

Why teams perform better with divergent perspectives

May 18 2018, by Gregory Muraski

Team members aren't always going to agree with leaders' goals and strategies—but that's not necessarily a bad thing. In certain circumstances, having disagreement among teams, and the discourse that this disagreement elicits, can translate into success for certain types of teams who are tackling complex problems, according to researchers from the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business, University of Florida's Warrington College of Business, and Michigan State University's Eli Broad College of Business.

The researchers studied multiteam systems (MTS)—or teams of teams—that take on complex projects or crisis situations, such as new product launch teams, natural disaster emergency response teams or major accident scene patient-care teams.

Multiteam systems are complex, and with so many teams involved conventional wisdom suggests it's best for all parties to agree on strategy and goals quickly. The researchers—Trevor Foulk, assistant professor, University of Maryland, Klodiana Lanaj, associate professor, University of Florida, and John Hollenbeck, professor, Michigan State University—found otherwise.

MTS are often structured with a leadership team that coordinates the actions of several component teams. Due to the complex nature of these systems, teams coordinate via planning and goal-setting, and receive their tasks from a leadership team. These large, complex interdependent teams have to plan for risk because they are dealing with high-stakes

projects. They need to weigh the costs and rewards involved in any possible course of action to figure out which strategy to pursue.

The research, which was recently published in the *Academy of Management Journal*, reveals that multiteam systems actually perform better—by engaging in less unwarranted risk behaviors and more aspirational behaviors—when component teams disagree with leadership teams about of how much risk the MTS should take. Foulk said this is likely because agreement may spark premature consensus, whereas disagreement causes all parties involved to express ideas, opinions, and concerns that may ultimately lead the team to consider better options.

"There is comfort in agreement and shared views, but the leadership team should be particularly wary of rapid consensus during the planning process because the research shows this can result in lower performance and lower aspirational behavior," said the researchers.

They believe if leaders see [team members](#) agreeing too quickly, they should challenge their decisions to elicit different perspectives.

To keep people from simply going along with the leadership team, Foulk said leaders shouldn't reveal their goals during the planning session. They should urge team members to speak up first and voice diverse perspectives during planning and goal setting, rather than too quickly agreeing on a strategy. Leaders also need to be patient because the benefits of different perspectives may take time to emerge, said the researchers.

More information: Klodiana Lanaj et al. The benefits of not seeing eye to eye with leadership: Divergence in risk preferences impacts multiteam system behavior and performance., *Academy of Management Journal* (2017). [DOI: 10.5465/amj.2015.0946](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2015.0946)

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