

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF TEAMWORK APPLIED TO LOGISTIC TEAMS

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Abstract

The work of small non-manufacturing employee teams is becoming more and more crucial for achieving organization goals. Since the teams function as complex social groups, it is necessary to understand the complexities of teamwork dynamics and their impact on the effectiveness of teams and the organization as a whole. The management of organization plays a vital role in successful implementation of the principles of teamwork dynamics into the organization processes and their effective management. Management dictates the most important and strategic aspects of teamwork such as the team management style, the degree of team autonomy, team composition methods, the coordination strategy of different teams and the most important rules of team behaviour.

Depending on circumstances and the type of organization, the logistic teams can represent some of the most important teams inside the organization. While many principles, rules and methods used during teamwork processes are universal and can improve teamwork in all the types of non-manufacturing teams, the unique nature of logistic teams requires certain modifications and specialization of team management processes. The main goal of this paper is to present the most common and widely used theoretical frameworks of teamwork and teamwork dynamics, confront them with the unique nature of logistic teams and suggest how to modify it to these special conditions.

Keywords: Teamwork, logistic teams, team management

1. INTRODUCTION

Many organizations currently consider the absence of team management tools as one of the most serious problems, combined with a lack of management experience with team management and an insufficient understanding of the team as a social group. Although teamwork is highly talked about and promoted in organizations, it is only very rarely fully and accurately implemented to its fullest potential. This problem has negative impacts such as higher costs, time delays, frustration of people, low or poor quality of work and higher employee turnover. Good team management can eliminate the negative impacts and contribute to effective team setup and performance.

The paper consists of three main parts. The first part focuses on providing a basic theoretical framework on the topic of teamwork and teamwork dynamics. Since teamwork is an incredibly complex topic, the theoretical information provided in this paper present only a very basic and brief insight into the topic. Its main purpose is not to provide a complex overview of the teamwork literature, but to introduce the topic and provide context for the following chapters.

The second part of the text looks at teamwork and its importance in logistics and supply chain management. This presents an interesting concept because while these business processes are quite well suited for teamwork implementation, its potential is not always fully utilized.

Based on the unique nature of logistic teams and teams responsible for supply chain management and the theoretical frameworks regarding teamwork, a new model of teamwork is proposed.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF TEAMWORK

Many authors have attempted to define teamwork appropriately. Based on one of these definitions [1], we can say that teamwork is a group of people who were assembled to perform some organizationally relevant tasks.

At the same time, Kozlowski states in further detail how a group of employees must meet following conditions to efficiently work as a team. It must exist to fulfil a role important to an organization, the members must share one or more common goals, perform social interactions related to their business tasks, demonstrate interconnection of tasks and create and maintain separate identity to the external environment. At the same time, it must work in a wider organizational context that defines the boundaries of the team, limits it, and coordinates its interactions with other entities within the organization.

Wang et al. [2] have a different point of view on teamwork and define it as a cooperation with others, within which the team members interact, support each other, solve conflicts, negotiate and lead each other.

Team members must share one or more goals, engage in social interactions with other team members, maintain and manage team rules, and engage in interdependent tasks. Teams can be created by an organization and should work with other units within the organization. For the teamwork concept, it is necessary to promote and present values that strengthen team culture within the organization. These are, for example, the ability to listen and constructively respond to opinions expressed by other members of the team, the ability to build trust amongst members, the ability to properly support others and to recognize the successes and interests of others. [3]

Such values are especially important for project-oriented teams as they help to improve collaboration and communication among team members, a prerequisite for creating synergies within the team. [4,5] They also help to create a positive and innovative environment within the team.

According to West [6], the positive and innovative team climate is a key prerequisite for team success and helps team members work more efficiently and creatively. Within his model, West defines four of the most important factors influencing the emergence and development of team climate. These include: support for innovation, vision, role orientation, and members' safety.

On the other hand, it is important to remember that the topic of teamwork is very complex and, in some cases, even well-established teams with advanced team climate and culture do not have to successfully fulfil all their tasks. This situation can be partly explained by the fact that the team performance depends not only on the competence of the team itself but also on the wider organizational context in which it works. [7]

2.1 Teamwork process description

Teamwork is an extensive social business system that represents a complex set of components, tasks and activities. Due to the extensive and complex nature of the issue, most authors in their research focus only on a certain narrow subset of team collaboration or on some individual components. For a comprehensive understanding of teamwork, it was therefore necessary to combine individual research into a coherent structure depicting a team collaboration system.

Several authors have attempted to describe the partial processes and components that form within the dynamics of team collaboration. [8-10] One of the most widely accepted models of teamwork is the Dickinson and McIntyre's model. [11] Dickinson and McIntyre's model of team collaboration process is based on the definition of seven major components of team collaboration and the relationships between them. They are:

- communication,
- team orientation,
- team leadership,
- monitoring,
- feedback,



- coordination,
- communication.

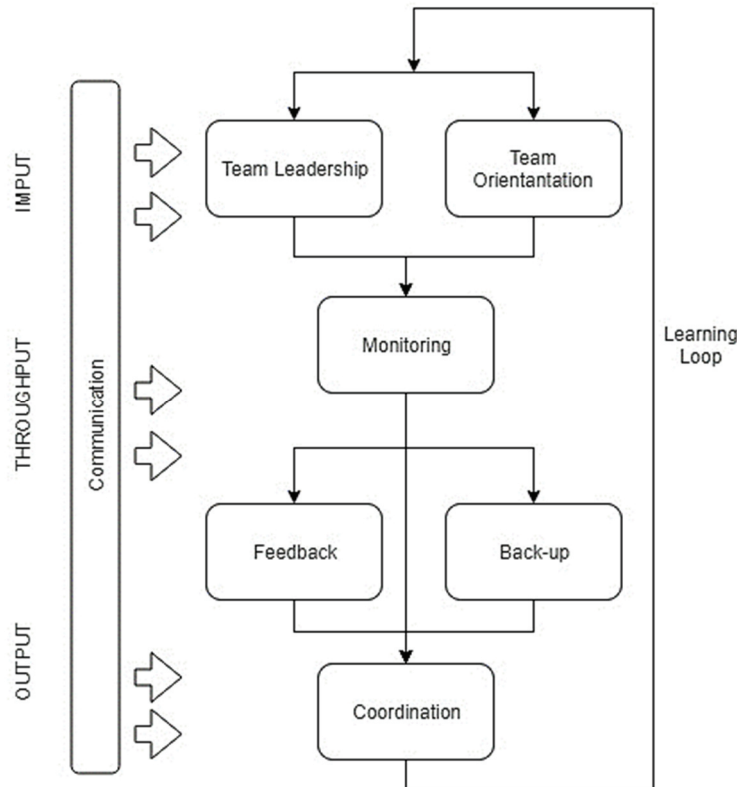


Figure 1 The teamwork model by Dickinson and McIntyre [11]

Even though the model captures some general aspects of teamwork, its direct implementation into the real-life business processes such as the supply chain management or logistic team management is unlikely. To provide an efficient and comprehensive framework for organizations to manage their teams better, a new, more complex and more specific model is needed.

3. IMPORTANCE OF TEAMWORK FOR LOGISTICS AND SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT

The system of teamwork is complex, and the understanding of its principles can bring competitive advantage to the organization in almost all of its processes. The logistic processes and management of the company's supply chain are no exception. The principles of team work can be applied to logistics and supply chain management in two different cases.

In the narrower sense, teamwork can be applied to teams responsible for planning and executing logistic processes inside an organization. Within the teams like these, a correct utilization of cooperation and teamwork can help improve the internal processes and create a new competitive advantage. Unfortunately, the teamwork processes are not always sufficiently utilized in areas such as logistics. [12] Cross-functional teams inside the organization are responsible for the process of purchasing, storing and delivering the goods needed. To successfully and efficiently conduct the processes mentioned, an active cooperation of employees from several organization's department is necessary. Teamwork plays a decisive role in order to effectively coordinate and improve operations concerning the purchasing, storing and delivering the goods. It also helps the organization to be more agile and respond quicker to the changes in the market and in the supply chain. [13]

In a broader sense, teamwork can be applied to much bigger and more complex systems such as the cooperation of multiple links in the supply chain. The implementation of teamwork principles into the supply chain management has been researched and a significant correlation between teamwork and supply chain satisfaction has been found. [14] An inadequate teamwork and the lack of cooperation can also represent an important inefficiency inside the supply chain. [15] Capability to work in a team and other teamwork skills such as leadership, ability to negotiate and influence others have been highly recommended by Manon as a necessary tool for all supply-chain managers and employees. The reason is that it's mostly these skills that help employees and managers with their everyday interactions with supply chain partners but also within their own company. Teamwork skills of the managers and employees have been also found to impact delivery performance of the organization.

While traditional technical skills required for managing the supply chain are still of vital importance, another set of soft skills such as team skills, negotiation skills, strategic skills, and the decision-making skills, is also needed and can significantly improve the supply chain. [16] Some organizations realize this and invest not only in the supply-chain-related technical training but also into the non-context-specific training of teamwork or leadership skills. [17] Within the present business conditions, it is becoming more and more common to use cross-functional, cross-company teams responsible for managing joint business processes. These teams consist of members from the individual companies and they act as the boundary spanners between the individual companies. Effective operation of supply chain teams is an important contributor to its success as a whole. [18] In his research, Day [19] found out that cooperating companies and their boundary spanners are more motivated to work closely and foster relationships because they have created interpersonal and interorganizational investment in cooperation.

4. THE PROPOSED TEAMWORK MODEL FOR LOGISTIC TEAMS

As it was mentioned above, theoretical models of teamwork are well established and researched. However, to successfully implement principles of teamwork into the organization processes, a more specifically constructed model could be more helpful. The proposed model has been designed based on the extensive theoretical research, content analysis and real needs of organizations.

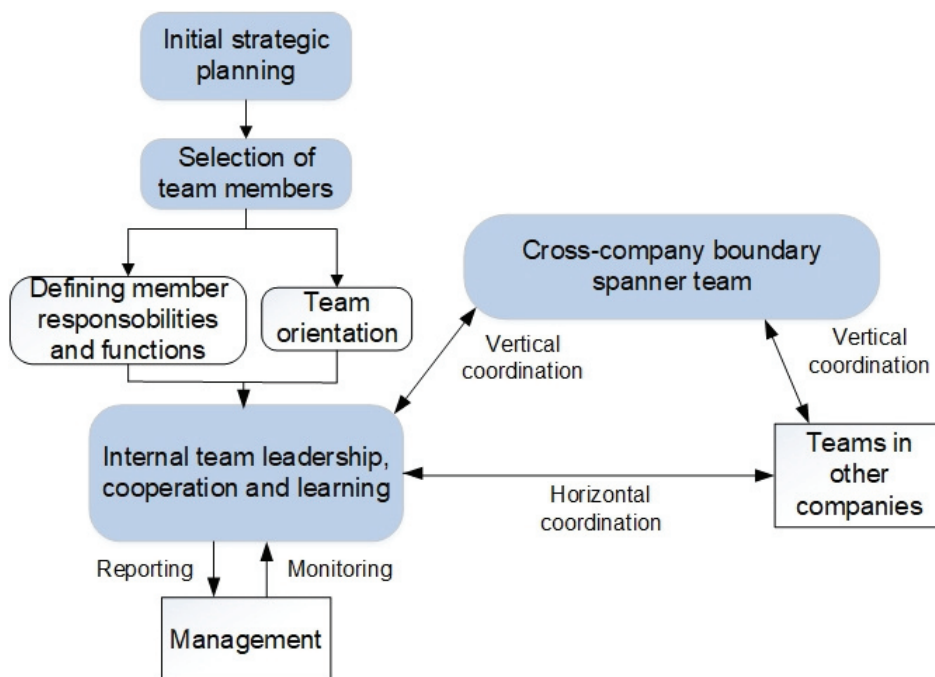


Figure 2 The proposed teamwork model

As a part of the initial planning, management defines the strategic goals and requirements of team collaboration. It defines the properties of the team collaboration output, schedules organizational resources assigned to the team, and sets deadlines. After the initial planning, teams are being formed. In order to properly select individual team members, the organization must consider whether it creates teams by itself or it fosters a work environment where teams emerge organically. If the organization selects members, it must define the criteria for selection and consider balancing the individual roles within the team. When the team is assembled, the orientation period starts. During this period team members also define the individual and team responsibilities and functions. The team should be fully capable of cooperating internally and using the principles of teamwork to run itself, learn and evolve after the orientation period is over. Team informs the management about its function via periodical reporting. The teamwork on a broader level is represented by the cooperation with other teams in other companies inside the supply chain. To do this, the teams are vertically coordinated by a cross-company boundary spanner team. The efficiency and the work of the team are being controlled by the management via monitoring.

5. CONCLUSION

The main goal of this paper was to briefly introduce the concept of teamwork and the theory regarding this concept and subsequently confront this very complex and relatively general topic with the unique nature of logistic teams and teams responsible for supply chain management. With this confrontation in mind, the general teamwork frameworks presented in literature were considered and synthesized into a new proposed model of teamwork. This model should better reflect the conditions of the teams mentioned, and at least partially clarify the process of teamwork.

While at the first sight the teamwork and teamwork dynamics can look as simple as putting some employees together and telling them they are a team now, in reality, it is a much more extensive and complex topic. When implemented right, teamwork can create synergy, enrich the work environment and provide a significant competitive advantage. Unfortunately, the topic is widely misunderstood by organizations, and even though it is widely talked about, it is very rarely implemented to its fullest potential. To achieve better utilization of teamwork, organizations must not only see a team as a management tool but also realise that it is a social group with its own complexities and uniqueness.

When it comes to the area of logistics and supply chain management, the basic principles of teamwork can be used at two different levels. In the narrower sense, teamwork principles can promote cooperation and synergy between the individual employees working in logistic teams. But in the broader sense, the principles can be applied to the whole supply chain and help all its members.

The paper focuses on bringing the attention to the huge potential of implementing teamwork principles into the organization and the whole supply chain. While the topic is becoming more topical, more and more research is being conducted, and the organizations are provided with new pieces of information. The opinion of the authors is that for the future improvement of teamwork utilization, a tangible list of implementation instructions for organizations is needed.

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