

The Team Leader And Cultural Diversity

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ABSTRACT

In a diverse working environment such as the South African situation, it is imperative that issues surrounding cultural diversity, and its impact on employees should be examined. This article reflects on a study conducted in the South African security industry, as one of the few industries that utilise diverse work teams as part of their operational success. The rational for using work teams will be explained, with an emphasis on the team leaders. The model of Eales-White (1996: 26) was applied to the development of the team member questionnaire, and the subsequent results will be reported.

Keywords: Diverse work teams, South African security industry, leadership

1. Introduction

In order to examine team leadership and cultural diversity this discussion reflects on the results of a study conducted in the security industry. Human culture, as the basis for understanding individual behaviour, will be referred to, as well as the rationale for utilising diverse work teams. The role of the team leader in this setting will be explained. With an increased emphasis on safety-related issues a greater demand are placed on security services to protect lives, property and information. Du Preez (1990: 8) argues that the security industry is aiding the police force, the community and the army in combating increasing criminal activities. In the USA the number of security personnel is double compared to that of the police force. In South Africa the same tendency seems to emerge. There is approximately 800 000 security personnel compared to 70 000 members of the South African Police Force (Du Preez, 1990: 8). The next section will highlight the rational for implementing work teams, as well as the role of the team leader.

2. Culture

Every human society has its own shape, its own purpose, and its own meanings, which are expressed mainly in arts and living. The making of a society implies that common meanings are found amongst the members of a

given society. The term culture has been explained by numerous authors. The first comprehensive definition was formulated in 1871 by the British anthropologist, Sir Edward Burnett Taylor (Haviland, 1994: 304). Taylor defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Haviland, 1994: 304). A variety of other definitions [see Jandt (1998: 6), Bohannan (1995: 3), Spradley & McCurdy (1994: 4), Young (1996: 34), Desmond (1997: 35), Cox & Beale (1997: 147), Kreitner & Kinicki (1998: 33), Gerritsen (1998: 28) and Joyst & Warner (1996: 33)] show that even amongst anthropologists, who claim culture as their guiding conceptual principal, there are no agreement on a single definition of the term. Culture represents the essence of our differences, as it equips individuals with the means to adapt to the complex environment around them. In a globalized world that is progressively becoming part of our daily life, cultural barriers are breaking down and cross-cultural understanding needs to take place. In this regard work teams could make a substantial contribution in the service provided to clients.

3. Work Teams And Team Leaders

Work teams represent a meaningful way for organisations to enhance their productivity. Work teams are a relatively new concept, although some companies have been doing this since the 1970's. Teams should be distinguished from groups to accentuate their distinct differences. "A group is two or more members with a clear leader who perform independent jobs with individual accountability, evaluation and rewards", while "a team is a small number of members with shared leadership who perform interdependent jobs with both individual and group accountability, evaluation and rewards" (Lussier, 2000: 343). In this regard teams are usually smaller, close-knit units, as opposed to groups, which are normally large (Greenberg & Baron, 2000: 286). The focus of the discussion falls on teams, more specifically work teams, as opposed to other types of teams.

Certain phenomena exist that explain why work teams perform well. In this sense, work teams bring together complementary skills and experiences that exceed those of any individual working alone. This broader mix of skills enables work teams to respond faster to challenges, and problem solving and creativity are stimulated. In this regard the team structure, are more flexible and dynamic than any group structure (Katzenbach & Smith, 1998: 18). According to Maginn (1994: 1) companies that employ work teams, seem to accomplish more and less time is wasted. Homogeneous work teams are more likely to pass quicker through the initial stages of team formation than diverse ones, as they have to deal with various cultural issues first (Recardo &

Jolly, 1997: 4). Some of these issues involve language, norms on communication, status between cultures and loyalty to the cultural group (Berger, 1996: 182). Needless to say these problems should be sorted out before work teams could perform optimally. With regard to team leaders a new leadership philosophy needs to be adopted, which means some traditional views need to be discarded. A shift in focus should occur, and team leaders could act as educators, coaches and facilitators (Dyer, 1995: 32). Traditional leadership styles, thus needs to make room for new approaches.

Eales-White (1996: 26) identified certain characteristics that are likely to make work teams more effective. Team members should know exactly what is expected of them, as this could lead to a shared sense of direction and purpose, with enthusiastic, committed team members that are willing to support each other in order to develop and grow. Team members furthermore need to share humour, be decisive, possess focus and persistence, plan ahead, and learn from their mistakes. Team cohesiveness could thus be continuously improved by team members that know and enjoy what they are doing while displaying openness, honesty, mutual respect and trust. It is furthermore imperative that team members share information with each other, as this will enable them to be more flexible and creative in dealing with various situations (Eales-White, 1996: 26). Team cohesiveness refers to the "extent to which team members are attracted to a team and motivated to remain in it" (Williams, 2000: 520). It is important that team members receive constant feedback on their performance, as this will enable and motivate them to improve. These aspects were fundamental in developing the team member questionnaire, as mentioned in Table 3. In order to determine this, the following methodology was applied to this research project.

4. Methodology

The company under investigation is one of the main role players in the South African security industry, with work teams forming the backbone of its operational success. With global affiliations, it supplies a broad spectrum of security services, and is also involved in other industries such as aviation, postal and courier services. The South African initiative of the company is divided into geographical regions. These regions include the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Gauteng, Mpumalanga and the Free State/Northern Cape region. The Free State/Northern Cape region is geographically the largest and forms the focus of the study. The Bloemfontein area serves as the core of the Free State/Northern Cape region, as it houses the administrative offices and management team. The Bloemfontein area was chosen as the majority of the work teams for the region are situated there.

The organisational structure operates as follows: Patrolmen/women operate on the site of the client and represent the lowest hierarchical level. A team supervisor is usually present on site, overseeing duties. The team supervisor could be a senior patrolmen/women, a section leader, inspector or senior inspector, depending on the structure required by the client. A contract manager could also be appointed to manage major contracts. The activities of team leaders are monitored by an operations manager, who also needs to consider the needs and requests of clients. The regional operations manager oversees the operations manager, and reports directly to the managing director for the region. Retail and industrial sites were identified, and work teams are allocated according to the needs of clients. Three team leaders oversee the operations in the Bloemfontein area. The under-mentioned Table 1 applies to the various teams, which will be referred to as teams A, B and C.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF SITES FOR TEAM'S A, B AND C:

| TEAM A | TEAM B | TEAM C |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 10 SITES IN RETAIL SECTOR | 6 SITES IN INDUSTRIAL SECTOR | 6 SITES IN INDUSTRIAL SECTOR |

The data was collected by means of a structured questionnaire. The whole population was included in the study, and of the 141 questionnaires distributed 110 were retrieved, which represents a response rate of 78% and could be regarded as representative of the population. The questionnaire was preceded by a pilot study.

5. Results And Analysis

Teams will be referred to as teams A, B and C, overseen by team leaders A, B and C. The racial and gender of the work teams are reflected in Table 2. The research delivered the following results.

TABLE 2: RACIAL AND GENDER COMPOSITION OF WORK TEAMS - BLOEMFONTEIN AREA:

| | TEAM A | TEAM B | TEAM C | TOTAL (N) | PERCENTAGE (%) OF TOTAL |
|----------------|--------|--------|--------|-----------|-------------------------|
| Coloured Men | 20 | 8 | 25 | 53 | 48 |
| Coloured Women | 14 | 1 | 4 | 19 | 17 |
| Black men | 6 | 5 | 10 | 21 | 19 |
| Black Women | 3 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 5 |
| White men | 4 | 2 | 2 | 8 | 7 |
| White Women | 3 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| Total | 50 | 17 | 43 | 110 | 100 |

The racial groups included in the investigation were White, Black and Coloured individuals. The responses of the different cultural groups regarding their team leader are reflected in Table 3, in terms of team-based responses. The team leaders were all white males.

TABLE 3: TEAM-BASED RESPONSES REGARDING THE TEAM LEADER

| | TEAM A YES | TEAM B YES | TEAM C YES |
|--|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 3.1 Consult team leader with work-related problems & complaints. | 84% | 86% | 50% |
| 3.2 Consult team leader with personal problems. | 68% | 53% | 27% |
| 3.3 Opportunity to share ideas with team leader. | 82% | 89% | 59% |
| 3.4 3.4.1 Feedback to members on client expectations. | 84% | 82% | 50% |
| 3.4.2 Believes everyone can contribute to team's success. | 96% | 94% | 64% |
| 3.4.3 Undermine leader's authority. | 24% | 24% | 14% |
| 3.4.4 Encourages openness and honesty. | 84% | 88% | 41% |
| 3.4.5 Provides encouragement when tasks are executed unsuccessfully. | 92% | 88% | 50% |

The responses to the statements in Table 3 were applied to the different racial groups in the various work teams. Each of the above questions will be elaborated upon separately in the following section, by means of tables reflecting the responses of the diverse individuals.

In Table 4, team members had to indicate whether they could consult their team leaders regarding work-related problems.

TABLE 4: AGREE-RESPONSES OF DIFFERENT RACIAL GROUPS, ON WHETHER THEY SHARE WORK-RELATED PROBLEMS WITH THE TEAM LEADER

| | TEAM A | TEAM B | TEAM C | TOTAL (N) |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|------------|
| Coloureds in teams Coloureds agree | 34 29 (85%) | 9 9 (100%) | 29 13 (45%) | 72 |
| Blacks in teams Blacks agree | 9 8 (89%) | 5 5 (100%) | 12 7 (58%) | 26 |
| Whites in teams Whites agree | 7 4 (57%) | 3 3 (100%) | 2 2 (100%) | 12 |
| TOTAL | 50 | 17 | 43 | 110 |

The respondents of team leaders A and B indicate they have the share work-related problems with their team leader (question 3.1). This is opposed to team leader C where the team leader interacts well with White individuals, but not with Coloured and Black individuals.

In Table 5 team members had to indicate whether they consult the team leader regarding personal problems.

TABLE 5: AGREE-RESPONSES OF DIFFERENT RACIAL GROUPS, ON WHETHER THEY SHARE PERSONAL PROBLEMS WITH THE TEAM LEADER

| | TEAM A | TEAM B | TEAM C | TOTAL (N) |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|------------|
| Coloureds in teams Coloureds agree | 34 26 (76%) | 9 8 (89%) | 29 20 (69%) | 72 |
| Blacks in teams Blacks agree | 9 9 (100%) | 5 5 (100%) | 12 4 (33%) | 26 |
| Whites in teams Whites agree | 7 5 (71%) | 3 2 (67%) | 2 2 (100%) | 12 |
| Total | 50 | 17 | 43 | 110 |

The respondents of teams A and B indicated that they consult their team leader more frequently regarding work-related problems compared to team leaders C (questions 3.2). This shows that teams A and B are more approachable than team C.

In Table 6 team members had to indicate whether they have the opportunity to share ideas with the team leader.

TABLE 6: AGREE-RESPONSES OF DIFFERENT RACIAL GROUPS, ON WHETHER THEY HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE IDEAS WITH THE TEAM LEADER

| | TEAM A | TEAM B | TEAM C | TOTAL (N) |
|--------------------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| Coloureds in teams | 34 | 9 | 29 | 72 |
| Coloureds agree | 26 (76%) | 8 (89%) | 20 (69%) | |
| Blacks in teams | 9 | 5 | 12 | 26 |
| Blacks agree | 9 (100%) | 5 (100%) | 4 (33%) | |
| Whites in teams | 7 | 3 | 2 | 12 |
| Whites agree | 5 (71%) | 2 (67%) | 2 (100%) | |
| Total | 50 | 17 | 43 | 110 |

Respondents of team leaders A and B indicated that they share ideas more frequently with the team leader than the respondents of team C. By sharing ideas team members could feel that they are involved in the process of decision making, and creative ideas could be stimulated. Again team leader C interacts better with White individuals, as opposed to Coloured and Black individuals.

TABLE 7 captures the responses of question 3.4 (Table 3)
 TABLE 7: AGREE-RESPONSES OF DIFFERENT RACIAL GROUPS REGARDING THEIR TEAM LEADER
 C = Coloured people, B = Black people and W = White people

| | TEAM A C B | TEAM B C B | TEAM C C B W |
|--|-------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Total respondents in teams | 34 9 8 | 9 5 5 | 29 12 2 |
| 3.4.1 Team leader informs team members. percentage (%) | 29 85% 89% | 4% 57% 89% | 2 67% 100% |
| 3.4.2 Team leader believes everyone can contribute to team. percentage (%) | 28 82% 100% | 7 100% | 9 100% |
| 3.4.3 The team leader's authority is undermined. percentage (%) | 4 12% 67% | 2 29% 44% | 1 20% 33% |
| 3.4.4 The team leader encourages openness and honesty. percentage (%) | 28 82% 89% | 7 100% | 9 60% |
| 3.4.5 The team leader provides encouragement, if failed. percentage (%) | 32 94% 89% | 6 86% | 9 100% |

From Table 7 the following could be deducted:

All racial groups in teams A and B, and the White individuals in team C indicated that team leaders supplied the necessary information. The Coloured and Black individuals in team C disagreed with this statement. Respondents of all races in teams A and B, as well as White and Coloured individuals in team C felt that the team leader provided encouragement. Black individuals in team C disagreed with this statement. The authority of team leader C is undermined less than those of team leaders A and B, which could be because team leader C has less tolerance for such behaviour. In question 3.4.4, the respondents of all races in teams A and B responded that the team leader encouraged openness and honesty. This included the White respondents of team C. The Coloured and Black respondents in team C indicated the opposite. In question 3.4.5 the Black and Coloured individuals in team C felt that there was no encouragement from the team leader if a task fails. This is in contrast to teams A and B.

6. Conclusions And Recommendations

By reflecting on the above results criteria could be proposed for team leaders to enhance their effectiveness when dealing with cultural diverse work teams. Team leaders need to provide information and feedback to team members. This is especially crucial with regards to operational level work teams. The team leader also needs to provide encouragement to team members, with openness and honesty as a guiding principle. Needless to say the team leader should be approachable in order to facilitate open relationships with team members. This will enable diverse work teams to solve problems and accept authority. The responses indicate that team leaders A and B are more successful in applying these principles than team leader C. Overall, team leader C interacts well with White individuals, but not with Coloured and Black individuals, and thus experience problems with the diversity component. This tendency is visible throughout the various responses to the questionnaire. As team leader C is less approachable to Coloured and Black individuals, it will ultimately influence team performance. Team leader C should be guided in this respect and be encouraged to receive training in diversity management and communication skills.

The conclusions reached in this investigation highlights the diverse work environment, as well as the role of team leaders in the day-to-day functioning of operational level work teams. As the team leaders were White males, it shows that some have the ability to lead in the face of cultural diversity and some are not able to. Team leaders A and B possess the skills to interact with individuals of various cultural groups, whereas team leader C lacks these

skills. The importance of diversity training for team leaders, as well as continuous training in the application of leadership principles are thus proposed to ensure the continuous improvement of work team performance.

7. Literature

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