

When Identity Groups Collide: What We Know About Cross-Cultural Leadership in Organizations

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The Leadership Challenge

- Globalization makes it more likely that diverse employees will be required to work together
- Leaders must face the challenge of managing conflicts that emerge due to historically deep rooted boundaries and tensions between social identity groups

Theoretical Underpinnings

- Social Identity Theory
- Intergroup Anxiety
- Faultlines
- Conflict Escalation
- Leadership across difference

Social Identity Theory

- Individual self-concept derived in part from group membership (Turner & Giles, 1981)
- Categorization helps us to define our selves as well as others
- Generally, people are motivated to identify with social groups

Intergroup Anxiety



- Historical legacy of conflict between groups influences the extent to which conflict emerges in the workplace
- Intergroup anxiety created by 1) prior relations, 2) prior cognitions, 3) situational factors such as competition, group status, etc. (Stephan & Stephan, 1985)

Faultlines



- Identity group composition or representation may activate categorization and increase the potential for conflict
- Faultlines are “hypothetical dividing lines that may split a group into subgroups based on one or more attributes” (Lau & Murnighan, 1998: 328).
- Faultlines may be activated when events make social identity salient (e.g., triggers)

Conflict Escalation



4 stages of conflict escalation (Northrup, 1989)

1. *Threat* – group identity threatened
2. *Distortion* – response to threat may include denial or redefining the incident
3. *Rigidification* – increased polarization
4. *Collusion* – conflict becomes institutionalized

Leadership Across Differences



- Employees expect leaders to intervene
- We define leaders as individuals with formal organizational authority who engage in processes and actions that lead to shared direction, alignment, and commitment (O'Connor & Quinn, 2004; Van Velsor & McCauley, 2004).
- Leaders have the potential to de-escalate conflict or polarize groups further

Leadership Across Differences



- Challenging because the leader is also a social identity group member
- The group member most likely to exert influence represents the strongest in-group prototype (Haslam, 2001; Turner, 1987)
- In a conflict situation, employees will confer leadership on those who best embody the position of the ingroup (Fielding & Hogg, 1997; Hogg, 1996)

Summary & Workplace Implications



- Anxiety between groups exists in society at large
- Group members forced to interact at work
- Faultlines become activated and conflict emerges
- At least one party attributes the conflict to social identity differences
- Groups polarize and the conflict escalates
- Leader intervention may be reactive or preventative
- If conflict is not successfully resolved, it may become entrenched in the organization

Overcoming Conflict



- SIT predicts that classification and in/out group categorization leads to bias and conflict
- Social categorization processes may also create opposite effects

Decategorization



- Person based rather than group based interactions (Brewer & Miller, 1984)
- Provide opportunities to get to know out-group members as individuals
- Personal identity emphasized (consistent with Transformational and LMX theories)
- Organizational strategies may include social gatherings, collegial and cooperative culture

Recategorization



- Creation of a superordinate identity that includes both in-group and out-group members
- Common in-group identity model (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman & Rust, 1993)
- Focus on common goals and integrative tasks
- Non-profits often use their mission and for-profits may use market share
- Organization itself becomes the inclusive identity group

Subcategorization



- Members of both groups have distinct but complementary roles to contribute toward a common goal (Hewstone & Brown, 1986)
- Group differentiation and superordinate goals serve to compliment each other
- Organizational affinity groups or formal networks allow groups to have voice and at the same time identify with the superordinate goal

Cross-Cutting



- Brewer (1995) recommends systematically or randomly crossing work group roles (e.g., function) with category membership (e.g., gender) so that social identity and function no longer covary
- Faultlines less likely to emerge and conflict less likely attributed to social identity
- Virtual teams may facilitate collaboration

Role of Cultural Values



- Current literature fails to consider the effectiveness of the 4 strategies within various cultures
- Leader strategies may be unacceptable or inappropriate:
 - expatriate assignment
 - leading a multinational virtual team
 - trying to bridge differences between employees with a history of conflict and tension

Cultural Values



- Relationship of the individual to the group (Individualism and Collectivism)
- Collectivistic societies:
 - Identification with fewer social identity groups
 - Group membership salient and relatively fixed
 - Clear distinctions between in and out groups
 - Interdependent self-construal = express oneself in relation to others, emphasize commonalities

Decategorization Revisited



- Emphasizing individual identity is consistent with independent self-construal in individualistic cultures
- Leadership strategies that foster strong relational ties with out-group members will be met with resistance in collectivistic cultures
- ***P1: Decategorization will be more effective at reducing social identity conflict with members of individualistic cultures***

Recategorization Revisited



- Creation of a superordinate or inclusive identity is consistent with the interdependent self-construal in collectivistic cultures
- Leadership strategies that encourage a collective approach in which employees place the needs of their organization in front of their individual needs will NOT be met with resistance in collectivistic cultures
- ***P2: Recategorization will be more effective at reducing social identity conflict with members of collectivistic cultures***

Subcategorization Revisited



- This hybrid strategy, which draws on existing subcategories while at the same time unifying efforts within the superordinate identity, will likely be effective in both cultures
- ***P3: Subcategorization will be an effective strategy at reducing social identity conflict with members of individualistic and collectivistic cultures***

Cross-Cutting Revisited



- Crossing work group roles with category membership to ensure adequate representation may be met with resistance in collectivistic cultures
 - assumes task is of primary importance and in-group/out-group distinctions are of secondary importance
 - greater value on individual contributions and unique characteristics consistent with the independent self-construal in individualistic cultures
- ***P4: Cross-cutting will be more effective at reducing social identity conflict with members of individualistic cultures***

Research Implications



- Criticisms of SIT
 - Laboratory experiments
 - Student samples
 - Strategies implemented in “real world” ?
- Need to identify appropriate leadership strategies within specific cultural and societal contexts