Teamwork is the collaborative effort of a team to achieve a common goal or to complete a task in the most effective and efficient way. This concept is seen within the greater framework of a team, which is a group of interdependent individuals who work together towards a common goal. Basic requirements for effective teamwork are an adequate team size (about 6-8 members), available resources for the team to make use of (i.e. meeting space and time, guidance from a supervisor, support from the organization, etc.), and clearly defined roles within the team in order for everyone to have a clear purpose. Teamwork is present in any context where a group of people are working together to achieve a common goal. These contexts include an industrial organization (formal work teams), athletics (sports teams), a school (classmates working on a project), and the healthcare system (operating room teams). In each of these settings, the level of teamwork and interdependence can vary from low (e.g. golf, track and field), to intermediate (e.g. baseball, football), to high (e.g. basketball, soccer), depending on the amount of communication, interaction, and collaboration present between team members.

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History

Even though collaborative work among individuals is very prominent today, that was not the case over half a century ago. The shift from the typical assembly line to more contemporary organizational models that contain increasing amounts of teamwork first came about during World War I and World War II, in an effort for countries to unite their people. The movement towards teamwork was mostly due to the Hawthorne studies, a set of studies conducted in the 1920s and 1930s that highlighted the positive aspects of teamwork in an organizational setting. After organizations recognized the value of teamwork and the positive effects it had on their companies, entire fields of work shifted from the typical assembly line to the contemporary High Performance Organizational Model.

Effective Teamwork
In addition to practical components required for efficient teamwork, there are certain characteristics that members of the team must have in order to produce effective teamwork. Firstly, there must be a high level of interdependence among team members, a characteristic that stems from open communication and the increase of trust and risk-taking. Through interdependence come the group dynamics, which are the ways in which team members interact with each other. Healthy dynamics lead to team members being more satisfied and therefore working more efficiently together, whereas unhealthy dynamics lead to conflict, and consequentially to unsatisfied team members. Due to this, an important characteristic of efficient teamwork is healthy conflict resolution, that comes along with open communication. In order for efficient teamwork to exist, a team needs to have clear and attainable goals, through which team members can feel accomplished and motivated. Finally, sharing leadership positions between team members enhances teamwork due to the feeling of shared responsibility and accountability.

**Basic Team Dynamics**

Basic team dynamics include:[9]

- **Open communication** to avoid conflicts.
- **Effective coordination** to avoid confusion and the overstepping of boundaries.
- **Efficient cooperation** to perform the tasks in a timely manner and produce the required results, especially in the form of workload sharing.[10]
- **High levels of interdependence** to maintain high levels of trust, risk-taking, and performance.

All these teamwork conditions lead to the team turning in a finished product. A way to measure if the teamwork was effective, the organization must examine the quality of the output, the process, and the members' experience. Specifically, the teamwork can be deemed efficient if: the output met or exceeded the organization's standard; if the process the team chose to take helped them reach their goals; and if the members are reporting high levels of satisfaction with the team members as well as the processes which the team followed.

**Processes**

Specific teamwork processes have been identified fall into three categories:[11][12]

**Transition Processes**

These processes occur between periods of action. In this period, the team members can evaluate their overall performance as a team as well as on an individual level, give feedback to each other, make clarifications about the upcoming tasks, and make any changes that would improve the process of collaborating.

- Task Analysis
- Goal Specification
- Strategy Formulation
Action Processes

These processes take place when the team attempts to accomplish its goals and objectives. In this stage, team members keep each other informed about their progress and their responsibilities, while helping one another with certain tasks. Feedback and collaborative work continues to exist in high levels throughout this process.

- Monitoring progress toward goals
- Systems Monitoring
- Team Monitoring and Backup Behavior
- Coordination

Interpersonal Processes

These processes are present in both action periods and transition periods, and occur between team members. This is a continuous process, in which team members must communicate any thoughts and/or feelings concerning either another team member or a manner in which a task is being performed. Furthermore, team members encourage and support each other on their individual tasks.

- Conflict management
- Motivation and Confidence building
- Affect Management

Teamwork performance generally improves when a team passes through these processes, since processes like these enhance coordination and communication between the team members and therefore increase teamwork and collaborative work.[13]

Training to improve teamwork

Overall, teamwork and performance can be enhanced through specific training that targets the individual team members and the team as a whole.[2] Bruce Tuckman proposed a team developmental model that separated the stages of a team's lifespan and the level of teamwork for each stage:[14][15]

1. Forming
   - This stage is described by approach/avoidance issues, as well as internal conflicts about being independent vs. wanting to be a part of the team.
   - Team members usually tend to 'play it safe' and minimize their risk taking in case something goes wrong.
   - Teamwork in this stage is at its lowest levels.

2. Storming
   - The second stage is characterized by a competition for power and authority, which is the source of most of the conflicts and doubts about the success of the team.
   - If teamwork is low in this stage, it is very unlikely that the team will get past their conflicts. If there is a high degree of teamwork and willingness to collaborate, then the team might have a brighter future.

3. Norming
   - The third stage is characterized by increasing levels of solidarity, interdependence, and cohesiveness, while simultaneously making an effort to adjust to the team environment.
   - This stage shows much higher levels of teamwork that make it easier for the above characteristics to occur.

4. Performing
   - This final stage of team development includes a comfortable environment in which team members are effectively completing tasks in an interdependent and cohesive manner.
   - This stage is characterized by the highest levels of comfort, success, interdependence, and maturity, and therefore includes the highest levels of teamwork.

Enhancing Teamwork
A manner in which organizational psychologists measure teamwork is through the Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSA) Teamwork Test.[16] The KSA Teamwork Test was developed by Michael Stevens and Michael Campion in 1994 and it assesses the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) of people wanting to join a team. Specifically, the KSA is a 35-item test that is designed to measure 14 individual KSA requirements for teamwork, especially within formal teams (i.e., those with per-designated tasks), since self-managing teams have a need for high levels of teamwork. Overall, the KSA is separated into two main categories: The Interpersonal KSAs that contain items such as Conflict Resolution and Communication, and the Self-Management KSAs that include items such as Goal Setting and Task Coordination. The fact that the KSA focuses on team-oriented situations and on knowledge of appropriate behaviors instead of personality characteristics makes the test appropriate to assess teamwork and team-specific behavior. Furthermore, it makes it appropriate for organizations to figure out their personnel's level of teamwork, and ways in which they can improve their teamwork and communication skills.

Drawbacks and Benefits

Utilizing teamwork is sometimes unnecessary and can lead to teams not reaching their performance peak. Some of those disadvantages include:[17][18]

- **Social Loafing**: This phenomenon appears when an individual working in a group places less effort than they can towards a task. This can create an inequality between the amount of work other individuals are placing within the team, therefore can create conflict and lead to lower levels of performance.

- **Behavior Conflicts** or **Ingrained Individualism**: Employees in higher organizational levels have adapted to their positions at the top that require more individualism, and therefore have trouble engaging in collaborative work. This creates a more competitive environment with a lack of communication and higher levels of conflict. This disadvantage is mostly seen organizations that utilize teamwork in an extremely hierarchical environment.

- **Individual Tasks**: Certain tasks do not require teamwork, and are more appropriate for individual work. By placing a team to complete an 'individual task', there can be high levels of conflict between members which can damage the team's dynamic and weaken their overall performance.

Working in teams has also shown to be very beneficial. Some of these advantages include:[17][18]

- **Problem solving**: A group of people can bring together various perspectives and combine views and opinions to rapidly and effectively solve an issue. Due to the team's culture, each team member has a responsibility to contribute equally and offer their unique perspective on a problem to arrive at the best possible solution.[19] Overall, teamwork can lead to better decisions, products, or services. The effectiveness of teamwork depends on the following six components of collaboration among team members: communication, coordination, balance of member contributions, mutual support, effort, and cohesion.[20]

- **Healthy competition**: A healthy competition in groups can be used to motivate individuals and help the team excel.

- **Developing relationships**: A team that continues to work together will eventually develop an increased level of bonding. This can help members avoid unnecessary conflicts since they have become well acquainted with each other through teamwork.[19] By building strong relationships between members, team members' satisfaction with their team increases, therefore improving both teamwork and performance.[12]

- **Individual qualities**: Every team member can offer their unique knowledge and ability to help improve other team members. Through teamwork the sharing of these qualities will allow team members to be more productive in the future.[10]

- **Motivation**: Working collaboratively can lead to increased motivation levels within a team due to increasing accountability for individual performance. When groups are being compared, members tend to become more ambitious to perform better. Providing groups with a comparison standard increases their performance level thus encouraging members to work collaboratively.[21]

References


Further reading


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