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Cultural Acumen: Wolves and Sheep

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“I was wondering what I would write about for my next culture column, but I have found my topic.” These are words that I wrote on LinkedIn after inadvertently becoming involved in a disagreement over a silly, little thing...I had an exchange with someone about one of those pseudo-motivational photos that have an inane question typed over the image. You know, the ones that are marginally acceptable for LinkedIn and would probably be better suited for Facebook, to which I don't belong.

This psycho-babel leadership tidbit exposed that it was better to be a wolf than a sheep. The main subject of the photograph was a beautiful, but fierce looking wolf. The wolf was snarling, as it stood proudly among the other wolves. Upon further inspection, it was unclear if the wolf was fighting for its life or had already won the battle. So, why was this a good example? I would not want to work for a wolf and I am certainly not a sheep. I found the symbolism to be troubling.

What kind of culture exists in an organization where your boss is a wolf? I would wager that there is a pervasive lack of trust, cooperation, and employee engagement. Such an organizational culture is summed up by its use of social capital. Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998) defined social capital as, “the sum of actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit” (p. 243). Chang (2017) studied the relationship between intragroup conflict and social capital in teams. His central theory is that there is a strong relationship between conflict and social capital within cross-functional teams.

For Chang, the *structural dimension* of social capital describes the extent to which there is social interaction that supports the flow of information. While, in contrast, the *relational dimension* of social capital is concerned with the quality of relationships among team members: Is there trust? In the context of social capitalism, trust can be thought of as how much confidence team members have in each other's motives. Finally, the *cognitive dimension* of social capital is focused on meaningful communication among members and reflects the shared meaning of values and goals of the team. Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998) said that cognitive social capital draws upon the shared language and narratives used to create understanding.

However, there are times when team members in competitive organizations are verbally aggressive. They intentionally interrupt one another speaking. They are poor listeners whose impatience hinders the exchange information. Members employed aggressive tactics to address other members, such as using harsh language, speaking ill of others behind their backs. Think of wolves fighting each other for scraps.

I won't go into the details of the methodology of Chang's study, but it was a longitudinal study that took place in a firm with a challenging cultural environment. Chang observed and surveyed over 500 team members over a two-year period. Broadly speaking, the results of Chang's study revealed that task conflict promoted structural social capital and that intergroup conflict is detrimental to the development of cognitive social capital. Chang noted that team leaders were expected to control the level of disagreement among team members because leaders who have teams with open conflict are viewed as being incapable of leading. The result of such behavior, Chang noted, is that these leaders were likely to pay too much attention to maintaining harmony, so they inadvertently stifled the free-flow of ideas that stem open discussions. Chang stated that there was frustration with the lack of innovation. It is quickly worth noting, this is also a problem in western countries, where Jehn et al. (2008) found that all types of conflict were negatively associated with the trust, respect, and cohesiveness.

So, back to the wolves and the sheep...The person that I had the negative exchange with runs his own company. I don't know how many people he employs, but I cannot help but think about how horrible the organizational culture there must be. In my vision, leading people is about helping the people who work with you find and grow their better selves. It is about helping them be more productive contributors. Being a leader should not be about asserting your own authority. This exchange left a bad taste in my mouth; so much so that I decided to break the link. This exchange was a clear indicator that this is not the type of person with which I would like to associate.

BTW, there is a third option; I said that I would be a sheep dog. Sheep dog keeps the sheep safe, while leading the sheep to greener pastures. At the same time, the sheep dog keeps the wolves away. ;-)

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Note: The views expressed in this column are my own personal views.

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