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Understanding team maladaptation through the lens of the four R's of adaptation

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ABSTRACT

The process of team adaptation is crucial for team success as effectiveness in today's workplace hinges upon teams that are flexible and dynamic in the unavoidable presence of change. A considerable amount of work has been conducted on the positive aspects of a team's adaptation process (e.g., successful adaptation resulting in beneficial outcomes). These efforts, however, have largely ignored the process and outcomes of *maladaptation* when a team fails to adapt properly. We use influential works (e.g., Burke, Stagl, Salas, Pierce, & Kendall, 2006; Kozlowski, Watola, Jensen, Kim, & Botero, 2009) to build a concise heuristic (e.g., the four R's) that is then used to outline and describe potential errors teams may engage in before, during, and after a change that cause maladaptive outcomes. We offer propositions around our heuristic that can readily utilized in research contexts to guide further exploration into team adaptation so that we may better understand the processes underlying maladaptive outcomes.

"*Life is neither static nor unchanging…In an inherently changing world, any species unable to adapt is also doomed*" (Auel, 1985, p. 267).

This quote not only captures the nature of the human condition and evolution, but also the nature of the modern organization. It can be argued that in today's workplaces, characterized by dynamic operational environments, any team unable to adapt is destined to fail. In fact, scholars argue that effective teams, by definition, are both adaptive and dynamic (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003; Salas, Dickinson, Converse, & Tannenbaum, 1992), and team behaviors are determined not only by organizational goals, but also by contextual conditions that are often unstable (e.g., Coovert, Craiger, & Cannon-Bowers, 1995). Thus, research on team adaptation has increased in recent years (Baard, Rench, & Kozlowski, 2014), which has resulted in several theories and reviews on the subject (e.g., Burke et al., 2006; Kozlowski et al., 2009). Although existing theory suggests a variety of antecedents, mediating processes, and adaptive outcomes (e.g., Burke et al., 2006), the continued theoretical development resulting in a lack of synthesis is troubling as it hinders comprehensive theoretical refinement and ready application to practice. But perhaps most importantly, this vein of research often fails to acknowledge the possibility that teams may adapt poorly by engaging in maladaptive behaviors (Koseoglu, Shalley, & Herndon, 2017). In fact, Maynard, Kennedy, Sommer, and Passos (2015) specifically highlight how the study of adaptation has too often focused on the positive outcomes associated with the process. Thus, the overarching goal of this work is to concisely integrate previous work into a heuristic that can be readily utilized in both research and practical contexts to not only provide a concise and memorable frame for the process of adaptation, but also to enable a focus on *maladaptive* team behaviors that hinder the ability of a team to successfully adapt as needed. We begin by analyzing two definitions of adaptation developed nearly a decade apart to highlight the evolution of the concept. Then, we briefly review and synthesize the most influential adaptation theories into a heuristic designed to provide an overarching view of a team adaptive process. We end with a research roadmap, identifying

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propositions specifically focused on how the heuristic can be used to inform team maladaptation.

1. The definition of team adaptation and maladaptation

Burke et al. (2006) define team adaptation as "a change in team performance, in response to a salient cue or cue stream that leads to a functional outcome for the entire team." (p. 1190). Baard et al. (2014) provided a similar definition of performance adaptation as "cognitive, affective, motivational, and behavioral modifications made in response to the demands of a new or changing environment, or situational demands" (p. 50). At their time of publication, both definitions were syntheses of various conceptualizations of adaptation with the Baard et al. (2014) definition integrating nearly a decade of research published after the influential Burke et al.' (2006) model.

Burke et al.' (2006) definition focuses exclusively on teams, whereas Baard et al. (2014) focus on the specifics of change. Although both definitions suggest that team adaptation must occur in response to a stimulus or cue, although Baard et al. (2014) suggest this must be *external* to the responder(s) whereas Burke leaves the nature of source more vague. Finally, Burke et al. (2006) suggest that adaptation must result in a functional outcome, which is not a requirement in the Baard et al.' (2014) definition. We submit that this may be due to Burke et al.' (2006) effort to define positive adaptation, while Baard et al.' (2014) leaves open the possibility that an entity may change in a maladaptive manner.

Taken together, these two definitions form the basis of our heuristic. But, we make two important integrations. First, as articulated by both previous definitions, we focus on the notion that there must be a stimulus instigating the necessity for adaptation. Differing from Baard et al.' (2014) work, and adding specificity to the Burke et al. (2006) definition, we consider cues as potentially emanating from either *internal* (e.g., membership change) or *external* (e.g., resource availability) sources, as both can demand a change in the team course of action. Second, in closer alignment with the Baard et al. (2014) definition, we suggest that a team may make *maladaptive* changes. Further, we extend this to consider a failure to adjust to a cue altogether, whether it be due to an unrecognize need to change *or* an inability to change. Based on the Burke model (2006), as well as other recent theories and empirical evidence (e.g., Koseoglu et al., 2017), such instances will likely have a negative impact on performance. Yet, as described in greater detail below, these experiences *can still result in* learning (Burke, Salas, & DiazGranados, 2008; Kozlowski & Bell, 2008) and, therefore, must be conceptualized as part of an adaptive cycle—albeit a maladaptive one.

2. Team adaptation literature synthesis

To identify relevant articles for our synthesis, we conducted a literature search using the keywords team, adaptation, model, taxonomy, phase, and theory.[1] We focused our literature search on the areas of management and applied psychology. In the Web of Science search, the works of Marks, Zaccaro, and Mathieu (2000), Day, Gronn, and Salas (2004), Burke et al. (2006), LePine (2005), Randall, Resick, and DeChurch (2011), Langan-Fox, Canty, and Sankey (2009), Bearman, Paletz, Orasanu, and Thomas (2010), Woolley (2009), and Baard et al. (2014) were all in the top-10 list of most-cited articles at the time of writing (in descending order of citation count). It should be noted that the Web of Science search that produced the most cited articles on adaptation also included irrelevant articles removed from this synthesis effort (e.g., individual adaptation, technology adaptation). The remaining highly cited articles relative to their publication dates either provided a comprehensive review of the literature or offered theory about team-level adaptation. Below, we briefly summarize these articles, highlighting the unique contribution of each to the overarching understanding of team adaptation (see Table 1).

2.1. *Burke et al.'s (2006) model of team adaptation*

Focusing on creating a nomological network of team adaptation, Burke et al. (2006) developed an input-mediator-output-input (IMOI) model of team adaptation, which synthesizes *individual characteristics, cues, emergent states*, and an *adaptive cycle* in IMOI format. The four components of this adaptive cycle are situation assessment (phase 1), plan formulation (phase 2), plan execution (phase 3), and team learning (phase 4). In addition to the adaptive cycle, the model also accounts for cues (e.g., timeline milestones), job design characteristics (e.g., structure, autonomy, task difficulty), individual characteristics (e.g., knowledge, attitudes, traits, abilities), and emergent states (e.g., situation awareness) in the process of team adaptation. For our purposes, we focus on the construct level.

Drawing on the work of Louis and Sutton (1991), Burke et al. (2006) provided specific situations in which teams are more likely to recognize cues, including unusual or novel situations; discrepancies, disruptions, or unexpected issues; and events that require increased levels of awareness to cues. Cue identification enables teams to discern a need to adapt. Thus, the Burke et al. (2006) model states that situation assessment occurs when at least one team member scans the team's environment for cues that could affect the team's goal-oriented processes. Relevant constructs include cue recognition and meaning ascription. Teams then formulate a plan, which involves various elements originally delineated by Stout and Salas (1993). These include choosing a course of action, setting goals, clarifying member roles and responsibilities, discussing environmental characteristics and constraints, prioritizing tasks, clarifying performance expectations, and sharing information. Once a plan is established, team members engage in individual-level (e.g., back-up behaviors, communicating, monitoring) and team-level behaviors (e.g., coordinating) to adjust to the cue. This should

[1] The exact search phrase used was: "(team) AND (adaptation) AND (model OR taxonomy OR phase OR theory)".