
Networking for Team and/or Self



By Frederic Godart , INSEAD

Teams and their leaders may have conflicting networking goals. That needn't be a problem, but often is.

When it comes to teamwork, the role of team leaders is not only about setting goals and allocating resources, but also organising the work of their team members and forming networks among them, such as who works with whom, where and when. To get their work done, one team might need a leader to coordinate otherwise unconnected team members (for example, with separate, specialised sub-teams such as task forces), while another team might need to be more cohesive, tightly knit group collaboration.

The leader, therefore, often walks a tightrope between acting as a broker to channel information and connections from multiple unconnected team members and creating a highly cohesive group to shield the team from distrust. Leaders play a balancing act between brokerage and closure. But this presents a dilemma. In addition to managing the team, a leader also has other aims, such as furthering his or her own career. He or she may use and abuse “the power of networks” to manipulate team members and advance up the corporate ladder at their expense (for example, by “dividing and conquering” and playing sub-teams against each other, or not diffusing information and using it for his or her own advantage).

This means leaders might make certain trade-offs for their own or their team's benefit, which can affect their team's performance. Teams and their leaders may thus be at odds, creating a social dilemma.

Broker or protector?

I studied this phenomenon in my latest theoretical research paper with Fabrice Cavarretta and Matthias Thiemann, [“Task complexity and shared value orientation: exploring the moderators of a social dilemma in team social networks”](#), to explore the costs and benefits of brokerage network strategies within teams and what we call closure strategies, i.e. maintaining tighter connections to keep the team cohesive. We show that the extent of the dilemma between the two depends on the complexity of the team's work, i.e. how dependent they are on one another, and whether the team is individualistic or collectivistic in its nature.

Unlike previous research, our theories focus on the divergence of interest between the team leader and their team, depending on various characteristics of the latter.

Based on research of the literature in this area, we propose Figure 1 as a visualisation, which shows different levels of performance for team leaders and their teams, depending on their level of brokerage or closure:

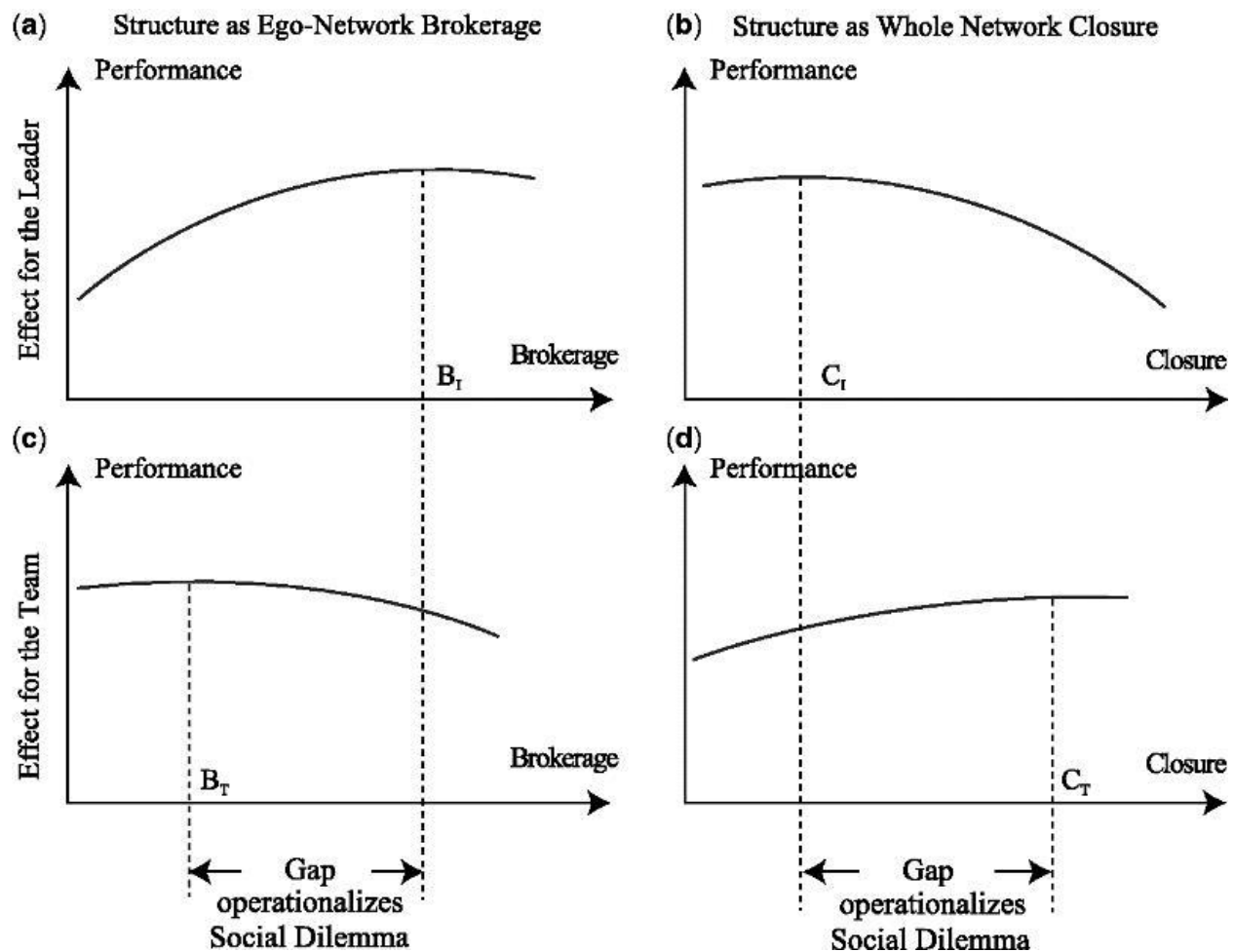


Figure 1. Social dilemma as the multilevel gap between optimal structures for closed teams

We will use this figure in future empirical work to try and test it. As shown, the benefits for the leader and the team vary. The gap between the needs of the team leader and those of the team is visible in our chart for brokerage or closure (which can be, in most cases, considered opposites). An optimum point for the leader is never exactly the same as for the team, as seen in Figure 1. When a broker leader (as seen in (a)) performs best, the team's performance (c) starts to decline in performance beyond a certain point. When the cohesive leader (b) performs best, the team (d) is far from its best performance. The social dilemma can be seen in these gaps.

Brokered and cohesive teams also have other characteristics to consider, in terms of impact on performance. For high task complexity, when multiple team members are required to work closely together to meet a challenging common goal, the optimum team structure is a cohesive one. In this way, the team members can trust and rely on each other and act quickly. As

brokerage by the team leader increases, the team that is heavily reliant on one another to complete a task starts to crumble and the social dilemma – the rift – between the team leader and team increases.

For individualistic teams in which team members value the individual's autonomy, brokerage is accepted and even possibly encouraged. Leaders can get away with brokerage and self-serving behaviours in this environment, although it is precisely then that more closure could help the team deal with its challenges.

Nationality can have an impact on the individualistic/collectivistic nature of teams. Americans, for example, are more likely to be more comfortable in individualistic teams and other nationalities which are more accustomed to a well-defined group structure, like Japanese, may be more comfortable in collectivistic teams.

Social networking strategies for the leader

Team leaders, especially in some contexts such as when there is a high complexity of tasks, quickly find out that networking for self-serving purposes is not a viable option for a successful team, although they may personally benefit from it.

Solving the dilemma would imply that the leader actually goes against his or her own interests from time to time or that team members decide that they should work together and put pressure on the team leader. Human resources departments or bosses can also enforce “rules” directing team leaders to focus on the needs of the team or find ways to reduce the tension between the team members and the leader.

Organisational adjustments

Organisations can act to ensure that leaders and their teams are both successful through three levers: hiring, developing the right culture and aligning incentives. The first solution should be putting the right people in place, hiring and promoting managers who are aware of these issues and who make the success of the team their own success.

The second option is to cultivate a culture that fosters collaboration, reinforcing this culture with training and teamwork exercises for example. Team leaders should understand when there is a problem and make it their duty as a manager is to solve social dilemmas, even if it goes against their

own best interests.

Finally, team leaders are often motivated people, and aligning the leader's incentives to reflect the success of the team should be a priority.

Determining how to best incentivise them – with rewards or punishment – depends on other factors like national and company cultures.

Understanding the nature of their teams, their goals and primarily themselves, team leaders need to find the balance between their own networking needs and those of their team to achieve the best possible team performance.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/networking-team-andor-self>

About the author(s)

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