

WORKING IN TEAMS: THE INFLUENCE OF RHETORIC—FROM SENSEMAKING TO SADNESS

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ABSTRACT

At a time when teams are increasingly and routinely being used in Public Administration (PA) organizations, the prevailing wisdom about teams continues to confirm that teams axiomatically bring increases and improvements in effectiveness, productivity and communication. There has been relatively little critical address of whether these benefits actually accrue, nor what the experience of team members actually is. The PA literature, in particular, remains silent on this important issue. This paper shares findings from an exploratory phenomenological study. Members of teams in organizations were interviewed and asked about their experiences of working in teams. In contrast to the current wisdom, not only did team members not report the anticipated improvements and benefits, their stories tended to highlight the negative influence that the rhetoric surrounding teams might have on individuals. This paper shares the responses of team members to that rhetoric, revealing themes of “Teams, Rhetoric and Sensemaking,” a challenge to the notion of “Teams as One Big Happy Family?” while identifying “Teams as Crucibles of Resignation and Sadness.” These findings indicate the continuing need for further research into understanding the experience of individuals within various team and organizational structures, especially as they operate in PA organizations.

TEAMS: CHALLENGING THE PREVAILING WISDOM

At a time when teams are increasingly and routinely being used in Public Administration (PA) organizations, current wisdom regarding teams continues to confirm that teams will axiomatically bring to all organizations increases and improvements in effectiveness, productivity and communication. In short, teams are believed to be the “magic pill” for modern organizations and have become especially prevalent in PA organizations. Current wisdom extols their benefits to the point where

not using them is regarded as extreme foolishness. For those of us who have found teams to be less than perfect, we are informed that our “team building” skills are insufficient, that staff have not been adequately trained, that the culture of the organization is problematic—that the problem lies anywhere but with team functioning and structures. To date, there has been relatively little critical address of whether the accolades routinely surrounding team life are deserved, nor what the personal experience of team members actually is. Further, the PA literature, in particular, is silent regarding the phenomenon of teams, a point of concern when one considers how widespread teams have become in PA organizations.

This paper shares findings from an exploratory and interpretive qualitative study, where members of teams in organizations were interviewed and asked about their experiences of working in teams.¹ In contrast to the prevailing assertions, not only did team members not report the anticipated improvements in effectiveness, productivity and communication that underpin the continued and escalating use of teams in organizations, their stories tended to highlight a sense of unease and discomfort with team membership. Indeed, we argue that some of the negative outcomes for people working in teams were in response to the continued use of the rhetoric surrounding teams in organizations. This paper shares the experiences of team members in relation to this rhetoric.

The use of teams in the workplace has increased markedly over the past twenty years (Guzzo, 1996), often in response to a need for flexibility and responsiveness within organizations (Buchanan, 1994, cited in Lloyd & Newell, 2000, p. 184). PA organizations, in particular, have been required to focus on the provision of quality and efficiency in their customer relationships. This imperative has led to many public sector organizations introducing work teams as a means to facilitate these changes (Athanasaw, 2003; McHugh & Bennett, 1999). These teams have come in many forms and guises: initially, as quality circles (e.g. Blair & Meadows, 1999) and then, as self-managed or self-directed teams (e.g. Cordery, 1996; Garrow & Holbeche, 1999; Yeatts & Hyten, 1998), multidisciplinary and crossfunctional teams (e.g. Jackson, 1996; West, 1996) and, most recently, virtual teams (e.g. Hutchison, 1999). The use of teams, however they are labelled, has become a ubiquitous part of PA organizational life.

Unsurprisingly, this surge of literature and use has been matched by an increased research and teaching focus, drawing on previous research into group behaviour and the potential benefits of group involvement

(Jackson & Ruderman, 1995). Organizational behaviour texts of the 1980s and 1990s included chapters on groups, group behaviour and groupthink (e.g. Robbins, 1998; Vecchio et al., 1992). Chapters previously termed “The Group,” which may have included a distinction between groups and teams, are now entitled “Team Processes” and talk of the types of teams, team processes, and team building (e.g. McShane & Travaglione, 2003). Teams are a major focus for managers and scholars trying to find ways to do things better in organizations.

The attention of much of this research has been at the team-level, considering such aspects of team functioning as effectiveness (e.g. Fortune, 1999; Tannenbaum & Cannon-Bowers, 1999), productivity (e.g. Hallam & Campbell, 1997) and overall interaction (e.g. Hartley, 1996; Hitt, 1988). Traditionally, concern for individual team members was mainly focused on issues such as motivation and job satisfaction, drawing on the broader organizational theories of writers such as Maslow (1954), Herzberg (1959) and Alderfer (1969). More recently, researchers have begun to consider the individual’s experience within a work team (e.g. Barker, 1998; Ezzamel & Willmott, 1998; Findlay et al., 2000; Knights & McCabe, 2000; 2003). Inherent in many of these studies is an acknowledgement of the role of rhetoric in shaping employees’ perspectives of teamwork and their reactions to it.

In the next section of this paper, we discuss the notion of organizational rhetoric, not as a linguistic device *per se*, but as a phenomenon of influence on people who work in teams—a tool of persuasion. We also consider the literature on employee experiences of teamwork, paying particular attention to the role of rhetoric in these experiences. We then introduce the study and examine, in detail, the experiences of respondents working in teams. The discussion explores three associated themes: the process of individual team members’ sensemaking; the flawed notion of “teams as one big happy family,” and the reported outcome of resignation and sadness experienced by respondents. We conclude by considering the implications of these findings for public administration scholars and practitioners.

RHETORIC AND TEAMS

Rhetoric is defined as the use of language to persuade or influence others (Oxford Dictionary, 1971). Organizational rhetoric is the expression of arguments about organizational practices in such a manner as to make them attractive to listeners (Grant, 1999, p. 330), and to persuade others as to their validity (Watson, 1995, p. 806). The use and impact of organizational rhetoric has recently received increased re-

search focus in such areas as human resource management (e.g. Bowles & Coates, 1993; Grant, 1999; Vaughan, 1994) and organizational learning (e.g. Field, 1995; Hallier & Butts, 1999). Much of this research considers the disparity between “rhetoric and reality.”

Rhetoric can influence one’s construction of one’s workplace “reality,” with the outcome being the deferral of new and important knowledge, ultimately contributing to a personally damaging outcome (Vickers, 2002). Through rhetoric, we may use a mild, delicate or indirect word or expression in place of a plainer or more accurate one (Stein, 1998, p. 26). Rhetoric is the art of speaking or writing effectively which involves skill in the effective use of speech. It is the insincere or exaggerated use of language calculated to produce some effect (Wilkes, 1979, p. 316) that is of interest here. Organizational rhetoric also encourages people to de-emphasise the bad and to shift attention away from what is really going on (Stein, 1998). Rhetoric allows organizations to perpetuate new and exciting messages—the new gospel being preached—and rhetoric is intended to enhance, for example, the belief that the organization is in transition, that it is embracing new and exciting techniques, and that the values espoused by the organization will take it forward (Eccles & Nohria, 1992, p. 18). We believe that the language surrounding teams is frequently rhetorical and designed to convince those in organizations that teams are good; indeed, that using teams *is the only way* to successfully structure organizations these days.

We are encouraged to see others also exploring the individual’s experience of working within a team. These researchers have also recognised the need to ‘examine critically, rather than take as given, the responses of employees to the implementation of teams in the workplace (Knights & McCabe, 2000, p. 1487). Most of the studies consider, either explicitly or implicitly, the impact of organizational rhetoric in shaping the responses of these team members. The rhetorical discourse identified in these studies is used, as noted above, to enhance the benefits of team membership, aiming to excite employees and sell teamwork as a “win-win” situation for both organizations and their employees (Ezzamel & Willmott, 1998, p. 360).

Unfortunately, rhetoric—even in teams—is often given the status of conventional wisdom. The case is put so simply, forcefully and fashionably that any other view sounds untenable or, even, politically incorrect. The clarity of the message can lull the listener into uncritical acceptance (Hilmer & Donaldson, 1996, p. 7). We argue that this is what continues to happen in organizations using teams. Organizational members “engage with, respond to [and] imbibe” the rhetoric about

teams (Knights & McCabe, 2003, p. 1588). We argue that the rhetoric surrounding teams and their use is a major factor shaping knowledge and understanding about teams: about how teams work, what teams can achieve, and what the expectations of team members should be.

The rhetorical language surrounding teams in the workplace includes terms such as “team player” and “team ideal,” indicating a “cooperative, collegial atmosphere” (Stein, 1998, p. 32). It is this kind of rhetoric that we believe has acted to shape the respondents’ reality of team membership. Respondents also frequently used the rhetoric surrounding teams themselves. For example, they spoke of aiming for a “cohesive” group (personal communication, March 16, 2002; personal communication, November 3, 2001) or a “close-knit” team (personal communication, May 9, 2002; personal communication, August 9, 2001); of team members having “a bond” (personal communication, February 9, 2002); and of individuals needing to be “team players” (personal communication, February 9, 2002; personal communication, April 6, 2002) and exhibit a “team spirit” (personal communication, March 16, 2002).

It has been argued that the rhetoric concerning teams can serve to “mask”—to both disguise and distort—the reality of working within a team (Parris & Vickers, 2003). As rhetorical statements serve to form unchallenged assumptions, for both organizations and team members alike, they serve to conceal the reality that many team members experience. Sinclair (1992) argued that the “tyranny of a team ideology” leads to organisational situations, which “tell only half the story” (p. 614). There is a need to further illuminate individuals’ experiences beyond the rhetoric to uncover—and unmask—the reality.

Some of the tension between rhetoric and reality that our respondents described has been identified previously, such as experiences of conflict (e.g. Ezzamel & Willmott, 1998; Findlay et al., 2000) and resistance (e.g. Ezzamel & Willmott, 1998; Knights & McCabe, 2000). Indeed, Carter and Mueller (2002) argue that the rhetorical “spin” can lead to “critical, and sometimes cynical, responses” (p. 1349). However, we propose here another possible response by team members. We argue that the rhetoric surrounding teams is actually making the experience of working in a team *more* difficult. Beyond serving to obscure the *actual* experience of working in a team, teams rhetoric acts to raise team members’ expectations of how working in teams “should be.” When individuals’ actual experience differs from these high expectations, the result is a sense of dissonance—of incongruity and inconsistency between the experience and the previously acquired knowledge

(McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001). When presenting the construct of dissonance theory, Festinger (1957) argued that when individuals experience inconsistency and resultant dissonance, they seek to alleviate this negative state. We consider our respondents' experiences in light of this claim.

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY: THE EXPERIENCE OF INDIVIDUALS WORKING IN TEAMS

The exploratory nature of this study lent itself to a qualitative methodology, one that sought to understand social life and interaction (Sarantakos, 1998, p. 55). Interpretive phenomenology was selected because of its emphasis on seeking to "illuminate the richness of individual experience" (Baker, Wuest & Stern, 1992, p. 1358). The goal of phenomenology is to understand everyday practices (Benner, 1985, p. 5; Vickers, 2001, p. 34). Phenomenology is essentially about capturing the subjectively experienced life of informants as interpreted by them (Taylor, 1993, p. 174), and describing lived experience (Oiler, 1982, p. 178) and the meaning that experience holds for that individual (Drew, 1989, p. 431; Vickers, 2001, p. 33). As Baker and colleagues remind us, being concerned with the psychological phenomena of lived experience has only one legitimate source of data: informants who have lived the reality being investigated (Baker, Wuest & Stern, 1992, p. 1357; Vickers, 2001, p. 33). The value of a phenomenological approach, then, comes from learning about lived experience from the informant's perspective—to capture lived experience as it is lived and share it with others (Vickers, 2001, p. 33).

The purpose of this exploratory study—to develop insight into the individual experience within a work team—informed the selection of respondents. Rather than focusing the research on a single team or organization, our key concern was that all participants had experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 1998, p. 118). Purposive sampling was used to select respondents, with a focus on the potential of each "case" to provide rich insight into this particular area of interest (Patton, 1990, p. 169). Accordingly, the criterion used to select potential respondents was that they were currently working in a team in an Australian workplace, or had done so within the past twelve months. For this research project, the following definition from Hackman (1990, p. 4) is paraphrased; highlighting what we believe to be the three essential attributes of organizational work teams.

1. They are *real*, that is, they are intact social systems complete with boundaries, interdependence among members and differentiated member roles;
2. They have one or more *tasks* to perform, that is, there is some outcome for which members have collective responsibility and for which acceptability is potentially assessable; and,
3. They operate in an *organizational context*.

Contact was made with potential respondents through the use of Watters and Biernacki's (1989) *Modified Chain Referral Technique* (see also Vickers, 2001). This method involved the use of intermediaries to identify potential respondents, who were then contacted by the researcher. The eight respondents had worked in a team they identified as corresponding with Hackman's (1990) definition, within the past twelve months.

Lengthy, in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the eight respondents, providing "an appropriate means of gaining access to the individual's words and interpretations" (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995, p. 73). Focus areas were developed before the interviews, and included broad issues such as team interaction and development, organizational support, and personal and career impact. These areas formed a starting point for discussion, as well as a guide to ensure key points were discussed with all respondents (Kvale, 1996, pp. 129-131). As would be expected in an exploratory study, further areas of concern arose during the course of the research and were explored as the project progressed. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was conducted, reviewing transcripts for commonalities (Benner, 1994). The interpretive nature of this analysis sought to uncover the meaning conveyed by individuals in their shared experiences (Benner, 1994). Respondents' statements were viewed critically, as we continually asked what the *meaning* and *experience* was for each individual. This analysis led to the development of the three themes considered in this paper. While respondents did not use terms such as "rhetoric" and "sensemaking" when describing their experiences, their stories conveyed situations where their expectations were raised but, ultimately, unmet. The following discussion presents "exemplars," instances that capture the meaning of these situations (Leonard, 1994). Respondents have all been given pseudonyms to maintain their privacy and confidentiality.

FROM SENSEMAKING TO SADNESS

Teams, Rhetoric and Sensemaking

We see and experience events in terms of what has just occurred. It is done retrospectively—it is sensemaking (Vickers, 2002). Meaning is attached to these acts (Schutz, 1932/1967, p. 40). What is good or bad, expensive or cheap, reasonable or unreasonable, is profoundly affected by what we have just experienced (Pfeffer, 1992, p. 190). The vulnerabilities of framing can result in a false “reality” being constructed, especially if this framing has been strongly influenced by language or any other slippery symbolism (Vickers, 2002). We argue that, in organizations, people are not misinterpreting the messages they receive about teams. Instead, the messages are rhetorical—inaccurate, persuasive, designed to convince.

Sensemaking is described literally as the making of sense (Weick, 1995, p. 4). It involves more than interpretation, but a creation of meaning (Weick, 1995, p. 8). Sensemaking highlights the concept of invention of meaning, which precedes interpretation (Weick, 1995, p. 14). This sense, or meaning, is generated by words and vocabularies (Weick, 1995, p. 106), and the phrases and conversations used by organizations create what we know to be organizational sensemaking. It is through the use of rhetoric in these conversations that our reality of the organization is constructed (Vickers, 2002).

In listening to the respondents to this study, we heard statements that exhibited strong expectations of how working in a team “should be.” These statements indicated a belief that teams would provide a supportive and co-operative working environment, and reiterated many of the words and phrases present in the teams rhetoric. Lauren’s comment exemplifies this: “I’m very much a team player. . . . I do believe in helping each other and supporting each other and working through stuff” (personal communication, March 16, 2002). This expectation of support within the team also included aspects of respect and care for other team members. Michelle (p. 27) expressed this as: “We’re always thinking of the other person. We’re always thinking of the implications for the other person.”

However, when uncertainty arose, the respondents tried to make sense of their circumstances. Sensemaking is an interpretive process necessary for organizational members to understand such things as what the organization is about, whether it is doing well or poorly, what problems it faces, and how it might go about resolving them. It is a process where individuals develop cognitive maps of their working en-

vironment (Weick, 1995, p. 5). Sensemaking is grounded in both individual and social activity, and is about such things as the placement of items into frameworks, comprehending, redressing surprise, constructing meaning, and interacting in pursuit of mutual understanding and patterning (Weick, 1995, p. 6). As March (1984, p. 18; cited in Weick, 1995, p. 8) concludes, this sometimes leads to ambiguity and discomfort. Organizational life is as much about interpretation, intellect, metaphors, and fitting our history into an understanding of life, as it is about decisions and coping with the environment. It is about making sense of an uncertain situation that may, initially, make no sense (Vickers, 2002; Weick, 1995, p. 9). For example, when discussing the support their teams received from the organization (which we all know is one of the axiomatic assumptions surrounding “successful” teams), respondents often spoke positively about this, initially:

They probably do [provide the tools to work as a team]. I mean they—. There’s certainly plenty of time for people to meet and there’s sort of certainly time to get together and discuss things, and they *do* talk about all the right things like planning, team-planning, and that type of thing. So, yes, I think the resources or whatever are there to do things. (personal communication, March 16, 2002)

William saw this support in terms of ensuring all the team members were capable of doing their job:

Yes, they did [provide support to work as a team]. They equipped everybody to do the job that they were supposed to do. The team leaders had training as team leaders, so they were then able to pull their resources together. (personal communication, April 6, 2002)

However, Karen’s initial, positive response was couched in rhetoric itself. She described “them” doing all the “right” things, like team-planning and allowing staff time to get together and talk. While she also mentions that resources were supplied, she doesn’t actually specify how or in what form. When she continued, Karen confirmed that, while lots of talking went on, concrete support for the team as it developed was lacking. Karen also indicated that, at the end of all of their team-building sessions, the team members didn’t know one another very well, something that they had all agreed was important:

Karen: Because that’s what we thought: “We’re different people coming from different groups. Now we’re going to be part of this team and we don’t know each other and we don’t know what each other does.” And actually, I’ve got to say, that was quite a good start. We did all sit down on the floor together and we did put down ideas. You know, “Why do we think we need to do this?”

“What should we do?” . . . We did identify that we needed to get to know each other better as a group, or as a team, so we could actually work together because, I mean, we didn’t really know each other very well. And I’d say we probably still don’t now.

Researcher: Because you had that and nothing else really happened with it?

Karen: Yes.

Researcher: And what would you put that down to? The team leader then didn’t really drive it, or people didn’t want to, or—?

Karen: No, I think, like, what often happens, you come back, everyone gets busy, and it kind of gets shoved under the carpet. There’s more important things, supposedly, to do. (personal communication, March 16, 2002)

We now observe Karen beginning to make sense of her situation, having identified, probably for the first time, an element of concern or a surprise that she needed to consider:

Well, that’s the thing. They say they want people to [work cohesively]—and I think they think people do—but then there are examples, like I said, about the team-building weekend just being cancelled [Karen previously noted “this was the first thing to go” as part of cost-cutting]. And, actually, at the last team-building weekend, the Marketing Manager had just been sacked. . .and there were quite a few people, particularly in the Marketing area, who were really unclear of. . .what was the structure of the Marketing department now and what was going to happen. It just hadn’t been communicated. And, yet, our CEO stood up and said that, you know, it was the best team. . . . And then, after saying that at that team meeting, three more people got sacked. And he actually made the comment on the team-building: “And I’m looking forward to seeing you all here at the next building thing.” And then a couple of weeks later, three people were gone. So, it kind of, like, although they say that, you don’t—. It’s a bit hard to believe. (personal communication, March 16, 2002)

Karen alludes again to other hallmarks of successful teams: effective communication and trust. She clearly has an expectation that communication of central decisions, such as people being terminated, should have been provided to the staff involved in a timely and sensitive manner. She also distinctly indicates a loss of trust in management as a result of these events.

Karen’s story also demonstrates the use of rhetoric by the CEO to “persuade and influence.” He refers to the *team-building weekend* (in itself, a rhetorical term) to tell everyone in the organisation that the Marketing team is “the best team.” This *should* have given a feeling of

comfort to those team members with respect to their positions in the described situation of uncertainty. Yet, following this meeting, three people were made redundant from this team, resulting in a dissonant and alienating experience for Karen. How does she make sense of the CEO making one assertion, then following with a completely contradictory action? If the Marketing team was “the best team,” and team members were made redundant, what might that mean for *her* position and *her team*?

For Karen, there is a need to make sense of the discrepancy between her understanding of the importance of teams to the organization and her described experience of “the best team” having members made redundant. Weick (1995, p. 106) argued that organizational sensemaking is created by the words and vocabularies of the organization, and this creates a sense of meaning and understanding of the organization. When an event takes place that does not fit the expected interpretation of the environment, this disrupts the individual’s sensemaking (Vickers, 2002). However, it does not immediately lead to a complete reversal in thinking. That may take several events, over a protracted period. However, Karen’s statement—“it’s a bit hard to believe”—does represent a shift in her understanding, perhaps the beginning of scepticism, as a result of her process of sensemaking.

Teams as One Big Happy Family?

One of the aspects of organizational rhetoric which contributed to these respondents’ outcomes was the appeal for togetherness, that employees were part of “one big team.” Many organizations espouse words such as “teamship,” and the phrase “team-based philosophy” has been used to describe organizations which are using teams across various sections and levels of the workplace (Sheard & Kakabadse, 2002). Teamwork is frequently presented as something that will “enrich” the lives of employees (Knights & McCabe, 2000, p. 1488). However, this thinking does not recognise the possibility that, in some circumstances, team members may feel quite alienated and disconnected from both the other members of their team and the organization as a whole. Instead, the rhetoric continues: “Some organizations want to emphasize that ‘we are all in this together.’ Managers in these organizations say they want togetherness, cooperation—‘one big happy family’” (Huszczko & Hoffman, 1999, p. 5).

Respondents themselves reiterated the rhetorical language surrounding team membership. When talking about their team’s work and interactions, they also used phrases such as “we’re all in this together”

and “we’re all part of a bigger team,” demonstrating their expectation of co-operation and a supportive working environment within the team and across the organization (Parris, 2003). Their stories also portrayed an expectation that team members would all participate evenly and “share the load.” However, the reported reality vastly differed from these expectations.

The experiences of many respondents revealed serious concern with team members whose participation they considered to be less than acceptable; those who were perceived to not be “pulling their weight” (personal communication, February 9, 2002). Lauren described a full-time team member who was not carrying a comparable workload to others in the team:

The social worker person, look, she’s so tentative. Her caseload would be really low. It’s difficult because, you know, obviously if you’re part-time, you’ve got a smaller caseload. But if you’re full-time, you really should have double, at least double what the part-time person’s got. . . . But it hasn’t been like that at all. (personal communication, November 3, 2001)

When questioned as to how this made her feel, she replied: “[Sigh] Well sometimes it’s frustrating for all of us. When I say “all of us,” I mean . . . basically the older, more experienced ones” (personal communication, November 3, 2001).

Here, discord between Lauren’s belief that all team members *should* participate at the same level and work together to help each other, versus the frustration and disappointment evident when this did not happen, was clear. This frustration led to a break within the team, with those experiencing the disappointment and frustration banding together—certainly *not* one big happy family. David also demonstrated his resentment of others in the team when anticipated participation was not forthcoming: “That’s why we’ve got Jane [a pseudonym]. But Jane is not really up to scratch, and doesn’t really help. And as a team member, she really *lets everything down*” [italics added] (personal communication, May 9, 2002). Here, David shares his perception that Jane was “letting down” the team. Again, this is juxtaposed against the routine expectations of team members, that being in a team meant working *with* each other. The disappointment, frustration and anger expressed by respondents were magnified by the assumptions that routinely surround work in teams, including confirmations of team “togetherness” and strong support. The reality reported was quite different:

[In my previous team] if you had regular things, like you had to make your monthly phone calls or something like that, they’d split

it out amongst each other. As it works now, if I'm away or something happens, there isn't that same thing where other people help take on responsibilities. People are less willing or likely, you know, wanting to do it. And usually someone kind of gets dumped with a bit of it. You know, it doesn't really get done, I guess. (personal communication, March 16, 2002)

When these respondents' expectations of team co-operation were not met, there was a sense of betrayal in their stories. The discouragement and isolation felt in these situations was far removed from the "togetherness" aspect of team membership that had been continually portrayed to them. Furthermore, when no action was taken to address team members' concerns, their frustration and anger led them to realize that, "we're *not* all in this together."

While respondents reported interactions with fellow team members that differed widely from their expectations, the behaviour of others in the organization also contributed to experiences which deviated from the anticipated togetherness. For example, Karen felt a disparity in the level of support given to different teams across the organization:

And, actually, there's one little part of our team—three of us, Robert, Lincoln [pseudonyms] and I—were put together, because at the company meeting each month a different team presents. . . . But the IBS team's a bit big, so we break up into IT team or smaller groups. And Robert, Lincoln and I were considered to be—, not really fit in anywhere, even though we're supposedly in this team. So when the thing came around. . . [of] the company meeting presentation, next to our names, we were called the "odds and sods"—*that was lovely!* So that's our team. We were just the scum of the earth, odds-and-sods team. (personal communication, March 16, 2002)

It is interesting to observe an outcome of the pervasive concept of teams in this organization; a possible example of the "team-based philosophy." As Karen confirmed: "You're all meant to be part of the same bigger team" (p. 1). Further, the organization is also grouped around different layers of teams, with each grouping also being called a "team." When this is the case, what is the impact for individuals being labelled "odds and sods"? What is inferred by the individuals involved? Karen portrays what it means for her: "We were just the *scum of the earth* odds-and-sods team" (p.14; our emphasis). Karen's remarks depict her sense of being devalued; of being marginalized or alienated within the organization.

Erikson (1985; cited in Heinz, 1991) describes this alienation as a disconnection or a separation. Kanungo (1992, p. 414) argues that individuals' alienation in organizations can be experienced as a separation

from their job and other work-related contexts that includes a sense of frustration, even anger. Colin also reported a lack of organizational support. While the organization proclaimed the importance of teams, Colin felt that the preferential treatment some team members received increased levels of animosity in the team:

Yes, our director's constantly referring to us as a team. . .[but] there's a little bit of animosity when "team" is talked about because the way that the department's now set up, there's been preferential treatment given to a few people in the department. (personal communication, February 9, 2002)

Again, this comment can be viewed in terms of organizational rhetoric. The department is described as a team, giving organizational members an impression of togetherness and fairness in its dealings. However, Colin's experience is the opposite: He believes there is unequal treatment for department members, resulting in his anger. While we recognize that the unmet expectations and negative experiences expressed by these respondents are neither uncommon nor unique to the team experience, the use of teams rhetoric appeared to bolster these unmet expectations through evoking a sense of co-operation and collaboration, not just at the team level, but also for the organisation as a whole. Colin's experience of his team being within a larger departmental team reflected this concept: "The hierarchy tends to regard the whole department as a team" (personal communication, February 9, 2002). This invoked an image of organization-wide teamwork, juxtaposed with respondents' understanding of teams as helpful and supportive, serving to even further heighten expectations of organizational support.

The depiction of teams as "one big happy family" carries images of nurturing, care and support (Gibson & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2002). However, rather than commenting on their teams as being a "big happy family," our respondents demonstrated that teams may also be hostile, abusive or sick. The notion that organizations are hostile or abusive is not new and has been closely linked with managerialist and capitalist doctrines (Perrone & Vickers, 2004). Managers who are inconsiderate of other members of organizations, through ignorance or the chasing of efficiency objectives, may feel exempt from responsibility (Vickers, 1999, p. 72; Vickers, 2001). Both Fromm (1942/1960; 1963/1994) and Blauner (1964) described organizations as alienating places, discussing feelings of fragmentation, meaninglessness, isolation and powerlessness in the capitalist workplace. Braverman (1994) also discussed the degradation of work, while Marx (1975/1994) described the alienated workforce. Morgan (1997), in *Images of Organisation*, described the

especially relevant metaphor of organizations as instruments of domination. Finally, Vickers (1999; 2001) has described the problem of rabid managerialism and problems that might exist for marginalized individuals in “sick” organizations. The literature returns regularly to these notions, suggesting that capitalist processes continue to encourage alienation, degradation, powerlessness and, most recently, abuse and aggression (Perrone & Vickers, 2004).

Respondents’ experiences of powerlessness and alienation could have much to do with managerialist processes in their organizations. Indeed, the very use of teams and the rhetoric surrounding them can be just one of the methods employed by managers to promote their ends (e.g. Ezzamel & Willmott, 1988). However, we argue that the promulgation of rhetoric about togetherness and the supportive working environment within a team served to heighten these respondents’ expectations of both support and a safe haven from hostile workplace experiences. From the respondents’ accounts, it seemed that they believed that their team would provide a ready-made support system. This was highlighted by the repeated use of phrases such as “support each other” and “help each other” in their descriptions of what a team *should* be like. Indeed, the terms *support* and *team* were sometimes used interchangeably, with both words carrying the same meaning and expectation for many respondents. Conversely, descriptions of being “let down” and betrayed revealed frustration and despondency, with the sense that they were not really part of a team at all (as they understood it), and certainly not protected from hurtful and negative workplace experiences.

Teams as Crucibles of Resignation and Sadness

We also argue that there is an emotional response to the juxtaposition of teams-based rhetoric with the reality of working in a team. If the experience has been positive, then positive emotions are likely to follow the sensemaking process (and while we didn’t find that in this exploratory study, we acknowledge its possibility). However, if the experience has been negative, as it was for these respondents, then the emotional response will be, similarly, negative. Team membership—when combined with expectations (fuelled by the continual rhetoric) that teams should be harmonious, cohesive, productive and positive groups of people, working together towards a common goal—may provide a context inviting exactly the opposite experience. Rather than being positive and supportive, working in teams was found to be disappointing and de-motivating. This potential for negative outcomes

has been recognised by other researchers considering team member experiences, including conflict and resistance (e.g. Ezzamel & Willmott, 1998; Knights & McCabe, 2000; 2003). However, we highlight another outcome—equally unwelcome—that of resignation and sadness.

Resignation is defined by Wilkes (1979, p. 1241) as a submissive un-resisting attitude; passive acquiescence. Rosenthal (2002, p. 3) defines sadness as mental anguish or suffering in the absence of any physical pain. When we are sad, our emotions are expressed through crying, talking or thinking continuously about our sorrow. Sadness is characterised by sad feelings, the opposite of the numbness that is the main feature of depression. Wilkes (1979, p. 1282), similarly, defines sadness as feeling sorrow or unhappiness. We heard resignation in these stories, but also sadness. This is not what is generally expected (or desired) from members of work teams. For example, Karen described how she responds when she feels her team isn't working the way she would expect, when the experience is not what she believes it "should be":

I just ignore it. [Laughter] I just ignore them, and think, you know, it does make you less -. Well, it makes me kind of like my job less. Because I kind of think, "Oh. It's not that great." You know, "What a shame people don't support you." And then I just tend to do my own thing. You know, and then you get all these people just working on their own type of thing, which is kind of -. Or you don't feel part of it as much. You don't feel part of the whole thing. And get a bit cynical about it all [voice dropped quite low for this sentence]. (personal communication, March 16, 2002)

We see a shift in Karen's emotions here. From opening her response with a light laugh, what followed was an air of despondency and sadness. Again, we see Karen comparing her experiences with what she has been led to believe working in teams "should" be: that she should be working with others, feel "part of it," and feel "part of the whole thing." Karen's response to this is frustration and sadness: "What a shame people don't support each other." Her demonstrated resignation and feelings of powerlessness are also evident in her comment about needing to ignore her colleagues and, especially, about liking her job less as a result. Lauren also demonstrated a sense of resignation, of sadness, about the organization not providing her team with any real support. She used rhetoric herself, to illustrate her point about support for her team just being "the flavour of the day": "They pay lip service to it [support]. I mean they do, they pay lip service to it. . . . There's no real support.

It's whatever's the flavour of the day" (personal communication, March 16, 2002).

With this lack of organizational support for her team and their continued functioning, Lauren's response was similar to Karen in that she felt she needed to "start looking after herself" (personal communication, November 3, 2001). Her sadness surrounding the isolation she felt was addressed by putting her energies into her counselling work, a career that gave her fulfilment: "Yes, just focusing on the work, focusing on the clients, doing what had to be done, and interacting as minimally as possible with the rest of the team" (personal communication, November 3, 2001). Here, Lauren's method of coping with the resignation and sadness was to distance herself from her team members, to reduce the opportunity for further disappointment. This experience is far removed from the conventional image of team "togetherness," with its rosy depiction of employees working happily and supportively alongside each other. We found respondents feeling frustrated, alone, and sad.

CONCLUSION

The use of teams in organizations has increased markedly over the past twenty years. As the virtues of increased productivity and effectiveness have been extolled, organizations have uncritically adopted this work structure as a means of involving and motivating employees while, concurrently, increasing productivity and efficiency. However, the proliferation of the use of teams in organizations seems to have surpassed the expectations of even the most ardent supporters.

We have explored here the juxtaposition of the rhetoric surrounding teams with the reality of the individual phenomenological experience of working in a team. We have witnessed discomfort and dissonance in these respondents as the sensemaking process took place, we believe, because the teams rhetoric did not match the reality of their experiences of working in a team. We found that these team members, rather than experiencing the sense of a belonging and support they were led to expect, described a real sense of isolation, disconnection and alienation. Finally, and unexpectedly, we discovered these respondents' reported experiences included resignation and sadness.

What has been demonstrated is that the experience for individuals in work teams can be, and often is, far removed from the rhetoric. If the uncritical rhetoric about teams is allowed to proliferate in PA organizations, we believe it will continue to provide a flawed basis for the expectations of team members. If the requirements for improved

productivity and efficiency are to be realised, recognition of the impact on employees when their rhetoric-based expectations vary so wildly from their workplace experiences must be considered. Without this understanding, the potential for unwelcome employee outcomes, such as isolation, alienation and sadness, increase markedly and are of concern.

These preliminary findings highlight the need for further consideration of the role of rhetoric in team member experiences. We have explored here respondents' expectations being influenced by the use of rhetoric in organizations. Although the scope of this initial study did not allow for repeated interviews with respondents over time, we note that employee experiences and expectations may, in turn, act to shape further rhetoric. We believe there would be great value in investigating the language used about teams by both management and employees over an extended period of time, and in determining how experiences shape and change this vocabulary. Considering such research within a single organization or team would also help to further our understanding of how expectations and meanings are created by members of the same team, both through hearing similar rhetoric from their managers and in interacting with each other.

Certainly, there is a compelling need for scholars and practitioners in the PA field to better understand the experiences of individuals working in teams within these environments. If PA organizations are to successfully harness the benefits of work teams, the experiences of individuals warrant continued enquiry. We recommend that studies specifically exploring the experience of team members working in PA organizations be urgently undertaken.

ENDNOTES

1. We note that this study did not involve interviewing respondents in PA organizations in particular, although some respondents did work in government organizations. However, we believe that the findings should prompt further investigations specific to PA organizations. We comment further on this in the concluding section.

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