Communication flow key to long-distance collaboration

August 17 2016, by Jay Wrolstad

When it comes to teamwork, familiarity breeds productivity rather than contempt, according to a new study from Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration (SHA).

Establishing such affinity is increasingly important, the researchers say, given the rising number of virtual [project](#) teams comprising far-flung members.

The research examining collaboration among geographically dispersed academics from multiple universities suggests smaller groups accomplish more because fewer connections allow members to interact more frequently and intimately, creating a more cohesive group.

The study in Communication Research, "Team Member's Centrality, Cohesion, Conflict and Performance in Multi-University Geographically Distributed Project Teams," is by Alex M. Susskind, associate professor of food and beverage management, and Peggy R. Odom-Reed, lecturer in hospitality leadership, at SHA.

"The key is having a cohesive team and a limited number of contacts in the communication network," Susskind said. "This allows team members to benefit from the strength and relationships within their team and not have their team interactions diluted by a larger base of network contacts."

At the same time, he said, those at the team hub may be pulled in many

different directions as a result of their strong connections in the network.

"We have a limit on how many people we can have meaningful interactions with," Susskind said. "Hence, smaller networks in this study were associated with higher levels of individual performance."

The researchers focused on work done by teams from 11 universities on a nationwide research project conducted by the Educational Institute of the American Hotel & Lodging Association, in collaboration with six national hotel chains. They collected network members' perceptions of team cohesion and conflict during the first three months of the 14-month project, and again during the last four months.

They found work groups that communicate frequently, both internally and externally, are more productive than groups with fewer interactions, suggesting network communication and information flow are critical parts of the team process.

As team members established stronger bonds over the course of the project, individual performance improved as well. There was a strong negative connection between conflict experienced during the project and team member cohesion.

"Reported conflict in teams did not demonstrate a statistically significant negative relationship with team member performance as expected in the study, but changes in cohesion were strongly and inversely related to changes in conflict, showing that over time increased levels of cohesion were associated with decreases in conflict," Susskind said. "Research has shown that a certain amount of conflict is beneficial in teams, but how much exactly is too much conflict, I don't precisely know."

The research resulted in three significant findings regarding how individuals engage in a team network:

- Team unity and productivity suffer when individuals interact with members in the network outside their immediate team. Although having unique ties outside one's team provides access to new information, these links may reduce members' attachment to their group.
- As project teams develop over time and team members develop familiarity with each other, there is less conflict about the project work.
- Individual feelings of "closeness" and satisfaction with team members improves individual-level performance in the team.

More information: A. M. Susskind et al. Team Members Centrality, Cohesion, Conflict, and Performance in Multi-University Geographically Distributed Project Teams, *Communication Research* (2016). DOI: 10.1177/0093650215626972

Provided by Cornell University