

When does prioritising group goals backfire?

By Kai Chi Yam and Tiffany Tan

CULTURES have long been studied on how individualistic versus collectivistic they are. Individualistic cultures focus on the needs and goals of the self, while collectivistic cultures prioritise the needs and goals of the group.

Singapore scores 20 out of 100 on Hofstede's individualism index, with lower scores signalling a higher collectivism orientation. In comparison, the United States has a score of 91.

Intuitively, many of us imagine that collectivism is a good ingredient for groups to succeed. Logically, the more people prioritise their group above their own needs, the better the outcomes for everyone, right?

Well, not always.

Group goals versus relational goals

Imagine this: you are playing a game of football, and you have the ball with you. It is a tense moment – you are still too far from the goal, and now, you have four critical, heart-pounding seconds to make a big decision: who to pass the ball to.

On the one hand, you could pass it to your best friend Paul, who you have known and played with for years. On the other hand, you could pass it to another player Jim, who is in a better position to receive it as he has fewer blockers in



If organisations repeatedly fall into the trap of prioritising relational closeness over performance outcomes, letting competent workers get sidelined for leadership roles or promotions by employees less capable, but more chummy with the boss, perceptions of favouritism and unfairness may emerge in the team. PHOTO: PIXABAY

the way than Paul.

It seems like an easy choice. Jim is obviously in a better position to take the pass.

Yet, in a recently published study, we find that many Singaporean university students who identified as collectivists choose to pass to their best friend Paul than the not-so-close teammate Jim, risking losing the ball to the opponent.

Although semi-professional players in China who identified as collectivists never made such mistakes, it took them significantly longer to pass the ball to a stranger who is in a better position than a friend in the same position.

The idea that collectivistic cultures cooperate better as teams largely make sense. But it appears that there are certain situations where they sacrifice the team's outcomes anyway – such as when the group's goals conflict with their relational goals.

Though the better choice for the team would have been to pass the ball to Jim to score, people from collectivistic cultures are more likely to opt to pass it to Paul whom they are closer to preserve or strengthen this relationship. In other words, our research suggests relationships within the group are more important than the team goals.

This might also explain why collectivistic countries (including Singapore) have long performed worse than individualistic ones in team sports like football, basketball, and volleyball, both men's and women's, as the study found. These effects hold even after controlling for nation's characteristics (eg, GDP, geographical location, etc) and the national team's talent.

The cost of choosing relationships over teams

Prioritising relational goals is not inherently bad. Good, genuine interpersonal relationships have long been linked to a wealth of benefits including better health and well-being.

For organisations, good professional relationships with other businesses and professionals also create valuable networks and potential opportunities for growth.

However, the choice to sacrifice team outcomes in its place can be costly.

To illustrate, think about all the employees choosing to work on projects with the colleagues they like than the colleagues who are better qualified, but less close to them.

Or, think about all the businesses or governments that hire people who they already know over people they do not, regardless of how good they are for the job.

Concerningly, past research has found nepotism practices more

prevalent in collectivistic countries than in individualistic ones. Recently, collectivistic Sri Lanka found itself in a devastating economic crisis that is largely blamed on an incompetent government rife with nepotism.

Re-evaluating our choices to start

Organisations that are highly collectivistic, in particular, may benefit from having a more nuanced understanding of the advantages and pitfalls of collectivism, rather than buying into old assumptions that it always benefits the team.

If they repeatedly fall into the trap of prioritising relational closeness over performance outcomes, letting competent workers get sidelined for leadership roles or promotions by employees less capable, but more chummy with the boss, perceptions of favouritism and unfairness may emerge in the team.

Unsurprisingly, favouritism in the workplace can seriously hurt the organisational climate, creating tension and dissatisfaction among teammates.

Poor decision-making, unchecked groupthink, and discrimination are other issues that may result if organisations select only familiar collaborators over welcoming new people and ideas.

Yet, it is important to note that team goals and relational goals are not always mutually exclusive, and

both are essential for successful organisations.

In some situations, the benefits of staying loyal to close, long-time partners may outweigh the benefits of choosing a capable but unfamiliar person. Teammates who have historically made great teams may rather stick to what have been tried and tested, than risk disrupting the current relational dynamics for a possible (but unguaranteed) better outcome.

In other situations, the best person for the job is simply the one with the most expertise, regardless of his relationship with his collaborator.

Hence, organisations should recognise that team goals and relational goals must co-exist, as both bring about unique benefits as well as costs. Rather than shunning one for the other, it becomes an intricate balancing game of knowing who to choose or lose – and when.

Associate Professor Kai Chi (Sam) Yam is head of the department of management and organisation, Dean's Chair and Assistant Dean (Faculty Development) at NUS Business School.

Tiffany Tan is a research assistant in the same department.

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