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How Team Player Styles Impacts Followership Behavior

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Abstract

This empirical research study examines the effect of Parker's (2008) team player styles on followership behavior. While most research focuses on the team leader, most of the work accomplishments are attributed to the team players on the team. Of the four team player styles, only one, contributor significantly increases followership behavior. However, it does not add enough to raise the followership behavior into the exemplary range. Discussion of the findings is provided coupled with a post hoc analysis and ideas for future research.

Keywords

team player styles, followership behavior, team player impact

1. Introduction

Workplace teams were predicted to be the building blocks of organizations in the 21st century (Senge, 1990). Research on teams in the workplace has increased in recent years examining the team player, social interdependence, and organizational performance (Johnson & Johnson, 2005; Millhiser et al., 2011; Parker, 2008; Taggar & Haines, 2006). This trend has paralleled the evolution of the construct of team player as organizations have emphasized the importance of the team player (Parker, 2008; Scarnati, 2001). Particularly, research on the impact of team players on an organization demonstrated a critical difference in performance between high-performing teams and other teams (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993).

Based on social exchange theory, teams are interdependent, and success is reliant on the actions of other people (Blau, 1964). Moreover, teams involve social interdependence theory which asserts that an individual's performance on a team is dependent upon the interactions between team members

(Deutsch, 1949). Parker's (2008) definition of team bridges historical understanding with modern applications suggesting teams are "a group of people with a high degree of interdependence geared towards the achievement of a goal or completion of a task" (p.13).

Parker's definition of team shares similarities with followership, particularly with Chaleff's (2009) definition of followership as an exchange of influence between people to achieve a shared goal. The exchange of influence is based on leader-member exchange wherein relationships between leaders and followers significantly impact the followers' performance and contributions to the shared goals (Lindsey Hall et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2019).

Followers who work on a team are contributors to the shared goal with their team members and leader. Parker (2008) has identified differing team player styles while Peterson et al. (2021) have identified differing levels of followership. The purpose of this research is to examine relationships between team player styles and followership scores.

2. Literature Review

According to Katzenbach and Smith (1993) a team is a small group of people with complementary skills who are committed to a shared purpose and a team approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable. The complementary skills that the team members bring to the team are: technical skills, problem-solving skills, interpersonal skills, and managing skills. While there are countless differences in the people that encompass teams, there are also similarities that can categorize team players into common methods of interaction to achieve shared goals. Parker (2008) suggested that team players participate with a group through one of four styles to achieve a shared purpose.

One of those team player styles is categorized as a *Contributor*. These team members are usually responsible, thorough, and reliable team members who focus on *tasks* and technical information. Their strengths lie in sharing information with the team and making sure every aspect of a project is completed on time. Parker (2008) says that contributors are task-oriented individuals who enjoy providing the team with good technical information. They do the assigned pre-work, they set high-performance standards, and they make effective and efficient use of resources. Similar to those team members who bring technical skills to the team (Katzenbach & Smith,1993).

The second category of team player style is *Collaborator*. These individuals are generally forward-looking, goal-directed, and imaginative team members who focus on *goals* and the big picture. Collaborators make sure the project stays on track. According to Parker (2008), the collaborator is a goal-directed individual who sees the purpose of the team as central to its existence. However, the collaborator is also open to new ideas, willing to pitch in and work outside their defined role. Their focus is on the purpose of the team, not their personal recognition. Most likely these team members bring problem-solving skills (Katzenbach & Smith,1993) to the team with their ability to diverge and converse on solutions to problems the team faces to achieve the goals of the team.

The third category according to Parker is *Communicator*. These individuals are generally supportive, considerate, and tactful team members who focus on *process* and consensus building. These team players are dedicated to ensuring effective process management. Parker (2008) would say that the communicator is an effective listener and facilitator of involvement, conflict resolution, and consensus building. They bring interpersonal skills coupled with some managing skills (Katzenbach & Smith,1993). Since these individuals focus on the *process* or the way work is planned, resources are organized, how the work is implemented, and the way the work is monitored, they provide the managing skills needed by the team.

The final category is *Challenger*. These individuals are generally honest, outspoken, and ethical team members who focus on *questions* regarding methods and goals. They are looking at the larger purpose of the team and continually asking why. Again Parker (2008) says the challenger is a team member who questions the goals, methods, and even the ethics of the team. They are willing to question the leader. They are very principled individuals. These individuals might bring technical skills (Katzenbach & Smith,1993) and because of their expertise, they might challenge the way a task is accomplished. They might bring problem-solving skills (Katzenbach & Smith,1993) and challenge either the creative portion of problem-solving or challenge the alternative selection process. Parker suggested these styles are not hierarchical, and one style is not greater than the others, rather they are diverse ways in which team players participate in achieving the shared purpose of the team.

While Parker has suggested that no style is greater than others, researchers have suggested that teams focused on collaboration are more likely to have shared mental models. Burke et al. (2006) postulated that teams who have similar goals and work to support each other's goals experience a higher level of team adaptation or collective performance. A modern study, however, reported that team adaptation was not significant in a team's task performance (Yue et al., 2019). This would suggest that there are varying results in collaborator team player styles and team performance.

Followership researchers have suggested that followers fall into three categories: low, moderate, and exemplary, wherein exemplary followers are high performers as team players (Peterson et al., 2021). Individuals with *low followership* are not committed to the shared purpose of the team and do not act out expectations with the intention of supporting the team or fulfilling the shared purpose. Gallup's (Harter at al., 2009; Ott, 2007; Wagner & Harter, 2006) engagement level of *active disengagement* is similar to this type of follower. Actively disengaged individuals are described as employees who have intentions of doing more harm than good to the team and organization. This type of follower aligns with the commitment level that Etzioni (1961) labeled *alienative committed*. Alienative committed employees would not feel any commitment to the team or the purpose.

Individuals with *moderate followership* perform their required job duties to the minimal extent of expectations. However, they may not be committed to the shared purpose of the team. These followers may function well within the team but do not contribute ideas and tend to focus on personal goals over

team goals. These followers may be easily distracted or more apt to be not engaged based on the behaviors of team members around them. Etizioni's (1961) description of *calculative* commitment is similar to this type of followers in that followers may appear exemplary; however, their participation is based on personal wants or needs. This is similar to Gallup's (Harter et al., 2009; Ott, 2007; Wagner & Harter, 2006) engagement level of *not engaged* where followers would only give minimal effort and energy towards the shared purpose.

Exemplary followers are committed and engaged in achieving the shared purpose of the team. These followers frequently share their expertise with the team, are actively engaged in achieving the shared purpose of the team, and regularly go beyond the duties expected of their assigned role. This type of follower aligns with Gallup's (Harter et al., 2009; Ott, 2007; Wagner & Harter, 2006) definition of *engaged* employees in that *exemplary followers* are passionate about the shared purpose and contribute new ideas. Moreover, *exemplary followers* would be *morally* committed according to Etzioni's (1961) definition because they would internalize the values and standards of the team.

Kelley (1992) suggested that exemplary followers, much like contributor team players, share responsibilities and are highly reliable workers on their teams. Moreover, Kelley suggested that exemplary followers complete tasks; however, Kelley differentiates from Parker in that exemplary followers prioritize tasks based on team needs rather than personal needs. Kelley, also suggested that exemplary followers, like collaborators and communicator team players, are focused on shared goals and supportive of other team players in achieving the shared goal.

Chaleff (2009) suggested exemplary followers, like challenger team players, must ask difficult questions to ensure the team continues to focus on the shared goal. Moreover, Chaleff suggested exemplary followers are courageous at times when they are needed to challenge the direction of the leader if it does not align with organizational or team goals.

The connection between Kelley (1992), Parker (2008), Chaleff (2009), and Peterson, et al. (2021) is that accountability is placed on the individual as part of a group rather than the group as one unit. McIntyre and Salas (1995) suggested that teams are more effective when organizations conceptualize and support teamwork. Hirschfeld et al. (2006) added to McIntyre and Salas (1995) reporting that teams were more effective when the individual participants were clear on what they viewed as an effective team. Hirschfeld et al.'s paradigmatic shift in modern times to understanding effective teams from the individual input level is consistent with our concept of exemplary followership. This coupled with the strong linkage between Parker's Team Player Styles and Katzenbach and Smith's complementary skills has led to the following four hypotheses:

H_1: Subjects who indicate higher levels of *contributor* as a team player will show greater exemplary followership.

H_2: Subjects who indicate higher levels of *collaborator* as a team player will show greater exemplary followership.

H_3: Subjects who indicate higher levels of *communicator* as a team player will show greater exemplary followership.

H_4: Subjects who indicate higher levels of *challenger* as a team player will show greater exemplary followership.

3. Method

Participants were recruited through SurveyMonkey, which recruits participants for surveys from their users. SurveyMonkey screens their participants based on user profiles set up on their site with matching demographics (SurveyMonkey, 2018). The participants are paid a minimal amount ($0.35) for their responses. The screening process required that participants be at least 18 years of age and work in some role in the healthcare industry within the United States.

Two instruments were concatenated into one electronic survey along with demographics such as gender, age, ethnicity, education level, and length of employment. The survey was then distributed by SurveyMonkey to individuals who met the screening requirements. This resulted in 215 usable responses.

The instrument we used to identify team player styles of participants was developed by Glenn Parker (2008) called the Parker Team Player Survey (PTPS). The PTPS is an 18-item self-report instrument that reports one of four team player styles. This uses a rank order scale for each of the 18 items which consists of possible behaviors. Each respondent ranks the behavior they are most likely to do as #1, with #4 being the one they are least likely to do. The range of scores for each style is from 18 (low reporting of that specific Team Player Style) to 72 (high reporting of that specific Team Player Style). The PTPS has been tested and retested for reliability. Parker (1991) reported Cronbach's alpha for the subscales as: contributor = .67, collaborator = .55, communicator = .71, and challenger = .51. Parker used this instrument in a healthcare setting noting the distribution of styles: contributor = 12.9%, collaborator = 27.6%, communicator = 12.1%, challenger = 20.2%, and two or more primary styles = 27.2%. Our sample came from the healthcare industry as well.

Followership was measured using the Peterson et al. (2021) instrument with 32 items. It uses a Likert scale ranging from 0 to 6. There are three anchors on the scale: 0=Never, 3=Occasionally, and 6= Almost Always. The highest possible score with this followership instrument is 192. The score range is categorized into three categories: low followership (0-64); moderate followership (65-128); and exemplary followership (129-192). All factor loadings for the 32-item scale exceeded .5. The overall followership Cronbach's alpha for their instrument was .97. Next, we report on our findings between the relationships of team player styles and followership behavior.

4. Results

All 215 participants completed both the 18-item team player style portion of the survey and the 32-item followership portion. When participants failed to answer one item on the team player assessment. The sample size was large enough that we used the mean for that item to fill in those blanks. No participant had more than one blank on this portion of the overall survey.

A total of 182 (85%) females participated along with 31 (14%) males and two who preferred not to identify their gender (1%), which is consistent with the healthcare industry which is typically comprised of more than 80 percent female employees. The mean age of the respondents was 38 years ranging from 18 to 64. Seventy-four percent of the population was Caucasian. 9% were African American, and the remaining 17% spread across many other ethnicities. The vast majority (92%) had some college or professional certification and only 8% reported having only a high school education. The mean length of employment was 7.9 years, ranging from a half year to 39 years of employment. The descriptive statistics and correlation matrix for all of the variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Zero Order Correlations (n = 215)

Variable	Mean (s.d.)	1	2	3	4
1.Followership	118.42 (24.05)				
2.Contributor	43.69 (5.41)	.22**			
3.Collaborator	43.10 (4.94)	-.08	-.21**		
4.Communicator	45.20 (5.87)	-.08	-.53**	-.15*	
5. Challenger	47.65 (5.50)	-.10	-.16*	-.42**	-.42**

* P < .05; ** p < .01

One interesting finding from the correlation matrix is that the four-team player styles are significantly different from each other so that when one style goes up the other styles go down. In addition, the only team player style that is positively correlated with the followership variable is a *contributor*. This is consistent with Collins' (2001) level two leadership, which he defines as *Contributing Team Member*. At this level, the team member uses their knowledge and skills to help the team succeed. The contributing team member works effectively with other members of the team. The other three styles are negatively correlated with followership, not something we anticipated. It is important to point out that while they are negatively correlated with followership none of these correlations are statistically significant.

Since the four-team player styles are categorical variables, using the mean value we divided each team player style into two subgroups – those with scores above the mean were considered high in the subgroup (coded as 2) and those with scores below the mean were considered low in the subgroup (coded as 1). Next, *t-tests* were used to determine if the scores above the mean were significantly

different than the scores below the mean. This process was done for all four team player styles to answer each hypothesis. As a reminder, we have placed the hypothesis here. H_1: Subjects who indicate higher levels of *contributor* as a team player will show greater followership behavior.

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted between the followership means for contributor team player style to compare followership behavior from contributors who scored below the mean to those who scored above the mean. Table 2 below displays the *t*-test results.

Table 2. *T-test* for Contributor Style (n= 215)

Variable	High Contributor *M* (s.d.)	Low Contributor *M* (s.d.)	*t*(213) *df*=2	*p*	Cohen's *d*
Followership	121.99 (20.54)	114.38 (27.01)	2.34	.02	.32

There was a significant difference in the followership behavior for participants who scored higher on *contributor* than the participants who scored lower on *contributo*r. These results indicate that the followership mean score was significantly lower for contributors reporting a lower contributor style. Cohen's d = .32 indicated a medium effect size and when converted to r^2 the amount of variance in the followership scores for *contributors* was a small effect size of .16. The results do support Hypothesis 1: subjects who indicate higher levels of a *contributor* as a team player will show greater followership scores. Based on these results, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

The next hypothesis examined the collaborator style as it relates to followership behaviors. The hypothesis read: H_2: Subjects who indicate higher levels of *collaborator* as a team player will show greater exemplary followership behavior. We followed the same process as for hypothesis 1 by dividing the collaborator team player style at the mean into two categories of high and low based on their score compared to the mean. Then we performed a *t-test* on the two independent samples. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. *T-test* for Collaborator Style (n= 215)

Variable	High Collaborator *M* (s.d.)	Low Collaborator *M* (s.d.)	*t*(213) *df*=2	*p*
Followership	118.54 (24.03)	118.33 (24.16)	.06	.95

This hypothesis was not supported. The two means and standard deviations are almost identical. Because there is no significant difference, there was no reason to calculate the r^2. These results suggest that a person's *collaborator* style does not impact a person's followership behavior.

We next examined the *Communicator* Team Player Style. The hypothesis for this team player style was similar to the first hypothesis: H_3: Subjects who indicate higher levels of *communicator* team player

style will show greater followership behavior.

Again, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted between the followership means for participants who indicated the *communicator* team player style to compare followership behavior from communicators who were below the communicator mean to those above the mean. Table 4 below displays the results.

Table 4. *T-test* for Communicator Style (n= 215)

Variable	High Communicator *M* (s.d.)	Low Communicator *M* (s.d.)	*t*(213) *df*=2	*p*
Followership	116.89 (26.41)	119.90 (21.52)	-.92	.36

There was no significant difference in the followership scores for participants who scored high on communicator (M = 116.89) and participants who scored low on communicator (M = 119.90). The results indicate that Hypothesis 3 is not supported. While this hypothesis is not supported, it is interesting to note that the followership score is higher for those low in the communicator style than those high in the communicator style.

Finally, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted for participants who indicated the *challenger* team player style to compare followership behavior scores from challengers who were below the challenger mean to those above the mean. The hypothesis read: H_4: Subjects who indicate higher levels of *challenger* as a team player will show greater exemplary followership. Table 5 below displays the results of this analysis.

Table 5. *T-test* for Challenger Style (n= 215)

Variable	High Challenger *M* (s.d.)	Low Challenger *M* (s.d.)	*t*(213) *df*=2	*p*
Followership	115.57 (25.52)	121.24(22.26)	-1.74	.08

There was no significant difference in the followership behavior scores for participants who scored lower on challenger and participants who scored higher on challenger. However, once again those who scored lower on *Challenger* scored higher on followership behaviors. These results indicate that Hypothesis 4 is not supported but they do raise some interesting thoughts for the discussion session of this manuscript

5. Discussion

Our findings suggest exemplary followers must be *contributors* to the shared purpose of the team. While our results are significant and the effect size according to Cohen (1992) is medium, it is

important to note that the mean value of the high contributor style (121.99) does not reach the exemplary level which ranges from 129-192. So, while the *contributor* style is statistically significant, the results have made us pause to reevaluate our analysis. In the study, there are only five individuals (2.3%) in the low followership category. This did not really surprise us too much since these individuals would be labeled as alienated committed by Etizoni (1961) and actively disengaged by Harter et al. (2009), Ott (2007), and Wagner and Harter (2006). We generally would not expect these individuals to even participate in studies about their organizations and their followership behaviors. On the other hand, there are 136 individuals (63.3%) of the sample that identify as exhibiting moderate followership behaviors. The final 74 (34.4%) identify as exemplary followers. Could it be that the mean split for the different team player styles is diluted by the five low followers? Could it be that the correct dependent variable is followership behaviors and the independent variable is the team player styles? This thinking led us to conduct a set of post hoc analyses.

6. Post Hoc Analysis

We began our post hoc analysis by examining the five individuals who scored below the cutoff, which was 64. Their scores ranged from 1 to 57. The mean score was 37.2 and the standard deviation was 22.96. We reexamine the individual who scored a 1 on the followership assessment. In fact, the person had completed the whole survey and had placed zeros in all of the followership items except for one which he rated a 1. Since the followership assessment came first and the individual completed all the other items on the survey including the demographics, we are sure that this individual intended to indicate that they are not much of a follower. We decided to eliminate the five individuals and then rerun all of our statistical analyses. Having done this, we found that the elimination of the five individuals did not change our results. Still, none of the team player styles allowed participants to rise to the exemplary followership level. This seems to confirm our earlier analysis that while the Contributor style does increase followership, it does not increase it enough to reach exemplary status.

Our second post hoc analysis was to flip our initial analysis on its head by using followership as the dependent variable and team player styles as the independent variables. Our thinking was that as individuals move from lower levels of followership up to exemplary followership, they might incorporate the different team player styles that Parker (2008) has identified. We returned to the full sample of 215 participants and split the followers into three categories: Low (0-64), Moderate (65-128), and Exemplary (129-192). We then did four one-way analyses of variance on each of the team player styles. Our results still showed that the *Contributor* style was significantly different between the exemplary followers and the low followers. However, there is no significant difference between the exemplary followers and the moderate followers. Again, there is no significant findings for the other three team player styles. The mean score for the *Contributor* style is 44.5 for exemplary followers. Given that the maximum score on this style is 72, it clearly indicates that while exemplary follower in

this study exhibited more contribution to the team it does not help us better identify a team player style that if developed would lead to exemplary followership.

What are the implications of this research? Many businesses use the Parker Team Player Styles in professional development sessions to train employees to be better team members. While the assessment is easy to administer and interpret, it will not increase followership on the team or within the organization. It might even harm the team functioning by employees placing labels on different members of the team. Based on those labels team members might develop expectations of different team members, such as expecting someone with the label of *communicator* to carry the conversation in team meetings, allowing other team members to sit back and not share in the communication process. Another implication of this research is to signal to other followership researchers that this is not a fruitful vein to follow in conducting followership research.

In conclusion, while the Contributor style does increase followership, it does not raise it to an exemplary level. While this is disappointing, it has pointed us in a different direction that might be more fruitful. We are now turning our attention to Psychological Capital (Luthans, Youssef, Sweetman, and Harms, 2013), Etzioni's (1961) commitment scale, and Gallup's (Harter et al., 2009; Ott, 2007; Wagner & Harter, 2006) engagement assessment. We will be collecting a new sample using these assessment tools to better understand exemplary followership and to identify factors that organizations can use to develop an increase in exemplary followership in their teams and their organizations.

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