An Introduction to Teamwork

by James Renlund

Welcome back to the second article in a series that explores teams, teams research and their place within organizations. Reemphasizing the first article - the intention of this series is to create a thoughtful and purposeful place for dialogue that engages the ISODC community in developing new ideas and practices for teams research. We need your participation on the ISODC LinkedIn page in order for this series to work. This article will take a quick look at the idea of teamwork, some historical perspectives within ODC, and where teamwork is headed.

“That’s great teamwork!”

When you read this statement, what does it mean to you? For some it may mean “We, as a team, have done a great job.” While others interpret it as “mission complete, let’s go have a beer!” Still others may think, “But wait, how can that be great teamwork if we aren’t even a team?” The point is that teamwork has become so ubiquitous in both the teams literature and workplace that it has lost any specific meaning.

Teamwork has been studied through the various lenses of economics, business management, as a social process, as its own science and even as a form of social control. In the teams literature researchers can’t agree if teamwork is a psychological state, a team process or a social network. Yet, it still remains as a significant factor of effective teams. To add to the confusion, teamwork has been used both synonymously with, and independently against, the term team process.

So what is teamwork? Marks, Mathieu, and Zaccaro (2001) define teamwork as “team members' interdependent acts that convert inputs to outcomes through cognitive, verbal, and behavioral activities directed toward organizing taskwork to achieve collective goals” (p. 357). To clarify (or to confuse), the authors explain that taskwork is “what teams are doing” (physically or mentally) to accomplish team goals and teamwork is “how they are doing it.” An easy example is a baseball game, where the defensive team is manning the bases and pitching the ball (taskwork) while their coordinated efforts together form the process of teamwork. Hopefully their thinking, talking and player coordination are enough of a concerted effort to prevent the other team from scoring. This is important to understand in an organization development and change context because we experience so many teams that are not acting like a team, but are rather a group of individuals acting on their own agenda and happen to occupy the same spaces.
Conversation Point 1 – does the provided definition of teamwork fit within your mental model and experience? If not, what would you add, remove, refine or improve in this definition?

Probably one of the greatest (and also infamous) events in teamwork history is Tuckman’s (1965/1977) forming, storming, norming, performing (and sometimes adjourning). But teamwork goes beyond a simple cycle and is a significant team process that requires teamwork competencies. Using Tuckman’s model as a tool is good for identifying the current status of a team, but is inadequate for understanding the process of how teams function.

There are five different schools of thought for the composition of teamwork. The first uses competencies or KSAs based on teamwork skills. The second includes functions or dimensions along with supporting functions. The third conceptualizes teamwork as a sequentially phased - multidimensional approach (fancy terms for 3 phases with many factors in each phase). Our fourth theory is a teamwork taxonomy. The final theory envisions teamwork as a social network or clustering function. Below is a small table that provides representative samples of each theory (with the exception of social networks/clustering). I personally view all four as the same phenomenon, just viewed from different angles and magnifications. The Blind Men and the Elephant analogy comes to mind.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competencies or KSAs</th>
<th>Dimensions and Functions</th>
<th>Multi-Dimensional Phases</th>
<th>Teamwork Taxonomy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge</strong></td>
<td><strong>Main Dimensions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Transition Processes Phase</strong></td>
<td>Adaptability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of teamwork skills</td>
<td>Team leadership</td>
<td>Mission analysis formulation and planning</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skills</strong></td>
<td>Mutual performance monitoring</td>
<td>Goal specification</td>
<td>Coordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morale building</td>
<td>Backup behavior</td>
<td>Strategy formulation</td>
<td>Decision-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict resolution</td>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td><strong>Action Processes Phase</strong></td>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information exchange</td>
<td>Team orientation</td>
<td>Monitoring progress / goals</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task motivation</td>
<td><strong>Support Functions</strong></td>
<td>Systems monitoring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation</td>
<td>Shared mental modes</td>
<td>Team monitoring and backup behavior</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consulting with others</td>
<td>Closed-loop communication</td>
<td>Coordination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertiveness</td>
<td>Mutual trust</td>
<td><strong>Interpersonal Processes Phase</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitude</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective orientation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Motivation and confidence building</td>
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</tbody>
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Importance of teamwork


Conversation Point 2 – Do any of the composition models resonate with your personal experiences? If so, which ones? If not, what would you add to the table?

What does all this mean? The practical applications for identifying, testing and changing teamwork processes (interventions) so far have been limited. There are several ongoing efforts to identify key teamwork KSAs in different industries (e.g., medical, aviation and information technology), but there is a significant amount of research and applied practice left unfinished. Only three teamwork tests have been published: (1) Stevens & Champion’s (1993, 1999) Teamwork KSA Test; (2) Hirschfeld et al.’s (2006) Teamwork Effectiveness Test, which was only tested on U.S. Air Force Officers; and (3) Aguado et al.’s (2014) Teamwork Competency Test (TWCT). O’Neill, Goffin, and Gellatly (2012), among others, have found significant reliability and predictability problems with the Teamwork KSA Test. The TWCT has not been psychometrically validated by an independent study. The area of teams and teamwork interventions is far too vast to explore in this article. In answer to the proposed question - all of this means that 100 years of groups and teams research, so far, still has not pierced a large enough hole in “the black box” of team dynamics for adequate observation and measurement.

Practical Examples

Sacrifice is not mentioned in any of the teamwork definitions. Should it be included? Is it really teamwork if one person sacrifices more, on a consistent basis, than the rest of the team?

Is it still considered teamwork if the team leader or another team member is not directly contributing towards the team’s taskwork, but is working towards the team’s mission or goal?

How would you measure teamwork? What variables do you think are consistent with teamwork?

The last part of this article is a glimpse of the next article. With the definition of teamwork accomplished, it would make sense to explore the concepts of team performance and team effectiveness. What do you think are the differences between the two terms, how do they affect your organization, and how do you get higher performing teams? Please join the conversation on the ISODC LinkedIn page and let us know what you think so far.

References


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James Renlund served 23 years as a military leader in various roles that include nuclear engineer, human resources business partner, curriculum manager, leadership development program manager and training facility director. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Organization Development at Benedictine University while teaching business and entrepreneurship at a post-secondary vocational school. The topic of his dissertation is a meta-analytical examination of the crossroads between teams and Authentic Leadership. Awards include 2015 Presidential Management Fellowship finalist along with several military honors. He is actively seeking a post-secondary teaching position with a focus on teams research.