The Impact of Divisive Political Conflict in the Workplace on Team Creativity and Satisfaction in Virtual Teams

Emergent Research Forum Paper

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Abstract

The past decade has seen an increasing rift in political ideologies, culminating in the extreme polarization during the past election. The unusual aspect of these elections has been the existence of ideological divisions within traditionally homogeneous groups like families and friends. This state of unrest compounded by the merging of personal and professional life due to the presence of social media has made it difficult for individuals to keep their ideological values hidden from their colleagues. Therefore, it is not surprising that political tensions have permeated the workplace. These conflicts seem to be especially influential in virtual teams given the delicate nature of their relationships. Indeed, it seems inevitable that the satisfaction and creativity of such teams would be impacted. This research investigates the direction and magnitude of this impact along with an exploration of the causal factors for such reactions, including trust, psychological safety, and prevention focus.

Keywords

Virtual teams, divisiveness, creativity, trust, psychological safety, prevention focus

Introduction

Over the past decennia, team-based work structures have become the primary format in which work is executed (Gilson, et al., 2014). Due to fiercer market competition, fast technological developments, and shortened product life cycles, organizations are increasingly replacing individuals with teams to perform tasks that require a certain level of innovation and creativity (e.g., Hansen & Birkinshaw 2007). Advances in information and communication technologies have enabled teams to operate virtually, performing a majority of their work through electronic means (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017).

For virtual teams to be creative and productive, several conditions must be met, including but not limited to applying appropriate coordination structures (Kratzer, et al., 2006; Ocker, 2005), choosing effective collaboration techniques (e.g. Chiravuri, et al., 2011), developing social bonds (Gressgård, 2011), and variability in the use of communication modalities and physical proximity (Kratzer, et al., 2006). Two key conditions for effective teamwork in creative virtual teams are trust and psychological safety. Team members’ willingness to share information and collaborate is a function of the trust as experienced among team members (Greenberg, et al., 2007; Ocker, 2005; Robert, et al., 2009). This needs to be coupled with a sense of psychological safety where team members feel comfortable to signal problems, raise issues, solicit feedback, or speak up about concerns (Edmonson & Lei, 2014; Kirkman, et al., 2013).

While the conditions for team productivity remain relatively stable, the context in which these teams work appears to be in a dynamic state. One significant variation in the context of teamwork is the decreasing compartmentalization of team members’ personal and professional life. Smart phones and social media have permeated every aspect of our lives – both personal and professional (McDonald & Thompson, 2016). While employees bring their work home because of the prevalence of technology, they also bring their personal, political, and religious values to work through their social media profiles and overlap between work-related and private social media contacts (Hampton, et al., 2016). Thus, in the current media-dominated society,
individual values are more transparent and have a greater potential to impact intra-team relationships, which in turn are expected to affect feelings of psychological safety and trust. This development is especially important to virtual teams, as their personal familiarity is not as in-depth as face-to-face teams and thus, information from social media has a more meaningful effect in evaluating each other.

The relevance of this new reality of permeable barriers between work and private life is underscored by current events, which have unraveled the presence of an unprecedented political divisiveness and polarization (Abramowitz & Webster, 2015). There has been a sharp increase in the political divide amongst the populace in the past two decennia (Mann & Ornstein, 2016). A study by the Pew Research Center (Suh, 2014) showed that people are more divided along ideological lines now than they have been at any point in the past twenty years. These divisions show up across party, generational, educational, and ideological lines. Typically, Americans tend to be ideologically self-sorting, living and socializing with those who share their political worldviews. Yet, during recent elections, discussions have taken a turn from ideological to personal creating rifts between families, friends, and colleagues. People reported refraining from political debates fearing conflicts with their friends and relatives with contrarian political opinions (Wells, et. al., 2014). Therefore, it is not surprising that these political tensions have made their way to the workplace (SHRM, 2016).

Given the conflicts in political ideologies and increased influence of social media on work life, it is reasonable to assume that virtual team productivity and creativity would be eventually impacted by these developments. The questions that arise then are regarding the role of these conflicts in determining creativity and satisfaction of such teams. Do these conflicts play a facilitating role by increasing creativity levels as team members find novel ways to defend positions or a hindering role by decrease creative inclinations among team members as they limit communication with colleagues whose values they do not share? Consequently, this study aims to address the following two research questions:

- Do divisive political opinions negatively impact individual creativity levels of virtual team members?
- Do divisive political opinions of team members negatively impact virtual team creativity?

Background and Research Model

This study aims to understand the impact of the negative attributes of transparent value systems as evidenced in situations of political divisiveness on creativity and collaboration in virtual teams. Based on our literature review, we propose a model to explain the impact of political divisiveness on workplace creativity and satisfaction. The model proposes that increased political divisiveness results in a decreased sense of psychological safety and trust in virtual teams, which in turn results in increased polarization and reduced creativity and satisfaction. Below, we briefly examine the components of the model and their relationships.

Political divisiveness is degree of negative emotions between the individuals arising from differing political opinions. It is characterized by heightened sense of antagonism coupled with a deficiency of understanding for the opposing perspective. Political divisiveness among team members portends the existence of contradictory goals, values, and opinions between them. Political divisiveness increases the proclivity for and magnitude of workplace conflict as it engenders a lack of trust. Thus, deep political divides make conflict in (virtual) work teams more likely and more severe.

Team conflicts are disagreements that arise between individuals and teams due to the presence of divergent goals, values, and opinions thus preventing progress (Pondy, 1992; Thomas, 1992). The team development literature has long documented the influence of team conflict on team effectiveness (Gersick, 1988, Tuckman, 1965). While it was initially suggested that cognitive conflict can lead to positive team outcomes like team cohesion (Pondy, 1992), more recent studies show that both cognitive (conflict over the task) and relationship conflict (due to interpersonal disagreements) are both detrimental to team effectiveness as the effects of cognitive conflict spill into interpersonal conflict and impact team cohesion (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003).

While conflicts have a negative impact on performance, psychological safety and trust appear to have a positive effect on teams. Research shows that the presence of these perceptions among work teams increases their performance and creativity (De Jong, et al., 2016; Gong, et al., 2012). Psychological safety is a shared belief amongst individuals that they can express themselves without negative consequences (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Psychological safety in teams is an amalgamation of acceptance and respect of team members for each other. It has been shown to encourage risky behaviors (Pearsall & Ellis, 2011) and learning (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Trust is a connected yet distinct concept from psychological safety.
psychological safety deals with a shared belief, trust is an individual perspective towards others. Trust in teams can be defined as willingness of team members to be vulnerable to the actions of team mates based on the expectation that they will perform the actions that are expected and important to them irrespective of whether these actions can be monitored or not (Mayer, et al., 1995). Trust has been correlated with many team attributes like cooperative behavior and performance (De Jong et al., 2016; Hempel, et al., 2009).

Creativity research also finds support that psychological safety and trust are positively correlated to creativity (Gong et al., 2012). Interestingly, creativity studies have also shown that conflicts or debates within teams lead to higher levels of creativity and improved decision-making (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995). One explanation can be that the presence of divergent attributes and opinions in a team influence the team’s radical innovation because it increases the knowledge and efforts that team members put towards their task (Bell, 2007). Therefore, it can be contended that some degree of healthy debate is necessary to overcome team challenges like inertia, common information effect, and groupthink, but high levels of divisiveness and conflict among team members may nullify these benefits. Given the two literatures, it can be surmised that team creativity and performance will be improved in the presence of divergent opinions – but that would only be possible if the expression of such opinions is made in a respectful manner and if the team members had high levels of trust, acceptance, and respect for each other. Consequently, it can be argued that while some healthy political debates may invigorate team members to think deeper, if these differing political ideologies reach a point of political divisiveness and start to impinge upon psychological safety and trust amongst the team members, they will adversely impact performance and creativity.

While we can find support from the literature regarding the negative influence of conflict on psychological safety and trust and the positive relationship of these psychological states to team performance and creativity, most literature, to our knowledge, remains silent regarding the underlying group dynamics that can explain why conflict results in reduced creativity. We propose that group polarization may be partly responsible for the decreased virtual team performance under conflict. Group polarization is a phenomenon where the opinion of an individual towards a certain topic is strengthened because of the discussion with the group (Myers & Lamm, 1976). In the context of political discourses, it can be argued that group polarization results in the members of opposing ideologies walking away from a debate with their initial opinions even more firmly entrenched than before. As the political divisiveness increases, entrenchment of one’s own beliefs draws the individual further away from the opposing belief resulting in lowered trust, respect, and acceptance for the other. This phenomenon, we argue, is exacerbated in a virtual team. When the virtual team lacks trust, acceptance, and respect, the divergence of opinions crosses the maximum threshold of cognitive distance to merge disparate ideas successfully. The ensuing chasm will result in decreased creative performance and process satisfaction.

Furthermore, when the intensity of political divisiveness erodes trust and psychological safety between the team members, it causes a shift in their motivational state from “attainment” where they want to advance and attain positive outcomes (like rewards) to a “maintenance” state where they focus on avoiding negative outcomes (like failure) while fulfilling their mandated obligations (Molden & Finkel, 2010). These motivational states are known as promotion (reward) focused and prevention (maintenance) focused states respectively. The creativity literature shows that promotion focus encourages creative insight and creative idea generation relative to prevention focus (Friedman & Forster, 2001). In other words, loss of trust and psychological safety triggers a prevention-focused state which results in reduced virtual team performance.

![Figure 1. The effect of political divisiveness on virtual team creativity and satisfaction.](image)

In summary, we propose that the presence of high political divisiveness triggers group polarization among virtual team members, which results in a loss of psychological safety and trust. This loss put the team members in a prevention-focused state, which inhibits creative performance and dampens satisfaction.
Method

We will execute a laboratory experiment with 196 subjects, recruited from undergraduate programs in Business and Psychology. Subjects will respond to a survey gauging their political inclination and the depth of their emotions regarding their preferred and opposing candidate (high, medium, low). Subjects will then be randomly assigned to groups of 4 in a fitting condition: In the first condition, all four subjects in a group will be either Trump or Hillary supporters with high emotional investment. There will be 8 groups for each camp. In the second condition, 16 groups will be organized into two Hillary supporters and two Trump supporters each with high emotional investment. In the third (control) condition, there will be 16 groups of subjects who do not display any preference towards either candidate (low emotional investment).

Each group member will be in a separate workspace; interactions will take place through Skype with video and chat enabled. Subjects will rate their emotional state at the beginning of the experiment. Then they will be asked to complete an individual creative task and a collaborative creative task. These tasks are non-political and concern finding creative solutions for work or study related challenges. Subjects in condition 1 and 2 will then be asked to defend their preferred candidate’s position and degrade the other candidate’s position as much as possible. Subjects in the control condition will be asked to discuss the political situation but be civil in their responses and try to think of the best attributes of the two candidates. Next, subjects in each condition will complete a survey to assess their level of conflict, their emotional state, and attitude towards the opposing members of the group. After completing the survey, subjects in conditions 1 and 2 will be asked to summarize their arguments to reignite the emotions. Next, in each condition the subjects will be asked to perform another individual and team creativity task. Finally, they will be surveyed regarding their satisfaction with the group, task, and the quality of the product. After completing the surveys, they will be debriefed.

A panel of trained judges will assess the level of creativity of all individual and team products in terms of originality and usefulness. The judges will be blind to the conditions. The research model will be tested using SEM. The possible effect of common method bias will be tested using the partial correlation approach and Harman’s one-factor test (Podsakoff, et al., 2003).

Conclusions

The aim of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the effects of political divisiveness on virtual team creativity and satisfaction. This understanding is critical for organizations, as it will assist managers to effectively select team members. Also, even if the team members cannot be pre-selected based on political (or other divisive) opinions, managers are aware of the nature of these dynamics and can create an environment where these differences can be harnessed to stimulate creativity. Finally, having these insights may enable managers to effectively structure tasks such that they minimize conflict and maximize creative productivity.

References


