

## **A Blog For Practitioners About Teamwork And Team Leadership**

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*“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”*

This old African proverb illustrates the relevance teamwork had and has in our lives. Especially in nowadays work, tasks are getting more complex. As one consequence, it is hardly possible for one person to complete such complex tasks all alone. Thus, we need teamwork to accomplish higher goals in our everyday work.

Despite the many advantages and chances of teamwork there exists also potential risks and problems while people work together. The aim of our blog entry is to write about teamwork and highlight the roles of leaders, teams, and coaches in enhancing team performance. Specifically, we wanted to explore the factors team composition, team building, communication, conflict management and enhancing conditions as well as team leadership.

Therefore, we searched for pre-existing theoretical concepts in teamwork and compared these to work practice in team training. The theoretical concepts presented in this blog are mainly based on the review of Salas, Shuffler, Thayer, Bedwell, & Lazzara (2015). In their paper the authors summarized nine factors influencing teamwork and offered practical guidelines in a heuristic manner. Exploring the usefulness of those guidelines, we asked a practitioner who is training and working with teams to what extent the nine factors are useful for coaching teams and additionally, who could provide us with insights in common problems concerning for example team conflicts. We conducted an interview with Mrs. S., shareholder of a consulting company. As an experienced process consultant and coach Mrs. S. focuses among others on personal- and organizational development, change management and team building. Her clientele consists mainly of automobile industrial companies. Therefore, the teams are dominated by men. Mrs. S. has already worked with various kinds of teams, from lower-level workers to top-notch leaders.

In the following we will discuss, after viewing at interventions generally, six out of the nine factors proposed by Salas et al. (2015), namely composition, cooperation, communication, conflicts and culture as well as coaching, respectively. The remaining factors coordination, cognition, and context will not be considered.

Starting with a definition of teamwork, according to Salas et al. (2015) teamwork can be defined as “a distinguishable set of two or more people who interact, dynamically, interdependently, and adaptively toward a common and valued goal/objective/mission” (p. 600). Thereby, teamwork focuses especially on shared behaviors between the team members as well as on their attitudes and cognitions towards a shared task (Morgan, Salas, & Glickman, 1993).

### *Pre-, during-, and post-teamwork interventions*

Interventions of teamwork processes can be found pre-, during- and post-performance. Theoretical findings claim that interventions should be conducted prior to teamwork in order to ensure an effective development regarding for instance the cognition or the cooperation of team members (Salas et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, reality often shows a different approach. Mrs. S. emphasized the importance of team development being a long process. It should first be clarified if a team is even needed, what the goal is, and what kind of process is necessary. Afterwards, one should think about what competencies are needed to achieve a certain goal. However, without consultation, companies often do it backwards. They start with the consideration what kind of competencies already exist within the organization and then they start to build a team on this basis. Instead, possible team composition and development should be discussed in work council meetings and at the leadership level. They should discuss the possible advantages and disadvantages, model possible change curves and offer training to help with team coordination. Leaders also should talk about communication concepts, so that the important information is transparent. With all this information and plans, firstly a pilot project should be launched.

### *The composition of teams*

The decision, how a team should be composed, depends on different aspects. First of all, there is the question, which individual factors are relevant for team performance and what is considered a "good member"? Furthermore, it is of interest which knowledge, skills and attitudes should exist within the team and which of them can be trained if necessary. Additionally, the role of diversity often is discussed within the literature (e.g. Harrison, Price, Gavin, & Florey, 2002) . Salas et al. (2015) recommend choosing employees for teamwork with a high team-orientation, that means with a cooperative working style and efficient behavior, coordination, and communication. According to the authors choosing team members should be based on their expertise, generic skills, and complementary personalities.

These statements are congruent to Mrs. S.' answer: Depending on the task a team can be composed differently. In which part of the process are which kind of competencies needed? How to get these competencies in this process and if they are not already present, how to get the competencies on the level needed? Companies often tend to put the best workers in a team. However, teams should be diverse and heterogeneous, so an exchange of knowledge is guaranteed. Furthermore, when a team is built one should keep the work past of the individual in mind. Normally informal groups were already built. Therefore, there could be some difficulties with other informal work groups or rather work colleagues. Thus, putting work colleagues with a difficult past together in a new team can be counterproductive.

### *Team building*

One very popular intervention in teams is team building. Team building interventions can have different aims, depending on the instruction of an organization. In a meta-analysis Salas, Rozell, Mullen, and Driskell (1999) found that interventions focusing on the role clarification were likely to increase the performance of a team. Concerning their practical guide, Salas et al. (2015) emphasized the importance of clearly defined team member roles and an understanding of responsibilities for facilitating the coordination of a team.

Mrs. S. adds important practical considerations and mentioned differences in team building interventions. Depending on the maturity level, a team should focus on different team building measures. Furthermore, adequate measures for team building, such as questionnaires based on the OCEAN model or the MBTI, help to identify preferences and characteristics of each team member. The process of an effective team building takes at least a couple of days, starting with the discussion of the formal and informal rules within the team (e.g., role definition, goal setting). If all of this is clear, the next step is to work on the relationship level. One possible scenario for a team building measure could be as following: Provoking a conflict with the task of dividing the office space by themselves. This can give the workers the opportunity to work on their consideration of others.

### *Team communication*

The communication between team members is also a vital process which forms and re-forms the attitudes, behaviors, and cognitions within a team (Craig, 1999). To install well working communication structures, Salas et al. (2015) recommend the implementation of closed-loop communication procedures. Thereby the recipient of an information acknowledges the receipt and can clarify discrepancies directly.

Surprisingly, Mrs. S. was not convinced of the usefulness of this strategy. One only needs feedback if there is a lack of trust. It takes too much time and disturbs the workflow. To guarantee a good communication there should be rules on how to communicate (e.g., using the subject line, which kind of action is needed - only reading the mail, correcting something etc.).

Another interesting topic in the field of team communication is the comparison between face-to-face and virtual communication. Experimental studies often found a negative effect of virtual communication on performance, however field studies showed very successful teamwork outcomes using virtual communication (Purvanova, 2014).

In our interview, Mrs. S. stated that both options, virtual communication and face-to-face communication are prone to risks for miscommunication. Although it cannot be denied that virtual communication has an easier accessibility. There is a wide range of possibilities where one can communicate virtual. Thus, here communication rules such as which

communication channel to use for which purpose, while also considering the familiarity of workers with the platform and the exchanged data type, are very much needed. Additionally, one should think about the expectations regarding response times and availabilities.

#### *Team conflicts and the influence of organizational climate*

There is a great consensus about teams always experiencing conflicts while working together. However, there are many discussions about the impact and the outcomes conflicts have on teamwork. Bradley, Postlethwaite, Klotz, Hamdani, and Brown (2012) found out, that given a safe team climate, conflicts are promoting the team performance due to offering different points of view and different solutions to a problem. In contrast, in their meta-analysis De Dreu and Weingart (2003) revealed strong negative correlations between conflicts, team performance and team member satisfaction.

Based on her experiences in handling team-conflict, Mrs. S. assured that conflicts are existent in every kind of team. People like to cover up their conflicts, they do not want to talk about interpersonal interference, but this is the most common conflict point. Thus, instead of hiding them one should learn from conflicts. Considering past information, escalation levels and rules can be determined. Often the simplest things such as the duty of cleaning the coffee machine can represent the underlying interpersonal conflicts within a team. The most common issue in teams are values such as money, vacation time and performance, especially one main question is, who is more diligent. Leaders should keep in mind that they must set some sort of framework, so that the workers' values are considered, and they can effectively organize their team. Furthermore, she stressed out that conflicts are never unnecessary because they are the symptoms of somebody suffering and somebody who is not. The focus for solving conflicts should not lay on the change of the environment, but on the leadership. Even if the work framework is not the greatest, conflicts could be mostly avoided if the leadership shows support and respect for the workers. Conflicts are amplified if the leadership doesn't have concrete parameters, the sense of purpose is missing, the treatment is unfair and non-transparency, and the tasks are ambiguous.

#### *Team leadership*

What could a leader do to enhance or promote teamwork? A good leadership can recognize the performance and process gaps within a team so it could react and enhance the development of a team (Hackman & Wageman, 2005).

Asking Mrs. S. about how to promote teamwork, she answered: Depending on the task, the situation, and the maturity level there are different approaches to promote teamwork. The most impact comes from the leadership style. Cooperation often includes accommodating workers' wishes. If the leadership style is more cooperative (Laissez-faire) chances are high that teamwork is difficult to promote if the workers do not see the need for teamwork. In this case a more direct authoritarian leadership is more fitting with clear guidelines and a clear hierarchy.

(Salas et al., 2015) argued further, the responsibilities of leading a team do not have necessarily to lay on only one person's shoulders. The concept of shared leadership is especially helpful facing very challenging tasks within a team and when there is a high level of interdependence. Thus, to avoid overwhelming a single leader, additionally it can facilitate effective teamwork and improve the performance of a team (Salas et al., 2015).

Based on her experiences, Mrs. S. mentioned, that the rule of success regarding shared leadership is to communicate the goals, rules, and any other important information a priori. Additionally, a shared leadership is only functional when the competition between the leaders is not important. The leaders must favor the style of shared responsibilities and shared profits. Their motivation should not be based on their own monetary gain, but on intrinsic reasons. They must have a high tolerance level and a lot of trust in each other. The biggest conflict in a shared leadership is the value of trust versus the value of money.

### *Summary of this blog*

In our blog article, we compared theoretical guidelines on five team influencing factors proposed in the paper of Salas et al. (2015) with the experiences of a practitioner in team coaching and consultation. In conclusion our interview partner could illustrate typical issues in team composition, -cooperation, -communication, -conflicts, -culture and -coaching.

From a practical and theoretical standpoint, the establishment of teamwork encompasses a long process. Team interventions start with work council meetings and at the leadership level to discuss the necessity and goals of interventions a priori. Those goals are necessary for planning team composition. From there, competencies, knowledge, skills, and attitudes to successfully reach the goal of teamwork can be deduced. The importance of diversity seems equally emphasized in the guidelines and in our interview.

In theory, it is proposed that team building measures contribute to role clarification whereas Mrs. S. added that there are many team building measures which can be used differently depending on the maturity level of a team.

When it comes to innovative solutions for team communication we learned, that closed-loop communication can be practically challenging. Additionally, our interview partner emphasized that communication is not limited to one communication channel, for example via E-Mail or via video conference. Each channel has its perks and the crucial communication rules for users depend on knowledge, purpose of communication and content.

Another influencing factor on teamwork is team conflict. Studies showed its negative association with team performance and team member satisfaction. Our interview partner talked less on the influence of team conflict but rather highlighted practical hurdles, such as the unwillingness of workers to talk about their interpersonal interferences. Mrs. S. further mentioned the role of leadership as leaders who act unfair, non-transparent or ambiguous foster negative team climate and therefore conflict.

Leaders can also promote teamwork. According to Mrs. S., leaders can promote teamwork in terms of leadership style. There she saw an authoritarian leadership most fitted to establish clear guidelines while an authoritarian leader should also treat his or her team with appreciation. Further, we explored the practical view of shared leadership which was mentioned in the paper of Salas et al. (2015). Shared leadership can be practical, but from experience, Mrs. S. stressed that the competition between the leaders should not be important and, aside responsibilities, profits have to be shared.

Overall, Mrs. S. conveyed the importance of leaders in managing team conflicts, establishing a cultural consensus, and communicating on all organizational levels.

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