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A STUDY OF THE COPING MECHANISMS ADOPTED BY WORK GROUPS TO
DEAL WITH PROJECT STRUCTURE

by

Katie R. Foster

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Business Administration)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2012

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Abstract

The structure of a project has a large impact on how an individual operates within a team. This study explores the issue of ambiguity and clarity in regard to project structure. A total of seventeen interviews were conducted with individual members of two teams to explore the role of ambiguity in differentially structured teams. Interviews identified challenges and coping mechanisms adopted by team members. Challenges faced by the standardized team centered on rigidity, standardization, and routines. Members adopted coping mechanisms to address these issues, including precise research, conformity for purposes of efficiency, and structured communication. Challenges faced by the non-standardized team centered on imprecise project nature, visionary objectives, intangible outcomes, and a flat model. Coping mechanisms adopted to address these issues included an open forum model, a focus on tangible outcomes, and a structured team hierarchy. Limitations to this study included the case study method and small sample size. Team leaders and managers can apply the results of this study to future teams in order to better empower their team members and achieve success.

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Introduction

Employees face an increasing amount of pressure to deal with a fast paced work environment. They are forced to quickly adapt working styles in order to deal with issues including team dynamics, role clarity and project structure, and must still effectively complete their project or task.

Research has noted that teamwork can be structured in different ways including special-purpose teams, also known as project teams, formed to address specific problems, improve work processes and enhance the overall quality of work (Mathis & Jackson, 2008). Projects can be structured in a variety of ways. One of those being an ill-structured project (Erhardt, 2011). These types of projects are generally based on the notion that they require individuals to speak up in the team and deploy creativity, as well as allowing room for individuals to take the project in a variety of directions. However, this type of structure has been shown to sometimes create more stress. This stress may result in various coping mechanisms including problem-focused coping strategies, emotion-focused strategies or physical techniques (Brown, 2011). Problem focused strategies allow for direct and proactive methods to be adopted, aimed at removing the stressor. Emotion-focused strategies center around reducing the negative psychological and emotional impacts (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Physical techniques can be shown in a study of employee-fitness programs as a method to reduce stress and therefore increase efficiency of employees (Falkenberg, 1987). This study, by Falkenberg, explored exercise as a coping mechanism, and how it has been shown to decrease the consequences of stressful situations.

Interestingly, research has generally ignored more structured teamwork. Yet structured problems may generate a different set of team member responses and coping mechanisms. Teams with set routines, clear processes, and detailed roles are expected to conduct their work using routines, agendas, and a focus on efficiency. The standardized work allows employees to understand their role within the team. However, this well-structured workflow has the potential for negative impacts in terms of very little creativity or lack of engagement on the part of team members (Mathis & Jackson, 2008).

Prior research has answered the question of how individuals cope with various stressful situations, including ambiguous problems or situations. However, it has not been explored to what extent structured problems induce different coping mechanisms for these team members. Further, little research has looked into how these mechanisms work into the identity of the team and establishing a team culture. Coping mechanisms are adopted in a variety of situations and settings; however, the adaptive behaviors that allow efficiency to prevail vary based on the situation or team structure. This study will show in a limited sample how two project-based teams are able to adapt to their team structure and complete their projects on time and with a determined level of success.

Conceptual Background

There have been a large number of studies conducted surrounding coping mechanisms in various scenarios, including those involving hospice volunteers, stressful life situations, as well as differentiating the coping strategies between problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies (Brown, 2011; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; e.g., Downey et al., 1990). The majority of these studies have used quantitative methods, including a

study to examine the impact associated with role conflict and ambiguity (Deluga, 2006). However, there has been surprisingly limited research that explores coping mechanisms within project teams and the link with the team's project structure. Project teams are defined as temporary entities that execute specialized time constrained tasks and then disband (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003). While coping mechanisms are adopted to deal with stressful situations, or in this case, ill-structured problems, they are also used to deal with the issues presented by structured problems. Adaptations to behavior in stressful situations are considered to be coping mechanisms; however, the type adopted will vary based on the structure of the problem.

Coping Mechanisms

Research has defined behaviors adopted as a response to different work contexts in a variety of different ways. For example, coping mechanisms have been defined as proactive behaviors adopted by individuals to deal with strain when they are confronted with environmental pressure or perceived threat from stressors (Kirk, 2011). Others have categorized coping strategies as problem-focused or emotion-focused (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused strategies are direct and proactive behaviors aimed at removing the stressors or reducing their impact. Emotion-focused strategies minimize the negative psychological and emotional effects. The present study focuses on problem-focused strategies, those that allow the employee to take proactive steps towards adopting coping mechanisms that are aimed at reducing the impact of the stressors.

The exploration of coping mechanisms using qualitative methods has been done in the context of hospice volunteers, and how they cope with their everyday work

(Brown, 2011). Coping mechanisms identified and discussed in this study included problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, meaning making through appraisal and physical techniques. The study identified that the most meaningful coping mechanism for these individuals was discussing what their feelings were with the volunteer coordinator.

The majority of research on coping mechanisms deals with the benefits that they have for individuals dealing with stressful life situations, especially situations involving loss such as the death of a family member or close friend (Downey, Silver & Wortman, 1990). This is not directly relevant to a workplace examination of coping mechanisms, but is essential in understanding coping mechanisms more generally. A recent study explored how changes in job demands may predict a variety of behaviors in individuals, including the use of absenteeism as a coping mechanism to deal with stressful job demands. A study of role clarity indicates that role ambiguity creates a level of psychological and physical stress for individuals (Ivancevich & Donnelly, 1974). Based on this, it can be understood that a level of ambiguity in project structure creates a certain amount of team ambiguity, thereby inflicting stress on the individuals within the team or within an organization. This identified level of stress and need for coping mechanisms would be particularly prevalent in ill-structured teamwork.

There has been a limited amount of research around coping mechanisms in the context of a team and how team members employ problem-focused coping strategies in order to deal with the stress surrounding the structure and nature of their given team and project. Coping mechanisms have typically been explored in terms of how stress or ambiguity impacts individuals and little literature is available on how these factors impact

teams. Certain levels of ambiguity have been shown to create a level of organizational stress, as well individual psychological and physical stress (Ivancevich & Donnelly, 1974). This type of stress will force individuals to seek out opportunities to adopt coping mechanisms or adapt behavior to achieve success. Similarly, they will force teams to seek out opportunities to reduce potential team stress.

A project that is ambiguous can generate a high level of stress, while one that is extremely structured can also induce stress on the team members. These structural factors can cause team members to adopt coping mechanisms to adjust and meet the needs of the team.

Ill-versus Well-Structured Problems

In well-structured problems, members are clearly presented with the necessary information and have convergent answers and existing single processes to address the problem (Simon, 1973). Research on ill- and well-structured problems suggests that framing a problem, and thereby, making it understandable allows members to prevent mistakes and avoid learning episodes, (Luscher & Lewis, 2008; Weick, 1993) events that could induce coping mechanisms. When the project is well-structured, it is perceived that the team can start taking more concrete steps toward achieving their goals more quickly. Well-structured problems consist of well-defined initial routines and a known goal. They are considered to have a preferred, prescribed solution process and call on a constrained knowledge base (Jonassen, 1997). The value of efficiency is high in a well-structured problem and the deployment of creativity is not as important to solving the problem.

Due to the lack of ambiguity in well-structured problems, research does not often associate them with stress or confusion. Interdependence is used to describe the working relationship between members of a team, described as the extent to which team members cooperate and work interactively with one another to complete tasks. (Stewart & Barrick, 2000). The focus on efficiency and high level of interdependence creates separate coping mechanisms and team member behaviors in order to achieve success. Research has shown that asking questions and understanding why a well-structured team is pursuing the structure they have is important to the success of the project (Jonassen, 1997). Literature has reviewed the idea of employee involvement, which is defined as a participative process that uses the input of employees and is intended to increase employee commitment to the organization's success (Judge & Robbins, 2007). Based on this idea, it is concluded that when employees feel they are involved in making decisions that impact them they will become more motivated to contribute. Adversely, if an employee is too structured they will become disengaged and lack enthusiasm for the project or organization. Also considered is the opportunity to perform— when challenges that constrain an employee and require a variance in behavior are absent, high levels of performance can be attributed to that absence. Even though an individual may be willing and capable of performing within a team, obstacles such as too much structure may constrain that performance (Judge & Robbins, 2007).

Ill-structured problems are defined as possessing multiple solutions, criteria for evaluating solutions, and a level of uncertainty about which concepts, rules, and principles are necessary for the solution (Jonassen, 1997). A problem can be considered ill-structured if the various actions that might be taken to modify the initial state are not

clear, and many possible actions have not yet even been formulated (Chi & Glaser, 1985). The need for multiple solutions and the lack of clarity in terms of the preferred solution allows those solving tasks within project teams to take a creative approach to their teamwork. The study has shown that the issues that are related to an ill-structured problem are the opposite of those within a well-structured problem and present a series of issues for an employees' ability to be successful that would not be true for a team with more structure and vice versa.

In a study of how children work via problem-based learning, it was found that several students initially experienced difficulties when dealing with ill-structured projects, but after discussing it openly were able to overcome the initial barrier and formulate meaningful problems for investigation. The ill-structured problem was able to stimulate their minds and lead to independent inquiry. They investigated outside of the boundaries of their typical studies (Chin & Chia, 2005). Their use of outside inquiry was valued as a coping mechanism to view the ill-structured technique as a classroom success.

Research has provided a significant amount of literature surrounding coping mechanisms in terms of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty. It has also explored coping mechanisms in terms of role ambiguity, resulting in disengagement and sometimes boredom. Research has also explored project-structure and has extensively defined ill-structured and well-structured projects. However, very little research has explored coping mechanisms in the context of teams. Further, very little research has explored coping mechanisms adopted by team members as a result of team structure. This case

study was designed to qualitatively explore these factors and to offer insight as well as a starting point for future research surrounding team coping mechanisms.

Methods

Research Setting

I adopted a qualitative case-based approach in order to explore how the structure of teamwork impacts the nature of coping mechanisms used by team members. Data were collected from two project teams at the mid-late stages of their teamwork. Each team had a formal leader as well as an executive sponsor. These cases were chosen based on a pre-determined set of criteria to fit the research question addressed in the study: both teams had to be project-based teams, with a clear beginning and end. My research was conducted at the mid-late stage of each team's progress. The basis of the two teams was the knowledge that they were both project-based initiatives (PBIs) with goals, one clear and one ambiguous.

The teams were selected for the study after a meeting with the executives of Company X in which sponsors of the projects identified their current teams and the structure of their projects. These teams were identified as being well into their team processes and being closer to completion than just beginning. This allowed me to explore how an individual had experienced these factors, rather than how they believed they would experience them.

The teams were composed of a variety of members from across the company that had relevant experience and understanding to improve and/or impact the team. They were chosen by the executive team to serve on the team for their applicable knowledge,

rather than familiarity with the company itself. Team members were asked questions in four categories, including general questions, as well questions relevant to job description, role ambiguity, and job empowerment. They were asked to identify what their role was on the team and who they believed the leader to be, aside from the identified leader. These questions served to identify the level of structure within the team hierarchy and related to job empowerment in terms of how the members felt they could speak up. They were asked to evaluate the interaction between the sponsor and the leader and the communication between the leader and the members of the group. The study explores how an individual can identify and cope with varying factors, how this can impact their perception of the team and ultimately their ability to be efficient or to offer innovative and creative opinions.

Team A was identified as having a highly formalized team structure and well-structured goal. It was a straight forward project with clear expectations and existing routines. The team was created with the objective to review, edit, and eventually implement updated policy and procedure manuals for credit practices, in order to maximize company opportunities and mitigate risks associated with extending credit to individuals and wholesale customers. The team was composed of the same membership for the entirety of their yearlong project. There were seven members on the team, including the executive sponsor, team leader, and general members. This team was composed of members who currently work in the credit department or had previously worked in a credit department, as well as one member who offered an outside perspective. They met bi-monthly with a set agenda, and each team member was partnered up and tasked with completing research on agenda items outside of team

meetings to be brought back to the next meeting. Changes to the policies were made in the meeting, with a structured schedule and high priority placed on checking off and completing agenda items.

Team B was identified as having a less formalized team structure and a more ill structured objective to allow for creativity and exploration. They were focusing on a new project that didn't have pre-existing routines. When it was originally created, Team B had a structured objective, and intended to create a model for an on-the-go food service kiosk for retail convenience store locations that were too small to house a full operation. It was composed of ten members that were chosen based on their experience in convenience retailing or food service. As the project began, the original objective adapted to focus on idea generation. The capital was not available to complete the original task, so the teams adjusted in order to ideologically prepare everything they need so that when the money was available they could immediately move ahead. The year became more exploratory, based on creative input from members. As the membership of the team changed, the executive sponsor controlled more of the meetings and a co-team leader set up was created in order to offer more structure through a team hierarchy.

Interviews

Seventeen interviews were conducted with all identified members of Team A and Team B, and company support staff. Meetings ranged in length from twenty to thirty minutes and included a variety of depth in answers. They were conducted in the form of open discussion and questions were offered based on answers, rather than a specific format. However, each candidate was asked the same core questions, with further

probing and follow-up questions used to gain more depth in answers. Candidates were asked to evaluate how they conducted themselves within the team and contributed to the team and why they believed this was valid or beneficial to the success of the team. Candidates were given the opportunity to offer their insights as to why or how the outcome they described was happening within their team and were asked to identify how they believed each identified factor impacted their success as well as the team's success.

Questions reflected what they had done in the past rather than asking them to assume what they would hypothetically do on the team. The resulting data was coded on the basis of the reflections being descriptive of the team, a challenge to the team, or a coping mechanism that the team employed. For each of these three categories data was further classified into four sub-categories. The four general sub-categories were nature of project, scope of discussions, scope of outcomes, and empowerment. Data coding was done using qualitative classification methods in order to categorize candidate responses. These were chosen based on the interview questions and consistency of responses across multiple candidates. Quotes were chosen that provided evidence of a consistent theme on the team rather than the observations or opinions of one individual member. Quotes were categorized as D, C or CM and sorted into a table (Table 1A-1B) based on characteristics. The category of descriptors was used to establish how team members perceived their team to be, rather than what the definition of the team was. Challenges were identified as things that could potentially inhibit the success of the team, and coping mechanisms were defined as those behavioral adaptations that still allowed the team to achieve success.

Team Overview

Both of the identified teams are project based initiative teams (PBI) with a goal that determines whether or not their PBI was successful. Success of the project was based on whether the executive sponsor believed that the team had produced something of value and whether or not they could move forward with the new year's projects, following the completion of this year's initiatives.

Both team member populations identified as team members, without clearly defined roles, but understand what skills they brought to the group that made their contributions worthwhile to the team's overall success. Team A was heavily focused on completing tasks and crossing them off their list of items. Team B was an exploratory group with the end goal of establishing a how-to, to achieve future goals and objectives that were necessary in order to move their department forward and create a sustainable brand identity for their convenience retailing division. Their pathway to success required team members to employ creativity. Both teams were identified by their sponsor as being successful. On Team A, success was attained through structural efficiencies, where as on Team B, success was attained through their lack of structure and high level of project creativity.

Results

Interviews identified six main coping mechanisms, three that were specific to each team. Coping Mechanisms on Team A were identified as precise research, on-task meetings, and structured communication as solutions to the challenges presented by their fact based project, lack of creativity, and very clear role structure. Coping mechanisms

on Team B were identified as an open forum model, tangible outcome focus, and a structured hierarchy as solutions to the big picture objective, idea generation focus, and pressure to have all members speak up. These mechanisms are further outlined in Table 1A-1B with supporting quotes. The identified coping mechanisms will be elaborated upon further below.

Table 1A:

Team A: Descriptors			
Nature of Project: <i>Precise</i>	Scope of Discussions: <i>Factual</i>	Scope of Outcomes: <i>Tangible</i>	Empowerment: <i>Hierarchy</i>
"There aren't written steps, but there is plan – procedures, policies & guidelines, we are going through each step by step – very methodical."	"It was all about processes and procedures. I have a thick book, full of all of the information that we were able to put together following the year, it was really a great result."	"Efficiency is valued more than creativity on the team, there are more team members, including team leaders, who believe this is true so the greater masses go in this direction."	"Everybody was free to just talk out, come up with ideas."
"We have a plan as to what we want to accomplish."	"The notes include just about every word said. By the time I get back to my desk the minutes are waiting for me. It shows you everybody's action items, and when we come back next time we are working from that, it was very organized."	"We have an agenda every week, we follow our agenda and have our tasks scheduled out for each week."	"No one has ever been made to feel like his or her suggestion wasn't beneficial."
"We're pretty formal."	"There is greater opportunity with credit than what our project is focusing on."		"I wouldn't say there was a lot of brainstorming. This group has a fair amount of delegation and checking off of completed tasks."

Team A: Challenges			
Nature of Project	Scope of Discussions: <i>Facts, Legalities</i>	Scope of Outcomes: <i>Lack of Creativity</i>	Empowerment: <i>Role Clarity</i>
"I would sometimes like to bring up an obscure idea, but because the response is never let's pursue that & see where it goes, I am stifled."	"My creativity is stifled."	"Efficiency is valued more than creativity on the team, there are more team members, including team leaders, who believe this is true so the greater masses go in this direction."	"I don't have the ability to take a new direction in the team."
	"Credit is so structured with law and what not, you really have to stay within the lines of that."		"I'd like my role to be potentially different but it's a challenge because I didn't design the team."

Team A: Coping Mechanisms			
Nature of Project	Scope of Discussions: <i>Precise Research</i>	Scope of Outcomes: <i>Stayed on Task, Conformity</i>	Empowerment: <i>Communication</i>
"We are accomplishing our plan, step by step."	"In this Project Based Initiative "you can't really have any cowboys" you have a step-by step for what you do in each situation."	"I think the structure was definitely the way to go. It was proven that it worked this year because we had a big PBI and we got a lot done."	""If someone were to talk to me about my goal, it would be done by the team leader. It would happen in the group setting -- the reason you are all here is to do this because there's several people in my role."
	"To deviate from that you have to talk to someone because you have to stay within the credit guidelines."	"It's easy when you have a group of people to get away from what we need to do, our leader was able to bring us back around and keep us on track."	"If two people had very different ideas, we would do the pros and cons of each and in the end it was what worked better."

Table 1B:

Team B: Descriptors			
Nature of Project: <i>Imprecise</i>	Scope of Discussions: <i>Visionary</i>	Scope of Outcomes: <i>Intangible</i>	Empowerment: <i>Self Managed</i>
"The idea was to bring all of the disciplines of food service knowledge together so that we could move ideas forward and brings things together that we normally wouldn't have."	"There was less structure to our goal; this was more of an exploratory project. "	"I feel we did get the outcome we were looking for because we were able to identify our needs and moved on it and this year we were able to move right out of the gate to act on issues."	"They're all experts in their field, so if we need someone to do something, I believe that they can make those decisions and come back and make presentations on what the database will look like or come back and say, "these are my ideas"
"Very micromanaged project with a highly defined goal, objective and outcome, and quickly realized that wasn't going to happen so we reshaped and readapted, a lot of creativity deployed to find how to capitalize on the synergy in the team to drive forward with the team."		"This is not a team where you are given a solid goal and everyone has solid roles and you just meet together to hit the end run. But in this type of team, the path is never really defined because how we get there is subjective to the artistic license of the thing."	"A little bit of a power struggle between the two co leaders."

Team B: Challenges			
Nature of Project: <i>Imprecise</i>	Scope of Discussions: Big Picture Objective	Scope of Outcomes: The objective is to generate ideas.	Empowerment: Everyone has a say.
"The product development portion of our team objective is extremely ambiguous."	"You are at a point and you understand where you want to be, but the path to get there is unclear."	"First half of the year the meetings were left to the control of the team lead. I don't like busy work, I like productivity, there needs to be tangible outcomes."	"There are co-leaders and it is not solely one person's responsibility to say we are going to do this."
"We have a program that is our livelihood and the goal of the project was to figure out where we were going to go with it."	"We were just getting the project off the ground, trying to make sense of who we want to be and what we want to become."	"The creative side came on what do we want this to be."	"Created a little ebb and flow."

Team B: Coping Mechanisms			
Nature of Project: More clarity would create greater results.	Scope of Discussions: Team Members need to just talk.	Scope of Outcomes: Make intangibles, tangible.	Empowerment: Everyone's voice is equally important.
"With more set goals and a more set timeline, the efficiency of the team would be improved."	"There was no structure, it was more of a throw it on the wall and see what sticks".	"Halfway through the year I took control of the meetings and somebody had to be the architect to say today we are covering these 4 items and stay on target."	"They're all experts in their field, so if we need someone to do something, I believe that they can make those decisions and come back and make presentations on what the database will look like or come back and say, "these are my ideas"
	"You have to deploy creative license to say how do we get there, but you also know what your end goal is."	"Once the project is clearly defined then it's about how to produce tangible outcomes. In 2011 we realized that what we thought was tangible, was now intangible so the creative process flowed all last year."	"But also caused them to bounce ideas off each other."

Team A:

Precise Research:

The scope of the work conducted by Team A pertained to credit practices, which focused their research and project work on factual research and definitive solutions rather than creative ones. The nature of this team had legal implications, which limited their creative work. If they were to deviate too greatly from their structure, they could have potentially jeopardized the team and organization in terms of legal consequences. Because of the nature of their department, a high level of regulation loomed over their team objectives. As one team member, Shannon, reflected:

“Credit is so structured with law and what not, you really have to stay within the lines of that. You can’t really have any cowboys, you have a step-by-step for what you do in each situation.”

While Shannon reflected on the implications of such a regulated team, change and innovation was still potentially possible within their group. As a solution to the legal challenges of the team, they conducted careful research to ensure that they were covered against legalities for each policy change. Because of this structure, the creativity of the team in an open discussion model was limited, often leading to an idea needing to be researched at length before the team could make a decision either way.

“To deviate from that, you have to talk to someone because you have to stay within the credit guidelines.”

Team A was regularly faced with the challenge of how to deal with the level of regulation that is necessary for their project and dictates the nature of their discussion.

As a solution to this, they adopted a method of outside research where they explored presented angles in a structured way and brought back the facts that they uncovered for the team to review. As team member Sarah reflected,

“If two people had very different ideas we would do the pros and cons of each and in the end it was what was better.”

This factually based style allowed for creative discussion, but as further interviews and discussion of coping mechanisms will show, while creativity was possible, it wasn't encouraged or implemented on the team because the risk to the team's efficiency was too great.

On Task, Conformity:

Team A dealt with the challenge of how to implement creativity into their highly structured project. The team structure and established hierarchy, along with the team culture that placed the majority of value on efficiency, and checking off tasks, stifled the ability of members to capitalize on their creativity. As team member Samantha reflected,

“I would sometimes like to bring up an obscure idea, but because the response is never, ‘let's pursue that and see where it goes’ I am stifled.”

The members of the team observed that in daily work they could make new suggestions or present ideas, but they still needed to accomplish the same tasks in the same time frame. Because of this, the innovative ideas that may take a much longer time to exhaust, were either quickly reviewed, passed over or not voiced, due to a desire to not

impact the speed and efficiency of the teamwork. As a solution to their stifled creativity, team members identified an ability to speak up when necessary, however emphasis on necessary and general team feeling towards efficiency having higher value, limited their creativity and kept them from speaking up.

Structured Communication:

The established team hierarchy influenced the team dynamics and the methods to complete everyday tasks. The team projects were secondary to the everyday job descriptions of the team. Each team member was identified for a set of skills or valuable knowledge that they could contribute to the team objective. Members of Team A were challenged with the level of role ambiguity that exists within their team. The roles on the team were generalized to executive sponsor, team leader and team member. As team member Samantha reflected,

“I’d like my role to be potentially different but it’s a challenge because I didn’t design the team.”

The extent to which the team leader communicated with the members of the team about their role was explored as a potential solution to the uncertainty around roles. The solution to the issues of role clarity on this team was communication about the expectations of individual roles. This allowed the team members to understand what was expected of them and how their contribution impacted the overall success of the team. At the beginning of the project, it was discussed with the team that they were all brought onto the team because of their current job, or because of skills they possessed from prior jobs that could be used to help this project. It was established that each of the team

members were expected to contribute on an equal level, to perform the tasks that were delegated to them at the end of each meeting, and to return with their research to report back to the team. As Stacey reflected:

“We follow our agenda every week, we have scheduled out what we need to do. By following the process you’re all on the same page.”

The team leader, Susie reflected:

“Everybody had a function, something they did from one meeting to the next. Meetings would start by discussing what was put out as tasks, whoever had that task would present it.”

Because this team was able to establish a level of understanding where each team member, regardless of the level of description in their role, understood why they were there and what was expected of them from meeting to meeting, they were able to move past the challenges that the lack of ambiguity presented and still remain efficient.

The members understood that the opinions of all members were valuable. Even if a member was not a veteran in the project department, team members knew that they were on the team for a specific skill set that was valuable to achieving the intended goal. Team members that weren't in the specified department may have more finely tuned skills in other areas. As team member Shannon reflected:

“There is a way you can write a letter to customers that they can understand. Part of the reason I am on this team is because when I don't

understand something, I ask and because I'm not a part of this department, I have the consumer perspective."

The sense of teamwork and team identity was strong within this team. Members may be from different departments, but didn't seem to identify as individuals, aside from when they are prompted to explore their role in the team. Members understood their external role, why they were pulled in to work on this team, but did not have an identified internal role. This promoted a sense of team, but also limited the creativity of the team because they had a limited amount of time to work as a team during the team meeting, and operated mostly on consensus and efficient processes.

Team B:

Originally Team B had a very clear and tangible objective. Creativity would need to be deployed in order to reach their goal in an efficient way, but there wasn't a large amount of variation in what they were looking to do. The interviews conducted with Team B revealed that the team had changed a lot and had become an exploratory, open-forum model team in order to establish a series of objectives that could be accomplished on a later project team. When they started the project they had intended to pursue one goal, but because of barriers to that, they had to readapt and realign their goal to brainstorm how to achieve their tasks in a new innovative way. Team B encountered challenges due to the imprecise nature of their project, idea generation focus, and the lack of hierarchy present on the team.

Open Forum Model:

In the convenience retailing industry, Team B was faced with the need to be innovative and to create a level of operational success. They understood as team members where they needed to be, but the steps to reach their goal were extremely ambiguous. As team member Eric, reflected,

“ We have a program that is our livelihood and the goal of the project was to figure out where we were going to go with it.”

As a solution to the need for creativity, mixed with the ambiguous nature of the project, Team B adopted an open-forum model. They took development suggestions as their team progressed and were able to work through them by bouncing ideas off of one another and seeing what the viable options were. Reflecting on the open forum model, Eric discussed the imprecise structure:

“There was no structure, it was more of a throw it on the wall and see what sticks.”

The objectives of Team B were intangible and therefore it was fairly difficult to establish measures of success. Because their team structure was an open model, they needed to focus on talking openly and producing starting points. It was essential to counteracting the challenging nature of their structure that the team understand this and talk openly about it.

Tangible Outcomes:

The challenges that Team B faced were all related to the structure of their team. Because they had an imprecise project, solutions they employed to counteract the ambiguity were potentially challenging to other aspects of the project. One of those challenges was the focus on idea generation as a way to reach their end goal. The creative end of the project was employed to decide what the team wanted the project to look like and what they wanted to do with their ambiguous objective.

As a solution the team needed to focus on how to make their intangible conversations relative to tangible goals. Team member Elizabeth reflected:

“At first the creative process was a larger component leading up to getting detailed in the approach, but then it becomes more about the task at hand and whether or not you’re fulfilling that task.”

The team needed to cover items and areas of interest in a way that employed their creative skills, but still needed to focus their efforts in order to control the scope of their creativity. Controlling their creativity would ensure that they didn’t end up losing sight of their objectives. The team had established a structure of open conversation, and placed value on what each member was able to contribute to the team. They spent the majority of their project group time bouncing ideas off one another and for that reason were not able to move as efficiently through their outcomes as they could have.

"They're all experts in their field, so if we need someone to do something, I believe that they can make those decisions and come back and make presentations."

This trust from the co-leader represented a sense of empowerment within the team, where they all had a valuable self worth. But it also represented each member's value in contributing to tangible outcomes.

This style promotes a great level of creativity within the team, but also presents the challenge of efficiency. As a solution to this, the team leaders and the executive sponsor needed to step in and direct the team to tangible outcomes. It was discussed that if they had provided even a little bit more structure, the team could have the potential to be more efficient.

Structured Hierarchy:

Team B was focused on an open-forum, on creating a model where members were free to openly present their creative opinions. Because of this there was very little hierarchy present and while a technical hierarchy was in place, it wasn't always recognized during the team meetings or executed in a typical way. The team was lead by an executive sponsor and also had two co-leaders. There was a lack of clarity as to which of those three members directed the discussions and often the open nature didn't require a leader. The lack of structure is present because as the executive sponsor, Evan, indicated:

"Team members are there for very specific reasons because they are key catalysts."

While this type of structure empowers the team members and they have a valuable contribution to make on the team and towards the team discussion, it also presents a challenge, as the discussion is continuous. The co-team leaders were not focusing the project as was necessary for the success and due to that, the executive sponsor felt it was time to intervene,

"Halfway through the year I took control of the meetings and somebody had to be the architect to say today we are covering these 4 items and stay on target."

A more structured, targeted approach was necessary in order to direct the team and reach a level of efficiency where they were moving past the discussion phase into what they were actually going to do with the ideas they had generated.

Discussion

Research surrounding coping mechanisms was found to be extensive, however there is currently a gap in the literature regarding how and what coping mechanisms are adopted in different types of teams. This study was designed to explore these factors using a case study method to analyze how team members are influenced by the structure of their project and how they adopt coping mechanisms in order to still achieve a level of success within their project.

When answering the question of what this study means in terms of teamwork, I found that members of Team A (well-structured) were regularly faced with rigidity with respect to how the work was actually carried out. Members of Team B (Ill-structured) were faced with too much ambiguity by not having enough guidance and clarity about

their work. Following these findings, I was able to establish that while neither team favored their extreme approach, Team B was able to achieve a level of success by implementing more structure into their team. Team A did not experiment with implementing creativity, but in the future could explore that option in order to create a more balanced team structure. Based on my interviews, I was able to conclude that the more balanced approach would be necessary for future or long-term success on teams.

This approach to team structure and team work established that coping mechanisms have been explored and thoroughly researched to the extent that they impact an ill-structured team or one with a level of ambiguity or uncertainty. It has been shown that this type of teamwork induces a need for adaptive behaviors and coping mechanisms. Through my field work I was able to conclude that as originally expected, a more structured team also induces the need for a number of coping mechanisms, and that they are different than those required for a more ambiguous team

Following the completion of the case study and data coding process, I was able to consider what practical implications the results had for the managers and executive team at Company X. One practical implication from my fieldwork is the importance of a manager to be aware of the status as well as the challenges and potential for confusion on an ill-structured team project. Because Team B was not able to implement for themselves a level of structure, the intervention of the executive sponsor was necessary for their eventual success. With a certain level of awareness, that issue could potentially have been identified earlier on in the process. Team A was faced with the challenge of how to implement creativity in a project team that was structured by legalities. Managers must also have a level of awareness for this issue and work with the teams to ensure that

members are not feeling stifled or a lack of empowerment and that they continue to engage in the project and feel invested in its success. Based on these factors I would recommend to managers implementing a discussion period, regardless of project structure, prior to the start of the project, that allowed for all members to feel that they have an empowered voice, without worrying that they were impacting the efficiency of the team. It would be a beneficial discussion time that allowed for all opinions to be voiced openly, and wouldn't impact structured team's efficiency or create the need for managerial intervention mid-way through an ambiguous team's progress.

Limitations

A limitation to the study was the limited number of interviews and relying on two teams working in one company. . Because I only conducted interviews with two teams, the scope of our outcomes was very narrow. With only seventeen interviews conducted between two project teams, it is important not to generalize outcomes too much as they are specific to the company studied and may not be true for future samples. Because of the limited timeframe of the project, there was limited opportunity for follow-up interviews and as the scope of the project and focus of research adapted, the study could have benefited from more detailed interviews. Further research should test the coping mechanisms identified here in a variety of different project contexts through quantitative means to further validate findings. Research should also explore the idea of team coping mechanisms and the extent to which they are considered or not considered to be team norms when they are proactive team member behaviors.

Conclusion

This paper addresses how individuals adapt their behavior to deal with their team structure in order to obtain a level of efficiency or creativity within the team. Based on this study I can conclude that the coping mechanisms adopted to deal with project-structure are different, depending on whether the team is ill- or well-structured and whether the focus of the team, is on creativity or efficiency. Further research should explore in greater detail the extent to which this is true and also explore coping mechanisms in a variety of contexts.

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Appendix A

APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH WITH HUMAN SUBJECTS
Protection of Human Subjects Review Board
114 Alumni Hall, 581-1498

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Katie Foster
EMAIL: Katie.foster@umit.maine.edu TELEPHONE: 207-991-1485
CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):
FACULTY SPONSOR (Required if PI is a student): Niclas Erhardt
TITLE OF PROJECT: Impact of Role Perception in Work Place Teams

START DATE: October 1st or as soon as IRB approves study PI DEPARTMENT: Honors College
MAILING ADDRESS:
FUNDING AGENCY (if any):
STATUS OF PI:

FACULTY/STAFF/GRADUATE/UNDERGRADUATE Undergraduate

- If PI is a student, is this research to be performed:

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	for an honors thesis/senior thesis/capstone?	<input type="checkbox"/>	for a master's thesis?
<input type="checkbox"/>	for a doctoral dissertation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	for a course project?
<input type="checkbox"/>	other (specify)		
- Does this application modify a previously approved project? N (Y/N).
If yes, please give assigned number (if known) of previously approved project:
- Is an expedited review requested? Y (Y/N).

SIGNATURES: All procedures performed under the project will be conducted by individuals qualified and legally entitled to do so. No deviation from the approved protocol will be undertaken without prior approval of the IRB.

Faculty Sponsors are responsible for oversight of research conducted by their students. By signing this application page, the Faculty Sponsor ensures that the conduct of such research will be in accordance with the University of Maine's Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research.

10/5/11
Date

Katie Foster
Principal Investigator

[Signature]
Faculty Sponsor

Co-Investigator

Co-Investigator

FOR IRB USE ONLY Application # 2011-00-04 Date received 10/5/2011 Review (F/E): E
Expedited Category: _____

ACTION TAKEN:

- Judged Exempt; category 2. Modifications required? Y (Y/N) Accepted (date) 10/27/2011
- Approved as submitted. Date of next review: by _____ . Degree of Risk: _____
- Approved pending modifications. Date of next review: by _____ . Degree of Risk: _____
- Modifications accepted (date): _____
- Not approved. (See attached statement.)
- Judged not research with human subjects

Date: 10/7/11

Chair's Signature: Cynthia A. Erdley

10/09

Appendix B

You are invited to participate in a research project conducted by Katie Foster, an undergraduate student in the Honors College and the Maine Business School at the University of Maine, and advised by Niclas Erhardt, a faculty member in the Maine Business School. The purpose of the research is to explore how working teams, composed of knowledge-based workers, deal with role ambiguity.

What will you be asked to do?

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to answer a variety of questions that will assess the level of clarity regarding what is expected of you in your job or position, referred to in this study as role ambiguity. You will be asked to evaluate how you believe this impacts your team success, and whether or not it impacts your personal success. You will be interviewed as an individual. The interviews will take place in a private conference room at RH Foster Energy, LLC. The interview will last approximately one hour. The interviews will be recorded using an audio recording only.

Questions will include but are not limited to:

Job Description:

- 1. Can you explain to me what you do in the team?*
- 2. Explain what your formal job description is and how this relates to your current job duties?*
- 3. Informal: Has the team leader spoken to you about you about your role on the team*

Risks

Except for your time and inconvenience, there are no risks to you from participating in this study.

Benefits

You may learn how your personal knowledge of your role, impacts the ability of your team to succeed given specific tasks.

This study may have no direct benefits to you, but we will learn how to better improve the practices within teams and will help us to learn more about the impact of role ambiguity.

Confidentiality

Your name will not be on any of the documents. A code number will be used to protect your identity. Data and audio recordings will be collected on the student's

personal computer, which is password protected. Your name or other identifying information will not be reported in any publications. The key linking your name to the data, along with the data, will be destroyed after data analysis is complete, in May 2012.

Voluntary

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at 207/ 991-1485, katrfoster@gmail.com. You may also reach the faculty advisor on this study at the University of Maine Business School 207/ 581-1968, niclas.erhardt@umit.maine.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Jones, Assistant to the University of Maine's Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, at 207/ 581-1498 (or e-mail gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu)

Appendix C

You are invited to participate in a research project conducted by Katie Foster, an undergraduate student in the Honors College and the Maine Business School at the University of Maine, and advised by Niclas Erhardt, a faculty member in the Maine Business School. The purpose of the research is to explore how working teams, composed of knowledge-based workers, deal with role ambiguity.

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time and the decision to stop will not impact effectiveness of the previously answered questions, if any. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

Interviews of individual members of two teams within the organization: one team contains a high level of role ambiguity; the other contains a low level of role ambiguity.

Specifically, it will delve into the conflictual tensions between role formalization, as a mode of allowing for clarity, and the importance of ambiguity, as a mode to allow for creativity and how employees within work teams develop mechanisms as to how they conduct their work in these two work conditions.

General & Introductory Questions:

You are being interviewed today as a member of Team (A or B), which I understand has been tasked to complete a project regarding (_____) can you tell me a little bit about what your team does?

What is your project about?

Is there a level of confusion on your team? Why do you think this exists? Are you confused about your role on the team? How do you gain clarity, if you do?

Job Description:

4. Can you explain to me what you do in the team?
5. Explain what your formal job description is and how this relates to your current job duties?
6. Informal: Has the team leader spoken to you about you about your role on the team

Probe based on:

- a. *This can provide a reveal if they do not have a job description? Why is this not defined? Is it necessary for the job itself? Why?*

Role Ambiguity:

“A lack of clarity about expected behavior from a job or position.”

1. Do you think role ambiguity exists within your team? **Do you think there is a lack of clarity about specific job duties, roles, or tasks on your team?**
 - a. If yes: To what extent is your unclear? How formalized is what you do within this team?

- b. Can you talk to me about the structure of your job? Do you feel like your job on this team is well structured?
 - c. How does this impact your ability to successfully do your job? Do you think that confusion inhibits team member efficiency?
 - d. Are there jobs on your team that are high priority? Are these more formalized?
 - e. Is there an established level of report for your team? Is there someone that checks in with you regularly?
2. Is the lack of clarity or lack of formalization on your team necessary for your project?
- Probe with:** allowing for creativity? Nature of the team project? What are the mechanisms that allow you to cope with this? Impact on success? How is this a risk of failure? Benefit to success?

Job Empowerment:

Difference between not feeling empowered on an ambiguous team & not feeling empowered on a formalized team.

- 1. To what extent is empowerment (e.g. take initiatives, decision making) encouraged in your job?
- 2. Do you feel that you have the ability to take a new direction with your tasks? Are you able to decide whether or not to follow through with something? How does this relate to your level of report?
 - a. If yes: please elaborate on how that happens? & why that happens?
 - b. If no: is there a reason why they don't empower you? Would it strengthen your contribution to the team? Are some team members more or less empowered?

Authors Biography

Katie R. Foster was raised in Hampden, Maine where she attended and graduated from Hampden Academy in 2008. She majored in Business Administration with a concentration in Management. She served as the Undergraduate Student Representative to the University of Maine System Board of Trustees for a two-year term. She also served on the University of Maine Presidential Search Committee as well as the University of Maine System Chancellor Search Committee. Katie is a sister of Alpha Phi Fraternity, where she was Chapter President, Vice President of Chapter Operations, a collegiate perspective blogger for Alpha Phi International and collegiate delegate to Alpha Phi's Committee on Leadership. Katie is passionate about the Alpha Phi Foundation and women's heart health.

Katie plans to pursue a dual degree program to earn her Master of Business Administration and Juris Doctorate. Her future ambitions include owning and managing her own clothing boutique.