Lesson 14: Cohesion

**Introduction**

This lesson consists of:

1. Cohesion Theory

2. Case Study

3. Student Journal Entry

**Assignment**

1. **Read Course Guide**, pages 2 – 5.

2. When you solve a case study or act as a leader in your organization:

I. ***Identify*** the **Areas of Interest**.

II. ***Analyze*** the situation using Cohesion Theory.

A. ***Identify*** the Common Indicators of Cohesion that are missing (or low) in the situation.

B. ***Identify*** the strength of group cohesion (high/low).

C. ***Describe*** whether the group’s cohesion supports the organization’s goals.

III. ***Explain*** an Area of Interest in terms of how the group’s cohesion influences the group’s individual, group, and organizational outcomes.

IV. ***Select*** an appropriate theoretical leader strategy(ies) to address Areas of Interest.

V. ***Apply*** the theoretical leader strategy(ies) to the situation in the form of a specific leader plan that addresses all Areas of Interest.

VI. ***Assess,*** evaluate, and revise your leader plan.

3. **Complete a Student Journal entry** for Cohesion Theory.

Briefly describe, from your department, a formal unit or group that had/has low cohesion. What Common Indicators of Cohesion were missing (or low)? Despite the low cohesion, did the group’s cohesion support the department’s goals? How did the low cohesion affect individual motivation, performance, and satisfaction? How did it influence group performance? Lastly, how did it affect organizational performance? What could the leader have done to improve cohesion and thereby improve individual, group, and organizational outcomes?

COHESION THEORy

**Common Indicators of Group Cohesion**

Cohesion refers to the degree to which members are attracted to and remain committed to a group. In other words, it represents the strength that holds a group together. We can expect that highly cohesive groups will exhibit greater levels of mutual respect, trust, confidence, understanding, and performance in achieving their shared goals. Conversely, groups with low cohesion tend to show lower levels of these qualities.

While these attributes are intangible and challenging to observe or measure, a highly cohesive group typically consists of members who care deeply about the group and demonstrate strong commitment to it. We would anticipate that these members invest more energy—both physical and psychological—into group activities. With increased energy from members, cohesive groups are better equipped to allocate collective resources towards their activities, efforts, and objectives.

From these observations, we can identify common indicators of group cohesion. Let’s explore each of these indicators individually.

Greater Interaction and Communication

Members of a close-knit group are generally expected to communicate more with one another. Because they value the group, they are more willing to participate in its efforts and activities, which typically results in increased interaction, although this can vary depending on the task. Research shows that the greater the cohesion within a group, the more communication occurs among its members. Additionally, cohesive groups tend to meet more frequently, further enhancing member communication and interaction.

In highly cohesive groups, all members are more actively involved, and participation is distributed more evenly. The quality of communication within these groups is characterized by increased cooperation and friendliness, aimed at maintaining group unity. In contrast, low-cohesion groups tend to be less cooperative. Members often withhold comments related to group performance and may respond to interactions more aggressively. Brigadier General S. L. A. Marshall’s renowned work, \*Men Against Fire\*, provides numerous accounts of soldiers in highly cohesive units who maintain open horizontal and vertical communication channels. This openness significantly impacts their psychological well-being, fostering a closer bond among unit members. Such communication patterns also facilitate the quick and effective sharing of new skills and constructive feedback on performance. Thus, a reciprocal relationship exists between a group’s communication and interaction processes: as cohesion increases, so does both the quantity and quality of communication, which in turn fosters even greater cohesion. While the military serves as a primary example, these dynamics can also apply to police work groups or units.

Power of the Group over Its Members

When members are committed to their group, they are often more willing to make personal changes and sacrifices to remain active participants. This commitment grants the group a significant influence over its members' opinions and behaviors. Highly cohesive groups exert strong pressure on members to conform to the group’s opinions, attitudes, and actions.

Interestingly, cohesive groups not only have power over their members but also enhance their ability to resist external pressures and non-conforming internal pressures. Police work groups exemplify this phenomenon. A highly cohesive organization can withstand greater levels of resistance, stress, and even internal dissent without risking disintegration. Conversely, less cohesive groups tend to fall apart quickly under both internal and external scrutiny. This resilience stems from the deep value members place on their group membership; they are often willing to change their behaviors and tolerate differences that they might not accept otherwise in order to remain part of the group.

Goal Attainment

Intuitively, highly cohesive groups are more successful in directing their efforts and energy toward achieving group goals. Our experiences watching or participating in sporting events demonstrate that a team's cohesiveness can be the deciding factor between winning and losing. This is why one of the fundamentals of training is building teamwork.

When a highly cohesive group sets productivity and successful organizational performance as its goals, these goals are achieved to a much greater extent than by low-cohesive groups. However, as leaders, we must be cautious of cohesive groups that adopt dysfunctional norms and performance standards as their objectives. A leader’s greatest challenge may involve redirecting a highly cohesive group with dysfunctional performance norms toward organizationally desired performance standards.

Member Satisfaction

High levels of interaction and friendly, cooperative communication among group members naturally lead to a sense of satisfaction in belonging to the group. In moments of triumph, when a group comes together to accomplish a challenging task, there is often immense satisfaction.

It is important to note that members can feel attraction and commitment to a group without being satisfied with it as a whole. Generally, however, the greater the cohesion, the higher the satisfaction with group membership and the group’s goals and efforts.

Group Loyalty and Identification

Groups that provide significant satisfaction and have influence over members’ opinions and actions tend to inspire greater loyalty among their members. This, in turn, allows the group to expend less energy on maintaining membership, which can then be directed toward achieving goals.

There is also a reciprocal relationship between loyalty and identification. When members demonstrate loyalty to their group, they develop a greater psychological identification with it. This identification in turn fosters even greater loyalty from its members.

Elaborate Group Norms and Practices

When a group achieves high cohesion, it begins to establish extensive behavioral routines and practices that members engage in to express their group uniqueness and identity. Examples may include informal initiations, inside jokes, and playful teasing. Often, there are unique rituals and symbols that group members adopt to represent themselves. For instance, observe the daily operations of a motorcycle unit; their distinctive uniforms, equipment, and procedures all contribute to their identity.

These norms and practices help members create a psychological “we-they” boundary that distinguishes them from outsiders. As we see with other indicators, there exists a circular relationship here: as the group becomes more cohesive, it creates and develops these unique norms and practices, which in turn further fuel cohesion.

**Leader Strategies to Build Cohesion**

While it is relatively easy to observe a workgroup and determine whether they have high or low cohesion, it is much more challenging for a leader to build and maintain a group’s cohesion. One effective strategy is to guide a team through the stages of group development, thus fostering a productive and highly cohesive group. Additionally, a well-thought-out socialization program can help build and sustain high cohesiveness. However, these actions require long-term strategic planning.

In the short term, leaders should focus on six common indicators of cohesion and manipulate these variables to build or maintain group cohesion. Specifically, leaders can utilize some or all of the following concepts to positively influence group cohesion when appropriate:

1. ***S****acrifice*: Encourage personal sacrifice for group goals. Like the socialization objective of commitment, work activities that require hard work from the group will enhance cohesion.

2. ***T****eamwork*: Leaders should seek opportunities that necessitate cooperation and teamwork for the group's success.

3. ***I****nteraction*: Providing more opportunities for interaction and communication among group members enhances cohesion. Don't overlook the importance of social events, but keep in mind that social activities alone are unlikely to strengthen cohesion in a workgroup.

4. ***C****ompetition*: When conducted positively and productively, competition with outside groups can enhance cohesion. However, if competition turns into a means to hinder other groups from achieving their objectives or leads to illegal or unethical behavior, it becomes counterproductive.

5. ***K****eep members focused on Group Activities and Purpose*: Keeping members focused on group tasks and the organization's objectives will strengthen cohesion. Hard work directed towards the group's responsibilities enhances unity.

6. ***U****nique Norms and Symbols*: Reinforcing a group’s identity can significantly affect cohesion. Special uniforms, unique items, or distinctive behaviors and privileges set the group apart and instill pride, fostering cohesion.

7. ***M****issions*: Engaging in unique and challenging group missions, whether assigned by the organization (e.g., EOD, SWAT, or Homicide Investigation) or voluntary tasks (like coordinating holiday DUI checkpoints), can enhance group cohesion when successfully achieved.

This is not an exhaustive list, and you may identify additional methods through your leadership experiences. However, these theoretical solutions offer ample ideas. A goal of your classroom activities should be to create a list of potential leader behaviors to operationalize these strategies, thereby enhancing your understanding of Cohesion Theory. Remember the seven variables with the acronym ***STICKUM***.

**Case Study**

Today is your first day as the supervisor of the Street Response Unit (S.R.U.). You are met by its outgoing supervisor, Sergeant Keith Lewis.

Keith extends his hand and says, “Boy, am I glad to see you! I guess the commander told you that I want to go back to patrol. Well, I do! Somehow and somewhere I lost these people. We do a lot of dangerous work—stopping street sales of rock cocaine, serving warrants on career criminals and conducting surveillance for the detectives. I don’t have to tell you how important it is that we know what each other is thinking and how we will react to certain situations. We used to do that. This was one group of cops that was extremely close. Do you remember when everyone in this unit proudly wore jackets and T-shirts with the S.R.U. insignia? Now, we don’t even print them up anymore because no one would want to wear them.

“It all started when the commander replaced some tenured officers, who were peer leaders, with new people. The selections were really surprising—some very talented, hard working officers were not picked. Instead, the perception among S.R.U. officers was that the jobs were given out based upon ethnicity or gender and that merit had nothing to do with it. Whether this is true or not, it caused a lot of problems for me. Most of the officers from the old S.R.U. don’t want to work with the newer officers. Two officers from the old group have asked to be sent back to patrol where they can work with their old S.R.U. buddies. The newer officers feel they are well qualified to work this unit and that they are not being given a chance. There is a lot of animosity between the two groups.

“I remember when the whole S.R.U. team used to go out together after work; it was really a lot of fun. As a matter of fact, the entire unit used to have picnics in the summer and we even had our own Christmas party. Now, I’d be afraid to arrange a function for fear that no one would show up. I’ve talked to my officers over and over about instilling some pride in the unit, but they each seem to go their own way. They seem to be more interested in dropping dimes on each other when one of them makes a mistake. I find myself spending most of my time putting out little brushfires or writing personnel complaints on the big ones!”

“As I said, we work in a variety of dangerous situations here, and we have to rely on each other to get the job done. Looking at the way these people are now, I’m afraid that someone may get seriously hurt. There have been several arguments recently about officers not backing each other up quickly. This is a powder keg and I don’t want to be here when it blows.

“It seems that these officers only care about one thing, themselves. Just last week, after we had helped the Gang Unit serve an arrest warrant, our auto detectives told me where five stolen pickup trucks were stashed. They wanted us to stake out the area. We were already near the end of a watch, and I told the officers we would have to work overtime. There was plenty of cash available for overtime, but no one in the unit wanted to work it. That never happened in the past. Our people used to work for the sake of the job and never worried about the overtime. It’s totally different now.

“I sincerely hope that you have better luck with the unit than I did. When I took over a year ago, it was a hard-charging team. Now it’s really nothing more than a collection of individuals with their own agendas. Well, here are the keys!”

I*.* ***Identify*** the **Areas of Interest**.

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10.

(If necessary, continue listing **Areas of Interest** on another page.)

II. ***Analyze*** the situation using Cohesion Theory.

What is the relationship among the Areas of Interest listed above? More specifically, is there a chronological order or **logical chain of events** that helps you make sense of the facts you have? If so, outline the time sequence of events.

Which of the Common Indicators of Cohesion are missing (or low) in this group?

How strong is cohesion in this group (high or low)?

Does the group’s cohesion support the organization’s goals?

III. ***Explain*** an Area of Interest in terms of how the group’s cohesion influences the group’s individual, group, and organizational outcomes.

How has the level of cohesion in this group affected the motivation, satisfaction, and/or performance of individual group members?

How has the level of cohesion in this group affected the group’s structural dimensions and ability to get their job done?

Has the performance of the organization been affected by the group’s level of cohesion? How?

Do the facts of the case and your explanation form a pattern that allows you to identify a fundamental or **root cause** (i.e., is there something in the case information that suggests it is the underlying cause of all or most of the Areas of Interest)?

IV. ***Select*** an appropriate theoretical leader strategy(ies) that would be effective in this situation.

Which theoretical leader strategy(ies) should the leader use to address the Area(s) of Interest in this situation?

V. ***Apply*** the theoretical leader strategy(ies) to the situation in the form of a specific leader plan that addresses all Areas of Interest. The plan should be realistic and holistic, address all the Areas of Interest you have identified, and translate the theoretical leader strategies into action. What will you do and say to whom, when, where, and how?

VI. ***Assess*** the effectiveness of your leader plan and revise as needed. After your leader plan, list the measures you would use to evaluate your actions. In this step, leaders need to ask, “What information do I need to tell whether or not my leadership is having the desired effects? How will I obtain the information I need? How can it be generated? Who can help me get what I need? How often should I collect data and in what form?”

Name:

**Complete a Student Journal entry** for Cohesion Theory.

Briefly describe, from your department, a formal unit or group that had/has low cohesion. What Common Indicators of Cohesion were missing (or low)? Despite the low cohesion, did the group’s cohesion support the department’s goals? How did the low cohesion affect individual motivation, performance, and satisfaction? How did it influence group performance? Lastly, how did it affect organizational performance? What could the leader have done to improve cohesion and thereby improve individual, group, and organizational outcomes?