Team Dynamics in All-Female Teams

A Study of the Spring 2020 MGT 4910 Healthcare Management Practicum

Translational Article

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Introduction

In spring 2020, the MGT 4910 Healthcare Management Practicum attracted 16 students from 5 majors, who were considering careers in the healthcare industry. In this practicum course, students undertook a semester-long, group consulting project for Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. At the end of the course, the students reported the project to be the most functional and effective team experience that they had encountered at Georgia Tech. That semester, and for the first time ever, the course included only women students. What went right? And, can we replicate those conditions for women-centered organizations and for more gender heterogeneous groups on campus?

Over the past eight months, I have researched team dynamics, conducted qualitative interviews, and gathered data through a quantitative survey to determine what went right. I found themes of high emotional understanding and regulation, team trust, vulnerability, equal workshare, and a positive sense of ownership; effective teams have high emotional intelligence, take a democratic approach to workshare, and foster an environment that allows members to be vulnerable with and trust one another. It's hard to say whether or not these elements were instinctive or situational in the practicum group, but I found research that shows you can make an effort to allow for these aspects of high team performance to exist, and small, conscious behavior can help improve these dynamics no matter the team.

Application

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is an area where our study team was notably strong. The 1997 Mayer Salovey Ability Model is one of the most commonly used emotional intelligence testing models, and I used it to measure aptitude within the practicum course group. For the purposes of this research, I focused on emotional understanding and emotional regulation testing. Emotional understanding focuses more on situational awareness and the ability to predict emotions before or right as they occur. Emotional regulation involves individual emotions and one's capacity for recognizing and controlling them. With above average mean scores in both emotional understanding and regulation, it made sense that this team was skilled at reading each other's emotions and regulating their individual emotions. This component of team effectiveness is something that some people are inherently more skilled at than others. Luckily, anyone can increase their emotional intelligence through taking a more reflective and observational approach in studying internal and external emotions.

Dr. Katie Badura, Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Scheller College of Business shares that this awareness, or "other-focused" ability, is a key component of effective leadership (Badura, 2019, Slide 17). This factor can be improved upon by studying different emotions so that they will become easier to recognize over time. Taking more time to reflect and being intentional in observation can also boost emotional understanding. Dr. Badura also shares that emotional regulation is strongly connected to stress management, so those that better

regulate their stress by expressing emotions in healthy ways tend to excel at emotional regulation too. Self-reflection and knowing emotional triggers also help to manage emotions as they occur.

Workshare

Workshare was a component that I explored early on in my research and that students mentioned in the qualitative interviews. Course participants felt that they could lean on other members of their group to fairly allocate work, and participants felt that, compared to other class teams, work teams, and extracurricular teams, the practicum course team exhibited superior communication, trust, inclusivity, and overall effectiveness. Similarly, research from Dr. Anita Williams Woolley, Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior and Theory at the Tepper School of Business, Carnegie Mellon University, shows that "conversational turn-taking" or equal opportunity to share ideas and participate in discussion lead to higher team performance. Being conscientious of how much one is speaking and giving others a voice in group work goes a long way in workshare and creating an inclusive team.

Vulnerability and Trust

Vulnerability and trust were key elements that contributed to the ultimate satisfaction that course participants felt with the final deliverable. Trust and vulnerability are intertwined, meaning that they are equally important. Dr. Brené Brown from the University of Houston describes vulnerability as "not knowing victory or defeat, it's understanding the necessity of both; it's engaging. It's being all in." With a semester-long project, there was no way this team could have relied on one or two individuals to carry the majority of the project. Placing trust in one another and the ability of members to periodically ask others for smaller portion of the work during busy periods created an openly vulnerable environment where team members recognized that everyone was human and had commitments outside of this course while still showing commitment to the final outcome. Having an open dialogue and communicating priorities early help create vulnerability and trust in a team.

The Role of Gender

While the team included only women, I cannot definitively determine if gender had a significant role in creating a highly effective team working environment. Dr. Woolley's research, mentioned above, suggests that characteristics of a highly effective team – specifically social sensitivity and a democratic approach to workshare - are more often inherently present in women. Dr. Woolley's has observed increased "conversational turn-taking" in female-dominant teams, and in the qualitative interviews, group members that each agreed that there was no dominating course participant when it came to class discussions. I also saw average and above average emotional understanding and regulation scores with few outliers. My findings favor female ability; however, with no comparators and such a small sample size, I cannot conclude all-female teams are objectively more effective than all-male or heterogeneous teams. While gender was an

interesting observation that sparked this research project, it is clear that a better understanding of how teams can create a cohesive and effective environment is far more helpful in the long run.

Conclusion

What makes this research interesting is the ability to apply the findings in any team. Small, intentional behaviors can set up a team for success, and team dynamic research is widely available. Based on my research, I suggest setting goals at the beginning of a group meeting, going beyond the work at hand to learn about your team members and what is going on outside of their work with your group, ensuring you are not dominating a conversation and if you are, taking a step back, de-stressing yourself outside of group work time and paying attention to the emotions of others. These skills are not mysterious but applying them can make a big difference in the outcomes seen in your team's performance.

Further Research

For an in-depth understanding to the inner workings of the practicum team and what I found in our research, you can read the full white paper. Some of my favorite sources from this project were the New York Times article "What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team", Daniel Coyle's book: The Culture Code, and Brené Brown's TED Talk: The Power of Vulnerability. All of these sources go deeper into the concepts discussed in my research paper and this translational article and are valuable resources for anyone looking to learn more about how they can build their understanding of successful team dynamics.