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ERROR CULTURE IN TEAMS: TO BLAME OR TO INNOVATE?

Leaders who promote the belief that errors by team members can have beneficial effects, and result in improvements and innovation, will create better results in terms of learning and innovation.

Teams are important building blocks for organisational effectiveness. Teams are assumed to be more productive in problem solving than individuals, as they can benefit from a wider diversity of experiences, perspectives and expertise compared to individuals solving problems by themselves. Through the exchange and reflection upon different knowledge and experiences of members, teams have the potential to learn and be innovative. However, not all groups manage to learn as a team and to benefit from this wide array of perspectives.

In order to learn as a team, members must be willing to openly discuss errors and question certain assumptions that might be erroneous. In reality, people are often hesitant to display such vulnerable behaviours, as they don't want to be seen as incompetent by fellow team members or embarrass others talking about their mistakes. Research shows that the extent to which teams learn from their errors depends greatly on the beliefs that team members carry regarding error handling. Those beliefs are called error culture.

DIFFERENT ERROR CULTURES

Research by Van Dyck and colleagues (2005) identifies two types of error cultures: *error prevention*; and *error management*. These two cultures reflect the different ways people tend to handle errors after an error occurs.

In an *error prevention culture*, people focus on reducing negative error consequences (e.g. waste of time or money, faulty services), by avoiding the error altogether. In this culture, team members fear that they will be blamed and seen as incompetent, with

members trying to cover up errors and experiencing strain from errors that (might) take place. As a result, team learning will suffer.

In contrast, in an *error management culture* team members distinguish between the error itself and its consequences. They try to reduce negative error consequences and, at the same time, try to increase positive consequences, such as learning and innovation. As a result, in an error management culture people are more likely to discuss errors openly and quickly detect and correct errors, with team learning and innovation occurring as a result. For instance, imagine that an IT team responsible for safe internet banking discovers erroneous bank transfers within their system. In an error prevention culture, the team is more likely to waste time in avoiding taking responsibility for this error and to increase control and safety procedures to avoid the error in the future. However, in an error management culture, the team is more likely to see what it can learn about their banking system and find out the cause of the error in order to further improve the system.

Thus, for team learning to occur, teams need to share and integrate the (error) knowledge and information that team members provide. This implies that they should also be able to benefit from the different perspectives people may have in their team.

In a recent study, we investigated how error culture influences team learning in diverse groups. Past research shows that the way diversity characteristics are distributed in teams influences whether teams exploit the benefits of diversity. When diversity characteristics in a team align to create homogeneous subgroups, a faultline may originate and hinder



effective team processes. An example of a faultline would be a four-person team existing of two male financial accountants versus two female customer services employees. In contrast, when diversity characteristics cross-cut each other (e.g. a male and female financial accountant and a male and female customer service employee), teams are more likely to have effective team processes.

In an experimental setting we had male and female psychology and science students in a faultline versus cross-cut composition work as a hiring committee. Their task was to select candidates for a job interview, based on information they received about these candidates. In addition, we developed an intervention designed to instigate an error prevention versus an error management culture. We found that error culture was more influential in faultline teams than in cross-categorised teams. An error management culture promoted inclusive communication and team learning in faultline teams, while an error prevention culture decreased

inclusive communication and hampered team learning. Interestingly, however, the effects for performance were reversed. Faultline teams with an error prevention culture performed better than faultline teams with an error management culture. This might be due to the fact that the performance effects of learning take some time to manifest. Cross-categorised groups appeared to have more effective group processes in general, as the effects of the error culture were less influential.

HOW TO STIMULATE LEARNING AND INNOVATION IN TEAMS

Research suggests that promoting the belief that errors can have beneficial effects, and lead to improvements and innovations, produces better results regarding learning and innovation. Specific training can be used to promote these beliefs on error management. Management can also set an example by sharing errors and best error handling practices. In this way, people will experience that sharing error knowledge does not lead to embarrassment but, in fact, it leads to improvement and innovation. ■