attitudes and behaviours associated with each developmental stage, trust will be reinforced through normative processes of social exchange and leadership.

The role of team leader

What can team leaders do to help engender and accelerate a sense of trust within their teams? Researchers have identified some practical guidance, which includes the need for leaders to:

- Shape a positive social climate by identifying and resolving any signs of conflict.
- Demonstrate trust in team members.
- Ensure all individuals are treated consistently and equitably.
- Establish strong communication norms.
- Develop an appropriate hierarchy that creates a sense of procedural justice.
- Form stable team interdependencies arranged through flexible, but explicit, working contracts.

Those in leadership roles can rehearse each of these teamwork approaches within training settings.

How teams will look in the future

Future ad-hoc and hybrid teams may be composed of individuals and capabilities brought together in agile ways to meet adaptively specific organisational objectives, before rapidly disbanding. These teams may also draw on personnel from multiple organisational entities and from across national and cultural boundaries. Further, with the support of increasingly advanced and media-rich communications channels, these teams may also co-ordinate their tasks in distributed, and potentially virtual, structures.

Inevitably, these teams are likely to be harder to lead; find core teamwork feedback and back-up behaviours more difficult to successfully implement; suffer disruption to their shared situation awareness; and challenge the development of effective levels of team trust and cohesion.

What part can training play in building a good team?

Innovative team training approaches may be required to focus increasingly on reinforcing the teamwork behaviours and attitudes associated with practicing swift-trust mechanisms. Teamwork training needs to help ad-hoc and hybrid teams understand swift trust mechanisms and practice generic teamwork skills, such as providing open forums for communication and internal feedback, and sharing approaches for managing emerging team conflicts.

Training should also help team leaders tune-in to the indicators of potential deteriorating or dysfunctional teamwork performance – particularly when operating in virtual structures – and assist both team leaders and team members in understanding and recognising the particular challenges of emergent teamwork environments, giving them the opportunity to practice the behaviours required to be effective within them.

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