



Intergroup leadership: a unifying force

As the name suggests, intergroup leadership involves a fair amount of interaction among team members. On paper, it may look simple enough, but in reality, it's a lot harder to put into practice.

That's because of the various factors at play in intergroup leadership – culture, ethnicity, gender, religion, politics.

In today's fast-moving economy, the dynamics of intergroup leadership are best seen when a merger has taken place.

According to **Michael Hogg**, Professor of Social Psychology at Claremont Graduate University, one of the main challenges for intergroup leadership here is managing the anxieties of the sub group(s), because they feel that they're not going to be respected, treated as distinct, or seen as contributing something to the super-ordinate identity.

A change of focus

Though much of the leadership research has been centered around the organisational sciences, management and the like, Hogg says that help is at hand.

"I think we're in a really good position as social psychologists to be able to contribute and perhaps change the balance. And one of the reasons for that is social psychologists tend to look at particularly those who (conduct) research on collective identity,

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group identity; tend to look at how large social categories, ethnic groups, racial groups, gender groups, nations and so forth, religions – how these provide a really, really important sense of who you are ... and it's only a short step to be able to take that across to organisations," he says.

Hogg's research looks at how leaders or how certain people in groups provide the focus and the mechanism for people to define themselves. This has yielded a great deal of literature on social identity and intergroup relations that he feels can help in the whole leadership area – not just organisational leadership and management leadership, but public leadership as well.

Regardless of the context, intergroup leadership invariably involves at least two factions, more often than not with differing views. And in the case of a merger, one organisation is taken over by another, sometimes much to its chagrin.

"So typically what's going to happen there is each group, each sub-group, each previous organisation feels very threatened. It feels that its whole identity and sense of self is going to be absorbed into this amorphous identity. They feel a threat, an identity threat."

A little generosity goes a long way

Hogg says one of the first things the leaders need to do in these situations is somehow disarm that identity threat.

To do this, the leader has to make sure that the sub groups each see that their own attributes are adequately reflected in the super-ordinate group. Instilling this sense of inclusiveness will go a long way towards rebuilding cohesiveness within the new entity. If there is enough goodwill, it can create inroads to trust, where the value creation is enormous.

“If you trust your leaders, chances are you’ll allow your leader to be innovative; to do different things to move an organisation, if it’s an organisation or a nation in different dimensions. But you’re only going to allow a leader to do that if you trust that person.”

Hogg cautions, however, that if the leader is seen to come from this dominant sub group, the level of trust will be significantly reduced, because of obvious partisanship.

The best way of dealing with this, he says, is to start with a clean slate and bring someone from outside with no affiliations to either group – a neutral outsider as the leader to bridge the gap between the groups.

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