

Saint Mary's Applied Research Team

PRÉCIS:

SUBGROUP ISSUES AND LEADERSHIP

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Subgroup Issues and Leadership

Successful group functioning is important for most organizations. Due to the increasingly diverse nature of organizations, work groups are becoming more heterogeneous, which generates new opportunities and challenges for organizations and their leaders. Our goal is to provide a review of relevant psychological theory and research, with a focus on intergroup relations, diversity issues, their implications for leadership effectiveness, and leaders' influence on groups and diversity initiatives.

Groups, Diversity, and Leadership

Integrating a diverse workforce requires an understanding of several group issues. According to social identity theory, people tend to categorize in terms of in-groups ("us") and out-groups ("them"). In-groups contribute to social identity, which reflects both self-definition and self-esteem, and have some psychological and emotional significance. Intergroup behaviour (e.g., stereotyping and discrimination) is likely to occur when people identify strongly with their in-groups, especially when group membership is relevant in a given situation or organization.

In general, positive group interactions result in more positive intergroup attitudes, particularly if these interactions are rewarded within the broader institutional context. Integrating a diverse workforce requires perceived similarity, familiarity, and personal liking among organizational members. Intergroup contact, however, can also have negative outcomes. Although contact allows people to be perceived as individuals rather than as group members, it can also increase the negative stereotyping of minorities. The context and conditions in which contact takes place (e.g., equal vs. unequal status, competitive vs. cooperative interactions) is

important. Because leadership can affect these contexts and conditions, leaders' sensitivity to intergroup relations is crucial.

Some groups (e.g., groups defined by gender, race, or ethnicity) tend to feature quite prominently in perception, categorization, and identity, and contribute to the diversity of an organization. Because of their influence, leaders can promote or discourage diversity. Leaders may support diversity by promoting mutual adaptation and flexibility and by encouraging communication and relationship-building. Conversely, leaders may create and maintain barriers to diversity by excluding minority members, discouraging the expression of different ideas or philosophies, and isolating members of minority groups. These leader behaviours may stem from stereotypes and prejudice, which are resistant to change. Recruitment, selection, and performance appraisals are vulnerable to management practices that obstruct the creation and maintenance of a diverse workforce. However, providing decision-makers with information about the credentials, experience, and job performance of the person in question serves to reduce the effect of stereotypes and prejudice on employment decisions.

Leaders and organizations should consider the context in which diversity initiatives take place. Many organizations tend to view increasing diversity as a win-win situation, but it may be in the interest of particular organizational members to oppose diversity initiatives. For example, because heterogeneous work groups tend to be less cohesive and are often perceived by managers as less effective, managers may favour the homogeneous groups. Alternatively, women and minorities are more likely to favour diversity initiatives because they are more likely to believe improvement in this area is necessary and they are more likely to benefit from these initiatives. Leaders who support organizational diversity initiatives must consider the views of

the dominant group (typically white men). If members of the dominant group experience workplace changes that they view as unfavourable (e.g., fewer promotion opportunities, pay cuts, no raises), they may focus their hostility onto other groups, such as women and minorities.

Four leadership theories can help us better understand how leaders can influence diversity in organizations: (1) The leader-focused perspective, which examines the characteristics of effective leaders (e.g., charisma, intelligence, integrity, motivating followers), may help identify leader characteristics that are effective in diverse group contexts; (2) The leader-follower interaction considers the perceptions of both leaders and followers, as well as the interaction between them. Group diversity can influence the effectiveness of leader behaviours, and the leader-follower interaction can influence the success of diversity initiatives; (3) The leadership contingency perspective, which considers the organizational and societal factors that influence leaders, can help explain how certain external factors may impede or help leadership effectiveness and diversity initiatives; (4) The social identity perspective integrates the leader, follower, and contingency perspectives. This approach suggests that leaders emerge and/or are perceived to be effective by virtue of their embodiment of the “ideal” group member. The social identity approach can help explain why, for example, female leaders who occupy male-dominated roles (as is the case in the military) tend to be evaluated negatively.

Recommendations

Military leaders can take several steps to promote a diversity-friendly environment and counteract any diversity-derived conflict:

- Be sensitive to real between-group differences, and find methods of reducing or eliminating the negative impact of stereotypes.

- Be aware of and responsive to subordinates' needs, beliefs, and attitudes, regardless of their group membership.
- Include diversity initiatives in their vision for the organization.
- Ensure recruitment strategies target all potential applicants (including members of diverse groups).
- Prepare and adopt a written diversity policy.
- Set guidelines that reward employees for supporting diversity and that discipline employees for engaging in acts of bias and discrimination.
- Support activities that emphasize multiple aspects of the diverse population and avoid those activities that lend themselves to specific aspects of one group over another.
- Train group leaders to be sensitive to individual differences.
- Encourage a culture of tolerance. This tolerance can include increased flexibility to accommodate difference.
- Manage the potential for diversity conflicts on an ongoing basis by mandating regular diversity and discrimination training.
- Create a cooperative work environment where diverse individuals will be working together on a regular basis.

Our review points to a number of avenues for further research on leadership, groups, and diversity. One general direction will be to determine the extent to which laboratory studies of group relations and leadership capture the processes that occur in diverse organizational settings

(e.g., the military). Specifically, we suggest future research to address the following issues: (a) the roles that leaders can play in facilitating positive outcomes in diverse groups, (b) the relationship between leadership characteristics and effectiveness in diverse groups, (c) the process by which transformational leaders effect change in organizations, (d) the conditions that influence the stereotyping of subordinates by leaders, and of leaders by subordinates, and (e) the role of international (e.g., Canada-U.S.) distinctions in joint operations, policy, and leadership.

In summary, groups and subgroups are a fundamental aspect of organizational life. Although intergroup distinctions have the potential for conflict and divisiveness, there is also some indication that diversity can lead to positive outcomes for work groups and organizations. We suggest that leaders can play a key role in facilitating such outcomes, although they will also depend on support for diversity and diversity initiatives within the military as a whole.