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Managing the downside of goal orientation diversity

by Anne Nederveen Pieterse, Daan van Knippenberg and Wendy P. van Ginkel

Differences in individual goal orientations within a team can significantly impair group performance. Fortunately for companies, there are ways to mitigate these effects.

We often think of workplace behaviour as primarily driven by objective tasks or strategies. Instead, innate and often subconscious 'achievement goals' play a much greater role. These goals shape our perceptions of a task, determining what we consider most important and how we should approach it. Just like athletes preparing for a competition – some focus on building competence, others on winning the race. We might be working on the same task as a colleague, but we're often approaching it in very different ways.

for how well we collaborate on shared projects. And indeed, they do.

Researchers in child psychology first established that there are differences in the way people approach tasks. They observed that when children were faced with a task in which they had performed badly, some persevered at mastering it while others lost interest and gave up.

Why the difference? It comes down to the standards we use to evaluate competence – specifically a distinction between being 'learning' or 'performance' oriented. 'Learning

'Performance oriented' individuals, on the other hand, view task performance as reflective of innate ability. Persevering at a failed task simply means further demonstrating an incompetence. Their focus is external and on comparing their performance to others. At work, they select aspects of a task that maximise their chances of demonstrating strong ability as well as immediate success.

To understand the implications of these different goal orientations on team performance, we drew insights from socially shared cognition theory. This research posits that people construct mental representations of a task. The task no longer becomes an objective entity but takes on the subjective qualities of interpretation.

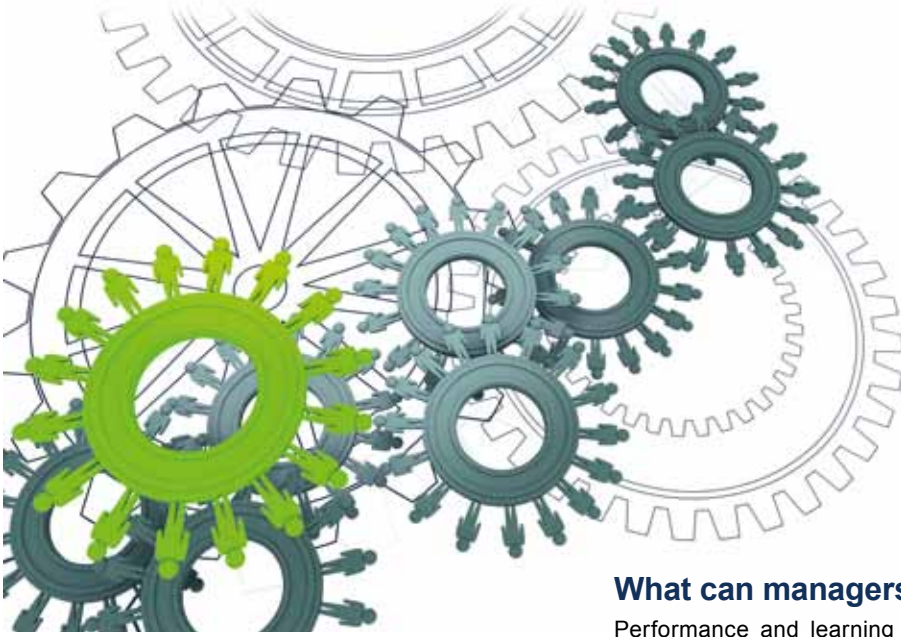
Socially shared cognition research highlights the significance of 'shared' mental representations for group performance. Where you find low levels of shared mental representations of a task between members of a team, you're also likely to find breakdowns in co-ordination and communication and a compromised team performance.

Parallels can clearly be found between this perspective and that of goal orientation. Goal orientation stems from a person's understanding of the nature of ability: what is required to achieve a task, and the meaning of performance. Goal orientations are

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'Goal orientation' is the academic term for this tendency to adopt different preferred goals in achievement situations and it's proven to have a powerful influence on individual performance. It is not difficult to imagine then that differences in goal orientation might have considerable implications

oriented' individuals view task performances as indicative of learned ability. Their focus is on acquiring the knowledge necessary to master a task. They are often engaged in deep-level information processing at work and favour an approach that allows them to acquire new competencies.



subjective mental frameworks that determine what people see as important in achievement situations that shape how they approach tasks.

Just as disparities in task representation have the potential to disrupt group performance, our findings confirm that diversity in goal orientation leads to impaired group performance – specifically in terms of co-ordination and communication, or group information elaboration (effective task-relevant communication) and group process efficiency (efficient co-ordination).

When team members have different goals in mind, they emphasise different information to other members. With no shared framework within which to see its relevance, other group members become less likely to exchange, discuss, and integrate this knowledge into their approach. Meanwhile, a lack of shared mental frameworks hinders members' abilities to understand each other and each other's contributions. Extensive discussion and questioning is required, making co-ordination of individual contributions much more time consuming and challenging.

What can managers do?

Performance and learning oriented individuals both make valuable contributions to company performance. Our research finds that many of the detrimental consequences of the diversity between individuals in goal orientation can be mitigated by 'team reflexivity'. This is when teams meet regularly to discuss goals, tactics and strategies. Teams with diverse goal orientations who engaged in team reflexivity displayed more shared visions of the task, improved information sharing and process efficiency and an overall stronger group performance, because the mental frameworks become more aligned.

Managers should also be mindful of inadvertently enhancing diversity in a group's goal orientation by setting different targets for team members. When formulating teams to collaborate on tasks, it is also helpful to consider goal orientation when selecting team members.

What other tactics can managers employ? Our research agenda is to further explore the effect of adding a team co-ordinator to a group to co-ordinate tasks and mediate communication, ensuring that new knowledge introduced by learning-

oriented individuals is not lost, but that only what is most relevant reaches those who are performance-oriented. Whichever measures are taken, managers should keep in mind that diversity must be carefully managed if companies are to truly reap the very real benefits it has to offer. ■

This article is based on the research paper *Diversity in goal orientation, team reflexivity, and team performance*, written by Anne Nederveen Pieterse, Daan van Knippenberg and Wendy P. van Ginkel and published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 114 (2011) 153-164.

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