Introduction

When people join a group, they feel less responsible for their actions than they do when they are alone. This phenomenon is known as "diffusion of responsibility." In the wake of corporate scandals at Enron and WorldCom, among others, we ask if the resulting alibis and lack of accountability were caused in part by the flat, "shared" organizational leadership structure of those companies, in which many of the officials ostensibly shared the same amount of responsibility.

Research Questions

. Does a shared organizational structure lead to a greater diffusion of responsibility than a hierarchical organizational structure, in which officials are explicitly ranked and assigned with different responsibilities?

2. Is diffusion of responsibility affected by positive or negative group decision outcomes?

Method

<u>Subjects</u>

150 Introductory Psychology students at Wesleyan University were recruited for this study, receiving research credit towards the class for their participation. 85 students participated: 44 males (52% of sample) and 41 females (48%).

Pro<u>cedure</u>

Participants told that they were participating in a study designed to explore how people make decisions in groups. They were randomly assigned "shared" or "hierarchical" group conditions. Groups were four- or five-person in size¹. Each participant filled out a 15-item leadership survey to begin the study. After all participants had completed the survey, the experimenter left the room to analyze the results and returned with instructions for a group decision-making task.

Experimental conditions were as follows:

In the "shared" condition, each participant was told that he or she was one of four partners who had invested in a research and development company. Each "partner" was given an identity from "Person A" to "Person D." Five-person groups also included a "Person E."

In the "hierarchical" condition, each participant was assigned a role from "President" to "Manager of Marketing"; in order to enhance role buy-in, participants were told that these role assignments were based on the results of the leadership survey they had completed; however, these roles were actually randomly assigned.

The order of the hierarchy was, from top to bottom: President, Vice President of Finance (VP of Finance), Director of Human Relations (Director of HR), Director of Research & Development (Director of R&D), and Manager of Marketing. The "President" had more responsibility than the "Vice President," and so forth down the hierarchy. In the four-person groups, only one of the two bottom roles (either Director of R&D or Manager of Marketing) was assigned to participants.

Group decision-making task:

After learning about the structure of their group, participants were presented with a scenario in which fraud has been discovered within the company: a leading research team has been pocketing government grant money. The group was faced with the task of deciding either to report the corruption or to keep it quiet. The decision was based on a consensus reached by the group after a 12-minute period allotted for group discussion.

After completing the group decision-making task, each member of the group then independently filled out a 12-item survey about the group decision-making process as well as the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) as a filler task for participants before assigning percentages of responsibility for the outcome of the group's decision.

Next, the group was informed of the consequences of their decision; the outcome was either positive or negative. The positive outcome was a year-end gain in profits, while a negative outcome was a year-end loss. Unbeknownst to the subjects, the outcomes were assigned randomly before the scenario was presented, so the outcomes were not related to the decisions.

Each group member was told that the gain in profits led to an increase in compensation for the group in the positive outcome; the negative outcome meant a loss of profits and a subsequent cut in compensation. After the outcome was reported, each group member assigned a percentage of the increase (or cut) in compensation for each member of the leadership team to take, including his/herself. Each member also filled out a 4-item survey to evaluate the group decision-making process; these 4 items were taken exactly from the earlier 12-item pre-outcome survey of group decisionmaking.

¹ Results for five-person groups are not reported.

Diffusion of Responsibility within Organizational Structures

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Darley, J. M., & Latané, B. (1986). "Bystander intervention in emergencies: Diffusion of responsibility." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 8, 377-383. Caine, B. T., & Schlenker, B. R. (1979). "Role position and group performance as determinants of egotistical perceptions in cooperative groups." Journal of Psychology, 101, 149-156. Forsyth, D. R., Zyzniewski, L. E., & Giammanco, C. A. (2002). "Responsibility diffusion in cooperative collectives." Personal and Social Psychology Bulletin, 28 (1), 54-65.

eresponsibility assigned to Person assigned to Persor B or VP of Finance assigned to Person C or Director of HR assigned to lowest identity (person D, person E, Director of R&D, Manager

Results

In "hierarchical" four-person groups, less diffusion of responsibility seems to occur than in "shared" four-person groups. In the "shared" groups, the average percentages of responsibility assigned to each position are very close to the mathematical average (25%) predicted for each position. However, in the "hierarchical" condition, the percentages of responsibility seem to depart from 25%. For example, the President identities in the "Hierarchical-Positive" and "Hierarchical-Negative" groups were assigned responsibilities of 30.6% (n=8, p=0.135) and 33.2% (n=12, p=0.072) respectively. See Figure 2.

The Director of R&D identities tended to assign more responsibility to themselves than they did to superiors (27.5% vs. 20.4%, n=4, p=0.297). This result was true for both the positive (30% vs. 25% respectively, n=3, p=0.635) and negative conditions (35% vs. 13.33% respectively, n=1). However, the results were not significant, possibly because of the small sample sizes.

The "President" identities in "hierarchical" four-person groups tended to assign lower percentage to themselves (27.5%, n=2) than the other leaders assigned to them (31.7%, n=6) in scenarios with a positive outcome. This held true for negative outcomes too: "Presidents" only assigned 31.7% (n=3) of responsibility to themselves while others assigned 33.7% (n=9). See Figure 3. Again, the results were not significant, perhaps because of small sample sizes. The "VP of Finance" identities assigned themselves lower percentages of responsibility (20%, n=2) than others assigned to them (25.8%, n=6) when there

was a positive outcome. However, in negative outcomes, the "VP of Finance" identities tended to assign *more* responsibility to themselves (38.3%, n=3) than others assigned to them (25.9%, n=9). See Figure 3. Results were not significant.

Discussion

"Shared" leadership groups showed little variation in the percentages of responsibility assigned to each role. This could be attributable either to diffusion of responsibility or to a mentality that the group truly worked together and each group member was therefore equally responsible.

Identities were predicted to assign more responsibility to their superiors than to themselves and less responsibility to their subordinates than themselves. However, the fact that the Director of R&D identities tended to assign more responsibility to themselves than their superiors was an unanticipated outcome that should be addressed in future replications of the study. In the scenario presented to the group, a corrupt research team was at the center of the matter, so the Director of R&D may be more important than the Director of HR.

Explicit leadership role assignment (as seen in the "hierarchical" condition) seems to carry more responsibility for the roles near the top of the hierarchy. In positive outcomes, the "President" and "VP of Finance" identities were assigned more responsibility by others compared to the percentage of responsibility that they assigned themselves. In negative outcomes, "President" identities were again assigned more responsibility by others than the percentages that they assigned themselves.

Interestingly, "VP of Finance" identities assigned themselves more responsibility than others assigned them in negative outcomes. Thus, the "President" identities seem to be deferring their own responsibility in situations, regardless of positive and negative outcomes, whereas the "VP of Finance" identities are displaying good leadership in the vein of the adage that "a good leader takes a little less than his share of the credit and a little more than his share of the blame." This result may have occurred because the responsibility measure pertained to a financial distribution, which was the assigned domain of responsibility for the "VP of Finance."

This was a pilot study. Future research should examine whether more diffusion of responsibility occurs in five-person groups than in four-person groups and whether perceived responsibility differs for the various hierarchical roles.

Limitations include the small sample size of each group, whether the scenario was realistic, and a potential mis-ordering of the hierarchy of roles in the "hierarchical" condition- the "Director of R&D" may have been too low in the hierarchy.

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