UNIMORE
UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MODENA E REGGIO EMILIA

Dipartimento di Economia Marco Biagi

DEMB Working Paper Series

N. 263

Groups and team in organizations

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September 2025

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ISSN: 2281-440X online

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Abstract

Why are some groups and teams effective and other teams ineffective? What factors within the organizational environment influence that effectiveness? At all levels in countless organizations, groups and teamwork seem to be a part of the strategy to become more productive and competitive. Self-managed teams, cross-functional teams, product-teams, and virtual teams, teams that rely on information technologies for communication and may never meet face-to-face, are all commonly used in the modern workplace. However, the use of this potentially powerful management tool has met with mixed effectiveness and often with high cynicism. Some detractors think that half of the decisions reached by teams are never implemented and the other half should not have been implemented. This paper is a literature review about group and team effectiveness and tries to point out some serious problems that can occur in groups and teams.

This work was supported by Fondo di Ateneo per la ricerca (FAR DEMB 2024 "Soft Skill e Project Engagement")

Introduction

Are twenty passengers on a bus a group? Are the thousands of runners in the New York Marathon a group? And would they be different from runners on a relay team? The marathon runners share the same objective but are not a group or a team because each runner is independent. On the other hand, the relay runners are a team and each member has the same objective and they must work together to achieve it. Each one must contribute by running at full speed, attend to the time, and encourage other team members. That is different for the marathon runners. A group is defined as two or more people who interact and are dependent upon each other to achieve some common objective. Patients in a doctor's waiting room or passengers on a bus do not constitute a group because while they may have some interaction, they do not depend on each other. Without interdependence, several people in proximity to one another are referred to as a collection. People in collections are usually aware of one another, such as in a movie theater.

The term "team" has gained increased popularity in organizations. Researchers who study groups often use this term when studying the same processes. Teams are a special form of a group that have highly defined tasks

and roles, and demonstrate high group commitment (Katzenback & Smith, 1993). In this paper the terms team and group are interchangeably.

Groups Formation

People join groups for a variety of reasons and are often willing to endure great hardships and financial costs to belong to a group. However, in many common organizational situations, individuals often have little choice about the groups and teams to which they are assigned.

Our social groups, which we usually join willingly, are often formed with those who share our beliefs, values, and attitudes. It is much easier to interact with those who share our attitudes: it permits us to confirm our beliefs, to deal with others with minimal conflict, and to express ourselves with less fear of contradiction. Groups also form around political philosophies and parties, ethnic and religious affiliations, or factors such as gender, age, or intelligence. While a common notion is that opposites attract, research into group formation does not confirm that conclusion.

A powerful force behind group formation are the shared goals that require cooperation. Managers organize employees around functions such as sales, production, accounting, or maintenance. If people in these groups also have similar characteristics, the basis for group formation and cohesion may even be strengthened.

Individuals may form their own groups or teams to achieve common goals. Common interests can include physical activities such as football, or basket. Groups may also form due to shared interests in personal or professional development such as among individuals who are interested in learning more about a particular subject or in learning new skills.

Interests and common objectives that give life to new groups may also be functional as emotional needs are satisfied. Many people derive security and a sense of protection from the membership of a group and this explains the birth of a group in presence of threats or pressure.

Individuals often form groups with others just because their jobs force them to be in close contact. Physical proximity and interaction permit relationships to develop and this can lead to friendships and group formation. We often associate with groups that developed from relationships that began in college dorms, apartment complexes, and work organizations.

Interaction and group formation can be influenced in an organization, for example, through the design of office space. Pathways and barriers can affect group membership and identification. People are more likely to form groups with others in their vicinity. Managers often cooperate with architects to design space so as to foster interactions. Employees who work closely together can be located near each other to increase interaction and allow the needed cooperation to take place (Baron, 2005).

Types of Groups

We are all members of some type of group. Since birth, most of us were members of a common group, our families. As we grew, we participated in groups or teams formed in our schools, neighborhoods, and work organizations. Each group added to our knowledge of how to behave in group settings and we learned that roles and expectations may differ, based on the type of group or team and Its objectives. There are several common types of groups.

*Reference groups***,** or *primary groups*, are groups that shape our beliefs, values, and attitudes. These groups are formed of members whom we trust

enough to rely on for testing ideas and giving feedback, guidance, or support. They serve as standards of comparison against which we evaluate our own behavior. A person facing a decision might draw on a reference group's values, or talk with someone in that group, before making a choice. Our family, our running partners, a local volunteer group, or a work team can also be reference groups.

A *primary group* is one with which we identify, even though we may not be a member, and we are more likely to affected by a primary group. The expectations of the group might lead a person to increase production, to "take to the streets", to take part in a strike or participate in a meeting. You might be able to better predict the behavior, values and attitudes of individuals, if you know the primary groups with which they identify.

Formal groups are those created as part of the formal organization structure. The formal organization is the hierarchical structure and the various departments that exist within that structure. Formal organization is reflected in the goals, policies, rules, and procedures that are designed to accomplish the organization's tasks. Any group that is purposely designed into this configuration is a formal group.

One form of formal group, a *functional group***,** is comprised of individuals who accomplish similar tasks within the organizational structure, and groups exist for an unspecified period of time. Many organizations organize around functional groups assigned to related work activities such as accounting, marketing, production, research and development, or other related task groupings. Universities, for examples, are usually organized into functional groups called departments.

Task groups are groups that are used to accomplish a specific organizational goal. They are usually established by the organization and exist for a specified

period of time. In task groups, social benefits for members are secondary or may even be absent. Committees, project teams, quality circles, task forces and employee participation teams are all organizational task groups. They usually have a defined purpose, deadlines to meet, specific work assignments and a reporting relationship in the organization. Some task groups are relatively permanent; others are temporary groups.

Informal groups arise out of individual needs and the attraction of people to one another. While out of the normal structure of the organization, these groups can have a significant effect on organizational performance. Membership is usually voluntary and is based on common values and interests. Sometimes the origin of these groups is social in nature.

Social groups exist primarily to provide recreational or relaxation outlets for members. For example, friends may eat together at work or socialize after work. Most softball teams, bowling groups, and gourmet clubs exist so that people can enjoy themselves in good company. Sometimes work goals could be involved, as might be the case for a company sport team or computer club, but the work is secondary to the social benefit.

On other occasions, an informal group develops in response to the organization, such as when workers band together to protest an unpopular management action. This case is an example of a *clique*, which may include people from the same or different hierarchical level. The key factor is that they share a common interest. Informal groups arise at work because many employees are concerned about their freedom at work, about control over their jobs, and about establishing good relationships with others (Katz, 1965).

Informal groups may develop to bypass company rules or to enhance the members' power. They might consist of people who also like and trust each other and perhaps interact outside work.

Informal groups can be both effective and powerful, and this may explain why some managers view them with doubt and suspicion. They tend to see informal groups as disruptive and potentially harmful to the formal organization. Some managers seek ways to gain the support of informal groups and informal leaders to reduce their threat or to enhance some company purpose.

Since informal groups are an inevitable component of behavior in organizations, managers should attempt to work with these groups so that they contribute to, rather than subvert, organizational goals. Informal groups serve basic needs for employees and are just as important, enduring, and rewarding as the relationship that employees have with the formal organization. The informal group can become a problem when it conflicts with some formal purpose, but even this is not necessarily bad. It may signal some error on management's part or be a symptom of a poor relationship with employees.

In most cases, work groups, whether they are functional groups or task groups, meet physically together to work on their problems.

Virtual teams don't do that; instead, the virtual team members are located in different physical locations and use electronic technology, particularly the internet to communicate. In the past virtual teams communicated by telephone conferencing. Now, however, organizations are increasingly reliant on virtual work arrangements with individuals that work in different buildings or even different countries.

While much of what we know about groups and teams applies to virtual teams, the very nature of this form of team structure creates new advantages and challenges for management (Cascio, 2000). One advantage is they can span time and distance constraints. For example, a virtual team meeting is not constrained to have everyone in town on the day of the team meeting. Team

members can “virtually” be anywhere and still be an active participant in meetings. Another is that these teams can take advantage of an individual’s expertise who works in another location. Suppose that the production line of a manufacturing plant in Great Britain has a history of frequent breakdowns. In response, plant management has appointed a virtual task team to solve this problem. This would allow the involvement of a trouble-shooter from the manufacturer of the equipment and a foreman from a similar plant in France that has had the same problems. This example also highlights a third advantage in that virtual teams can significantly reduce costs. The travel costs for members who are widely separated geographically would be quite expensive. A fourth advantage of virtual teams is improvement in the processes used to create team reports. In traditional teams this can be a cumbersome and time-consuming process, one in which everyone is sent a copy of a document to all team members and then having one person consolidate all of the inputs. With virtual technologies, all members can have synchronous and asynchronous access to documents. Virtual team members from London and Shanghai could simultaneously work on a document and that same document would be available for a team member in Tokyo.

A major disadvantage of virtual teams is the lack of physical interaction, so that many key elements of communication are eliminated. There are fewer verbal and nonverbal cues and as a result, information we traditionally rely on to infer meaning from communications is also missing. As a result, there is evidence virtual teams may have difficulty developing the level of trust necessary to become a high-performing team (Cascio, 2000).

Virtual teams are more likely to develop higher levels of trust when three conditions exist. First, there is a social period where members introduce themselves and provide background information. Second, there must be clear

roles for members. Finally, virtual team members must maintain and demonstrate positive attitudes about the team's tasks (Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998).

Like traditional teams, training is critical for effective performance of virtual teams. In some ways, virtual team members require similar skills as those for traditional teams. However, because of the use of technology, managers need to understand the limitations and advantages of virtual technologies as a communication medium. Therefore, team members must be competent to use the specific technologies that support team activities. Members also need to be trained in behaviors relevant for the virtual environment. Since traditional communication cues are limited in the virtual environment, members may need to learn soft skills to communicate effectively as part of a virtual team. These skills include collaboration, socialization, and communication, as well as a strong openness to experience, are necessary for high performing groups (Colquitt, Hollenbeck, Ilgen, LePine, & Sheppard, 2002). Collaboration skills are behaviors such as exchanging ideas without being critical, and ensuring that member ideas and input are tracked and summarized for accuracy. Socialization skills include using team member names in electronic greetings, soliciting feedback on process, express appreciation for ideas of others and volunteering for necessary roles. Communication skills include responding in a timely manner to email, using chat functions when available, addressing the entire team in communications, and ensuring that local translators are used when language issues may be a factor.

Group life cycle

One factor that may strongly influence the effectiveness of a group is its maturity. Group maturity can be thought of similarly to individual maturity.

As individuals, we develop confidence in ourselves and increase our emotional stability over time, partly through our education and interaction with others. Just like individuals, some groups are slower to mature and some never reach full maturity. Groups go through stages of development (Tuckman, 1965). Early in the life of a group, members engage in behaviors useful for forming the group and orienting members. Often a period of conflict or storming follows the initial forming stages and the polite behaviors that were associated with that stage. The group often struggles in this stage. In the next phase, the group is better organized and more cohesive, sometimes referred to as norming. As the group continues to mature, it will still have relationship difficulties to resolve if it is to mature fully into a high-performing team.

For a group to succeed, it needs to become organized. Initially, there is an initial orientation period called *forming*. Members try to find the purposes of the group and begin to establish its activities and priorities. Much of the early conversation revolves around learning the group's cognitive territory by identifying common objectives, methods of working, and internal rules. There is also a need to define relational territories, as members get to know each other and are very likely to be seeking roles they might fill, as well as testing the ground rules for behavior.

This early stage can be chaotic and uncertain. When a formal leader, appointed by the organization, exists, pressure is exerted on him or her to guide the group through this stage. In the absence of a formal leader, the group might select one or simply allow one to emerge.

In the forming stage, there is little to disagree about so, when the cognitive and relational issues are resolved, a conflict stage called *storming* usually emerges. This is a delicate stage because there is high potential for conflict.

There can be leadership crises and subgroups can form. Conflict is not necessarily bad at this stage, but good conflict management practices are necessary. If a group successfully resolves these conflicts, it is more likely that it will mature, moving into a cohesive stage. If consensus develops around goals and leadership and a sense of liking and trust develops, individuals begin to feel cohesive and express a readiness to move ahead into the norming stage. *Norming* stage is characterized by a high level of internal confrontation among members, as they can question each other and argue, but can come to agreement because they have developed the capacity to deal with such internal issues. If there are some who can't or won't be integrated into the group, they may leave the group or developed a resigned attitude.

If a group gets through these stages, its members move into dealing with problems concerning the structure of the group.

This stage is called the *performing* stage. Here, they face problems that stem from interpersonal relationships, such as intimacy and openness. These operate on at least two levels. One level is how well the group deals with emotional tensions that arise out of dissatisfaction of members. For example, do members feel free to say they are being unfairly treated? The other level is how idea generation is affected. Unless the participants can freely offer alternative definitions of a problem and differing solutions, problem solving and decisions making will suffer. If the group is successful in maturing beyond the conflict stage, a stage of acceptance is achieved. Subgroups become less important, communication increases and the needs of individuals are more freely expressed. When the task and the emotional needs of group members are handled well, the group has achieved full maturity.

Mature groups accept feelings in a nonevaluative way, disagree over real and important issues, make decisions rationally and encourage dissent,

but don't force members or fake unanimity, have an awareness of their process, and members understand the nature of their involvement.

In the *adjourning* stage, members leave the group. The group may cease to exist or it may be transformed with new members and a new set of goals. Like life, the group process is normal, and mixed emotions are to be expected.

Group decision making

Sometimes group decision making works well, and sometimes it does not. Several things are necessary for success. One is that the group norms place higher value on critical analysis rather than on consensus of the members (Postmes, Spears, & Cihangir, 2001). This is even more likely to be the case when there is a strong orientation to share information.

Using groups for decision making has both assets and liabilities. To a large degree, making them an asset depends on the skill of the leader. Compared to individuals, groups have more knowledge and information. Groups also generate a larger number of approaches to a problem, and members can knock each other out of ruts in their thinking. Group participation can increase understanding and acceptance of the decision, and the commitment to execute it.

Managerial decisions often fail because of faulty communication of the decision to those who must implement them. Employees often lack knowledge of rejected alternatives, obstacles, goals, and reasons behind the decision. These problems can be overcome when a group is involved in the entire process.

A disadvantage of group decision-making lies in social pressure for conformity. The majority can suppress good minority ideas, or a desire for consensus can silence disagreement. Some solutions, good and bad ones,

accumulate a certain amount of support. Once support for a solution reaches a critical level, it has a high probability of being selected and other solutions are very likely to fail. Even a minority can build up support for a solution by actively asserting themselves. Thus, decisions can emerge from this support, rather than from their quality. Members who are hard to control and who persuade, threaten, or persist in their point of view also can dominate groups. A final disadvantage of groups occurs when it becomes more important to avoid disagreement or win an argument than to make a good evaluation of alternatives. Avoidance of disagreement and arguments prevents open and objective discussions.

Some factors can be either benefits or disadvantages depending on the skill of the group leader. If the leader suppresses disagreement or allows it to create hard feelings, it can damage the solution. However, if the leader treats disagreement as acceptable, it can generate innovative solutions. The leader can also make a difference by emphasizing either conflicting or mutual interests. Mutual interests should be explored at all stages of decision making, beginning with the problem definition. Consensus development begins in the process of seeking mutually acceptable solutions, but the leader has to work hard to probe areas of mutual concern. Unless he or she does so, conflict among members might lead to a poor solution. The leader can also affect the level of risk that a group takes: it can be guided toward a very safe and conservative decision, or one that is riskier and more innovative (Tosi & Pilati, 2011).

Time can also be an asset or a liability. Groups generally take longer than individuals to make decisions. Even if both take an hour to decide, a group of five people has spent five work hours. Leaders who permit rushing to save time can risk losing acceptance and may reduce the quality of the decision. A

final factor that can help or hinder a decision is: who changes in the group?. If the person with the worst ideas changes, the decision will be better, but if the person with the best ideas is forced to change, the decision will be worse.

Deciding When to Use a Group

Not every decision that we make can - or should be - made by a group. Managers can make the decision alone or involve others in the decision process. They can assign the responsibility to an individual, a committee, or a task force.

But under what conditions is it best to use a group? Quality and acceptance are useful in deciding whether to engage a group in decision making. The quality of a decision refers to the feasibility and technical aspects of a problem and calls for the use of facts, analysis of data, and objectivity. Acceptance of a decision, on the other hand, deals with feelings, needs, and emotions and is subjective in nature (Tosi & Pilati, 2011).

Decisions can be classified into several types, depending on whether quality, acceptance, or both are important factors. With some decisions, quality is more important than acceptance. These problems are usually technical or scientific in nature, such as how to control pressure in a valve or devising a test to select among vendors' products. When quality is the main concern, you are not likely to become emotionally involved in the outcome or decision, so, as a manager, you need only find experts with the knowledge and experience to find a quality solution. They can research, develop, and test technically feasible solutions. Facts and analysis will dominate decision making. With other problems, however, acceptance may be the most important criteria. For example, deciding who works overtime is an acceptance issue, assuming that all of the candidates for overtime are able to do the work. Other changes that

might involve work place procedures or that will significantly impact a particular group and requires their efforts for successful decision implementation increase the importance of the acceptance criterion.

Other problems involve both quality and acceptance: deciding how to increase productivity, introducing new methods or equipment, reducing absenteeism, or developing new safety standards. Here quality solutions are essential, and those affected by them will have strong feelings about them. The decision could fail unless employees accept it and can commit to its implementation. An example of a decision in which both quality and acceptance were important was the way that the Pathfinder Mission to Mars would land the Sojourner Mars rover vehicle. The project team had essentially three alternatives; to land with a parachute, to land with retro-rockets as were used in the lunar landing, or to use airbags. There was a great deal of discussion, much of it very heated, as to what would be the best way and there were factions that favored different modes of landing. Finally, the decision was to use a combination of methods. The atmosphere of Mars was entered with the Sojourner in a capsule, then a parachute was used, and finally the Rover hit the Mars surface in an airbag device – successfully (Tosi & Pilati, 2011).

Whenever acceptance is critical, managers must at least consider using a group for the decision process. Unilateral decisions by the manager run the risk of being misunderstood or rejected. Even though shortage of time could argue against participation, group decision is the best way to achieve acceptance.

Pathologies in Group Decision Making

Groups can make poor decisions because they fall into a pattern called *groupthink* (Janis, 1972). The need for consensus and cohesiveness assumes

greater importance than making the best possible decision. It happens when the group collectively becomes defensive and avoids facing issues squarely and realistically. There are different symptoms of groupthink.

Illusion of invulnerability: the group acts as if it is protected from criticism and this gives members too much optimism and encourages extreme risk taking.

Tend toward rationalization: the group tends to explain away facts or ideas that press them to reconsider their position.

Illusion of morality: this is a belief that the group is acting in the name of goodness and causes inattention to ethical consequences.

Stereotyping: rivals or enemies outside the group are treated as evil, too stupid to negotiate with, or too weak to harm the group.

Pressure for conformity: team members are pressured to go along with the group's illusions and stereotypes. Dissent is suppressed as contrary to group expectations.

Self-censorship: team members become inclined to minimize their own feelings of doubt or disagreement.

Illusions of unanimity: silence comes to imply agreement and perceptions develop that unanimity exists.

Self-appointed mind guards: some members act to protect the group from adverse information.

There appear to be three key causes of groupthink (Baron, 2005) . It often occurs in highly cohesive groups, those in which there is very strong social identification among the members. Members have a strong sense that they are in the group for a particular, shared reason. When there is strong social identification, members will listen to each other’s ideas when they are put

forth. It also means that deviating too far from the dominant group position could be punished. Salient norms also are a prerequisite for groupthink. Strong and salient views among group members will lead to polarization, resulting in a strong defense by the group when its decision comes under criticism. Finally, there will be low group situational self-efficacy. This means, for especially critical problems, group members individually may lack high confidence to reach a good solution. All of these factors may be exacerbated when the group faces an important problem and there is high stress, as when an important decision is needed but hope is low for finding a solution other than the one desired by the leader or other influential members. Such factors can combine to create disastrous conditions. Consider a situation where a plant manager and his subordinates are under pressure from headquarters to complete a rush order from a customer. They might easily convince themselves that machine breakdowns, employee fatigue, or union resistance will not become an issue. Dissenting members of the team might be pressured to conform, and withhold their opinions.

In groups there is often pressure for conformity from those who hold a majority view on the minority of group members with a different position. Much of this pressure occurs during the social interaction of discussing the issues. The result of this pressure is a fascinating phenomenon found in groups: they often tend to take more extreme positions, either more risky or more conservative, than the individuals in the group might make.

What might cause a group to shift to a more extreme position compared to individuals? The answer provides a powerful lesson on social influence. In group decision making contexts, individuals usually have inclinations about a decision before they enter the group discussion. In general, group discussion tends to strengthen these inclinations (Whyte, 1989). The social process of

the group discussion causes a person who favored a particular decision before a group discussion to feel even stronger after the discussion. This process, called *polarization*, refers to the tendency that the average group member's position on an issue will become more extreme as the result of group discussion. It occurs as subgroups forms of members who have similar opinions on an issue, but opinions that differ from others. Through the decision process, these subgroups become further apart on the issue. For example, suppose the HR Department favors a new appraisal system for first-line supervisors, but these supervisors are against any change. As both sides meet to discuss the issue, polarization predicts that the HR Department will strengthen their inclinations favoring the new system while the supervisors will strengthen their biases against the change. This would create an even larger gap between the two groups. Prior to the discussion, the average pre-discussion positions of subgroup members were closer to the compromise position. However, notice that after a meeting, polarization causes the group members position to move, on average, towards a preference for a riskier decision.

Groupthink and polarization can be key factors in conflict, and there are several managerial solutions to minimize the problem. To reduce polarization, it may be wise to avoid premature meetings of subgroups for and against an issue. It is also helpful to mix membership within groups, or occasionally to invite outsiders or people with different ideas into meetings whenever feasible. Any action that calls for a focus on the total organization mission might reduce the tendency towards groupthink and polarization. Just making members aware of this tendency may cause members to develop procedures to minimize the impact of polarization in leading their group to make a riskier decision.

Intragroup conflict

Many managers have to be concerned with managing teams and groups. Often there is conflict between team members as well as between team members and the team leader.

Let's focus on the more specific issue of managing conflict on project teams. The issues that could lead to conflict on these teams are deadlines, priorities between projects, managerial procedures for the project, technical compromises, cost control, scheduling, personality differences. Different issues are important at different stages of a project (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). While deadlines are the most dominant issue over the life of a project, some appear to be related to the stage of the project. (Lock, 2007). For example, in the initial stage more conflict is about deadlines, cost estimates, specific work assignments, allocations of resources. This is often because each project incorporates a degree of innovation and team members may be inexperienced on some aspects of the project.

What happens in this first stage is particularly important. Effective teams usually begin with low process conflict and low relationship conflict, both of which tend to increase over time (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Interestingly, research shows that teams which begin with a high level of trust may experience lower trust among team members in later stages, as well as reduced individual autonomy and weaker task interdependence (Curseu & Schruijer, 2010; Langfred, 2007). When there is diversity of membership, teams on which members are interpersonally similar will be more creative, have greater social integration, and less task conflict in later stages, while teams with initially low interpersonal congruence are less effective overall (Polzer, Milton, & Swann Jr, 2002).

During the middle project stages conflict emerges over dates and management procedures that often leads to the first technical compromise. Other sources of conflict in the middle stages are individual autonomy of project managers, issues of task interdependence, the management of the project, and mid-project assessment criteria. In the final project stage, costs and deadlines cause team management problems. If the team members have a strong sense of ownership on the project, these types of conflicts can be resolved by increasing cooperation.

As teams deal with these conflicts over the life of the project, they tend to restructure themselves (Langfred, 2007). The team leader has a major effect on how well they resolve conflict and restructure themselves and the project kickoff meeting is of great importance. Team leaders with high levels of emotional intelligence and empathy are perceived to be more effective in managing teams. They are likely to be better at managing emotions of team members and, therefore, are more likely to lead more effective teams (Ayoko & Callan, 2010).

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