

Summary of groups and teams series in the workplace culture blog

This blog series reviewed the science of how teams and groups work. In particular how we get influenced by our group/team membership and the subsequent bias. This is a summary of the seven blog posts. The articles are fully referenced but in the interests of brevity they have been left out of this summary.

The full series can be found at: <https://www.prosocialteams.com.au/blog>

A list references can be found here:

Episode 1: Competition in the workplace

Competition occurs whenever one group has goals that conflict with another groups goals. Both groups will then assign negative attributes to the other group. As well as questioning the competence of the competing group they will be seen to be lacking warmth, sincerity and tolerance.

One advantage of a competitive situation is that when a group is under threat and competing for resources they become more cohesive and individuals will contribute more to the group.

Competition is almost impossible to eliminate entirely but by its definition, someone has to receive less than others in a competitive work environment. Sometimes we see improvements in performance under some competitive conditions but a recent paper in the European Journal of Management concluded that in the long run competition is detrimental to the workplace.

Signs of an overly competitive workplace

If you think your workplace might be overly competitive here are some of the negative signs of a competitive environment:

- Staff unwilling to provide advice and poor information exchange between groups
- Increased negative behaviours
- A feeling of ostracism for some staff
- Constant arguments over how things should be done.

Consequences of an overly competitive workplace

- Group rivalry and hence bias can develop very quickly, even when groups haven't met each other.
- This intergroup bias can lead to us inflating our own performance and downgrading that of the other group.
- Groups that are competing against one another, or perceive they are competing, develop unfounded negative views of the other groups.

Improving competitive cultures

- Remember some people are more competitive by nature and can thrive under competitive environments but will still feel the stress of competition at some point.
- Craft jobs to suit the competitive nature of certain teams or individuals and enable others to work free of the constraints and stresses of competition.
- Make sure compensation and rewards systems are considered fair. Most employees accept that those who are better and more experienced at their job get paid more. Find ways that it isn't at the expense of information sharing, coaching and training of other staff.
- Ensure staff have a vested interest in the success of others through collaborative goals and team performance measures
- Have strategies and processes to manage conflict.
- Clarify work responsibilities, preferably collaboratively, this avoids frustrating double ups (and competition) of work and relieves stress by giving staff certainty about expectations.
- When the boss's weekly email goes out make sure the same group isn't always getting the accolades

Episode 2: Group Identity and workplace culture

Cohesive teams and ingroup bias

We want our teams to be as cohesive as possible but the downside of a cohesive team is that they can become isolated and mistreat other teams. Cohesive teams may work so well together they feel they don't need other groups. These groups can distance themselves from others and can even be hostile towards other groups when competing for resources, power or authority.

We define ourselves through our social groups

- The groups we are part of, inside and outside of work, help us define ourselves and our identity.
- Work teams that can establish a positive identity (e.g. "we treat each other with respect") will be more effective and able to resist any negative influence of outside groups and negative behaviours within.
- Sometimes when we join a team we take on the characteristics and identity of the team (i.e. "We're professional and hard working"). Other times we see a group that shares some characteristic(s) with us and we attach ourselves to that group because "they are like me".

Morality and our group memberships

When we are attached to groups it can effect our behaviour in a number of ways.

- Our sense of **personal responsibility** is reduced due to the relative anonymity of the group. There is also a diffusion of responsibility of group actions.
- We experience a reduction in our own **moral standards**, which can drop down the ladder of importance as the group needs go to the top and we rationalise our actions by stating "It's for the greater good".
- One of the psychological principles that guide workplace culture is the principle of social proof. According to Dr. Robert Cialdini of Arizona State University, we look to others to be guided by what is appropriate behaviour and we are more influenced by 'others' if we see them as similar to ourselves.

Group influence over individuals

- Our morals and values can take a back seat when we're closely aligned to our group or team and we'll rationalise our actions by stating "it's for the greater good".
- Behavioural norms help create workplace cultures as we look to others on how to behave and these behaviours can override training and policy expectations.
- A groups conscious or unconscious identity will influence behaviour as individuals try and maintain consistency between the group identity and how they behave.
- An intervention that includes developing an agreed identity and common goals can improve relationships between teams.
- When this consistency between espoused values and the values in practice start to widen researchers call it a breach of psychological contract. This mismatch between what an organisation says it does and what it actually does can lead to lower levels of trust and commitment towards the organisation and reduced job satisfaction.

Episode 3: Breaking down cliques and building trust

We need to have friendships at work which can lead to greater productivity, retention and job satisfaction. But when a group stops sharing information and communicating, the negative effects of group cohesion start to occur and a clique has formed.

Cliques in teams

- Cliques can form within organisations and these groups restrict the flow of information and knowledge sharing coming in and out of the group.
- Trust can bring groups together, and individuals can fulfill the role of trust builder between groups, particularly if they aren't aligned to either group. These connector roles are more effective by people who can be discrete and are good at monitoring their own behaviour.

Trust building practices

Trust breaks down cliques and contributes to the open communication. Trust is contained within a closed system, meaning there can be a strong trust between team members within a group but that trust doesn't necessarily extend towards other groups.

The three elements of trust include competency, consistency and benevolence.

1. **Caring about people (Benevolence)**

- Breaking confidences is a sure way to destroy trust. Be clear about what can be shared and what can't and hold each other accountable. Ask "should you be sharing this?"
- Frequent communication helps build trust.
- Trust building communication is reciprocal in that we need to listen and be receptive to others and be open and share our views as well. People trust and seek out others who can help them explore a problem collaboratively.
- Stronger bonds, and trust, develop when colleagues get a chance to identify common interests. These can be work or non-work related. Some people like to keep a separation between work and their personal life but they can still identify common interests through work.

2. **Be consistent**

- Saying one thing (eg. "We value respect around here") and then doing something contradictory (eg. yelling at someone for making a mistake) will diminish trust. When making commitments be as realistic as possible, over promising and under delivering is a form of inconsistency.

3. **Demonstrate competence**

- Establishing common vision, purpose and goals gives groups some certainty and therefore enables trust. It limits misunderstandings about why and what you're doing.
- Leaders should be clear about their own expertise and limitations. Take the lead when working with your strengths and defer to others, or at least bring them in, when dealing in areas of limited knowledge. We are in effect trusting another's competence when we invite them to participate.

Episode 4: The need for certainty

One of our critical needs in work, and life, is certainty. We like a degree of certainty about what's going to happen, how we will be treated by others and how we see ourselves. One research paper describes it thus:

“Because uncertainty undermines our confidence in how to behave and what to expect from our physical and social environment. We have a fundamental need to reduce feelings of uncertainty about our world and our place within it”

We naturally behave to reduce any uncertainty we experience. Based on research, uncertainty can be generated from:

- the external environment (e.g. physical, social, economic)
- interpersonal relationships and specifically the inability to predict the attitudes and behaviors of another person
- challenge to our status or identity (the work we do, how we see ourselves and our role)
- not enough, or too much, information. Not enough information causes staff to fill the gaps in themselves, too much information makes it difficult to derive meaning.

When it comes to our sense of identity there are a number of ways uncertainty appears to challenge us in the workplace. Such as:

- Am I good at my job? (everyone else seems to know what they're doing)
- Do I belong here?
- Where do I, or the team, fit in the future of this organisation?

A clear identity reduces uncertainty

When we encounter uncertainty about ourselves (Who am I? What am I doing here?), we will identify more strongly with groups. This is one of the more effective ways to reduce the uncertainty we feel about ourselves. When we are part of a well defined group we understand how we are supposed to behave and how others in the group will behave.

A study into the role identity plays in workplace change, lead by Merlijn Venus, at the University of Amsterdam found that threats to identity can lead to staff resisting change. Whatever changes are requested or made, it's important for leaders to emphasise that the aspects of the organisational identity (i.e values) will remain the same.

A recently published study by researchers from Sapienza University of Rome and Rice University, Texas found that teams are more influential in driving organisational behaviour than the broader organisation. How closely an individual identified with their work unit or team was a better predictor of both positive and negative behaviours.

Leading change

- While the advice in the past has been to look for the positives and opportunities in a change, this may not be the best way to gain support for a change.
- Decide what is not going to change and communicate this as well
- Managers and leaders need to understand how staff perceive the organisation's identity and the confirm that 'who we are as a collective', will continue
- Ensure processes associated with the changes are considered to be fair, this reduces uncertainty and increases prosocial behaviours
- Assume smaller work teams are influential in motivating certain behaviours. Ensure any change initiatives are managed at the work team/unit level, as well as at the organisational level. This may mean committees or change 'champions' that work at this level
- Encourage all teams to have a plan and a purpose or mission statement that aligns with the broader organisational purpose and values. This ensures when individuals align closely with their team they will also identify with the organisation's values, purpose and goals
- Messages regarding change should make connections with the past and the future and a continuity of core values and practices. Leaders then have to behave in accordance with these values and practices.

Episode 5: Bringing teams together - four principles

Here are the four conditions for reducing group conflict based on Allport's principles. Not all principles have to be present but the more each of the principles are included the more effective the intervention will be.

1. Equal status of the groups in the situation

While groups don't have to be equal outside of the situation in which they are interacting, it's important that they perceive themselves to be equal while they are together. This means equal opportunity to contribute and equal access to information about the topic at hand.

2. Common goals for the groups to work on

The groups have to develop a shared understanding of what they are trying to achieve and this becomes the main purpose of the groups coming together. These are goals that can't be completed without both groups pooling their resources and efforts. Common goals increase an individual's identification with an organisation and for the group it creates a sense of common identity.

3. Institutional support, such as having the support of authority

Many groups exist in a hierarchy and it is important to have the support of the hierarchy to progress with whatever work the group is required to do.

4. Intergroup cooperation, which includes the removal of competition

The attainment of the common goal needs to be dependent on the groups cooperating. This means they cannot be competing in a win-lose situation.

When leaders are dealing with two groups it is important that leaders recognise and celebrate the unique and distinctive nature of the two groups. Support of change is more effective when leaders emphasise that each group provides a unique and necessary role to make the collective group function. This message points out the need to collaborate without a loss of identity for either group.

Other things to consider to reduce conflict between groups

- A structured approach to group contact using Allport's four principles is more effective than just 'bringing groups together', which can sometimes make relationships worse.
- Superordinate goals are effective in bringing teams together and one of the more effective team building activities according to research. The other is clarifying roles between team members
- Superordinate goals lead to a stronger connection to the organisation and higher levels of engagement
- Allow groups to keep elements of their identity when workplace change occurs. A fear of losing group identity, which extends to the individual, can lead to resistance of change.

Episode 6: Bringing teams together - Empathy

Empathy can be defined as **understanding another person's mental state and demonstrating that we understand what the other person is feeling**. Sometimes we feel the feelings of others (we cry along with them or feel sad when they feel sad) or we understand their circumstances and how that must feel, without necessarily feeling it. Empathy can be felt towards a group as much as an individual.

Higher levels of empathy have been shown to improve the quality of interpersonal relationships but the critical thing is that the subject of the empathy has to feel and observe the empathy. We have to confirm that the empathy is effective with who we are talking to (e.g. by saying "Have I understood the situation correctly?").

We all have different abilities to display empathy and some days we are better at it than others. All this is natural as our empathy levels go up and down depending on our mood and the context of the situation.

If empathy is directed mostly towards those in our group it can cause 'parochial empathy'. Parochial empathy is the difference between the empathy we feel for our group and another group. The late social cognitive neuroscientist, Emile Bruneau, showed that the problem with this is that when this gap gets big enough we feel more helpful towards our people and less helpful towards the other group, and even harmful.

Empathy Summary and what you can do

- Empathy protects and acknowledges a team's identity and reduces threat and defensiveness. If you find yourself arguing over an issue and getting nowhere, start asking questions and reflecting the other person's views. This display of empathy is more likely to be reciprocated than when arguing the facts.
- Displaying empathy contributes to the successful resolution of conflict and is an effective method of persuasion. If you believe the empathy will work, you'll use more empathic language when communicating.
- Empathic language includes using collective terms such as "we", "I understand" and "I agree" and the less use of labelling of other groups.
- Treat empathy as a skill that can be developed. Encourage empathy building at work. There are practices and exercises that help develop empathy, you can access some ideas [here](#).
- An empathy gap between an ingroup and outgroup can lead to the condoning of harm towards the outgroup.
- Stories are an effective way to invoke empathy, rather than facts and data, and encourage others to see the other side of an issue.

Episode 7: Bring groups together: morals and values

An understanding of the morals and values of others can help reduce conflict. The methods to understand another's values are similar to those for displaying empathy. When in discussions, some of the research based strategies are to ask yourself, or the group to:

- Suspend judgement for a moment, stop arguing and ask questions
- Quell emotions if you can, or at least make sure they are not taking over your behaviour
- Be curious about why people think the way they do
- Be prepared to share yourself, reciprocity is a major value across many societies, if someone gives you part of themselves, you're expected to do the same
- Use reflective listening skills to make sure you understand and that whoever you're talking to knows you understand.
- Trust that practising empathy will get you a breakthrough in the discussions, despite the ups and downs that might occur along the way.
- Articulate a desirable set of values and way of working. What behaviours and attitudes help us get there?

Motivational matching

One approach to influencing and persuading that has a consistent research base to it is called **motivational message matching**. This involves matching your message to the "goals, needs, values, motives or concerns" of the receiver of the message.

Moral reframing

Moral reframing is one form of motivational matching that is described as:

"a position an individual would not normally support is framed in a way that is consistent with that individual's moral values" .

Morals and values go back to our identity and when messages are presented in line with our identity we are more likely to evaluate it positively and the message will be easier to understand. It also suggests the message may be coming from an in-group member so we're more likely to subconsciously pay attention.

The researchers of moral reframing, group morals into five categories. These are:

- harm/care
- fairness/reciprocity
- ingroup/loyalty
- authority/respect and
- purity/sanctity.

Universal morals

A recently published study established a set of universal morals across 256 societies by analysing ethnographic (observations and interviews) accounts. These morals being a “collection of cooperative rules that help humans work together”. The authors categorised the morals and simply described them as being about:

- Helping your family and group
- Returning favours
- Acting heroically
- Being deferential and fair
- Respecting property.

Research consistently shows that Intergroup bias is often based on a biased perception of a group that can be at odds with the reality of the situation. Knowing individuals within a team who represent an alternative view to the common perception can help reduce bias. This experience of the outgroup, which is different from the perceived view, gets extended out to the broader group.

Seeing two people from opposing sides talking to each other shows to other group members that the two groups may have more in common than first thought.

- We tend to overestimate how much an opposing group dislikes us and how much they are trying to disrupt us. Leaders can take a role where they correct the misinformation one group has about another
- Matching a message with another person’s goals, needs or values (i.e. their intrinsic motivators) is the most effective way to communicate a message. Rather than just explaining what someone will lose or gain from an initiative.
- Moral reframing (framing a message on alignment with another’s moral values) have shown to be an effective way of enabling others to see the alternative side of an argument.
- Understand the motivations of other individuals and teams. Ask about purpose, goals and values and if teams can’t articulate these, encourage them to discuss them and write them down.
- Ask groups and individuals why they think and act the way they do and encourage the questioning of group norms.