

Humility, Utility, or Likeability? Undergraduate Student Perceptions of the Ideal Team Player

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Introduction/need for research

Agricultural educators have indicated that there may be a disconnect between the agriculture industry, schools of agriculture, and the public (Allen, 2017). Over 80% of hiring managers reported that the key skills they look for in new employees are interpersonal skills such as leadership, communication, and teamwork (Job Outlook, 2015). In order to meet this demand, the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) set standards for school-based agricultural education programs to include compassion, empathy, unselfishness, a willingness to help others, a passion for their work, and a communicative and collaborative disposition (AAAE, 2017). Consequently, teamwork has become a core focus of agricultural educators who strive to develop leadership skills that will allow students to function as effective team members in their professional lives (Lemons & Strong, 2016). However, no one model of teamwork education has been proven to be most effective. This study sought to investigate student perceptions of the Ideal Team Player (ITP) model which was used to facilitate teamwork development in an undergraduate leadership course at a tier one university college of agriculture.

Conceptual or theoretical framework

ITP was developed in the context of the Five Dysfunctions of a Team (FDT) (Lencioni 2002). The basic premise of the FDT model is that trust is the most important factor in group and organizational performance (Griffith & Dunham, 2014). According to Lencioni (2016), trust is developed when members are open, vulnerable, and authentic, and believe that their peers are committed, competent, and diligent. While the FDT model focuses on group dynamics, the ITP model focused on individual characteristics of team members that would foster optimal conditions for avoiding the five dysfunctions. The ITP model includes three primary characteristics of effective team members: humility, hunger, and (people) smarts (Lencioni, 2016). Humble team members lack excessive ego, are unconcerned with status or claiming credit, are quick to identify the contribution of teammates, and emphasize the collective success of the team over the self (Lencioni, 2016). Hungry team members are highly motivated, always going above and beyond what is required, always willing to take on more responsibility, and almost never need to be pushed by others to work harder or to meet deadlines (Lencioni, 2016). Smart team members possess high levels of emotional intelligence which allows them to know how to most effectively deal with others. Most importantly, they have good judgment regarding the complexities of group dynamics (Lencioni, 2016). The model implies students can develop a balance of these three virtues toward becoming an “ideal team player”.

Methodology

Twenty-eight students were enrolled in an undergraduate leadership course during Fall 2019. They were assigned to a team of four or five for the semester. Near the end of the semester, students analyzed the performance of their teams using the ITP framework and completed assignments (n = 26) were analyzed. Student responses were reduced to statements that described key characteristics of the three variables in the ITP model. These statements were then combined into themes that were used to create structural descriptions of the student’s experience in their teams (Creswell, 2016).

Results/findings

Students reported that humble teammates were quick to admit mistakes, apologize, share credit, and point out the contribution of others. On two teams, members invited teammates into their homes, and this was extremely impactful on the whole team. In both cases, the act of inviting others into the home was mentioned as a key reason why this person was humble, open, and a valuable teammate. Hunger was generally associated with leadership. Nine students suggested hungry teammates served as group leaders. Hunger was also characterized by going above and beyond what is expected, seeking out additional work and helping others with work, and being motivated. Twenty respondents indicated that team members' understanding how to work with others and how to work effectively with each individual group member was the primary characteristic of "people smarts." These individuals were effective at managing conflict, were good communicators, and were thought to have strong interpersonal skills and listening ability. In addition, smart teammates were deeply interested in the personal lives of other team members.

Conclusions

Although the ITP model identifies humility as the most important virtue, in these student teams hunger appeared to be the most important quality when determining student satisfaction with teammates. There are two reasons this may be the case in undergraduate class settings. First, Burdett and Hastie (2009) found that perceptions of fair workload distribution among group members and perception of learning outcomes were positively correlated. This suggests that having team members who are willing to complete more work and help with other's work would improve trust between teammates, which would lead to better learning outcomes and generally higher satisfaction. Secondly, students felt that hungry teammates had more leadership qualities. Having someone on the team taking on more responsibility reduced the stress on other team members. Two groups indicated high hunger on their team, but also reported higher levels of conflict. These teams reported lower smarts, which may suggest that hunger is only the most important characteristic in these groups when they have sufficient people smarts to manage conflict between high performing members. Finally, participants had a greater diversity of responses regarding perceptions of humility compared to hunger or smarts. One possible explanation for this variability may be that students struggle to understand humility in team settings. Qualities that were most often described as humble included teammates supporting the team financially, always doing what was asked of them, or providing access to their home or personal lives.

Implications/recommendations/impact on profession

Students in agricultural education programs must learn effective teamwork skills. According to ITP, humility is the most important teamwork virtue, but many students focus on hunger and smarts as more important qualities. Owens, Johnson, and Miller (2013) report that humility increases an individual's effective performance and ability to contribute in team settings and that more organizations are focusing on this critical skill as a core organizational value. Given that, it is critical that agricultural educators focus efforts on teaching students the importance of this virtue in teamwork facilitation models.

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