Assessing External Leader Involvement in Mitigating Deviance in Autonomous Teams through Narrative Analysis of Team-Member Recollections

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Abstract: This exploratory study examines the extent to which autonomous team members recollect the most salient memories of deviance in their team experiences, revealing those components of organizational context that can be redefined by organizational leaders to mitigate deviance. Feedback from 18 participants, all revealing lived experiences on their respective autonomous teams, suggested that deviance is most likely to prevail within the following contextual areas: (a) organizational culture, (b) member recruitment and selection, (c) level of collaboration, (d) resource allocation, and (e) relationships with team-external entities. With attention to these findings, organizational leaders can minimize deviance in an effort to nurture an organizational context most conducive to meeting team-member expectations.

INTRODUCTION

The use of autonomous teams to achieve organizational objectives continues to capture the interest of team researchers [1]. What makes autonomous teams stand out from other team types is the latitude of discretion with which members design and complete team tasks without interruptions from team-external authority [2]. Yet, organizational leaders have an obligation to shape an organizational context most conducive to team-process development and outcome implementation of autonomous teams. For example, Lorinkova [3] recognized that optimal levels of autonomy bestowed on teams is a key contextual component that enhances sense of ownership in team tasks and promotes team-member cooperation. Rashkovits [4] found a direct correlation between participation on autonomous teams and increased levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Other contemporary literature credits a well-designed organizational context for fostering advanced team-learning dynamics [5], innovation [6], and information sharing between hierarchical levels, which can result in enriched decision making [7]. Still, common within autonomous teams is the emergence of deviant behaviors.

According to Lawrence and Robinson [8], deviance signals a form of resistance, typically fueled by threats to perceived unfairness, threats to autonomy, or when power is unexpectedly enacted. Deviance among autonomous team members can surface in a variety of forms, embedded within various organizational contextual components, and with varying levels of aggression. Autonomous teams may be especially likely to foster deviant behaviors because of the continuous interaction among members [9]. Recent research has largely focused on antecedents for deviant behavior [10, 11] and on the impact of deviant behaviors on organizations as a whole [8, 12]. Yet, an under-researched area of deviance among autonomous team members is the extent to which exposure to deviant behaviors has a long-term negative impact on team members' perceptions of participation on autonomous teams in general. Negative and hostile reactions to team participation could potentially undermine the value of utilizing autonomous teams, which should encourage organizational leaders to alter their direct involvement in redefining the organizational context to reduce deviance. Therefore, this exploratory study examines the extent to which exposure to deviant behaviors in autonomous team settings shapes team members' later recollections of team experiences, and, in doing so, reveals the most salient parts of organizational

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context around which deviant behaviors are most likely to prevail.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In reflecting on deviant behaviors in autonomous teams, the following topics warrant mention in this review of literature: (a) the nature of deviant behaviors, (b) the isolative nature of autonomous teams, (c) team-external leader behaviors in mitigating deviance, and (d) mere incivility as a subset of deviance.

General Nature of Deviance

Deviance in the workplace prevails in a variety of forms. Warren [13, p. 622] defined deviance as "behavioral departures from norms". In addition, Robinson and Bennett [10] described deviance as voluntary in nature, whereby an individual lacks the desire to conform to organizational norms. Such behavior can be directed at either an individual or group of individuals or toward the entire organization [14]. According to Vardi and Wiener [11], individuals tend to engage in deviant behaviors when organizational commitment is low. Sometimes, deviance can result from organizational members' negative reactions to change in general [8]. Change within an organization's political climate can foster deviant behaviors among organizational members resisting the change; this may be common when individuals feel a lack of moral and emotional support from leaders during change processes. Another contextual change that may ignite deviant behaviors is a reduction in the level of autonomy bestowed on team members. Lawrence and Robinson [8] pointed out how reductions in expected autonomy levels threaten team members' feelings of security in what had been perceived to be an empowered situation.

Isolative Nature of Autonomous Teams

Autonomous team members have a significant latitude of discretion in designing team processes and implementing outcomes. However, over time, autonomous teams may become isolated from their organizational environments to the detriment of task performance [15]. In these situations, team members have a tendency to overlook valuable input from external constituencies and exhibit less learning and innovative behavior. Further, Rashkovits [4] pointed out that the extreme sense of independence often encountered by autonomous team members lessens their responsiveness to other organizational units' needs and team-external leader demands. Without team-external influence, autonomous teams are not likely to embrace change but will merely conform to prescribed practices instead [16]. Given their isolative nature, members of autonomous teams may not always recognize when procedural breakdowns are occurring

or be able to specifically identify where expertise may be lacking in the team [17]. Complacency and social loafing often result, which undermine the team's motivation. It is the isolative nature of autonomous teams that Arthur [9] partially attributed to team-member deviance.

Team-External Leader Behaviors

How organizational leaders approach leadership shapes organizational context [18]. In fostering a team culture, team-external leaders have a responsibility in "granting employees fair amount of autonomy so they are able to make independent decisions regarding how to achieve desired outcomes" [19, p. 1373]. An atmosphere surfaces whereby creativity fuels new ideas among members in team settings. Over time, team members are inspired to embrace teams as a part of their work structure. As Bradley [20] suggested, empowering leadership legitimizes team members' sense of safety and encourages freer discussions, reducing interpersonal deviance by minimizing misperceptions. Yet, when autonomy levels are threatened, deviant behaviors surface as individuals feel less secure in what was intended to be an autonomous team structure [8]. In addition, in bestowing more autonomy on teams, organizational leaders relinquish some control and, in a sense, become more dependent on team members. Thus, Hakimi [21] warned that organizational leaders often fail to properly empower teams to maintain an accepted balance of control. In reaction, team members find reason to engage in deviant behaviors.

Also appearing in the literature, however, are discussions of what organizational leaders can do from a team-external perspective to manage deviance. Brice and Rupp [22] suggested hands-on interventions through prescreening, interviewing, and mentoring employees to identify tendencies toward interpersonal conflict as fodder for deviance. According to Avey [23], these approaches may be particularly effective if deviance is attributed to personal factors among team members. Glomb and Liao [24] also suggested weeding out aggression-prone individuals in their selection processes, while Lim [12] suggested incorporating behavioral expectations in mission statements and policy manuals while making more direct observation of employee behavior. On the other hand, Cortina [25] also warned that permissive behaviors among organizational leaders can encourage employees to act out, suggesting that leaders be more attentive as role models in steering organizational members away from deviance.

Deviance vs. Incivility

Deviance can range from extreme aggression to mild incivility. In their seminal work on incivility, Anderson and Pearson [26] indicated that most forms of incivility cross over into the deviance category though incivility is often more difficult to identify than more blatant forms of aggression. Cortina [25, p. 55] defined incivility as "low-intensity conduct that lacks a clear intent to harm but nevertheless violates social norms and injures targeted employees". Therefore, such behaviors are often hidden and, therefore, will spread quicker and remain undetected [9, 27]. Because incivility emerges through sarcasm, negative remarks, hostile tones, and even the "silent treatment", such behaviors are often dismissed as "transient and trivial conduct that merits no intervention [12, p. 95]. Yet, such disruptions to mutual respect may be a precursor to more violently aggressive behaviors [24, 26]. Yet, Yang [27] argued that more studies on incivility at the group level will shed light on how incivility emerges in team contexts. This has been deemed particularly important, given that group-level actions result from ongoing events that nurture shared perceptions of the work environment among organizational members.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA GATHERING PROCEDURES

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the extent to which exposure to deviant behaviors in autonomous team settings shapes team members' later recollections of team experiences and, in doing so, reveals the most salient part of organizational context around which deviant behaviors are most likely to prevail. Therefore, this study required a narrative analysis of participants' descriptions of their lived experiences from having participated on autonomous teams.

Participants

According to Martin [28], narratives from participants within the same organization may reflect organizational values and lived experiences in different ways. Therefore, to examine possible differences in within-group and between-group data patterns and, thus, increase validity of the study, three participants from each of six autonomous teams were recruited. The participants were interviewed separately with a series of open-ended questions to obtain insights from their work in designing and implementing a quality-improvement project within their respective higher educational institutions in the Midwestern United States. Participants represented a chance-combination of faculty, staff, and administrators. Given that all team processes were developed according to the requirements of a common accrediting body for all six institutions, all participants represented in this study approached their work with consistency. Further, to prevent possible memory lapses and experiential gaps, two crucial selection criteria were that all participants must have participated on their respective teams from start to finish and their work must have been completed within the last two years.

Data Collection

In separate phone interviews, each participant answered a series of open-ended questions that invited responses related to the participant's lived experiences from participation on an autonomous team. Questions specifically related to the success or failure of the team, team-process development, any delays, support from institutional administrators, resource availability and allocation, perceived level of empowerment, communication, and team-member cohesion. In an effort to prevent baiting participants in their responses, no mention in the questioning referred to deviance or incivility in any way since part of the purpose of this study was to determine to extent to which team members might refer to deviance when recollecting team experiences.

Data Analysis

Verbatim transcripts were prepared from the recorded interviews in preparation for a narrative analysis. Vogel [29] recognized that narrative stories reflect participants' perceptions of reality and allow them to put events and activities into different perspectives. According to Hunter [30, p. 45], participants construct "narratives about their experiences in relation to others involved at the time". Such stories can be viewed as "surrogates for direct experience" [28, p. 1709]. In using narrative inquiry, the researcher can deconstruct the data to search for themes that inform the research inquiry. Though participants may omit details when delivering their narratives, the most salient activities and social relationships from their experiences are likely to be retained, even if in fragments, giving a certain credence to participants' recollections [31]. Through several iterations of review, narrative content alluding to deviant behaviors was extracted and thematically arranged in contextual categories. Analysis of the content of the contextual categories was then conducted to specifically address the research inquiry.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Recollections of a wide range of deviant behaviors, from mere incivility to more aggressive types, were noted by all participants in this study. Though

descriptions of such experiences varied widely, participants' seemingly natural attention to them when describing their team experiences is an indication of the high frequency with which deviance prevails in autonomous teams. In this study, no significant distinction was made between participants' job categories and the manner in which they referred to deviant behaviors when recollecting their experiences. A unanimous view among participants was that the ultimate success or failure of their teams' outcomes was either credited to or blamed on types or levels of involvement of top administrators with the teams; however, very little distinction in recollections of deviance could be determined based on the success or failure of a team. Participants from five of the six institutions represented did claim that teamwork was either embraced or at least recognized as a significant cultural component at their institutions. Participants did describe their experiences with varying degrees of favor; however, no one attributed any unwillingness to participate on future teams due to any deviance previously encountered. Yet data extracted for narrative analysis in this study do suggest that more direct approaches that curb deviance are needed if organizational leaders intend to shape an organizational context most conducing to autonomous team effectiveness.

Further, to reveal those parts of organizational context around which deviant behaviors prevail, a narrative analysis of the data was conducted and relevant narrative content was thematically arranged in contextual categories. Specifically, deviant behaviors were prevalent in references made to the following parts of organizational context: (a) organizational culture, (b) team-member recruitment and selection, (c) level of collaboration, (d) resource allocation, and (e) relationships with team-external entities.

Organizational Culture

An organization-wide team orientation must be ingrained in the culture if autonomous teams are expected to succeed. In fact, Schein [32] revealed that the role of nurturing such a collective approach lay with top organizational leaders. The following narratives from the data do suggest that contrary administrator actions weaken team orientation and are perceived as deviance among team members:

- *"If administrators are on your team, you see a 'silo mentality'; they don't care about others."*
- *"Most felt teamwork was a gimmick that administrators wanted since others were doing it."*

- *"Real decisions will be made by the top dogs who have the real authority to get things done."*

Yet, the following narratives also reveal that deviant behaviors are enacted among team members, in general, when a strong team orientation is absent from the culture:

- *"Some members dragged their feet, thinking the work would go away. But others didn't!"*
- *"We could reined in our newcomers better, but we didn't' want to direct our energy there."*
- *"Some team members moved ahead of the rest!"*
- *"Many complained instead of being pleased they were recruited because of their expertise!"*

Improved team orientation will enhance the usefulness of autonomous teams as teamwork becomes more ingrained in organizational cultures. Driskell [33] suggested that shared norms and values fuel a strong team orientation. Therefore, direct efforts to involve organizational members in defining values and norms and working to consistently integrate them into formal approaches to teamwork will likely reduce perceptions of deviant behaviors related to a lack of cultural team orientation.

Recruitment and Selection

Participants indicated that team members were recruited based on their levels of departmental expertise or by volunteering. In addition, cross-functionality was intended to drive team membership. However, deviant behaviors evident in the following narratives suggest that noted incongruities separated recruitment approaches with what members expected:

- *"They play favorites. Some people never get recruited."*
- *"No, not everyone has the same chance to be on a team. Many never wind up on a team."*
- *"Upon being recruited, some members took the attitude of 'What do I get paid for this?'"*
- *"Some members joined just to be a watch dog, I think."*
- *"I was squeezed onto the team; I went on kicking and screaming!"*

Some individuals are essential on teams based on the alignment of their expertise with the team's purpose or the necessity to maintain cross-functionality. Organizational leaders should clarify that with identified individuals early on. However, an equitable approach to recruitment should include unbiased selection procedures, perhaps utilizing a lottery or a selection committee. Careful attention to individuals having an equal chance of participating and having an opportunity to express desire to participate prior to being selected will shape more positive perceptions about teams. Another consideration for organizational leaders is to imbed team participation as an expectation in individuals' overall job duties; otherwise, much difficulty may arise in molding a team-directed approach around the organizational context when not everyone is onboard with participating.

Level of Collaboration

Deviant behaviors were also cited in participants' levels of team collaboration observed. The following narratives depict perceived deviance in team situations with weak team-member collaboration:

- *"There are those team members who just don't pull their weight!"*
- *"Some members don't show up, but the rest of us pull through so we don't miss them."*
- *"Team members who don't show up just aren't committed. That tough to change."*
- *"No one enforced participation. It was hit-or-miss."*
- *"People stopped presenting new ideas because they'd be shot down! Administrators stepped in."*

Also signaling perceived deviance resulting from weak team-member collaboration are the following narratives, advocating shared leadership among team members to enhance collaborative efforts:

- *"The team leader communicated decisions without everyone's input! We felt undermined!"*
- *"We don't always see accountability. People hand their work off to others."*
- *"When big assignments come down, there isn't a lot of willingness for people to step in."*
- *"Those who aren't sold on the idea from the start should have resigned. They were useless."*

Shared leadership may have reduced attention to the teams' needed collaborative efforts. Carson [34] argued that shared leadership fosters collaboration across multiple team members, while Sarin and

O'Connor [35] emphasized the direct role of organizational leaders in empowering team members toward shared leadership. An expected result is that team members will develop more clearly defined expectations of one another through more trustful relationships.

Resource Allocation

Another component of organizational context arousing participant recollections of deviant behaviors was resource allocation for teams. The following narratives reveal that organizational leaders may have a tendency to prioritize team projects within their institutions, however unknowingly or intentionally, which appears to directly impact resource availability and allocation:

- *"Administrators' pet projects always get the money! Work on a pet project, otherwise forget it!"*
- *"People get cranky when they priority of their project seems lower than another team's project."*
- *"People get cantankerous when resource availability is changed."*
- *"Once it became clear the money wasn't there, we lost interest and stopped meeting...."*

Criticism emerged in the data that connected the perceived importance of a team's efforts with the resulting resources made available. In fact, team members stated that a definite way to discourage team members and lower their morale is to either not make resources available or to alter resource allocation after teamwork has commenced. Organizational leaders have a responsibility to align team-directed goals with a pre-determined budget; this strategy can prevent deviant behaviors that result from misperceptions of team favoritism and changes in priority based on resource allocation.

Team-External Relationships

Negative undertones emerged as participants described their relationships with organizational constituents outside the team. The following narratives suggest deviant behaviors resulting from those relationships:

- *"We'd lose interest so fast, just waiting on getting a straight answer from outside the team!"*
- *"Team members were supposed to report progress to peers, but that didn't happen."*
- *"The team became paralyzed with too much vetting from the outside."*
- *"We're driven by peer review, but that most often resulted in mere criticism!"*

Given the cross-functional nature of autonomous teams, members rely on cross-unit flows of information to make better informed decisions. When searching for feedback, procedural information or a certain type of expertise, for example, team members may find higher-quality information to make decision when obtaining knowledge from the varying perspectives of external entities [15]. Liu and Fu [36] even praised such interactions for yielding higher feelings of efficacy among autonomous team members and increased competence in their work. Dysfunctional relationships between autonomous team members and team-external constituents provide an opportunity for organizational leaders to raise the bar for more consistent integration between departments and improvement in communication to encourage unit.

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

Autonomous teams function most effectively when the organizational context is shaped in ways that minimize deviant behavior among team members. A strong team orientation is an essential dynamic that, once ingrained in the institution's culture, will likely enhance the usefulness of autonomous teams. In addition, enforcing organization-wide collaboration by generating buy-in to new ideas and advocating shared leadership among team members may also minimize deviant behavior. Making more informed decisions through knowledge sharing with team-external constituents is also recognized as a way to shape a team-centered organizational context, as is an equitable approach to team-member recruitment whereby all organizational members perceive an equal change of being selected. Finally, developing a fair and consistent approach to allocating resources for teams can help organizational leaders avoid deviant behavior from discontent over change in resources. Given the secluded nature of autonomous teams within organizational structures, deviant behaviors often remain unknown and unaddressed outside the team. Awareness of the parts of organizational context from which deviant behaviors most likely surface provides opportunities to shape sustainable approaches to autonomous team use that will minimize perceptions of deviance that may interfere with overall team-member experiences.

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