Vicarious Team Learning

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A Tale of Two Kinds of Teams

• Drug development at ‘Pharma Corporation’
  • Two subsidiaries: Alpha and Beta
    • Very different organizations: legacy of recent merger
    • 3 project teams per subsidiary
      • Each set of teams constitutes a chronological sequence

• Characteristics
  • Organizational experience
    • Prior experience of technology in subsidiary: Beta > Alpha
  • Team member experience
    • Team members’ industry experience: Beta > Alpha
    • Members with prior experience of technology: Beta > Alpha

Which teams performed better?
A Tale of Teams of Two Kinds (Cont.)

Performance

Alpha Team 1

Beta Team 1

Alpha Team 2

Beta Team 2

Alpha Team 3

Beta Team 3

Time
The teams at Alpha engaged in...

Vicarious team learning

“the process by which teams learn from the experiences of others outside the team itself”

Involves multiple...

– Sources
  • Members of past teams, other internal experts, external experts, post mortem reports, etc.

– Kinds of knowledge
  • Information v. know-how, technical v. process, ‘know-who’
Enablers of Vicarious Team Learning

- Supportive organizational context
  - Structure
    - Support for external information needs, e.g. short-term supporting team members
  - Procedures
    - Procedures and norms that encourage team members to be entrepreneurial in fulfilling external information needs
  - Information system
    - ‘Know-who’-databases
    - Post-mortem reports in the form of short concise points of learning
- When the organizational context is supportive teams can leverage the experiences gained by past project teams

Large Sample Study: Research Questions

- What is the relationship between vicarious team learning behavior and performance?
- What are the conditions under which vicarious team learning behavior occurs?
- Is vicarious team learning behavior a legitimate group-level construct?
Preliminary Findings

- Data collection in progress: 29 teams in 5 organizations
- Negotiations under way with 5 additional firms
- Analysis based on 14 teams in 3 organizations giving encouraging results
- More data needed….
  - Product development teams or equivalent, that are…
  - Dependent on external sources of expertise in order to complete their task successfully
  - 1 short interview with team leader or equivalent (20 min)
  - 3 short questionnaires per team (10 min each)

Aerospace PD sample would validate/extend pharmaceuticals findings in the LAI context
Appendix
Exploratory Study (Cont.): A Process Model of Vicarious Learning

• How is this different from existing models of team learning?

• How is this different from boundary-spanning?
Quotes from the teams of **Alpha**:

“You quite often ask people from previous teams to give presentations... to get involved in a workshop to share their experiences.”

“And with the last project we structured the go/no go situation with a milestone payment based on the results of the toxicity study from [the team that worked on a similar molecule before us]”.

“**AlphaOne** was the first project based on a lead [of that therapeutic class]. Mistakes were made, lessons were learned, which were then applied in AlphaTwo and AlphaThree.”
Exploratory Study (Cont.): The Case of Beta

Quotes from the teams of **Beta**:

“We were constantly re-inventing the wheel. It was very tiring.”

“On one hand, I had to go through all the documents and come up with an intelligent assessment in ten days. On the other hand, to go out there to search for all the other information I needed to make an intelligent assessment would have taken me a month... Some support would have been nice.”

“We didn’t have anywhere to go for feedback... It was very frustrating.”
Large Sample Study (Cont.): Hypotheses

**Hypothesis 1:** Vicarious team learning behavior in project teams is positively associated with performance.

**Hypothesis 2:** Organizational level experience of similar projects is positively associated with vicarious learning, but only if organizational context is supportive.