

If I Share What I Know, Will You Listen? The Role of Personality and Rewards in Information Sharing and Group Decision Making

Janice Francis Super
Murray State University

Pingshu Li
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Ghadir Ishqaidef
California State University, Chico

James P. Guthrie
University of Kansas

Abstract

The authors examine underlying motivations for individuals to share information during a group decision making exercise. Focusing on two specific types of motivation: epistemic and prosocial, the study looks at both innate tendencies towards information sharing and the effect of a particular situational cue: group performance-based pay. Using a model called “Motivated Information Processing in Groups” (MIPG), the study examines the effect of group rewards on individual motivations to share unique information (prosocial motivations), as well the groups’ overall motivation to listen, consider, and deeply process that information (epistemic motivations). The authors find that, while some people are innately prone to sharing information and cooperating with others, group performance-based pay can act as a “substitute”; thereby spurring less cooperative and less interested people to effectively participate in the group decision making process. Implications from the study suggest that managers can either a) carefully construct the composition of decision-making teams or b) structure situational cues, such as reward packages, in such a way to encourage and facilitate optimal group decision making outcomes.

“Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence wins championships.”¹
Michael Jordan, Retired American Professional Basketball Player

At first blush, group decision making should be a simple process: two or more people come together in a meeting of the minds; each person shares, without reservation, everything that he or she knows; and this information is met with dignity and respect as the group mulls over various options. In the end, the group, working together, with efficiency and openness, selects the one option that is acceptable and fair to all. However, in reality, group decision making is a complex social interaction. As humans, our willingness to share information is contingent on several factors. For example, how do we feel about the people with whom we are working? Are they friend or are they foe? Will we benefit from this exchange, or will we suffer harm? On the other hand, as group members, will we listen to our colleagues? Will we, with open minds, carefully and thoughtfully examine all evidence before forming a conclusion? Experience, together with research findings, suggests “no,” and we are trying to understand why.

Economists have long considered decision making to be a rational activity, whereby individuals have access to complete and perfect information, and then make the one, best choice that maximizes their outcome. Recognizing that human decision making is, at its best, an inherently flawed process, renowned scholars from Herbert Simon to Richard Thaler have identified constraints that, all too often, result in sub-optimal outcomes. People are not machines, we do not have unlimited cognitive processing powers, we do not have perfect information or unlimited time, we are subject to irrational fears and impulses, and we often make choices that work against our own best interests.²

To further complicate the picture, we are often reliant on others to help in the decision making process. In the current knowledge-based economy, work has become far too complex for a single individual to be able to achieve much on his or her own. It is only with others that we can effectively solve problems, nurture creativity and innovation, and leverage diverse perspectives into superior products and services. This reliance on group work has become so pervasive that teams are often considered the building blocks of today’s organizations. However, as dependent as we are on other people’s knowledge and abilities, evidence suggests that individuals in a group setting often have an alarming inability to effectively share unique information. Moreover, to compound the problem, groups seem to be unable to effectively process that unique information once it is shared. Put simply,

If I Share What I Know, Will You Listen?

as group members, we are often reluctant to share what we know, whether through selfishness or an inability to recognize our knowledge as valuable. Then, when we do share unique information, the group is often dismissive of that information or too preoccupied discussing irrelevant information to recognize the value of the contribution.³

Motivations to Share and Process Information

Recognizing that group members bring their unique knowledge, experience, insights, and abilities to the table, and, to be effective, these disparate qualities must be shared and integrated, researchers have developed a model called Motivated Information Processing in Groups (MIPG). The cornerstone of this model hinges on two types of motivations: prosocial motivation, or a willingness to sacrifice self-gain for the overall good of the group; and epistemic motivation, a desire to learn and a willingness to spend time to deeply understand a phenomenon, including the task at hand.⁴ The main premise of the model is to identify factors that simultaneously encourage prosocial behaviors, i.e. a willingness to cooperate and share information, while at the same time, encouraging epistemic behaviors, i.e. a willingness to expend time and concentration in order to fully integrate all the information at the group's disposal. According to the MIPG model, some people are innately given to prosocial or epistemic motivations as part of their temperament and value systems. However, lacking this innate predisposition, people can be encouraged to adopt prosocial and epistemic motivations through certain situational cues.

Impact of Group Performance-Based Pay

In our study, we looked at the effect of one such situational cue: group rewards. According to theory, group rewards should incentivize people with naturally low levels of epistemic and/or prosocial inclinations to cooperate and effectively process information. Our reasoning for using group rewards was twofold: first, we thought that offering a reward would signal the importance of the task to each group member, thereby stimulating interest and a willingness to deeply consider and process information. Second, we reasoned that group rewards should serve to expand an individual's focus from self-gain to group-gain. An important aspect of our study was to factor in the personality composition of the groups. Small groups are especially susceptible to influences by individual members. One member, with an extreme personality, can have a profound impact on the groups' outcome. To measure personality, we looked at the Big-Five personality dimensions. This personality framework divides personality into five distinct dimensions: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and

openness to experience. People who score highly on the agreeableness dimension are often considerate, generous, and willing to cooperate with others; an indication that they are very likely to exhibit prosocial behaviors. Openness to experience is comprised of two major sub-facets: artistic and cognitive. This personality dimension includes such things as intellectual efficiency, ingenuity, curiosity, aesthetics, tolerance, and depth of thought. Naturally, people who score highly on the openness dimension would be more inclined towards epistemic behaviors.

To test our research question, we asked participants to solve a murder mystery case. While everyone read a similar scenario, each person held unique information. These unique facts, once known to the entire group, should exonerate one suspect and incriminate one of the others. Only if the unique facts are presented to the entire group and properly discussed and processed, will the group arrive at the proper conclusion. We divided our participants into two groups: one group solved the mystery for a set amount of money (fixed pay), while the other group was rewarded on the basis of how well they solved the mystery (performance-based pay).

We found that our situational cue, group rewards, was especially effective for groups naturally low in agreeableness and openness to experience. The groups low on openness exchanged more unique information, while the groups low on agreeableness were willing to sit in discussion longer. Instead of prematurely closing the conversation, these “disagreeable” group members talked with each other, thereby eventually exchanging key information. Because groups with lower levels of epistemic and prosocial motivations achieved solve rates equal to that of their more agreeable and more interested counterparts, we concluded that group rewards acted as an effective substitute for person-based (innate) epistemic and prosocial motivations.⁵

While we are making strides in understanding the dynamics of group decision making, we still do not completely understand why some people are innately prone to prosocial behaviors. Consequently, researchers in the group decision making field are now moving into biological psychology to identify factors that encourage or discourage cooperation. Specifically, they are looking at the formation of social groups, e.g. “in-group” and “out-group” mentalities. Studies suggest that a certain brain chemistry encourages cooperation and facilitates information sharing when people consider themselves connected to the group (in-group).⁶ However, this same chemistry can be detrimental when individuals are trying to work with outsiders (out-group).⁷

Implications for practice

Of course, these experimental results, while important for contributing to the group decision making theory, are not directly translatable to practice. Still, they do have profound implications for management because they underscore the importance of cultivating an inclusive organizational culture that is conducive to healthy collaborations. First, as our particular study suggests, it is important that managers carefully consider the composition of decision making groups. Extremes in personalities can have an effect on the entire group. So, if one person is having trouble working with others, it will have a decidedly negative effect on the groups' outcome. Finding people who work well together often leads to extraordinarily synergistic interactions, and these productive interactions often lead to extraordinary results.

Yet, as much as we would like to rely on people's innate interests and good will, we must acknowledge that not all people work well together. Incorporating and encouraging diversity in workplace leads to superior firm performance. However, when people come together from different cultures, speaking different languages, and having different expectations for work, it can cause some friction between co-workers and colleagues. Moreover, even the best of working relationships can deteriorate over time. Once warm friendships can grow cold, leaving people less willing and less able to collaborate.

Given the fragile nature of human relationships, we might arguably think it more important to understand the situational factors that encourage effective decision-making processes. For example, the culture of the organization is critical, in that it should encourage diversity and differences. As our study suggests, the reward structure should be carefully constructed in such a way as to communicate the importance of the task at hand, as well as encouraging benevolent cooperation between members of the decision making group.

In closing, readers might conclude from the results of our study that it would be hard to find someone who is all things: innately prosocial, competitive, hard-driving, possessing of a keen intellect and a desire to learn new things. We are fortunate to be living in interesting times, and we have witnessed the meteoric ascent of many successful entrepreneurs. A case in point, might be Elon Musk, who has been called the Thomas Edison of our time. By all accounts, Musk is hard driving and fiercely competitive. Certainly, he isn't afraid to disagree with others. Yet, Elon Musk has devoted his life to the development of non-carbon emitting engines, has plans for space exploration, and is, at the time of this writing, engaged in talks with the Governor of Puerto Rico to restore their severely damaged energy grid. When asked to reflect on his biggest mistake, Musk said that it centered on

hiring decisions: he used to think it most important to hire talented or “smart” people. Now he feels that it is important that someone be kind and it matters if someone has “a good heart.”⁸ Based on your organization’s mission, goals, and corporate culture, it might be worth thinking about what constitutes and, perhaps even more importantly, what encourages “a good heart.”

Authors

*Janice Francis Super is an Assistant Professor of Management at the College of Business at Murray State University. She received her PhD in Human Resource Management from the University of Kansas. Her research interests include information sharing and team decision making.
email: jsuper@murraystate.edu*

*Pingshu Li is an assistant professor of management at the Robert C. Vackar College of Business and Entrepreneurship, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. He received his PhD in human resource management and organizational behavior from University of Kansas. His research interests include strategic human capital and human resource management, prosocial motivation and behaviors, and knowledge-based organizations.
email: pingshu.li@utrgv.edu*

*Ghadir Ishqaidef is an Assistant Professor of Management at the College of Business at California State University, Chico. She received her PhD in human resource management from the University of Kansas. Her research publications appeared in various national and international conference proceedings and journals such as Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, Health Care Management Review, and Health Expectations. Her research interests include work environment, psychological safety, team dynamics, and strategic HR.
email: gishqaidef@csuchico.edu*

James P. Guthrie is currently the William and Judy Docking Professor with the School of Business, University of Kansas. He formerly served as the Associate Dean and Interim Dean with the KU School of Business. He received his B.A. and M.B.A. from the State University of New York at Buffalo and his PhD from the University of Maryland. He has had visiting faculty appointments with the University of Auckland and University of Waikato in New Zealand, the Consortium of Universities for International Business Studies in Italy, the University of Limerick and Dublin City University in Ireland. He teaches a variety of management courses and his research interests focus on strategic human resource management (SHRM), employment volatility and compensation. He has published on these topics in a wide range of scholarly outlets. He has also served as Associate Editor

If I Share What I Know, Will You Listen?

or Editorial Board member for a number of journals. His research has been cited in many media outlets, including the Wall Street Journal and CNBC.com.
email: jguthrie@ku.edu

Endnotes

1. Jordan, M. (1999). Teamwork. In *Workplace Writing* (pp. 85-86). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
2. Buchanan, L., & O'Connell, A. (2006). A brief history of decision making. *Harvard Business Review*, 84(1), 32-41.
3. Stasser, G., & Titus, W. (1985). Pooling of unshared information in group decision making: Biased information sampling during discussion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 48(6), 1467-1478.
4. Nijstad, B.A., & De Dreu, C.K. (2012). Motivated information processing in organizational teams: Progress, puzzles, and prospects. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 32, 87-111.
5. Super, J.F., Li, P., Ishqaidef, G., & Guthrie, J.P. (2016). Group rewards, group composition and information sharing: A motivated information processing perspective. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 134, 31-44.
6. De Wilde, T.R., Ten Velden, F.S., & De Dreu, C.K. (2017). The neuropeptide oxytocin enhances information sharing and group decision making quality. *Scientific Reports*, 7:40622,1-8.
7. De Dreu, C.K., & Kret, M.E. (2016). Oxytocin conditions intergroup relations through upregulated in-group empathy, cooperation, conformity, and defense. *Biological Psychiatry*, 79(3), 165-173.
8. SXSW. (2015, March 10). *Elon Musk | SXSW Live 2013 | SXSW ON* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LeQMWdOMa-A>