

Minority Dissent and Knowledge Sharing: Building the Case for Discrepant Knowledge Sharing In Problem Solving Teams

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge sharing is the key to collaborative problem solving by teams. Minority dissent occurs when a small group in a team publicly opposes the views, beliefs and opinion of the majority. Although the dissenting minority is thought to suffer from considerable strain due to their deviant views, it has been credited with boosting problem solving and innovation in teams. The impact of minority dissent on knowledge sharing by problem solving teams has evaded researchers' attention so far. Discrepant knowledge sharing is the act of sharing contradictory or oppositional knowledge by a dissenting minority in a team. This article fills in the gap in research by building the case for discrepant knowledge sharing through review of literature. The differences of the focal construct from other related constructs are discussed. The article ends with recommendations for future research and a note on the practical implications of the study.

Keywords: *Discrepant knowledge sharing, knowledge sharing, problem solving, minority dissent, task conflict*

The knowledge based view of the firm focuses on knowledge as the most strategically important of the firm's resources (Grant, 1996a). Traditionally, businesses have for very long relied on labor, capital, materials and energy as essential ingredients to production whereas resources such as knowledge and technology were considered as external influences (OECD, 1996). Although knowledge has been acknowledged as playing a role in economy for quite some time now, its role as a distinctive factor of production and driver of economic growth came to be widely recognized only by the second half of the 1950s (Cooke & Leydresdroff, 2006). Nonetheless, with the advent of the knowledge era, fueled by unprecedented technological developments and breakthrough innovations, businesses in the twenty-first century are investing in knowledge based capital like never before. Naturally, this calls for a renewed appraisal of the firm as a knowledge creating entity (Nonaka, 1994).

The agents of organizational knowledge creation are its people. Since tacit knowledge resides within the individual, and must be mobilized by organizations to be able to use it, the role of individuals in the knowledge creation process has been emphasized time and again by researchers (Grant, 1996b; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Simon, 1991; Spender, 1996)

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According to Nonaka (1994), “At a fundamental level, knowledge is created by individuals. An organization cannot create knowledge without individuals” (p. 17). Grant’s (1996b) knowledge-based theory of the firm places the individual at the core of the knowledge-creation activity. According to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), it is true that knowledge creation begins at an individual level, but the knowledge so created grows in traction and scope as it scales progressively wider levels of the group, organization and network of organizations.

Knowledge creation by teams

It follows from the above that knowledge creation by organizations is essentially a social process. Teams entrusted with the task of solving problems of some nature, which by default requires them to process, apply and build knowledge, display this aspect in all manners of their interaction. Teams have been defined variously depending on their composition, their purpose, and their scope of work (Lemieux-Charles & McGuire, 2006). Katzenbach and Smith (1993) define a team as

“...a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable. (p. 112)

In their review of the research on teams and groups in organization settings over a six-year period from 1991 to 1996, Cohen and Bailey (1997), offered the following comprehensive definition of a team:

“A team is a collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks, who share responsibility for outcomes, who see themselves or are seen by others as an intact social entity embedded in one or more larger social systems (e.g., business unit or corporation) and who manage their relationships across organizational boundaries.” (p. 241)

Problem-solving teams are special entities which qualify for knowledge-based performance. These teams typically perform complex operations under dynamic environments involving high degrees of uncertainty. To sustain themselves and perform optimally, they must be adept at leveraging on and coordinating diverse sets of expertise of their constituent members. They must also be able to make sense of high volumes of ambiguous information, and process them to bring clarity out of clutter. These teams frequently need to solve non-routine problems by generating new rules for novel situations. According to Cannon-Bowers, Salas, and Converse (1993), the high-pressure environment in which such expert teams operate are often characterized by severe time constraints, acute demands on short-term memory and requirement to make complex multipronged decisions. These teams are often project-based, which means team members are selected based on their unique ability to contribute to that particular project. Project teams are temporary entities that execute specialized time-constrained tasks before they are dissolved and people move on to other projects (Kozlowski & Bell, 2001). The need for performing non-routine tasks in dynamic, unstable environments call for expertise “out of context”, that is, these highly-skilled people have to go beyond everyday methods of performance to generate new rules for addressing novel situations. In doing so, they constantly create new knowledge for tackling unique problems (Fiore, Smith-Jentsch, Salas, Warner, & Letsky, 2010).

Knowledge sharing in the context of collaborative problem solving

Although knowledge creation is a social process, the willingness and action of individual members gain center stage in the process. It is the individual's knowledge sharing behavior that ultimately shapes the knowledge construction by teams (Brock, Zmud, Kim, & Lee, 2005). Knowledge sharing has been defined in the literature as the provision of task information and know-how to help others and to collaborate with others to solve problems, develop new ideas, or implement policies or procedures (Cummings, 2004; Pulakos, Dorsey, & Borman, 2003; Wang & Noe, 2010). Though closely related, knowledge sharing differs from information sharing by virtue of the logic that the former must involve an element of reciprocity between the seeker and the source, whereas the latter could purely be unidirectional and occur even in absence of a request by the seeker (Connelly & Kelloway, 2003).

Knowledge sharing is commonly thought to impact firm performance. Research has demonstrated that knowledge sharing cuts down production costs, leads to faster completion of projects, and improves team performance. Effective knowledge sharing between individuals and teams boosts firm innovation capabilities, sales growth and revenues from new lines of products and services (Wang & Noe, 2010).

Recent developments in the area of macrocognition in teams have sought to explain the role of knowledge sharing in problem solving and new knowledge construction. Fiore et al. (2010) defined macrocognition in teams as “the process of transforming internalized knowledge into externalized team knowledge through individual and team knowledge building processes” (p. 9). Letsky, Warner, Fiore, Rosen, and Salas (2007) proposed a set of macrocognitive phases engaged in by teams during collaborative problem solving – knowledge construction, problem model development, team consensus and outcome evaluation and revision. Each of these phases relies heavily on interpersonal knowledge sharing by team members. For instance, in the knowledge construction phase, individuals share knowledge with others to build a common fund of team task knowledge. During the problem model development phase, team members work collaboratively to combine their knowledge to develop a shared understanding of the problem and its parameters. During the team consensus phase, individual members again engage in extensive knowledge sharing to evaluate solution alternatives. Finally, outcome evaluation and revision depend to a large extent on the integration of feedback from a plan's execution, adaptation of knowledge, and development of new plans – each of which has interpersonal knowledge sharing as its key component.

Conflict in teamwork

When team members are on the “same page”, they are likely to have similar beliefs with regards to tasks, shared duties and processes, which translate into the formation of effective team mental models (Mohammed, Ferzandi, & Hamilton, 2010). In reality, however, diversity in the background of team members - such as their age, education, experience, and tenure - as well as differences in expectations tend to thwart the formation of team mental models. When differences in beliefs and preferences exist, and mental models are incompatible, teams suffer from the unfortunate vulnerability to conflict. Task conflict exists when there are *disagreements* among group members about the content of the tasks being performed, including differences in viewpoints, ideas and opinions (Jehn, 1995). Task conflict could take the shape of disagreements about the allocation of resources, perception about procedures and policies, and interpretation of events (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003).

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Disagreement has been defined in the literature as an “oppositional stance” (Kakava, 1993) and “a difference between parties in their views or opinions” (Kennedy & Pronin, 2008, p. 834). The terms ‘disagreement’ and ‘conflict’ have often been used interchangeably to refer to one and the same thing (Locher, 2004; Simons & Peterson, 2000).

In social and organizational settings, both conflict and disagreement typically wear the dubious distinction of being acts of negativity, and conflicting parties are commonly exhorted to resolve conflicts at the earliest (Angouri, 2012; Jehn, 1999; Schwenk, 1990). Disagreement is treated as a “dispreferred second” in the parlance of conversational analytics (Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1973/1987) and blamed as “largely destructive of social solidarity” (Heritage, 1984, p. 268; Sifianou, 2012). In the politeness literature, disagreement has been construed as an “act of impoliteness” (Brown & Levinson, 1978/1987; Leech, 1983), which has the potential of destroying interlocutors’ “face” irrevocably (Sifianou, 2012). Organizational conflict research has fairly trod the same line. Conflict has been thought to interfere with individual satisfaction and group productivity (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Jehn (1995) conducted a pioneering study of intragroup conflict by employing multiple methods of examination. She found team members subjected to task conflict to suffer from unpleasant consequences of tension, hostility, and dissatisfaction. They also shared an unwillingness to work with their current team members in future. She further demonstrated a curvilinear effect of task conflict on group performance, such that beyond or below an optimal level of task conflict, performance is likely to diminish. De Dreu’s (2006) work on task conflict and innovation also evidenced a similar curvilinear relationship.

It has been theorized that when team members enter a state of prolonged conflict, the unpleasant situation starts telling upon their ability to process valuable information. As conflict becomes worse, the powers of cognitive flexibility and creative thinking are compromised (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Task conflict may cause further damage by precipitating relational conflict or emotional conflict in the group through a process of biased information processing (Mooney, Holahan, & Amason, 2007; Simons & Peterson, 2000). When relationship conflict occurs, team members fall foul of each other, with the consequence that much of their energy is consumed in attacking others and defending themselves, rather than on task-related matters. This causes a decline in the information processing ability and performance of the group (Jehn & Mannix, 1997).

Minority dissent in teams

Minority dissent occurs when a minority in a group publicly opposes the beliefs, attitudes, ideas, procedures and policies assumed by the majority of the group (De Dreu & West, 2001; McLeod, Baron, Marti, & Yoon, 1997). Opposition to the majority is not without its costs though. Dissenting views are considered deviant and inimical to the group’s solidarity (Van Dyne & Saavedra, 1996). By challenging the normative influence of the group, they are thought to provoke cognitive and relational conflict in the team (Moscovici & Lage, 1976). The resultant tension and antagonism are highly unpleasant and must be snuffed out before the group succumbs to swirls of negativity. By promoting a divergence of opinion, minority dissent often forces upon group members the need to spend more time and effort to arrive at decisions (Nemeth, 1986). As a consequence of disruption in the usual state of affairs and the concomitant surge in hostility produced by it, minority dissent is often viewed with strong antipathy by the majority (Nemeth & Wachtler, 1983). Understandably, the nonconforming group members must withstand considerable strain arising from the conformity pressure exerted by the majority (Moscovici, 1980). However, a consistent and determined faction,

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which stands strongly by its position over time, is capable of effecting a slow but steady change in the majority's position. Researchers have therefore highlighted the importance of behavioral style in the influence process (Moscovici, Lage, and Naffrechoux, 1969). Further, a combine of at least two people tends to be more effective than just one, since it is relatively easy to reject a lone voice on grounds of personal bias (Moscovici & Lage, 1976).

The key to change in opinion affected by a minority lies in the influence process exerted by the said group. Majority and minority influence processes tend to be very different. According to Nemeth (1986), a majority exerts its influence primarily at the manifest level, while minority influence works at the latent level. Consistent and firm lobbying by a minority compels people to ultimately evaluate their position, an exercise involving deep cognitive and perceptual effort. As a consequence of this exercise, some people belonging to the majority start gaining an insight into the minority's position, and this is the start of a process of change. Be persuading people to think in divergent ways, minority influence is said to cause a slow and deep behavioral change. Moscovici (1980) argues that majorities induce compliance behavior whereas minorities induce conversion behavior. Although a dissenting minority may not always be successful at getting the majority revise its position, it can still cause a change in the group's problem solving process by stimulating divergent thinking in the group (Nemeth, 1985, 1986; Nemeth & Wachtler, 1983).

Minority dissent and knowledge sharing

Although minority dissent has been studied extensively under the domains of problem solving and creativity, it has been given a complete miss in the knowledge sharing literature. This is not only surprising, but counterintuitive too, since knowledge sharing is the key element for problem solving to occur (Fiore et al., 2010). The researchers in the field of knowledge sharing seem to have completely overlooked the possibility of disagreements in the knowledge sharing process. It will not be an overstatement to say that in the existing body of literature, knowledge sharing seems to have been treated as a process of simple exchange between the source and the seeker, devoid of any resistance between the two. It is as though the seeker would invariably absorb the knowledge transferred to it without any disagreement or dissidence at all. Therefore, the role of the seeker has been reduced to that of a passive recipient, who may limit himself to asking questions, but never strongly dispute or advance his contrary position. It also follows that knowledge sharing has largely been construed in literature as a smooth and peaceful process, with conflict never occurring at any stages of it. In reality, however, disagreement between parties is a common occurrence in knowledge sharing activities, since people tend to differ in their views, beliefs and opinion and may be in possession of conflicting bits of information. Nowhere should this be more apparent than in problem solving teams, which leverage on the diverse expertise of its members from varied functional backgrounds. In fact, Angouri (2012) had demonstrated that disagreement is an everyday phenomenon in problem solving meeting talk at workplaces. This gives us the liberty to argue that disagreement is a fairly common experience in the life of problem solving teams, and such groups often have to contend with the views of a dissenting minority. Since these teams must pool together unique and non-overlapping intellectual resources available with expert members to solve complex problems of novel nature, they must possess the flexibility to evaluate all views and opinion presented before them, including contrary ones. Drawing on the above arguments, we propose that knowledge sharing by a dissenting minority should be treated as a special case of knowledge sharing and subjected to the academic rigor it deserves. A dissenting minority's choice of either sharing or withholding its knowledge before a majority has important consequences on the team's deliberations and its

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outcomes. We call this special case of knowledge sharing as “discrepant knowledge sharing” and define it as:

The sharing of contradictory or oppositional knowledge by a dissenting minority in a team.

Two preconditions are necessary for discrepant knowledge sharing to occur. To begin with, there must be an expressed minority position in a group, which by default assumes the presence of an alternative majority position. In those unique instances, where the group consists of only two people, discrepant knowledge sharing may still occur. In these cases, the sharing of contradictory knowledge by any one of the two people in response to a stated position shall constitute discrepant knowledge sharing. However, should a divide in power and status already exist in this small group, its impact cannot be ruled out on discrepant knowledge sharing. Second, the mere presence of a minority shall not qualify for such knowledge sharing. Instead, they must share information, expertise and know-how to substantiate their position. In the same vein, just an expression of disagreement with the majority position shall not be enough; rather the opposing faction must reveal the reason behind their disagreement. In other words, knowledge must be countered with knowledge and the minority should be willing to lend its position to scrutiny by others.

It is important to differentiate the construct of discrepant knowledge sharing from other related constructs. Knowledge sharing is distinct from the focal construct, since the former involves no element of disagreement or dissent, whereas the latter has a critical component of opposition embedded in it. Minority dissent too, is different from the focal construct, since it is not limited to contexts of knowledge sharing only. Even though both the constructs share an element of opposition or contradiction, minority dissent can occur in a much wider range of situations beyond knowledge sharing. Knowledge hiding too is conceptually different from the focal construct. Although both involve a grain of intent as well as of action, knowledge hiding is essentially about concealment whereas discrepant knowledge sharing is about the exchange of contradictory information, expertise and know-how. Voice, too, share some similarity with our focal construct, as both involve an expression of dissent. Voice has been defined as “constructive challenge with intent to improve” (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998). Knowledge sharing may also contribute to positive changes in the group’s outcome. However, the prime difference between the two lies in the fact that voice is considered an extra-role behavior whereas discrepant knowledge sharing is very much an in-role behavior. The focal construct stands apart from organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) on similar grounds. OCBs are discretionary employee behaviors which are helpful – good to have – but not absolutely required by employers (Dekas, Bauer, Welle, Kurkoski, & Sullivan, 2013). By contrast, discrepant knowledge sharing is an integral aspect of knowledge work. Finally, the construct of focus differs from argumentation, which involves recognition of controversial issues, advocating positions on them and refuting other positions (Infante, Trebing, Shepherd, & Seeds, 1984). Although discrepant knowledge sharing involves all of the above, it is not argumentation, since the latter has a much broader scope and is not limited to knowledge sharing situations. Discrepant knowledge sharing, as noted above, is essentially a process of sharing ideas and information by a dissenting minority in a team.

CONCLUSION

Discrepant knowledge sharing occurs when a dissenting minority in a team shares knowledge in support of ideas and opinion which are at odds with, are deviant from, or contradictory to the position taken by the majority. Considering that previous research has demonstrated the importance of minority dissent in problem solving and innovation by teams, one would

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expect its role to have been examined in the context of knowledge sharing too, since problem solving in a collaborative context occurs through sharing of information, expertise and know-how, which ultimately leads to the construction of new knowledge. Therefore, lack of research on discrepant knowledge sharing presents itself simultaneously as a glaring gap in literature as well as an opportunity to excavate a rich and fertile field of study. In this article, we have shown that there is adequate theoretical support in favor of our focal construct; this should now be followed up with empirical studies to establish its construct validity.

The antecedents of knowledge sharing, especially its cost factors and motivators, have been subjected to long years of investigative scrutiny. Discrepant knowledge sharing likely has a set of cost factors and motivators unique to itself, and those should be explored to place the construct in a nomological network. The impact of knowledge sharing on individual, team and organization-level outcomes is a thriving field of study, and our focal construct should also be studied for its impact of these outcomes. In addition, the role of organizational culture and climate on the volume and usefulness of discrepant knowledge sharing should attract researchers' attention. Further, the role of rewards and recognition on discrepant knowledge sharing presents itself as a compelling and useful area of study. Finally, study of the role of individual personality or disposition on discrepant knowledge sharing or lack of it promises to offer valuable insights in the occurrence of such knowledge sharing.

Thorough understanding of the phenomenon of discrepant knowledge sharing has tremendous implications for practice. With this understanding, organizations can aim to create the right knowledge-sharing culture, draft supportive systems and policies in accordance with knowledge sharing demands, devise right rewards and recognition to promote knowledge flow and take appropriate measures to remove knowledge blockades.

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Conflict of Interest

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