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Trust, anxiety, commitment and knowledge (TACK): Emotional learning in project teams

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Any team is at bottom really a metaphor for the synergies resulting from a bunch of conversations and related actions of a set of individuals who, because they share some core values, are able to cooperate to achieve a common task. Team development then is about the extent of cooperative development and shared values that are held in common between this set of people. In other words, it is basically how quickly the team matures and how well they bond together. Such bonding occurs across a number of planes of development. Cooperative bonds may, at any time, encompass each of such planes or levels of existence separately or jointly in multifarious ways which often enfold each other and amplify the outcomes holistically, providing synergies that are larger than the sum of the parts. I mean the kind of results whereby you get more out than would normally be expected by simply adding together all the parts, i.e. 2+2 =5. Often this outcome is sought in vain in our favorite sports teams — unfortunately. It is a weird, emotional physics that many have experienced in various places and times. For instance, it exists in some work teams, religious organizations, sports team, families, communities, classes and so on. Mind you, some of us suspect that too often it is the other side’s turn to deliver synergies. Maybe that’s just bad timing on our part, of course — right place, wrong time.

However, to be serious, it is clear that emotions underpin much of everyday life, at work or at play, not merely these sorts of ‘breakthrough’ phenomena. Further, although carried out without defining or differentiating teams from other groups, George et al (cited in Barsade, 2003) showed that shared, collective emotions not only exist, but affect work outcomes as well as group stability. This element of contagion is also implicated in what has been called social capital—the growth in a person’s or group’s life chances and opportunities from accrued bridge-building and bonding in trusted social networks (Field, 2006). Social capital and educational capital are often linked, and although the exact nature of that relationship is not established, it is clear that civic
and community engagement is correlated with educational engagement (Putnam, 1993, 1995, 2000, Field, 2006, pp2-3, pp5-12). The situated or context-dependent aspect of much workplace knowledge and skill is highlighted by Field:

**Much knowledge** — including many practical applications — is tacit, or embedded in specific social networks with their largely unquestioned routines; indeed, these networks are often creating and re-creating knowledge, rather than simply engaging in a series of one-way knowledge transfer. (Field, 2006, p13)

Field also points to the team collective as the repository of many skills often associated with individuals, and the recognitions of this in employment practices focused on hiring a skilled team rather than skilled individuals (Field, 2006, pp5-6). There is still a need for research on team learning and how emotions are involved in the social construction of team decisions in workplaces, whether they be face-to-face (f2f) or virtual. In fact, even apparently ‘rational’, ‘clinical’ or ‘objective’ decisions and actions can exhibit an emotional sub-text or grounding.

The emotional regimes in teams are underpinned by both implicit and explicit sets of socio-emotional norms. This is part of what Fineman (1996, p218) calls ‘emotional rules’. These are rules of acceptable behavior operating between people and governing how they interact with one another. They generate particular behavioral ‘regimes’ or ‘acts and practices’ regarded as being ‘businesslike’. These rules are also relevant to the individual and team levels of project commitment, and to values transformations linked to personal identity. In this way, emotions synchronize social interaction and foster or inhibit group unity. Thus, inevitably, there are also emotional conflicts of interest and of practice. Emotions arise as part of benchmarking interpersonal events. These affirm and/or change individuals’ or collective levels of status, influence and power relative to others.

My research really then is on the emotional capital and emotional lifecycles in teams. That is, about the kinds of social and emotional ‘capital’ teams accrue; and how they sustain, grow and ‘infect’ others with that emotional energy over time.

**Research methods and data:**

The research was carried out over two years and involved more than 130 reflective logs and diaries from individuals in teams of MBAs engaged in live consulting projects. I identified four main emotional regimes in the teams, each with differing levels and types of emotional capital. In the first two years, I analyzed the rich data in these participants’ diaries and time-logs of events, triangulating that data with the observations, and post-project interviews with host companies, plus other MBA academic staff. Dates, times and frequency of self-reported and observed emotional peaks and troughs in each of the teams collated with their diarized individual and collectively-recorded perceptions and understandings of these events allowed me to note the emergent patterns as team members saw them.

The same approach was followed in the later research in 2000, 2001 and 2004, involving MBAs
in New Zealand and Australia. There were some minor variations between Australian and New Zealand cohorts and the others. Firstly, they were engaged on internal company projects in telecommunications whereas the others in the UK were on diverse projects and across the range of business types i.e. from SMEs to Multinationals. Secondly, the New Zealanders and Australians shared more business values, and ethnic diversity was more restricted. However, the teams could be located in the same set of four main quadrants.

I developed a simple two-by-two matrix to reflect the key quadrants that teams were located in, along axes composed of averages of observed, and/or recorded, diary or interview reflections on trust-related components and anxiety-related aspects within teams. Team commitment requires some base levels of reciprocated trust and, by inference, anxiety over fulfilling tasks and achieving outcomes. I used average anxiety as a proxy measure for the level of commitment to (or alienation from) the specific project-related tasks. Their emotion-coordinates were elicited from intersecting team averages of trust and anxiety relating to the project obligations.

In the figure below, numbers in brackets in each quadrant, including the center, refer to the totals of relevant, individual, reflective journals in each of these categories. Thus, the Trusty Followers quadrant totals 25 people and thus 25 journals.

![Figure 1: Typology of Emotional Regimes in Teams](image)

Most teams were in the Suspicious Mercenaries quadrant. These teams were suspicious of other
teams and of some within their own teams, at times exhibiting competitive, and at other times almost paranoid, concerns over perceived rivals’ progress. The levels of anxiety, tension, stress and friction were highest in these teams compared to those in the three other quadrants.

*Responsible professionals* exhibited high trust in each other but also high anxiety, and they attributed their anxiety to their commitment to doing a ‘professional’ job.

*Trusty followers* expressed characteristically high trust in the leader and low project-related anxiety because they trusted the team leader.

*Acephalous* (centerless) *pairs* and *Social Loafers* never really formed teams but exhibited either a.) pair-bonds where each pair-bond’s trust of each ‘significant other’ was higher than trust of the rest of the team or of other teams; or b.) they acted as a group of avoiders with a reluctant ‘leader’.

*Hybrids* were, as the name implies, a mixture and that is reflected in the figures for trust and anxiety.

**Workplace E-Learning**

Sustainable leadership, learning and emotional development of virtual project teams specifically interests me. Such teams are shaping up to become the dominant form of an organizational unit in some sectors and regions. Computer-mediated communication systems, such as email, instant messaging, NetMeeting and video or teleconferencing, are frequently used nowadays to disseminate new information or in team communication. So it is important to know how these forms of communication differ from face-to-face, and when one approach is better than the other. In a recent experiment, participants were given the same conflict scenario and instructed to negotiate either face-to-face, by email or via synchronous computer conferencing (SCC). Negotiated solutions were of two kinds. Either they were *distributive*—one person gains if the other makes a concession, or *integrative*—both parties cooperate to reach a win-win situation (Tan, 2005: 1). Integrative outcomes were highest for the SCC context and lowest face-to-face. Tan (2005) concluded that in low-level conflict, lack of non-verbal cues is an advantage as it encourages both sides to focus on the message.

Haythornthwaite *et al* (2002a, 2002b) noted the impact of social networks and norms on both individuals’ achievements, the tools used and learning in an online environment. John Suler (2004) refers to the emotional norms of people in online communicative environments. In particular, Suler describes many emotionally disinhibiting and inhibiting features found in online communication that differentiates it from face-to-face communication. Some of these relate to the development of an individual’s identity, and thus have emotional capital embodied in the communicative processes they engage in online. Riemer and Klein (2003) considered the usefulness of social capital for ill-structured tasks such as innovation. Stuckey *et al*, (2005) highlight the pre-existing dispositions and social network attitudes as well as motivations for learning as mediating the impact on learning and the type of social capital generated as a result.
My contention is that there also has to be recognition of the intertwined personal and collective emotional regimes underpinning such social capital accumulation in work teams.

Virtual project teams are often used where expertise is in short supply locally or is too costly to hire. Role based forms of trust along with clear ground rules and protocols are required for optimum functioning in such teams, but although that may be possible initially, some cognitive consensus is also required. In other words they need to share some common ideas on how to proceed and what each of them is saying (Riemer and Klein, 2003). However, I suggest that more than a set of shared mental models is needed; some concern about the project and its outcomes is also needed. That is, a broad level of anxiety over meeting commitments of the project tasks is required for any productive outcomes and for effective learning outcomes in particular.

This typology and approach has been piloted with a small cardiac team in a telemedicine organization in the UK and with a ‘virtual’ team operating between the UK and Sweden in a large corporation. The typology promises applicability to virtual or interim team management processes and to the development of a corporate identity, where flexible and fluid project collaboration arrangements apply or with limited duration of actual projects. This model and these techniques can be, if applied judiciously, used as “therapy” for project teams, including those online as Suler (2004) indicates concerning individuals, I believe, by mapping the extensive and intensive therapeutic interventions as described in figure 2 (below), onto the emotional regimes matrix in figure 1 (above). The Hybrids group might best be used to strengthen or dilute other teams’ emotional regimes as required.

Figure 2: Some possible therapies
Conclusion:

In effect, the projects were “snapshots” of the developmental lifecycles of teams. Valuable insights into the turbulent processes of personal, team and organizational developments were acquired in face-to-face and some limited virtual contexts. Teams occupied four main emotional regimes, namely Acephalous Pairs, Suspicious Mercenaries, Trusty Followers and Responsible Professionals. A small number occupied a hybrid regime. The commitment matrix, that framed the research, viewed teams in terms of key thematic elements linked to commitment, trust and anxiety. The meta-patterns of individual and group level interaction revealed features of an emergent team ‘personality’ demonstrated in their observable patterns of behavioral responses to problems, to other teams and to the organizational context. There, other implications of learning from the inside out arose, i.e. unblocking individual or team’s lack of self-confidence or failure complexes. The changed self-image and identities of individuals in successful teams is testimony to that. Some questions remain as much of this area is tacit rather than explicit. What is necessary to maintain high levels of team emotional effectiveness and the ‘contagion’ and capture processes for such emotional capital? Are there particularly efficacious tools and techniques applicable in communities of learners in an online or virtual environment?

References:


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