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# The Team Functioning Scale: Evaluating and improving effectiveness of school teams



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## ABSTRACT

While there has been considerable research on team effectiveness in business, military and healthcare environments, there is a relative scarcity of research that examines characteristics of effective teams within a school. This study focuses on facilitating improvement of school teams with the Team Functioning Scale (TFS), a 17-item scale designed to capture and evaluate overall functioning of a team implementing a school improvement process. The TFS is a reliable and valid scale that measures how individual team members observe team functioning and supports continual improvement in team structure, focus, meaningful communication and shared decision-making, ideally resulting in higher-functioning teams with increased potential for effectiveness. The TFS is sensitive and responsive to change over time, indicating potential as a mechanism for improving teaming practices.

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## 1. Introduction

For teachers and administrators, school teams are a part of work life and a key component of most education improvement initiatives (Algozzine, Newton, Horner, Todd, & Algozzine, 2012; Markle, Spleet, Maras, & Weston, 2014). In the context of this research, a team is defined as three or more individuals who interact to achieve common goals and accomplish productive outcomes. In addition to structural elements, there are processes within teams that help account for real differences in outcomes (Brannick, Prince, Prince, & Salas, 1995; Brannick, Salas, & Prince, 1997). Driskell, Salas, and Hogan (1987) described effective teams as “productive, cohesive, and resistant to performance degradation under stress” (p. ii).

There is a considerable body of research on teams and team processes dating back to the 1930s (Baker, Horvath, Campion, Offermann, & Salas, 1999; Richards, 1994). The prevalent framework for describing teams and team effectiveness has been a systems model including inputs, processes and outputs of the team (Baker et al., 1999; Barrick, Steward, Neubert, & Mount, 1998). Increasingly focus has shifted to conceptualizing a model of team effectiveness that looks more closely at core characteristics of high-performing teams whose members represent different disciplines, domains, or even cultures. For example, Baker et al. (1999) and Baker, Horvath, Campion, Offermann, and Salas (2005) discussed core team skills, knowledge, and competencies that are important to the effectiveness of an international team working on adult learning and literacy. These competencies include group decision making, planning, adaptability/flexibility, and interpersonal relations

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(Baker et al., 1999, 2005). Based on pilots conducted with the U.S. Army's European Command, Prevou, Veatch, and Sullivan (2009) explored how teams of leaders from autonomous organizations gained shared situational understanding, purpose, trust and confidence to achieve successful outcomes. This "teams of leaders" approach has also been applied and studied with interdisciplinary health research teams (Prevou, Hilton, Hower, McGurn, & Gibson, 2011).

In the current American education system, interdisciplinary teams are the norm rather than the exception in schools (Algozzine et al., 2012). This trend is largely due to legislation like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004, which increased the implementation of tiered models of support such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) (Markle et al., 2014). These school improvement interventions require teams, made up of individuals from across the school, to effectively collaborate on functions like planning service delivery, implementing evidence-based practices, and promoting systems change (Bahr & Kovaleski, 2006; Bahr, Whitten, & Dieker, 1999; Nellis, 2012).

In addition to productivity improvements, there are other clear benefits to effective teaming in education. For example, increased communication among professionals resulting from teaming (Weist et al., 2012) allows team members to align their goals, reduce unnecessary duplication of services, increase professional support, and decrease staff burnout (Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004). Teachers can be empowered through team participation to voice opinions and take an active role in educational improvement efforts (Somech, 2005). Educators who participate in teams are more effective teachers, show increased problem solving, and provide a higher quality of education for students (Jurasic-Harison & Rex, 2010; Somech, 2005).

School culture can also be positively impacted by teaming as teacher involvement in the development and implementation of learning practices creates an environment responsive to the community context. As team members, staff can promote the school's collective values, beliefs, behaviors, traditions, and norms that comprise culture (Stolp, 1994). This, in turn, contributes to shared decision making with administrators and community members (West, 1990). Furthermore, inter-professional collaboration in schools is associated with increased student attendance and academic achievement (Oppenheim, 1999), decreased levels of student misconduct (Smith, Armijo, & Stowitschek, 1997), and decreased referrals for evaluation and placement in special education (Kovaleski & Glew, 2006). Clearly, school teaming is related to school culture, and an important component for improving outcomes.

While there has been considerable research on team effectiveness in business, military and healthcare environments, there is a relative paucity of research that examines characteristics of effective teams within a school. This study focuses on facilitating improvement of school teams through the use of the Team Functioning Scale (TFS), a 17-item scale designed to capture and evaluate overall functioning of a team implementing a school improvement process. The TFS indicates how individual team members observe team functioning and supports continual improvement in team structure, focus, meaningful communication and shared decision-making, resulting in higher-functioning teams with increased potential for effectiveness.

### 1.1. Dimensions of team functioning

There are many dimensions within the concept of teaming that range from meeting logistics (e.g., start and stop times) to more complex concepts such as shared vision, communication effectiveness and leadership. At the basic level, structural elements such as agendas, specific start and stop times, and a note-taking system promote meeting quality and team meeting effectiveness (Nixon & Littlepage, 1992). Team meetings must be well implemented to achieve outcomes and realize their goals (Newton, Algozzine, Algozzine, Horner, & Todd, 2011; Truscott, Cohen, Sams, Sanborn, & Frank, 2005). Not surprisingly, teams with structural elements in place are more productive, and members feel good about the time commitment (Allen & O'Neill, 2011).

At a higher level, shared vision, communication and leadership are also important for successful team functioning; teams with a shared vision are more likely to perform at high levels, primarily due to a sense of purpose (Bishop, Scott, Goldsby, & Cropanzano, 2005; Prevou et al., 2009, 2011; Wageman, Hackman, & Lehman, 2005). Attitudes of team members are often based on the quality and relevance of a project, as well as a sense of cohesion or belonging to the group (Longo, 2005). The greater the perceived importance of a member's contribution, the more likely they are to be highly invested in the end product. Furthermore, communication and leadership influence group quality and team effectiveness. Shared leadership, where teams of teachers share joint decision-making, promotes a culture of collaboration (Gupta, Huang, & Niranjan, 2010; Wildy, Forster, Loudon, & Wallace, 2004). A group's sense of trust and belonging among its members develops into a shared desire to work toward successful projects and shared goals (Peters & Karren, 2009).

### 1.2. Measuring team effectiveness

Historically, team effectiveness was measured largely by the number of projects completed, without regard to quality of the products or outcomes (Cantu, 2007; Wageman et al., 2005). As the study of teams has progressed, research has shifted to examining the quality of team performance and its positive relationship to the quantity of production (Wageman et al., 2005). The relationship between team processes and team outcomes has been well established in research (Brannick, Roach, & Salas, 1993). The measurement constructs vary depending on the theoretical framework used in the research, with some focused on individual team member characteristics and attributes (e.g., the Model of Effective Team Functioning,

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