Teamwork Approach:

An Investigation on Iranian Teamwork Attitudes

APPROCHE DE TRAVAIL D'ÉQUIPE:

UNE ENQUÊTE SUR LES ATTITUDES DE TRAVAIL D'ÉQUIPE IRANIENNES

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Abstract:

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to address the main problems in Iranian working teams and study the Iranian teamwork attitudes.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors have examined several factors which affect teamwork performance. Besides, the Iranians attitudes and approaches in teamwork have been discussed and analyzed. Moreover, using Hofstede cultural dimensions, the teamwork characteristics of Iranians have been further discussed and compared with other countries in terms of cultural perspectives.

Findings – Most common Iranian Teamwork Problems and Conflicts, as well their symptoms, results, and suggestions to resolve them have been discussed in the paper.

Originality/value – The authors found out that the Hofstede's studies about different cultural dimensions cannot explain the teamwork performance level of different countries. Rather, there are other factors such as the work environment which affect the quality of teamwork.

Keywords: Teamwork; Iranian culture; Virtual teams; Team performance

Résumé:

Objectif - L'objectif de cet article est de résoudre les problèmes principaux des équipes de travail iraniennes et d'étudier les attitudes de travail d'équipe iraniennes.

Conception / méthodologie / approche - Les auteurs ont examiné plusieurs facteurs qui affectent la performance de travail d'équipe. De plus, les attitudes des Iraniens et les approches dans le travail d'équipe ont été discutées et analysées. En outre, en utilisant les dimensions culturelles de Hofstede, les caractéristiques du travail

d'équipe des iraniens ont été étudiées davantage et comparées avec d'autres pays en termes de perspectives culturelles.

Résultats - La plupart des problèmes communs et des conflits de travail d'équipe iraniens, ainsi que leurs symptômes, les résultats et les suggestions pour les résoudre ont été discutés dans l'article.

Originalité / valeur - Les auteurs ont constaté que les études de Hofstede sur les différentes dimensions culturelles ne pouvaient pas expliquer le niveau de performance de travail d'équipe des différents pays. Au contraire, il existe d'autres facteurs, tel que l'environnement de travail, qui affectent la qualité de travail d'équipe.

Mots-clés: travail d'équipe, culture iranienne, équipes virtuelles, performance de l'équipe

INTRODUCTION

In today's organizations, there is a significant attention to doing works in teams, because it is strongly believed that through cooperation and collaboration of team members, the synergy of their thoughts and skills, and the diversity of team members, the result will be much greater.

Indeed, working teams have been regarded as an essential structural form to achieve business objectives in the organizations (Sundstrom et al., 1990) as each member will contribute toward realizing the team goals. Of course, adequate amount of effort and time from each team member is required to complete tasks successfully in the teams (Hackman, 1987).

A team comprises a group of people with a common purpose which work together physically or virtually in order to perform a clear task. A work team consists of a "collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks, who share responsibility for outcomes, who see themselves and who are seen by others as an intact social entity embedded in one or more larger social systems, and who manage their relationship across organizational boundaries" (Cohen and Bailey, 1997). However, the extent to which the benefits of teamwork are realized is dependent on many influences at the individual and group level (Cohen and Bailey, 1997; Mohrman et al., 1995).

There are different factors affecting the performance of teams, including team size, team members' background and culture, proper communication among team members, and etc. It is believed that for teams consisting of members with prior mutual collaboration and work experience, a differing set of communications requirements and structures are needed in comparison with teams with non-familiar team members (DeLuca and Valacich, 2006).

Moving from physical team to virtual teams

The latter part of the twentieth century has provided a dramatic change in work team structures by moving from centralized, collocated teams to decentralized or dispersed teams (Haywood, 1998; Henry and Hartzler, 1997). Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have contributed greatly to shifting the arrangement of team membership beyond the physical and geographical boundaries of the workplace (Ahuja and Carley, 1999) which has resulted in the emergence of work groups that have been termed virtual teams: groups of geographically, organizationally, and/or time dispersed individuals brought together by information and telecommunication technologies to accomplish a common goal.

A virtual team is an evolutionary form of a network organization (Miles and Snow, 1986). They are groups of people working on interdependent tasks, geographically distributed, conduct their core work mainly through an electronic medium (a) and share responsibility for team outcomes (Horwitz et al., 2006).

However, the success of virtual teams performing complex tasks (Davidson, 2000; DeLuca et al., 2006; Kruempel, 2000; Kock and DeLuca, 2006; Majchrzak et al., 2000; Maznevski and Chudoba, 2000;

Miranda and Saunders, 2003; Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997; Ocker et al., 1998; Robey et al., 2000; Yates and Orlikowski, 1992) contradicts its central tenets and thus requires a new explanation. Consequently, researchers have looked for an alternative theoretical lens to understand the interplay of teams and communication media, particularly when attempting to solve business problems with little or no face-to-face communication (Weber, 2002).

Although communications are made easier through virtual; communications, managing and evaluating team members is more difficult in virtual settings; it is presumed easier to detect team members who are not "pulling their weight" in collocated teams (DeSanctis and Monge, 2000).

Iran

The word "Iran" was used as early as the third century BC by a ruler who used to name his empire as Iran-shahr and himself as the "King of Kings" (Daniel, 2001). Nowadays, Iran is known as an important country in the Middle East with a very rich and ancient cultural heritage. Much of what is known about the country is based on superficial and biased image of media and/or unreliable sources. Even so, Iran represents an important country (Yeganeh and Su, 2007).

With a relatively large population and with one of the world's largest oil and gas reserves, Iran is considered an important regional economy. Iran also possesses enormous mineral resources, including coal, copper, iron, zinc and gold, much of which has to be developed. Iran's economy is a mixture of central planning, state ownership of oil, large enterprises, village agriculture, small-scale private trading and service ventures. All large industries and the majority of medium-scale enterprises are run by the public institutions particularly the foundations which were set up during the revolution. These entities own some 20 percent of the country's assets, and contribute 10 percent of GDP (Khajehpour, 2000), however, they are generally mismanaged.

Cultural perspective of teamwork

The term culture has been widely used in different social sciences including anthropology, sociology, psychology, etc.; hence, it has different definitions based on the field of study (Groeschl and Doherty, 2000).

Shein (1992) defines culture as "A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems".

As pointed out earlier, culture of teamwork among the team members plays an important role in the success or failure of teams. There is a great number of evidence that culture has considerable influence on managers' decision makings and how they undertake their tasks (Yeganeh and Su, 2007).

Hofstede (2003) developed cultural dimensions and typologies for classifying and differentiating countries across the globe which included:

- Power Distance
- Individualism
- Masculinity
- Uncertainty Avoidance
- Long-Term Orientation

Individualism is an important factor studying the culture of teamwork, comparing to its opposite, collectivism, that is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. On the individualist side we find societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family. On the collectivist side, we find societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families (with uncles, aunts and grandparents) which continue protecting them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. The word 'collectivism' in this sense has no political meaning: it refers to the group, not to the state. Again,

the issue addressed by this dimension is an extremely fundamental one, regarding all societies in the world.

Hofstede studies (2003) compare countries on the five above-mentioned dimensions. The following table compares Iranians Individualism attitude with those of some selected countries.

Table 1: Individualism (Hosfstede, 2003)

Country	Power Distance	Individualism	Masculinity	Uncertainty Avoidance	Long-Term Orientation
Bangladesh *	80	20	55	60	40
Canada	39	80	52	48	23
China *	80	20	66	30	118
Germany	35	67	66	65	31
India	77	48	56	40	61
Iran	58	41	43	59	
Japan	54	46	95	92	80
Malaysia	104	26	50	36	
Russia *	93	39	36	95	
Turkey	66	37	45	85	
United Kingdom	35	89	66	35	25
United States	40	91	62	46	29

* Estimated values

But the question is that if countries are indeed culturally distinguishable, can they usefully be compared against each other? Or are they of different types and cannot be easily compared to each other?

If we extract and compare the data for both Iran and Japan according to Hofstede's cultural dimensions model, we can illustrate figure 2.
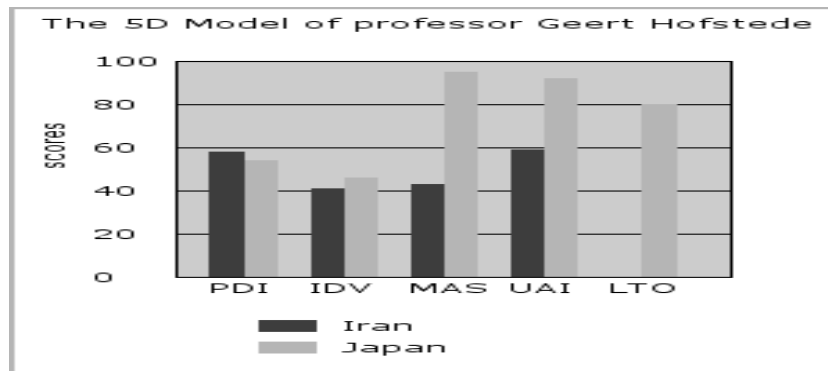

Figure 1: Iran vs. Japan

PDI   *Power Distance Index*
IDV   *Individualism*
MAS   *Masculinity*
UAI   *Uncertainty Avoidance Index*
LTO   *Long-Term Orientation*

The IDV represents the individualism score. The figure says that Iranians have more tendencies toward teamwork, in comparison with Japanese. However, although Iranians have a higher collectivism

tendency according to Hofstede studies, Japanese teamwork performance is far greater than Iranians'.

Besides, the different cultural dimensions score for Iran and America is somehow similar (Fig. 3), while we know that American teamwork is stronger than that of Iranians'.
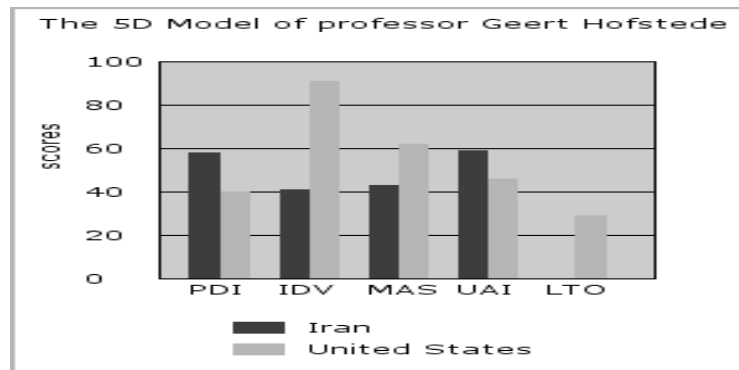

Figure 2: Iran vs. USA

It seems that we cannot conclude from the individualism score of Hofstede studies about the performance of the teamwork, because there is no direct relationship between this criteria and the level of teamwork performance.

However, it may be concluded that teamwork should be learned and can be enhanced through education and proper working environment. Therefore, we can see Americans and Japanese have enhanced their teamwork through gaining necessary skills for teamwork, and preparing a good collaborative environment.

A good example of this is the Iranians who travel abroad and are very successful members of their teams there, while they do not perform that well when they are working in teams in their own country. Actually, these Iranians learn necessary teamwork skills (i.e. good listening, effective communication, conflict management, etc.) within the teamwork environment of such countries.

Iranians approaches toward teamwork

It is believed that Iranians are not much into team working and are less successful in the team work activities compared to many other countries; something that has been pointed out by some other researchers as well (e.g. Bikmoradi et al., 2009; Farani et al., 2008). There are several reasons for this. The following is an investigation on the most important factors resulting in poor teamwork among Iranians.

The fundamental criterion for assigning persons to different job positions in Iran is mostly trust. This is mainly because managers do not want to put their time to control the team members, or do not have proper controlling methods. Therefore, they try to choose people in whom they have full trust, to undertake the responsibility of works. However, although trust is an important character of team members, it alone cannot guarantee successful team results; because the leader should control a group of people, and therefore, requires not only ethical qualifications, but also scientific and managerial capabilities. On the other hand, the mechanism for team evaluation in Iranian teams is not defined well, and there is often no method for rewarding good performance. This will result in less motivation from team members.

While all team members should have a clear understanding about the team's goals and vision, many of team members, due to poor communication within the team or lack of communication skills, are not aware of team objectives. Besides, Team coordinator should check to see that team objectives are the same with organization strategy. In many cases, the firm goals and objectives are not clear to the team leader, and especially for key members.

Organizational culture can also facilitate teamwork to members to a great extent, which unfortunately,

Iranian organizational culture is more focused on individual works, rather than team collaboration.

Unfortunately, Team leader (coordinator) selection is not based on competencies and qualifications. The team leader is merely selected by a decision from the top management, while in dynamic and mature organizations; team members preferably The team leader more than managerial skills should have the following capabilities and characteristics, apart from his/her managerial skills:

- o Initiation
- o Mentoring
- o Trusting his/her team members
- o Closing

Team leader should have acquaintance with problem-solving methodologies and results-oriented approach. He should be selected according to his competencies and merits. Dehghanan (2006) considers merit-based management as a coherent and harmonic approach to managing human capitals in the organization in the long term.

Team leader should regularly holds internal meetings to listen to team members and their concerns, and to keep team members updated about the work progress. However, the meetings should be so planned that only the key responsible and related persons attend the meeting, because otherwise, it is a waste of a time from others who are not familiar with or related to the issue to attend such a meeting.

While conflict management skills are important determinant of group process and performance (Baron, 1989; Putnam, 1986; Schweiger et al., 1989; Thomas, 1992; Van de Vliert and De Dreu, 1994), it seems that Iranian team works lack a mediator who can calm everyone down and find a logical solution for many of such conflicts.

Iranian team leaders normally try to have very rigid and under-control management. However, it should be allowed that the internal relationships are formed naturally within the team. There should be no fear from storming phase, however, it should be tried to facilitate the process and shorten the forming and storming phases.

Table 2: Most common Iranian Teamwork Problems/Conflicts, their symptoms and results

No.	Problem /Conflict	Symptoms	Results
1	Weak team performance	- Interference in responsibilities - Poor work outcome - Reworks within the system - Behavioral conflicts	- Lower productivity - Delay in projects phases
2	Communicational problems	- Behavioral conflicts - Team members too much disagree with each other - Problems are raised in discussions but never are clearly communicated	- Delay in projects phases - Weak performance of team personnel - Un-matched personnel
3	Lack of resources	- Incomplete or un-started tasks - Poor work outcome	- Lower productivity - Delay in projects phases
4	Difficulties in decision-making	- Behavioral conflicts	- Lower productivity
5	Limited support of top management	- Lack of supports of different types to the team	- Delay in projects phases - Weak performance of team personnel
6	Unclear and vague goals	- Un-disciplined set of works - Too much non-working discussions	- Deviation from main team goals - Weak performance of team personnel

A clear job description and job qualifications for each teamwork position should be identified and

members should be selected according to the required qualifications needed for the position. Otherwise, there is a concern that the team coordinator may over-estimate or under-estimate the required skills of the team member, which will result in poor team performance. Because, if a very skilled person is assigned to a very simple task, he will lose his motivation and gradually becomes less productive; while if a less skilled person is assigned to a very precise work, he will not have a proper performance and affects the total quality of work. Unfortunately, in Iran team selection is mostly done according to the preferences of the coordinator, and less according to team merit, volunteer willingness of people.

There is also one basic reason for the weakness of teamwork performance in Iran; Teamwork skills are not provided from the early school years (i.e. elementary school). However, if teamwork is taught to the children through interesting simple activities from early school years, this will become a social reality for them (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

Table 3: Reasons of the most common Iranian Teamwork Problems/Conflicts, and the suggested solutions

No.	Problem/Conflict	Reasons	Solution
1	Weak team performance	- Un-skilled Team coordinator - Unfair distribution of roles and responsibilities - Lack of responsibility sharing -Working more as a group of people who are just working beside each other, and not necessarily working as a team and all determined to reach team goals	- Assigning charismatic and/or skilled persons as the team coordinator and leader - Educating the skills of teamwork to the team members - Enhancing teamwork culture
2	Communicational problems	- Lack of sufficient teamwork skills - Diversity of team members background	- Educating the culture of teamwork to the team members - Enhancing teamwork culture
3	Lack of resources	- Weak resource planning & management - Wrong assigning of personnel to different team roles	- Reviewing team resources - Re-plan resources - Add to resources
4	Difficulties in decision-making	- Focusing on personal views	- Receiving others' feedbacks - Becoming a good listener - Respecting others' views
5	Limited support of top management	- Lack of trust to team coordinator and/or members - Disbelief in teamwork and its results	- To provide top management with regular reports and presentations about teamwork progress - Involving top management in the decision making process - Receiving top management feedbacks
6	Unclear and vague goals	- Weak planning - Weak managerial skills of team coordinator	- Deviation from main team goals - Weak performance of team personnel

While team members should have the characteristics and capabilities so that they can cover all team requirements; in Iran, many of the teams ignore this important fact. This results in poor team performance. It can be illustrated this way that teamwork can be seen as a multiple of skills. If all team members are skilled (means 1), but only one of them is not well skilled (means 0.5), the multiple (means total team performance) will become 0.5 as it is believed that output of teamwork has a multiple format rather than having a cumulative format $(1 * 1 * 1 * \dots * 0.5 * \dots 1 * 1 = 0.5)$.

In any team, it is necessary to sometimes bring in new fresh team members, instead of always looking for experienced old personnel; because, although experienced people can do a work more precisely, but using fresh resources makes the team life cycle longer, and helps to inject fresh up-to-date information to the soul of team. However, in many Iranian teams that an old experienced person is preferred to a fresh young person.

Too realistic rules and too limited goals and manuals, can deviate the team from its progress and success path.

There are several reasons for this which have been introduced and discussed in tables 1 and 2. Besides, the suggested approaches to resolve the mentioned problems and conflicts have also been stated.

CONCLUSION

Teamwork is very important in today's organizations as it can increase work performance and result in better outcomes, however, for any team to be successful, there are key factors which should be considered, including team members, their attitudes, responsibility sharing, and etc.

Besides, using Hofstede cultural dimensions, the teamwork characteristics of Iranians have been discussed and compared with other countries in terms of cultural perspectives.

The research findings show that Hofstede cultural dimensions cannot justify the performance of Iranian team works' performance in general. This is mainly because teamwork should be learned and can be enhanced through education and proper working environment. That's why Iranians' performance in team work with good mutual understanding, proper direction and professional interactions are quite acceptable; however, their performance in local teams is not that good.

Moreover, in this article, the most common Iranian Teamwork Problems and Conflicts, and their symptoms and results have been examined and suggests based on author's extensive years of experience in teamwork and working in groups have been provided.

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