

Status Perception Incongruence in Teams

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Changes in today's work environment have produced a strong trend toward the use of team-based structures in the workplace. This trend has been driven by the growing complexity of organizational work, the difficulties in fostering workforce commitment, and the need to draw on all available employee skills and resources (Hoerr, 1989; Sundstrom, Demeuse, & Futrell, 1990). Although many aspects of team structures have been a focus of renewed interest in organizational studies, status organizing processes have received relatively less attention (Ravlin & Thomas, 2005). Sociological and sociobiological perspectives suggest that virtually any group formation will generate a status hierarchy, based on needs for predictability and individual differences (Sidanius, Pratto, & Rabinowitz, 1994). This theoretical paper examines development of status orderings with a focus on what generates status perception incongruence, or a lack of agreement about team status ordering, and what implications status perception incongruence has for team functioning.

Status perceptions refer to the identification of differences in prestige and deference among group members (Conway, Pizzamaglio, & Mount, 1996; Shils, 1975). As differentiating information is categorized as "good" or "bad," the overall hierarchy is created by combining salient dimensions of comparison, weighted for importance (Fisek, Berger, & Norman, 1995). Status Characteristics Theory (e.g., Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980) suggests that external or diffuse status characteristics, such as gender, racial, or ethnic qualities, tend to be evaluated and used to form initial status perceptions. In addition to these external status characteristics, over time other sources of status perceptions include interaction patterns, evaluations of task competence, and styles of verbal and non-verbal behavior. Research evidence indicates that external or diffuse characteristics such as gender contribute, independently of performance, to ascriptions of status (Cohen & Zhou, 1991); that is, once status orders are formulated, they are difficult to change (Berger, et al., 1980). Within the team, status orders provide members with information about their roles, such as the amount of contribution appropriate, when to defer, and whose opinion carries the most weight (Cohen & Zhou, 1991).

Although there are clearly both motivational and cognitive reasons for the development of status perceptions within teams (e.g., Sidanius, et al., 1994), sharing of these perceptions among team members is not uniform. We identify three primary factors in the evolution of status perception incongruence within a team. These factors are 1) the differentiated belief structures held by members prior to joining the team (based on heterogeneity of team membership), 2) differing levels of prior familiarity within dyadic relationships in the team, and 3) individual differences related to self-esteem. These factors can lead to lack of a shared mental model of status with implications for team process and effectiveness.

Heterogeneous belief systems impact status beliefs in multiple ways. For example, cultural differences can carry inconsistent external evaluations of status (e.g., U.S. and Japanese beliefs about business superiority), they influence interaction patterns over time, and also

have implications for beliefs about appropriate verbal and non-verbal behavior (e.g., Ravlin, Thomas, & Ilsev, 2000). In general, we would expect that homogeneous others tend to evaluate one another more positively (e.g., Byrne, 1971); however, the effect of the similarity-attraction effect (or social identity processes; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) on status perceptions will be moderated by beliefs about the connection between demographic qualities and status and the task in particular. In addition, differences in prior familiarity within dyads on a team may lead to individuals having a great deal of task-based information about one individual, and purely stereotypical information about another. These differences in familiarity should also lead to differences in perceptions of the appropriate status ranking each individual should hold, in part based on the development of cognitive trust among more familiar dyads (Lewis & Weigart, 1985). Lastly, individuals will evaluate themselves differently in terms of status, with a tendency toward overevaluating their own importance within the team. Self-esteem level should play a role in exacerbating or mitigating this tendency. Propositions regarding these antecedents to status perception incongruence are developed in the proposed presentation.

Disagreement regarding the status hierarchy signals a lack of legitimacy of the current status structure in that it is not accepted as appropriate or proper by all team members. This is a significant issue, because when status orders are unstable, conflict is more likely to become manifest (Zelditch & Walker, 1989). Our model of the process indicates that status perceptions of other team members act as screening and evaluating devices. That is, based on my status perception of a team contributor, my perception and judgment regarding the member's contribution will be affected in the following ways. First, attention will be drawn to aspects of the contribution consistent with existing status perceptions, or inconsistent information will be processed until it fits better, or is marked as an understandable exception. Second, the task- and process-based evaluation made of the contribution will be influenced by existing status perceptions as well, to the extent that the evaluation criteria contain ambiguity. Third, the resulting interpretation and evaluation will then be encoded in memory, if the evaluation suggests that the contribution merits encoding. As the team uses the information from different members, each member's contributions contain information based on the above process. Both motivational and cognitive biases should be identifiable in the process.

If status perception incongruence exists within the team, we would expect the following outcomes. As incongruence in status beliefs increases, more behaviors will be labeled as illegitimate by team members (inconsistent with an individual's status role). Members will also be more likely to perceive that the legitimacy of their beliefs, affect, and behavior is being challenged (Ravlin, et al., 2000). If the status structure is perceived as unstable, members will demonstrate some form of non-acceptance. In general, they may either attempt to gain more status for themselves or their sub-group (individuals high in self-perceived status and self-esteem, subgroups in a numerical majority), or may become passive because they don't know with whom they should try to affiliate themselves (individuals lower in self-perceived status and self-esteem, subgroups in a numerical minority; see also Blalock, 1957). Conflict will tend to be destructive, as opposed to constructive (e.g., Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995), because members do not agree on a status hierarchy for resolving differences of opinion, and consensus will be difficult to achieve.

Non-acceptance can be demonstrated in multiple ways. Team members who experience status perception incongruence may either respond covertly, concealing their lack of agreement with the apparent dominant order, or overtly demonstrate their disagreement. In either case,

the goal of behavior may be to attempt to change the status system and/or its outcomes, or to leave the system intact. When the response is covert and status quo-oriented, compliance with the dominant expectation is the result. The team member responds to incongruence of status perceptions by complying with the apparent dominant order to receive team benefits (rewards, acceptance, conflict and sanction avoidance). As Kelman's (1958) approach to compliance suggests, as long as the behavior is reciprocated by these positive outcomes, it will continue. Compliance is likely under conditions of a strong apparent dominant order, marginally different beliefs about status, high benefits for compliance, and/or low situational ambiguity. When response to status perception incongruence is overt and status quo-oriented, withdrawal behavior occurs. The team member refuses to "play the game", but does not attempt to change others' expectations for influence and prestige-oriented behaviors. Withdrawal may also include turnover from the team. Withdrawal is more likely to occur when the perceived dominant order is strong, is significantly different from the individual's perceptions about status, provides low benefits for compliance, and ambiguity about the situation is low.

Change-oriented responses to status perception incongruence include both ingratiation behavior and iconoclasm. Ingratiation typically has as its primary goal attempts to improve outcomes for the actor (e.g., Jones & Wortman, 1973), but can also be aimed toward producing long-term change in the status order, at least for the self. This type of response is covert in nature, in that the actor attempts to act in a socially desirable manner (in accord with his/her status) while influencing the social order. Iconoclastic behavior is exhibited by those who perceive that it has some chance of changing the apparent dominant social order. When the apparent dominant order is perceived to be weak to moderately strong (an attack has a chance of success), when beliefs are moderately or highly different, and low benefits accrue for compliance, individuals are more likely to attack the system overtly. High contextual ambiguity may also foster iconoclastic behavior because opportunities for change may appear more positive.

This approach to understanding status organizing processes in teams suggests that teams that fail to share a view of the status hierarchy will not, of their own accord, solve their problems over time, but instead need training and guidance on developing appropriate interaction processes (Thomas, 1999). The proposed paper will present a theoretical framework addressing both causes and consequences of a lack of agreement about status, and will discuss practical implications from both a diversity and a team effectiveness perspective.

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