

EXPLORING DIFFERENCES IN STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF TEAMWORK: THE CASE OF U. S. AND LITHUANIAN STUDENTS

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Abstract

The attitudes of U.S. and Lithuanian students regarding teamwork are compared. Both groups had a common definition of teams and agreed on the value of teams with regard to self-development. Their attitudes diverged, however, with regard to whether teamwork produces better outputs and their satisfaction with teamwork. Possible reasons for this divergence are discussed.

Keywords: team, teamwork, students, Lithuania



INTRODUCTION

Organizations are increasingly relying on the use of teamwork processes to meet the challenges of global competition. Businesses rely on teams to increase quality and efficiency, reengineer systems, design and launch products, determine strategy and govern the firm (Guzzo & Dickson, 1996). In response to this challenge, teamwork has been implemented in many organizations in different countries over the last few years, taking a range of forms in practice (Frobel & Marchington, 2005).

Faced with this growing demand for a workforce with teamwork experience, businesses are increasingly interested in the teamwork skills, behaviors and attitudes that new graduates bring to the workplace. With the use of teams so widespread, students both in the U.S. and in other countries will eventually work and interface with teams locally and globally in all types of organizations. In response to these developments, educators, particularly those in business colleges, have put more emphasis on including teamwork experiences in a wide range of classes. It is likely, then, that a high use of teams would be found in many universities worldwide (Shaw, 2004).

Unfortunately, students do not always come away from these experiences with positive attitudes about teamwork and how teamwork relates to effective performance. Research shows that while most students recognize the importance of teamwork, they still prefer to work alone when the goal is achieving good performance (McCorkle, et al., 1999). Studies about teamwork attitudes that have been done in the U.S. are few in number and show contradictory results (Ruiz Ulloa & Adams, 2004). Bolton (1999), for example, found a discrepancy between professor and student satisfaction with team-based class projects with 91% of professors satisfied with the outcomes while only 64% of students shared a favorable viewpoint. Peslak (2005) surveyed IT students over the course of a long-term project and found that although team emotions at the start of the project were more positive than negative, the negative emotions grew more than positive emotions over the life of the project. Indeed, a number of observers have raised concerns about whether we are reaching our goals in preparing students to become effective team members (Ettington & Camp, 2002).

While the evidence from these and other studies is mixed, there is no indication if similar attitudes are held by students in universities in other countries. We were particularly interested in asking students how positive they felt about the outcomes of teamwork and comparing those responses across students from different countries. Specifically, we were interested in comparing the attitudes of U.S. students and students in countries where the economy is in transition, and where student attitudes toward western-based organizational concepts are still forming.

CHANGE AND TRANSITION IN LITHUANIA AND EASTERN EUROPE

While students in the U.S. and Western Europe are most likely to share many of the same values, we wondered how students in countries experiencing change and transition from centralized planned economies would view the concept of group or teamwork. Kerr (1983) suggested that with the adoption of western-style industrialization policies and education, cultures would tend to become similar.

For the Baltic and most Eastern European countries, their transition was characterized first by political change and then economic change. Communists were discredited and removed

from power, creating a period of “extraordinary politics” and a window of opportunity for reform (Denizer, 1997).

After fifteen years of reform, some countries have experienced rapid progress in large-scale privatisation and sustained macroeconomic stabilisation. Lithuania, in particular, has been named by The World Bank Group Report (World Bank, 2001) as one of the top 20 economies (15th in the world) and the best of the new EU states for ease of conducting business. It not only has modern banking and financial systems but offers excellent infrastructures, four airports and the best highways in the Baltics. As a full member of NATO and EU (it expects to become a member of the European Monetary Union in 2007), it has pursued a stable and effective monetary policy. In addition, it is the least expensive country in which to conduct business of the new EU-10 states with Pricerunner reporting that it is the least expensive country in Europe (Pricerunner, 2004). All of these factors create an attractive business environment for various multinational participation strategies. The Lithuanian Ministry of Economy states that “the estimated direct foreign investments (FDI) as of October 2005 accounted for LTL 18.2 billion and increased by 18.6% during the year (compared with 1 October 2004)” (Lithuanian Ministry of Economy, 2006).

The transition process, however, is not yet complete in Lithuania. As in many countries, they continue to struggle to implement basic reforms. One of the biggest areas of concern is in education. As these economies transition, they are negotiating three economic challenges that directly affect education. They are moving from: (1) centralized planned economies; (2) protected trade to global trade based on comparative advantage; and (3) mass production to customized, flexible production (Berryman, 2000).

Memorization of factual knowledge and following set procedures were determining factors in building and sustaining the planned economies. Educational systems and individual course offerings required State approval. They were not designed to respond to external economic, market and social forces.

On the other hand, free market systems require the ability to critically think, apply knowledge, deal with ambiguity, learn how to learn and create self-directed lifetime learning experiences. This skill set while necessary in flattened organizations that provide job rotation and team based environments was unheard of in the cradle to grave employment environment under the central planned systems.

With free market reforms and the potential explosion in the use of workplace teams in emerging economies like Lithuania, some change is taking place in these their educational systems (The World Bank Group, 2001). Private institutions have exponentially increased in Lithuania. Faculty from developed countries have been brought in to teach for short term or extended assignments, to design syllabi that focus on new skill sets and team based learning, and to prepare Lithuanian students for collaborative work with their western counterparts.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There is a growing interest in studying teams and team processes in Lithuania. Just as in the United States, however, there are few, if any, studies that have investigated attitudes about teamwork in Lithuania. Merkys, Žydžiūnaitė, Šaparnis, Urbonaitė-Šlyžiuvienė, and Dromantas (2006) provided a review of the literature which focuses on teamwork dimensions. They summarized that: (1) the aim of a team should be related to purposive, clear, detailed activity, reflect the direction of the organization, and motivate people; (2) the team is a system; (3)

networks within the context of a team which describe the relatively constant role of every team member in interaction between team members; and (4) teamwork results in higher quality of work and standards.

With the mixed results obtained from studies of student attitudes toward teamwork in the United States it is difficult to ascertain the effectiveness of teamwork training in U. S. higher education. And with the paucity of research in transition economies like Lithuania, it is virtually impossible to assess the potential synergies that could be generated by multinational work teams in both countries.

We designed this study to explore and compare student perceptions of teamwork in the United States and Lithuania. Specifically we were interested in knowing:

1. How satisfied students in both groups were with working in teams.
2. Whether they felt they learned more about teamwork as a result of their experiences.
3. Whether they believed they produced better outcomes working together than they would have if they had worked alone.

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

We surveyed college students from the United States and Lithuania – 151 undergraduate business students from a regional university in the southern United States and 95 undergraduate and graduate business students from an urban university in Lithuania. The mean age of the students in the United States was 22.6 years while the Lithuanian sample had mean age of 21.4 years. The United States sample was 60% male and 40% female while the Lithuanian sample consisted of 40% male and 60% female.

The survey was administered in English. The students from Lithuania were enrolled in a business school with an English language curriculum. Nevertheless, the survey was administered to East European students studying in the United States who recommended grammatical changes to reduce comprehension problems and response bias.

We developed two sets of survey items related to teamwork. The first set included two statements that used Pierce and Gardner's definition of teamwork as a "collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks and who share responsibility for outcomes," and "as a group consciously created to serve an organizational objective" (2002: 510). These items were included to assess students' understanding of the team concept.

The second set included statements that claim that teamwork can lead to three outcomes: (1) more, better and faster outputs, (2) satisfaction and willingness to work in teams in the future, and (3) learning and improvement of teamwork skills. Students were asked to respond to each of these statements using a 6-point Likert-type scale with the following descriptives: "strongly agree, disagree, disagree somewhat, agree somewhat, agree, strongly disagree." These items were meant to assess students' perceptions of the value of teamwork and their attitudes toward it.

The survey responses were grouped into two sample populations – one from the United States and another from Lithuania. We then determined the mean responses to each of the survey items for each sample. For the teamwork-related items, each response was assigned a value ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). We derived the means for each teamwork-related item for each of the samples and performed a t-test on each pair of item-means to determine if the differences between the samples were significant.

The results (shown in Table 1) suggested that the students from the United States and Lithuania were both in agreement with the concept that team members work toward common

Table 1**Means and T-Test Results for Survey Items Related to Teamwork**

Survey Items	Lithuania (Mean)	USA (Mean)	t-test (p- value)
A team is a group of individuals working together toward common goals.	5.57	5.56	.855
Team members have common tasks to perform and share responsibility for team outcomes.	4.96	5.05	.471
Teams can accomplish better outcomes than individuals working alone.	4.42	4.11	.046
Teams can accomplish more than individuals working alone.	4.84	4.08	.000
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Teams can accomplish better outcomes than individuals working alone.	4.42	4.11	.046
Teams can accomplish more than individuals working alone.	4.84	4.08	.000
Teams can solve problems faster than individuals working alone.	4.43	3.99	.008
Working in a team is more satisfying to me than working alone.	4.19	3.64	.001
My experience with teams makes me want to work in teams again.	4.23	3.91	.042
Working in a team improves my ability to work in teams in the future.	5.12	5.09	.822
Working in a team would allow me to learn new things.	4.89	4.75	.276

goals ($p=.855$) and have shared responsibility for outcomes ($p=.471$). They also agreed that they can improve ($p=.822$) and learn ($p=.276$) from teamwork.

Students from the United States and Lithuania, however, had significantly different views on the other outcomes of teamwork. U.S. students did not agree as strongly as their peers from Lithuania that teams produce better outcomes ($p=.046$), more outputs ($p=.000$) and solve problems faster ($p=.008$). The United States students also seemed to be less satisfied with the team experience ($p=.001$) and less willing to work with teams in the future ($p=.042$).

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results of this study suggest converging attitudes toward the pedagogical benefits of teamwork. However, there seems to be divergence between the two groups in their views on whether or not teams: (1) accomplish more than individuals working alone; (2) produce better outcomes than individual effort; and (3) create these outcomes faster than individuals working alone. There also appears to be divergence in the levels of satisfaction of the two groups regarding the teamwork experience and their willingness to work in teams in the future. With regard to the ability of teams to produce more and better outcomes faster, the U.S. sample had lower mean scores than the Lithuanian students. The U.S. group also had lower mean scores with regard to their satisfaction with group work and their desire to work in teams again. These scores seem to indicate that U.S. students have less positive attitudes about teamwork than the Lithuanian students.

Given the differences between the two groups, it is interesting to consider what is driving these divergent student attitudes. One answer could be that U.S. and Lithuanian students belong to societies that place different values on the need for collective effort.

Hofstede (1984) compared several national cultures in the degree to which individuals within a national culture needs to seek her identity through others – suggesting that national cultures characterized as having a low degree of individualism (or a high degree of collectivism) could be more comfortable with group processes. This dimension of culture has proved to be one of the more enduring of several developed by Hofstede in later studies that replicated his results (Sondergaard, 1994). Unfortunately, very few studies have treated the former republics of the Soviet Union as separate national cultures.

One such study by Straight (2004) surveyed U.S. nationals and Lithuanians who were either faculty members, staffers or students at a college in Lithuania. She found that the mean differences between the two samples were statistically significant. Although both U.S. and Lithuanian samples were characterized as individualistic, the U.S. sample scored higher on the individualism scale than the Lithuanian one. This could indicate that Lithuanians, as a group, tend to have a more favourable attitude toward teamwork.

If U.S. students belong to a society that value individualism, it is easy to understand how they could see the personal benefits they derive from teamwork but not necessarily appreciate the group outcomes that it can produce. The “learning” that they get from the teamwork experience does not necessarily mean that they are more willing to work in teams in the future. It could simply mean that they learn how to work within a team context.

The impact of societal culture, however, cannot be overestimated. Situational factors could also be at work. These Lithuanian students might have less experience with teams. They might still have more positive attitudes toward teamwork since this methodology was just introduced recently into the Lithuanian institution sampled in this study. Peslak (2005) found

that team emotions were more positive at the outset of a project and those emotions grew more negative over the course of the project. U.S. students, particularly business students, have much experience with teams and certainly recognize the benefits of teams. However, they might also be aware of the downside of working with others to accomplish their goals.

Another explanation may have to do with the type of team-building experience these students had during their education. The students in the Lithuanian University used in this study tended to form informal teams early on in their programs and teamed with their cohorts as long as possible through several classes. Because of this, students might have had a strong affiliation with the same group. One of the authors observed that student team members in Lithuania would almost never terminate someone from the group. The experience in the U.S. tends toward short-term groups. Teams rarely last more than one semester. Moreover, although students have many team experiences, this is likely to be with many different teams in different classes. This kind of experience may help shape the values of team members and ultimately influence their attitudes. In the U.S., both at the university level and in industry, the main emphasis and concern is about outputs or deliverables. Lithuanian students, by contrast, seemed to put more emphasis on nurturing affiliation with others. While this would not automatically translate into more positive attitudes about teamwork, it might account for some of the differences observed. If Lithuanian students have a strong affiliation with the group and long-term experience with the same individuals, that may affect their satisfaction and desire to continue working with each other.

CONCLUSION

This study confirmed what many studies with U. S. students have found in the past. While students recognize the need to work in teams and see it as a learning experience, they are also wary of its potential disadvantages. This finding was particularly significant when their attitudes were compared with those of students outside the U.S.—in this case, Lithuanian students. These differences could be the result of the cultural values in the two societies. Situational factors, however, could also explain these results. Such differences can ultimately affect student satisfaction and willingness to work in teams in the workplace.

Further research is needed to isolate the effects of each of these sets of factors. Whether or not such teamwork attitudes are due to cultural values, the results of this study suggest that students from societies with different cultural values could be developing different attitudes toward teamwork from their educational experiences. The challenge for U.S. and Lithuanian educators is to devise pedagogical tools to facilitate a positive teamwork experience among their students who will need to interact with each other in transnational teams in the workplace of the future.

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