

## Building Team Cohesion: Becoming "We" Instead of "Me"

Sheryl A. Friedley and Bruce B. Manchester, George Mason University

### Abstract

*Forensics fosters an appreciation for diversity; it embraces the unique qualities, characteristics, and talents that individual participants bring to the activity. Yet rarely does a forensics competitor attend a tournament as a single entry; instead, most students compete as a member of a larger group - a team. Because the activity recognizes success in individual as well as team effort, forensics educators realize that one of the most valuable skill sets students who participate in this activity can acquire is the ability to work as part of a team. Grounded in communication theory, this article discusses some of the unique opportunities the forensics activity offers to develop teamwork. Specifically, the authors focus on the source, channel, and content of messages that can be used to build a cohesive forensics team.*

The very nature of intercollegiate forensics fosters an appreciation for diversity; it embraces the unique qualities, characteristics, and talents that individual participants bring to the activity. Whether students develop a persuasive argument, analyze a communication event, interpret literature, or critically assess a political situation, intercollegiate forensics encourages students to find their unique "voice" in this communication-based activity. Yet rarely does a forensics competitor attend a tournament as a single entry; instead, most students compete as a member of a larger group - a team. Because the activity recognizes success in individual as well as team effort, forensics educators realize that one of the most valuable skill sets students who participate in this activity can acquire is the ability to work as part of a team.

In 1979, Francis and Young defined a team as "an energetic group of people who are committed to achieving common objectives, who work well together and enjoy doing so, and who produce high quality results" (as cited in DeWine, 2001, p. 273). Though the concept of "team" has long been a model for athletic competition, the concept of "team" has also emerged over the past two decades as the prevalent model in business. In a study that asked corporate executives to identify qualities they most often seek in recent graduates, 71.4% of those corporate executives identified the ability to work in teams as a critical skill set (Tubbs & Moss, 1994). According to Chaney and Lyden (2000), "between 70 - 82 % of companies in the United States use the team concept, making teamwork skills one of the most necessary skill sets in the work environment; teamwork tends to promote creativity and problem-solving, high-quality decision-making, and improved communication" (p. 6). Furthermore, McManus (2000) distinguishes a "group" from a "team" in the workplace by noting that members of a team demonstrate a strong commitment to each other as well as the common end goal; "in a team, there is a higher degree of cohesiveness and accomplishment than in a group" (p. 21).

Since cohesion is believed to be one of the distinguishing characteristics of a high-performance team, what is this powerful team quality and how is it created? According to Bollen and Hoyle (1979), cohesion is the degree of attraction members feel toward one another and the team; "it is a feeling of deep loyalty, of esprit de corps, the degree to which each individual has made the team's goal his or her own, a sense of belonging, and a feeling of morale" (as cited in Beebe & Masterson, 2000, p. 122). Though cohesion is rooted in the feelings team members have for one another as well as a common goal, creating, shaping, and strengthening those feelings relies on the use of effective communication. Communication scholars have long agreed that group or team cohesion is as much about the relationships created as the task at hand, and success in both fosters the development of team cohesion (Bormann, 1990).

Since building team cohesion is grounded in effective, constructive communication about relationships as well as the task at hand, intercollegiate forensics seems an appropriate educational context in which to explore building team cohesion. Specifically, to discuss how best to develop forensics team cohesion, let's briefly consider three basic aspects of cohesion messages used in building forensics teams: 1) the source of cohesion messages, 2) the channel of cohesion messages, and 3) the content of cohesion messages. In examining these three aspects of cohesion messages, we hope to reinforce some of the unique opportunities intercollegiate forensics provides to build team cohesion and strengthen teamwork skill sets.

### *Source of Cohesion Messages*

As with most team-building experiences, powerful messages about the nature of relationships among team members and the task at hand begin with those who hold strong leadership positions. Within forensics programs, directors, assistant directors, coaching staff, and team leaders are primary sources of communication for the team. Clear and consistent messages about the value of **this** team experience and what it means to be a member of **this** team are critical from the outset of team formation. Clear and consistent messages about how members of **this** team behave, in their relationships with coaching staff and other team members as well as their preparation for intercollegiate forensics competition (the task at hand), are critical throughout team development. This vision and identity can be reinforced by having former team members serve as members of the coaching staff. Such messages must be sent clearly and reinforced consistently beginning with top-down leaders of the team. These messages lay the foundation for a team vision as well as a team identity, and team cohesion is created when members have a clear understanding of that vision and identity. Another successful strategy is to have key administrators (department chair, college dean, vice-president, etc.) link the team's vision into that of the institution as a whole.

While it seems as though each academic year spawns the creation of a new team that becomes a "work in progress," continuity in leadership facilitates team cohesion. Allowing the current team members to select from their ranks the cap-

tain or officers for the next year's team can serve to ensure the desired continuity. Additionally, veteran team members can be paired up with rookie members thus creating a "big brother/big sister" mentoring support system. With retention of team directors, assistant directors, coaches, and members, consistent messages about team vision and identity are easier to sustain and perpetuate. For this reason, as well as many others, forensics educators must be given the necessary support to build a program over time; key leadership changes every year or two make it difficult to build team cohesion. College and university administrators should consider this aspect of team-building as they strive to support forensics educators in ongoing program development.

### *Channel of Cohesion Messages*

With the advent of technology as a primary channel of communication in the workplace, Hallowell (1999) urges us not to lose the "human moment" in our communication - not to lose the powerful impact of face-to-face, immediate interaction in real time and space. Though the forensics team experience has been enhanced by the development of technology (internet searches for supporting material and email conversations among participants within and between teams), the forensics team experience itself continues to foster the "human moment" in communication. Forensics teams practice, travel, and compete in real time and space; they thrive in the powerful impact of face-to-face, immediate interaction of students, coaches, and judges.

It is communication in the "human moment" that most powerfully creates team synergy - the energy that truly makes "the whole greater than the sum of its parts." It is communication in the "human moment" that also most powerfully creates team cohesion - a strong sense of loyalty and commitment to the team vision as one's own. Encouraging others to succeed, sharing the excitement of others' successes, owning as well as taking pride in team success, and receiving support from others to succeed creates a synergy that builds team cohesion. Providing an environment where synergy is created through "human moment" experiences such as these (both inside and outside the competitive arena) is not only possible within intercollegiate forensics, but it is essential.

Providing communication opportunities in real time and space for forensics team members is necessary to build team cohesion. Whether a room or lounge where team members can congregate between classes and the end of the day, practice space for formal and informal coaching sessions, travel time in cars and vans, or social time to enjoy pizza and a movie, both quantity and quality of communication are necessary to build a cohesive team climate of openness and trust. By establishing periodic meeting times for coaches and/or team members to discuss openly issues related to the team, the director can facilitate the creation and maintenance of this cohesive unit. According to Bormann (1990), highly cohesive groups interact in an open climate where individuals are free to ask questions and disagree with one another; even the ability to work through inevitable team conflict in such a constructive climate will only serve to strengthen team cohesion.

Again, the "human moment" experiences preserved and perpetuated in intercollegiate forensics provide a powerful team experience that can only serve to strengthen student transition to the workplace.

### Content of Cohesion Messages

Through the development of symbolic convergence theory, communication scholars have long recognized that groups and teams take on a life of their own; over time they develop a collective consciousness with shared feelings, motives, and meanings. Bormann (1990) explains that this "group consciousness" evolves as group members share group fantasies or stories; these stories tend to develop around central themes and, as such, begin to shape a "shared vision" for the group or team. As with any stories and themes that emerge, they reflect as much about what actually happened as they do about the interpretation of what actually happened. Recalling these stories and themes provide insight into the group's personality, values, and identity.

For example, the story of the "rookie" who narrowly qualified to attend nationals and then went on to become a national finalist offers hope for success and team value to even the most novice of competitors. Or the story of the team member whose luggage was lost on the flight to nationals and, having no clothes to wear for competition, was loaned a shirt by one team member, a tie by a second team member, a suit by a third team member, and shoes and socks by a fourth team member; thanks to team support (family support) in a time of need, this competitor became a true "fashion icon" during competition that day. Every team has its stories, its songs, its rituals, its rites of passage, and its traditions; when combined, these shared experiences create a strong sense of team identity and team cohesion.

This "shared reality" also creates a sense of past, present, and future for the team - a connection to those who have preceded them (alumni) and those who will follow. Such "shared reality" place the "here and now" into a larger context of program history - a legacy of what has come before and what will follow. Whether seeking alumni support (coaching, judging, or financial) or explaining to a current team member why a specific policy is necessary to ensure this program's future, owning responsibility for a forensic program's past, present, and future provides a strong context for building team cohesion. Creating opportunities for alumni to interact with current team members in a social setting can facilitate this connection. Team alumni can be invited to campus to share their experiences about the team with newly recruited members. Another strategy is to solicit letters from alumni to be read to the current team as they prepare for an upcoming national tournament. Such opportunities can create important connections that link the team's present with its past as well as providing a vision of its future.

In his recent article entitled, "What Makes Great Teachers Great?", Ken Bain discusses several principles of good teaching; among them, he notes that good teachers "create diverse learning experiences that help students learn out-

side the traditional classroom" (Bain, 2004, p. 9B). Intercollegiate forensics offers students just such an opportunity - the valuable opportunity to acquire the skills necessary to work as part of a cohesive, high-performance team outside the traditional classroom. To provide this opportunity for skill development under the tutelage of communication educators who can model effective communication skills and reinforce effective team-building behaviors will only serve to enhance the student's educational experience. Furthermore, the ability to create, shape, and sustain a cohesive team is perhaps one of the most rewarding experiences enjoyed by forensics educators. To empower individual students to create a shared vision, and rise to meet the goals and objectives of that shared vision, is to prepare the engaged citizen of the 21st century.

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