

Cross-understanding will help complex and diverse teams achieve mutually agreeable solutions

*Teams whose members have diverse backgrounds can experience differences in task knowledge, sensitivities to various aspects of the task system, as well as beliefs and preferences about how to best approach or solve a problem. How might managers deal with this? **Niranjan Janardhanan, Kyle Lewis, Rhonda R. Reger, and Cynthia K. Stevens** write that, rather than focusing on common ground, team leaders should emphasise cross-understanding. Understanding the bases of someone's views will help get to the real reasons behind differences in opinion, and therefore help to achieve mutually agreeable solutions.*

Organisations depend on multifunctional teams to get complex tasks done. Think manufacturing teams integrating module-based processes, healthcare teams engaged in a multi-specialty operation, or top management teams making a strategic decision. The diversity of views, knowledge, beliefs, and capabilities of these teams are often an essential feature to resolve the multi-faceted nature of problems they work on.

Although teams benefit from this diversity, do individual team members learn from interacting with fellow team members in such contexts? Do they come away more confused by being pulled in different directions, or do they feel enriched with new knowledge that they can bring to another similar task in the future? Our research sought to answer this “What’s in it for me?” question for individual team members in complex and diverse teams.

Diversity in backgrounds of individual members of teams gives rise to differences in task knowledge, sensitivities to various aspects of the task system, as well as beliefs and preferences about how to best approach or solve a problem. In other words, every individual’s approach to addressing the same problem is likely to be unique. Thanks to these underlying differences in how they each approach the problem, achieving ‘common ground’ is often challenging. [Huber and Lewis \(2017\)](#) introduced the concept of team ‘cross-understanding’. Cross-understanding is said to be high when team members realise and comprehend these differences.

In our recent [paper](#), we first demonstrate that team cross-understanding, rather than achieving common ground, improves team performance. In other words, the more individual team members comprehend the bases for the divergence in arguments that are made, the more they are likely to work towards identifying ways to resolve them, rather than fight it out. These arguments and discussions enhance the quality of decision-making rather than impede it. Beyond team performance, we also find that cross-understanding improves individual learning and performance on a similar subsequent task. In other words, individuals who were in teams that had a higher level of cross-understanding felt more included, and learned more about the task, than those in teams with lower cross-understanding.

Having established that cross-understanding is beneficial for both teams as well as its constituent members, we also aimed to establish the motivational antecedents that bring about cross-understanding in teams. We [examined](#) team goal orientation that pertains to the emphasis on mastery or performance pursuits in complex situations.

There are broadly two types of goal orientation. We found that team learning orientation—the propensity of team members to use complex situations to develop new capabilities—fosters higher cross-understanding, and that team performance orientation—the propensity of team members to demonstrate existing capabilities in complex situations—dampens this relationship. Our [findings](#) show that “managers might enable their teams to achieve better performance by reducing pressure to demonstrate capabilities and manage impressions, enhancing the safety of sharing diverse perspectives, and promoting a climate of helpful feedback and support.”

Our research establishes that in situations where common ground is unlikely, understanding the bases of someone’s views will help get to the real reasons behind differences in opinion, and therefore help to achieve mutually agreeable solutions... much like peeling an onion, where team members may realise that their fears or preconceptions are baseless.



Notes:

- *This blog post appeared first on LSE's Department of Management [blog](#). It is based on [Getting to know you: Motivating cross-understanding for improved team and individual performance](#), Organization Science.*
- *The post expresses the views of its author(s), not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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