

STUDENT DESIGNED CODES OF ETHICS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON GROUP DEVELOPMENT AND PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the impact of student-designed codes of ethics on group development and processes. Using a grounded theory approach (Patton 2002), we employ a variety of qualitative and quantitative research techniques in multiple contexts. Based on our results, we theorize that codes of ethics help groups develop at a faster rate. Further, we theorize that norming (Tuckman & Jensen 1977) is completed more effectively and that the storming (Tuckman & Jensen 1977) phase may be shortened or bypassed. Suggestions for future research with group-designed codes of ethics are presented.

INTRODUCTION

Ethics is one of today's important topics, and as such, ethics education appears to be receiving considerable attention as well. As more schools incorporate an ethics component into their curriculum, faculty are faced with the task of integrating ethics education into their curriculum. This can be accomplished in many ways; lecture material, case studies, exercises, video tapes, outside reading, and in-class discussions to name a few. The creation of a classroom or group code of ethics can be used as well (Buff & Yonkers 2004). Originally designed and implemented in courses with the intent of improving ethics education, it was noted that the dynamics of group work appeared to be influenced by both the actual document and the process of creating the document as well. Specifically, these student-designed codes of ethics seem to affect the way that group members interact. Thus, anecdotally, student-designed codes of ethics seemingly influence group processes. As more business schools incorporate group and team projects into the curriculum and more companies rely on functional teams in the workplace, it is important to understand how group work experiences may be improved.

Collaborative work accomplished through the use of group projects can be beneficial to both student and instructor. For the student, a group project affords one the opportunity to collaborate with peers, working together towards a common goal, assigning tasks, and moving the group forward towards successful completion of the task. From an instructor's

perspective, a project of significant substance can be assigned, necessitating multitasking, group-decision making, individual decision-making and ongoing communication and interaction. The use of a group project allows for the development or enhancement of small group interaction skills. These skills are especially valuable in a work environment and are an important learning outcome objective of many upper level business courses. Yet, for all its benefits, group work can also present some challenges that may result in the overall group experience not being as positive and rewarding as intended. Personality conflicts between group members may interfere with group communication and performance. There may be differences in the goals that individual team members hold, especially as the school environment and workplace become more diverse. Additionally, there may be significant differences in ability and motivation. Members need to feel comfortable communicating their ideas and opinions and moving towards identification and completion of common goals. Small group research suggests that there must be consensus on task allocation and a sense of confidence that each member will do their fair share in order for teams to be effective (Barker, Abrams, Tiyaamornwong, Seibold, Duggan, Park, & Sebastian 2000).

We see an opportunity for codes of ethics to be used to improve the development and performance of student work groups. Thus, this study combines previous research in the area of group work and codes of ethics. Specifically, it seeks to assess the usefulness of group-designed codes of ethics for enhancing the development and processes of student work teams. Many associations, organizations, high schools, and universities have developed codes of ethics to guide the behavior of their members or employees. However, these codes usually are developed and implemented from the top down. We will be evaluating codes of ethics, generated by the groups themselves, to determine if these self-designed rules improve the group process needed for productive groups.

BACKGROUND

Williams, Beard, and Rymer (1991) summarize the many benefits of team projects and offer supporting perspectives from educational research. They define comprehensiveness, realism, communication skills, group skills, technical skills, and interest and motivation as conventional benefits, adding that team work also allows for cooperative learning, accommodation of diverse learning styles, peer modeling, multicultural experiences, and acculturation to marketing (Williams, Beard, and Rymer 1991), as some of the benefits of group work.

A vital component to successful group work is individual accountability. In fact, Mesch (1991) cites it as critical to cooperative learning techniques. Individuals must be held accountable to the group. Evaluating individual members facilitates team performance, encourages equal and full participation, and spurs the team to work to capacity with the intent of achieving team goals (Brooks and Ammon 2003; Williams, Beard, and Rymer 1991). Without some type of recognized accountability there may be social loafing, free riding, behaviors to avoid the sucker effect, withdrawing, "ganging up on the task," each of which contribute to potential group process loss (Brooks and Ammons 2003; Houldsworth & Mathews 2000; Bacon, Stewart, and Silver 1999; Bacon, Stewart, and Stewart-Belle 1998; Maranto and Gresham 1998; Strong and Anderson 1990).

Group projects used in an academic setting may better prepare students for the group work they will likely encounter in the workforce. Mello (1993) cites the growing amount of organizational decision-making that is being made within the context of the group. Industry focuses on the attainment of corporate goals (Houldsworth & Mathews 2000), with secondary focus on the attainment of individual goals. Saavedra and Van Dyne (1999) report that "work groups answer to three masters: (1) the organization and its emphasis on outputs, (2) the group and its need for relational development, and (3) group members and their personal interests, as well as the costs and rewards of group membership (p.105)." In their research with work groups, Moreland and Levine (2001) developed a model based on evaluation, commitment and role transition. They identified the factors that the group will develop to evaluate individual members. These include individual contributions and the group's assessment standards for each individual's performance; normative expectations; and the gap between an individual's expected and actual performance. This can be extended to academic work groups. In addition, small groups performing in an academic setting must

learn to balance the demands of the professor, the group, and the individual. Importantly, as group members work together to solve an academic project or exercise, they are developing or further refining skills that they will take into the workplace.

Ngeow (1998) presents five attributes of group learning: (1) shared learning goals and outcomes form the basis of a group learning task, (2) behaving cooperatively involves trust-building, joint planning, and an understanding of team support conduct, (3) small group learning occurs in groups of 3-5 members, (4) positive interdependence is formed through mutual goal-setting, and (5) individual accountability, commitment to the task and one's role, are expected of students (p.2). Individual skills and abilities also contribute to group success. Specific social skills required in an effectively functioning group include "the ability to control progress through the tasks, the skills to manage competition and conflict, the ability to modify and use different viewpoints as well as the willingness to give mutual support (Cohen 1994, p.5)." In fact, Bastick (1999) acknowledges that problems associated with assessing an individual's contribution to group work have unfavorably impacted the implementation and use of this method. Inequitable contribution, regardless of the reason, means that members of the group learn less than if they had to do the project on their own (Williams, Beard, & Rymer 1991). Thus for group learning to be successful, a number of conditions associated with the project, the group, and the individual must be met.

Tuckman and Jensen (1977) identified five stages of group development: forming, norming, storming, performing, and adjourning. In his seminal work, Tuckman (as cited in Tuckman and Jensen 1977) developed a four-stage model that he proposed all groups would pass through. His model however did not indicate what triggers a group to pass from one stage to the next, nor how long a group would be in each stage. In the subsequent five-stage model (Tuckman and Jensen 1977), the authors conclude that all stages, especially norming (setting group processes) and storming (conflict phase), may be skipped. It is possible, therefore, that there may be a mechanism to create a trigger to help a group pass from one stage to the next or to skip a stage. A code of ethics for example, where groups are developing their norms, may allow them to go through the norming stage of the process quicker as the code provides a framework to work through that stage. Further, a group that successfully completes the norming stage with a code of ethics may be able to skip the storming stage as lines of communication are

open, and group expectations and recourse are established.

Historically, codes of ethics have been used to outline an institution's or association's expectations for ethical behavior. Honor codes have been implemented in colleges, universities, and high schools (RedEye 2003; Broussard and Golson 2000; McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield 1999; Carroll 1993). The intent of honor codes is to lower the levels of academic dishonesty by clarifying expectations and definitions of cheating behavior (McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield 1999). Organizations and professional associations have recognized the importance of codes of ethics to promote the behavior and values that they deem essential for their business (Kidwell 2001; McDonnell 1998; Harrington 1996; Peterson 1996). Like honor codes, corporate codes of ethics are also used to modify behavior "by impacting the decision-making processes of the employee. Corporate codes of ethics clarify responsibility and, in doing so, deter unethical behavior (Harrington 1996, p.258)."

Earlier research (Buff & Yonkers 2004) with group codes of ethics extended Kidwell's (2001) research and focused directly on the classroom experience, with the classroom or group serving as the students' workplace. The results of this initial research, in which we specifically focus on the use of codes of ethics as an ethics teaching tool, suggested that group designed codes of ethics not only effectively reinforced ethics content but, appeared to help in group development and process performance.

THE CURRENT RESEARCH

With this anecdotal evidence, we wanted to explore how the codes of ethics affected group development and performance. Using a grounded theory approach (Patton 2002), we employ a variety of qualitative and quantitative research techniques in multiple contexts, with the understanding that based on these findings, we would then be able to design a more controlled study of the impact of codes of ethics on group development and processes. Thus, the current research deals with developing the grounded theory.

We reviewed the group processes and performance for two upper-level consumer behavior classes, one upper-level retailing class, four lower-level (generally freshmen) business communications classes, and three upper-level international marketing classes, three domestic and one abroad. There were various forms of information, including course evaluations, submitted group projects, group codes of ethics, in-class observation of groups, and informal oral

feedback to the professor, that were collected for each class. These were reviewed for common themes that could be used to determine how codes of ethics affect group development and processes.

In each of these classes, there was a major group project assigned. Generally these projects included a written report and oral presentation. There were differences in how students were assigned to groups. In the retailing class, students were able to self select their teammates. In the other classes, students were assigned to a group for completion of a major course project, sometimes randomly, sometimes based on student schedule. With the exception of two international marketing classes, one of the first tasks that each group performed was designing a group code of ethics. The two international marketing classes were assigned the code of ethics class mid-way through the semester, after the group had been functioning for a while. The task was generally completed during one of the groups' first meetings. A short discussion of ethics and group work generally preceded the development of the group codes of ethics.

The goals of this assignment were twofold. They included:

- (1) To reinforce concepts that students have been exposed to in previous classes, namely ethics, social responsibility, and code of ethics; and,
- (2) To improve group interaction and functioning by allowing students to define group expectations and sanctions themselves.

Student groups designed a code of ethics that they would abide by. As requested by the professor, members signed the code to verify their acceptance of the expectations and sanctions. As this was generally completed fairly early in the semester, groups had no significant experience of working together before completing the code of ethics.

RESULTS

A total of 48 group codes of ethics were collected over a period of two semesters. A review of the content in each code of ethics revealed some consistencies. Most identified the expectations for how work would be assigned, how communication and decision making was expected to occur, expectations regarding meeting attendance and level of preparedness, expectations for task performance, and clear guidelines for recourse and enforcement. All of these are indications of norming and group socialization.

At the completion of the course, students were given an end of semester questionnaire that contained a few questions about the codes of ethics, to assess the students' perceptions on the codes as ethics teaching tools. In the consumer behavior classes, two business communication classes, and two international marketing classes, students were asked a very general question about how helpful the code of ethics was in guiding the performance of their group. Twenty-nine percent indicated it was not helpful, fifty-five percent indicated it was somewhat helpful, and sixteen percent indicated it was extremely helpful. Of the business communication students, 90% indicated that the group functioned well, while international marketing students only had 64% indicate that they functioned well as a team. Students were also given an open-ended question that asked them to comment on the usefulness of the group code of ethics. The results here were very mixed with some groups relying on their codes and others not referring to them. Some students indicated that they did not use the code because the group "did not experience any major problems." One student noted that the group "did not follow it at all...should be reinforced by all groups in future...demand it of students." Yet another student wrote "it was useful because it mandated the rules the group abided by. More useful because the group made up the code of ethics together, so no one could be taken advantage of."

Based on the first semester results, we wondered whether the codes of ethics allowed groups to build a certain level of trust very early on in the group formation process, perhaps a level of trust generally not achieved as early without some formal means of outlining group expectations and sanctions. In the end of semester questionnaire for a second semester class we asked three more focused questions on group trust and the impact of the code of ethics. Each was measured on a five point Likert scale, with "1" indicating "Strongly Disagree" and "5" indicating "Strongly Agree." In terms of whether the codes of ethics improved communications, 32% indicated "Strongly Agree" whereas 14% selected "Strongly Disagree." With regard to the code of ethics resulting in improved trust within the group, 26% of students strongly agreed while 13% strongly disagreed. Finally, when asked if the code of ethics provided direction to the group, 22% strongly agreed whereas 13% strongly disagreed.

One international marketing group and two business communication groups participated in a modified focus group to discuss the usefulness of the code of ethics. Their responses were similar to the open-ended questions and end of semester questionnaire,

with those who did not use the codes of ethics not doing so because it was not necessary. Many felt that the codes of ethics helped to avoid conflict and set expectations for the group process.

There was one exception from the focus group. A poorly functioning group indicated that the code of ethics had not been adequately crafted to fit the team's needs. As a result, they did use the code of ethics, but found that they had not defined the responsibilities broadly enough or determined an enforceable repercussion. They had felt that they could not change the code, which was too rigid for their situation.

DISCUSSION

As a result of the analyses described above, our theory is that the codes of ethics help groups to develop at a faster rate. This is due to the necessity of groups having to negotiate values, expectations, and recourse as they develop the group's code of ethics. Further, we theorize that groups using codes of ethics will complete norming more effectively, perhaps resulting in the bypass of the storming phase. This does not necessarily mean however that in the short-term group output, in our case the quality of the final project, will be better, although group processes may function smoother. In other words, each individual may find the group experience to be more favorable.

The initial use of group codes of ethics to reinforce ethics education in the curriculum, led to the realization that these codes might be an effective method for improving the function of student work groups. Allowing students to actually develop a code of ethics that would guide the behavior of the group gave them the opportunity to clearly define group expectations and the sanctions for not abiding by group rules. What we found is that these codes had the added benefit of improving group interaction. Although not explicitly tracked when the codes were used for ethics education, we noted fewer complaints about group members and group performance than we have seen in other semesters using these group projects.

In retailing, student responses suggest that they did find the codes of ethics to be useful in improving communication, improving trust, and providing direction. It is clear that students felt the codes had a favorable impact on group processes. This was further reinforced through our informal discussions with students and our observation of the work groups in class.

Collaborative work should be part of the undergraduate educational experience. Efforts should be made to minimize the problems that are often associated with group work. Of the five attributes of group learning expounded on by Ngeow (1998), we feel the code of ethics can impact at least four, including shared learning goals and outcomes, trust building and an understanding of team support conduct, positive interdependence formed through mutual goal-setting and individual accountability. We believe that the code of ethics is an effective tool for outlining the expectations of the group in terms of work goals and individual behavior. Since the group decides what those expectations are and how they will be enforced, we believe there is the likelihood for an improved work relationship. We believe that the foundation for trusting relationships can be built with the code of ethics.

Cohen (1994) identifies specific social skills that are required in an effectively functioning group. Here again, we see an opportunity for the code of ethics to be useful. Especially in student work groups where students are still acquiring and developing these social skills, the code of ethics provides a written framework for the group to function from. The ability to control progress through tasks (Cohen 1994) might be easier to achieve once the process of task assignment and guidelines for task responsibility are detailed in the code. The skills to manage competition and conflict (Cohen 1994) may be more easily attained when recourse is so clearly stated in the code of ethics. With expectations and recourse clearly defined beforehand, students can focus on managing the conflict itself.

Our research would indicate that codes of ethics should be introduced at the beginning of the group process. Those groups that developed a code of ethics after the group had been functioning for a while had more dysfunctional groups. By introducing the process for developing codes of ethics at the beginning of group work, students are establishing common values and work expectations. The negotiation of a code of ethics establishes beliefs and assumptions which become the common ground and shared knowledge on which to base subsequent conversations (Clark & Brennan as cited in Gay & Lentini 1995).

CONCLUSION

We find sufficient experiential evidence to conclude that the student designed code of ethics is a valuable instructional tool as well as a useful methodology for improving the interaction and performance (process) of student work groups. Subsequent research of our theory is necessary. Currently we are using the codes of ethics in a more structured research design, with control groups. This will allow us to determine the validity of our theory that codes of ethics favorably impact group development and processes. Further, we will be able to compare group performance (output) as measured by final project quality.

Another direction for future research would be to move the research from the classroom to the workplace. The goal would be to see if developing codes of ethics at the team level would improve the individual's experience in the group as well as the development of groups in the workplace. With multiple groups coming together for short periods of time, it is important that companies be able to quickly formulate performing groups. Further research should investigate whether codes of ethics might expedite this process. In addition, with the growing number of distributed groups in the workplace (group members at multiple locations), future research might also look at using codes of ethics to improve virtual group processes. Finally, the processes students go through to develop the codes of ethics (discourse analysis) would give insight on what factors need to be determined in creating an effective code of ethics.

References available to the reader upon request.