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Creating high performance teamwork in organizations

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A B S T R A C T

The adoption of teams continues to increase in almost every domain of modern work life. In the current article we review evidence of the complexity of modern work, industry trends in the use of teams, and the challenges of achieving the full potential of organizational work teams. We aimed to meaningfully move forward the science of high performance teamwork by assembling a focused set of review articles in the present special issue. We consider four themes that capture the articles in this special issue and avenues for achieving the full potential of teams: (1) work across boundaries; (2) build effective team processes and states; (3) manage team development issues; and (4) leverage human capital. Collectively, the contents of this special issue offer important new opportunities for advancing future research and for making a practical difference in the effectiveness of teams in organizations. We identify six areas in which future research efforts in high performance teamwork should be directed based on “realities” that, in our view, need to be addressed.

1. Introduction

When we set out to create this special issue, we had one goal in mind: To meaningfully move forward the science and practice of high performance teamwork. Why does this matter? The adoption of teams continues to increase in almost every domain of modern work life (Cross, Rebele, & Grant, 2016). Problems facing the world and organizations are so complex that collaboration among individuals with common objectives is fundamental (Salas, Shuffler, Thayer, Bedwell, & Lazzara, 2015). We know that teamwork matters, as effective teamwork is related to innovation, safety, fewer errors, and saving lives (e.g., Hughes et al., 2016; Hülsheger, Anderson, & Salgado, 2009). Yet, high performance teamwork is difficult to achieve and most teams fail to reach their full potential (and many fail dismally; Hackman, 1998). This lost potential manifests itself by inhibiting with a variety of key teamwork metrics, such as low engagement, innovation, scientific advancement, productivity, quality, competitiveness, and so on. In this special issue, we sought to advance current knowledge of team effectiveness, produce fruitful research agendas for future empirical studies, and provide useful implications for practitioners challenged with teamwork issues.

In this introduction to the special issue, we begin with an overview of high performance teamwork involving the need for teamwork and recent industry trends in the use of teams. Next, we discuss four avenues to harness the lost potential of teams based on themes of the articles in the current special issue. We conclude with a statement about how the articles in this special issue will help the field move forward.

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2. High performance teamwork

2.1. Defined

High performance teamwork means several things (Hackman, 1987). First, teams must deliver on stakeholder objectives at the highest level of quality. Second, teams must mature into increasingly capable work units over time. Third, teams must enable their members to continuously develop and grow their capabilities over time. This definition of high performance teamwork is intentionally broad and global, as teams can be productive but, if they do not maintain viability, their members will eventually burn out (Sundstrom, De Meuse, & Futrell, 1990).

2.2. Challenges

There is a litany of challenges involved in achieving and maintaining high performance teamwork. Wageman, Nunes, Burruss, and Hackman (2008) reported that only 21% of leadership teams are performing at an outstanding level and that 42% of teams are performing poorly. Hackman's (1990) book titled "Groups that work (and those that don't)" illustrated a plethora of difficulties and obstacles across a wide variety of team types. According to Steiner (1972) teams suffer from process loss, as their total output will be a function of the team's potential minus coordination costs. Furthermore, teams tend to procrastinate more on tasks than do individuals (Chang, Bordia, & Duck, 2003; Gersick, 1988). Dealing with the realities of coordinating a multi-team system, the need to span boundaries, and the importance of aligning strategically across the organization raises another increasingly critical, but vital, set of issues to address (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992). Thus, there are many difficulties in achieving high performance teamwork; clearly, there is a lot of work for researchers and practitioners ahead.

2.3. Complexity of work

If high performance teamwork is so difficult, why don't we look for alternative structures to accomplish work and objectives? The answer is that in the pursuit of excellence, it is difficult to imagine making much more progress on modern business and scientific challenges without several brains and bodies working in unison (Salas et al., 2015). There are several examples of huge initiatives with enormous complexity that require a team-based approach. The Buzz Aldrin Space Institute, NASA, SpaceX, and others are currently formulating plans for not just a mission to Mars, but an occupation and colonization (Salas et al., 2015). Tesla is attempting to create a fleet of automobiles that will be powered completely by the sun, and power stations that will be completely free to the consumer. Amazon is attempting to deploy a drone force so huge and efficient that packages can be delivered to doorsteps within hours of receiving the orders. Healthcare providers are testing resuscitation and rapid response interdisciplinary teams to better rescue and save critically-ill patients (Jones, DeVita, & Bellomo, 2011). Apple made a goal of installing entire music collections, traditionally stored on records, cassettes, and CDs, into small electronic handheld devices (i.e., the iPod). Military operators are seeking to anticipate and adapt to dynamic changes in enemy behavior through highly coordinated and empowered multi-team systems to combat terrorism (McChrystal, Collins, Silverman, & Fussell, 2015). Scientists are working on problems so complex that highly specialized experts in disciplines and sub-disciplines need to collaborate in order to continue generating knowledge and solving problems (indeed, team patents and research articles are increasing, Wuchty, Jones, & Uzzi, 2007). Entrepreneurial ventures are launching in numbers greater than ever before, given the flattened world created by technology and the Internet of Things. To innovate and compete with the catalogue of other start-ups, these ventures are much more likely to be team-based rather than sole proprietorships (Pennanen, 2016). It should be obvious that teams will be necessary to achieve such endeavors.

2.4. Industry trends

What do recent industry reports say about the use of teamwork? KPMG's (2012) report indicates that "people collaborating with each other to achieve common business objectives is a fundamental prerequisite to create optimization (p. 12)." According to Deloitte's (2016) *Global Human Capital Trends* industry report, 45% of organizations are restructuring around teams and multi-team systems. Ernst and Young's (2012) report concluded that "diversity...improves both financial performance and reputation (p.20)," calling for interdisciplinary teams. Gallup's (2017) report on performance management calls for team reflexivity, which they suggest "occurs when teams regularly review recent performance so they can work together more cohesively in the future (p. 24)." According to a McKinsey report, even at the top levels of an organization, developing an effective team is highly dependent on the soft skills of individual members. The report concluded that "the soft stuff matters – and is hardest to get right" (Keller, Kruyt, & Malan, 2010, p. 4). Teamwork matters in healthcare, space exploration, aviation, oil and gas, military and in the corporate world. The reality is that teams are needed, they are here to stay, and we need to know a lot more about how to design and deploy them to achieve their full potential.

3. Harnessing the full potential of teams

The contents of the special issue form four themes. Each theme represents a potential set of strategies for helping teams to achieve their full potential: (1) work across boundaries; (2) build effective team processes and states; (3) manage team development issues; and (4) leverage human capital. Below we offer highlights from each article represented in these themes.

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