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COHESION IN THE MILITARY

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Abstract:

The cohesiveness is considered to be an important characteristic of a group: it helps organizations increase the overall performance. Although, there are situations in which the cohesion may decrease the productivity or work against the organization.

The military organization is different from a regular civilian organization: it is mission oriented, focused on effectiveness while the group cohesiveness plays a small part in the outcome. More than that, military leaders, even having coercion tools available, they have much fewer tools than civilian leaders to adjust groups' cohesion in order to fit organizational needs. Military leaders need to balance the authority and group expectations.

Key words: group, cohesiveness, military, interaction, leadership, motivation, organization, goals.

Introduction

A simplified study of groups' motivation influence on a company performance may take into consideration a combination of group cohesion and goal acceptance. The combination of different levels of the two input factors would lead to different levels of performance. While in the civilian life there is abundance of tools to adjust the cohesion and goal acceptance (through financial, social, or constriction means), there is different situation within the military: a commander will have only limited means to influence the behavior of the group.

This discusses the main factors that influence the group cohesion and the implication of group cohesion in organization's overall performance. In the second part, the paper focuses on the specific group category, the military organization, looking into the differences civilian vs. military organizations and analyzing specific factors that affect military group cohesion.

1. Defining group cohesion.

Cohesion is defined as the “act or state of sticking together”¹, or the degree of the motivation to stay in that specific group.² Broadening the meaning, “cohesiveness” is the term generally used in human resources and psychology to analyze the human behavior, either individually as part of a group, or the group as a whole.

As general rule, the members of a cohesive group are highly motivated to work together, to cooperate and to continue to be part of the group. The affirmation is valid not

¹ Merriam-Webster, Incorporated. *Merriam-Webster's Speaking Collegiate Dictionary*. Franklin Electronic Publishers, Inc. (Burlington, N.J., 2009).

² Joyce S. Osland, David A. Kolb, Irwin M. Rubin, and Marlene E. Turner. *Organizational Behavior: An Experiential Approach*. (New Jersey, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 259.

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only in positive situations, when group cohesion leads to organization's success but also in less desirable situations where there is a disconnection between the leadership and the working groups and the group cohesion inhibit or even decreases organization's performance. A positive influence of group cohesion on the performance is enabled by the following factors:³

- a) *Similar opinions and values*, considered by Bogáthy as the most powerful source of group cohesion. Interpersonal attraction (shared liking for the members of the group) occurs when there are common values and knowledge, as in the military organizations that lead to similar opinions. Is this interpersonal attraction that maximizes the positive influence of group cohesion on organization's performance;⁴
- b) *The initiation phase* – harder to accede to the group, more attractive is the group membership and stronger the cohesiveness;
- c) *The dimension of the group* – smaller groups allow the interaction among its members and facilitate common opinions; on the other hand, bigger groups may split in smaller groups, based on specific common values and opinions, and the intergroup conflict may arise;
- d) *Task commitment* – tasks successfully accomplished by the group develops individual confidence in group membership, increasing the motivation to remain part of it;
- e) *External threat* – reasonable external threats to the group lead to increased cohesiveness.

It is widely accepted in the psychology field that high cohesiveness, coupled with high quality leadership, leads toward high performance, even though too high cohesiveness may lead to low productivity in the economical sector.⁵ It is safe, then to consider that influencing positively the group cohesiveness, we may alter, to some extent, group's performance. Steers and Black define the following factors influencing group's cohesiveness:

- a) *Group homogeneity* – the more members share the same values, backgrounds and characteristics, the greater the cohesiveness;
- b) *Group maturity* – one group's cohesiveness becomes stronger in time; longer interaction between members helps develop a shared experience within the group;
- c) *Frequency of interaction* – individuals that interact on a regular basis have the opportunity to discover common values and values and, if part of the same group of interests, develop a more cohesive group than groups that meet less frequently.
- d) *Success*, if based on common success and recognition, raises the group pride and facilitates increased cohesion.⁶

In addition to these factors, Steers mentions group size, external threat and clear defined group goals as factors that directly influence the group cohesiveness, not only augmenting the cohesiveness influence on the performance.

³ Zoltán Bogáthy, *Manual de psihologia muncii și organizațională*. (Iași: Polirom, 2004), 258

⁴ Daniel J. Beal, et. Al, *Cohesion and Performance in Groups: A Meta-Analytic Clarification of Construct Relations*. (2003, Vol. 88, No. 6: 989–1004), 997

⁵ Zoltán Bogáthy, 259

⁶ Richard M. Steers and J. Stewart Black. *Organizational Behavior (Fifth Edition)*. (New York, NY: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1994.), 258

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If we've mentioned the positive influence of group cohesion on organization's performance, it worth taking a look at the negative consequences of low degree of cohesion: individual isolation, low work satisfaction, absenteeism, members' autonomy. In this respect, we can see that there are some consequences that are not desirable at all in the military organization.

From the study on an AT&T Credit group, Steers illustrates that there is a strong relation between the degree of cohesiveness, agreement on organizational goals and group's performance, as shown in the following exhibit:

		Agreement with Organizational Goals (goal acceptance)	
		High	Low
Degree of Group Cohesiveness	High	High Performance	Low Performance
	Low	Moderate performance	Low Performance

Table 1. The relation between Group Cohesiveness, Goal Acceptance (Agreement) and the Performance as Outcome. (Steers and Black 1994)

What the table suggests is that all the military leaders (at different levels) need to do is, in order to boost unit's performance, either build robust, cohesive small groups or facilitate cohesion development within larger groups. If that is the case, is the goal of next chapter to study.

2. Military Groups. Cohesion in the Military.

Besides the direct relationship between group cohesiveness and group's performance, we need to study different factors that differentiate the civilian life from the military environment. The military group, including the leadership, is differently structured by the civilian organizational group; the organizational goals are different in both situations; there is no situation in the civilian life that may compare to the *in combat* status of a military group, and nevertheless, the motivational means in the military are different from the motivational tools available in a civilian organization.

2.1 Military Groups.

From the perspective of cohesiveness, the military groups differ from the civilian groups in the following aspects:

- a) *Group structure*: while the composition of a civilian organization is based on individual performance and skills, in the military the group members are usually appointed to perform duties on a specific position;
- b) *External threat* – there is no situation we may think of in the civilian organizations where the external threat against a group is higher than the external threat on a military group in battle. The reliance amongst military members is very high during military operations and there is high possibility the group dismantles in case of (heavy) casualties;

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- c) *Organization's Leadership* – if the formal leader often the same as the informal leader in civilian organizations, usually based on meritocracy, the military leaders are usually appointed, not infrequently, from different reasons that meritocracy (either they followed a strict, specific career path, or they just partially met the job description). In both cases, there might be the situation that the formal (appointed yet not elected) leader is different than the informal leader.

The military leader, at least at tactical level, is a passive leader, i.e. he receives the mission from his/her superiors and requires the same from the subordinates. He has limited input on the model that defines the group performance (actions). The conservative military institution, based on rules, technical standards and standard operating procedures accentuates the “passive” character of military leadership.

- d) *The dimension of the group* – depending on the level of the military structure, the groups might be small (the air forces and to some extent the navies), or large, as a company or battalion in land forces. Although it is expected that the former groups are more cohesive than the later, there might not always be the case: the technicality of the air and naval forces, limits the interaction between group members. In land forces, including special forces, there is an inter-dependency amongst members and greater interaction that leads to greater cohesiveness, even in bigger groups, company size for example.

2.2 Cohesion in Military Organizations.

The military might be seen both as an *institution* (strict norms, regulations, structure, and the chain of command influence the personal behavior and limit the personal relations at the formal level), but also as *organization* – its members interact through social or cultural events, they have a common background and history from relatively early age, starting from schools. The social interaction between military members is even more visible in small services, like the Romanian Navy or Air Forces, where almost all members know each other. This social interaction is a preferred solution when it comes to developing cohesiveness and becomes practice in almost every civilian organization, or even in large military organizations. But, as experts in the Canadian military Academy mentions,

“[t]he military's deliberately powerful socialization system and processes [might] create and reinforce a “tight culture” in which in-groups undoubtedly develop. One of the intended consequences of these socializing influences is the development of the cohesive, highly motivated groups deemed necessary for group survival and successful missions. One unintended – often negative – result is the emergence of norms, values, and stereotypes that exclude the “not like us” groups.”⁷

We may see that, even though the high cohesion enables a group to attain great performance, sometimes it has negative impact in the military. The questions of when the cohesiveness *is advantageous* and when *there is not* worth answered.

Daniel Beal considers that when the members of a group work together to efficiently attain a common goal in the organization, then the cohesiveness successfully contributes to performance. Instead, when the members are focused on successfully

⁷ Franklin C., Pinch, Allister T. MacIntyre. *Challenge and change in the military: gender and diversity issue*. (Kingston, Ontario: Wing Publishing Office, 2006.), 3

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complete a given task, as it is the case of the military actions, the cohesiveness doesn't prove to weigh too much; Beal says that "cohesive groups also achieve performance benefits when group performance is conceptualized as a behavior instead of an outcome."⁸ Groups focused on efficiency rather than effectiveness will benefit more from high cohesiveness.

When acting during peacetime, a military group behaves more like a civilian organization: the rewards are more valued, the discipline is negatively affected by members' social status, and leaders tend to negotiate their leading position within the group instead to gain it. The group is, in peacetime, required to focus on efficiency rather than effectiveness. Studies within the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery shows that:

*"cohesion is always an important aspect in any efficient group and especially in an Artillery Troop but when it gets to the level that negative norms are created it causes a problem and members begin to have altered judgment.[...] Within the Artillery world leadership is very essential and sometimes when members are not lead in the right direction as seen through the sergeant in this situation, they will make poor decisions."*⁹

Since the military fights during battles and are concerned about efficiency during peacetime with the same personnel, it's necessary that there is a balance between cohesion and leadership. Neither one has to overweigh the other yet there should be a balance between the two. More than that, there might be the case that a poor leadership develops negative high cohesion, the group acting against the leadership and the organizational goals.

One may argue that using proper tools, the leadership may adjust group's cohesion to fit organization's needs. This is not easily done in the military, though. Compared to a civilian leader, the military commander doesn't have too many tools available: there is nothing to say about remuneration and very little about rewards others than remuneration. The military becomes more an organization than a profession and is focused more on financial gains than self esteem or proud. Nor punishments are nowadays easily available for the commander: the young soldiers are tempted by the civilian life and the military is less and less attractive; a punishment would easily influence the young members switch to civilian jobs, more and more attractive. In comparison, the civilian companies have an abundance of means to adjust groups' cohesion, from remuneration to social events or intergroup competitions.¹⁰

Conclusion

It is no doubt that the cohesion in the military should be considered differently than in a civilian organization: due to the effectiveness focused military in battle, the cohesion plays lesser role in military groups, when their actions are mission focused. In peacetime, the leadership cannot fully benefit from a cohesive group, but should be focused on balancing the authority and group expectations.

⁸ D.J. Beal, 998-999

⁹ Pugh, RCAS. *The Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery. When Cohesion Turns Evil*, 2012

¹⁰ Bob Nelson proposes a thousand ways to reward employees in his book (*1001 Ways to Reward Employees*. New York, NY: Workman Publishing Company, Inc., 2005.), but at a glance, and probably even after a detailed study, there are very few methods applicable in the military: the financial and social rewards make a good cluster out of the thousand.

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