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# TEAMS AND TEAM EFFECTIVENESS

RESEARCH PREVIEW

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE NETWORK

At CRF we believe HR's purpose is to help the organisation build both people capability and an enabling environment, helping define and deliver business performance. Therefore, a key goal of HR practices and HR strategy more broadly is to shape employee behaviour in ways that contribute to the performance of the organisation.



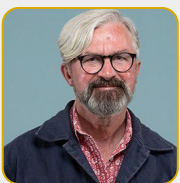
Psychologists have studied behaviour at work since around the early 1900s. Work psychology as a scientific discipline therefore provides much of the foundational knowledge for HR practice. The purpose of the Work Psychology Network is to provide an outline of work psychology theory and evidence relevant to various areas of HR activity and consider its implications for HR practice.

These reports contribute directly to the effectiveness of the HR function and HR professionals by providing a more detailed, elaborate and nuanced understanding of both the nature of the workplace behavioural phenomena HR is trying to shape and which practices or approaches are most likely to help do this.

As discussed in several of our previous reports – including [Evidence-Based HR: A New Paradigm](#) and [Driving Organisational Performance: HR's Critical Role](#) – the HR function's effectiveness depends on being able as accurately as possible to identify HR-relevant business issues and actions that will help resolve those issues.

The insights provided by work psychology research help us do both these things, taking us beyond the usually unhelpful notion of 'best practice' and instead to practices relevant to our business context and the specific issues our business faces.

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As the Network lead, Rob authors CRF's exclusive Work Psychology research and leads all events together with CRF Director John Whelan MBE (former UK HRD BAE Systems) who provides insight on the practical application of the research.

Thanks to Professor Joanne Lyubovnikova (University of Liverpool) for generously sharing views and insights.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- There are several important features of the context which should be considered before we discuss teams and team effectiveness:
  1. Teams are not necessarily effective nor a good thing, but they are often perceived to be. This has been described as the **romance of teams - where there is a bias towards seeing teams as generally positive**. This results in the over-application of teams, poor organisational alignment and a limited assessment of the costs and benefits of teams. A related form of bias is to view that teamwork is easy.
  2. However, **organising work into teams makes sense under two general conditions**: When the work requires a combination of skills or knowledge no one person is likely to have, and when the task is so large or complicated it cannot be completed by employees working individually.
  3. Teamwork today is often viewed as fundamentally different to teamwork in the past because of broader changes in the way organisations function and their environment. Such claims, while plausible, are rarely supported by good quality evidence.
  4. There is a large body of work psychology theory and evidence about teams, though its relevance and value to practice has been questioned.
  5. Teams **are fundamentally unstable and dynamic entities** which has important implications for how we conduct research into teams and how we improve team effectiveness.
- Teams are very diverse in many ways, which means **defining a 'team' is not straightforward**.
- There are many definitions of teams and while **most share some similar features** (e.g., two or more individuals, shared goals, work interdependently), **some definitions have more unique elements** (e.g., members have complementary skills, members are distinguishable from nonmembers, engage in reflexivity).
- It is also possible to consider **what a team is not**. Sometimes work groups are **pseudo teams**; in that they may be described as team but do not operate as such (e.g., little or no interdependence, no shared goals). A related concept is the co-acting group. Calling a group a team and trying to manage it as a team when it is not may not be an effective approach. **There may be more pseudo teams than real teams in most organisations**.
- Rather than identifying work groups as either teams, or not teams **it may be more useful to consider the dimensions along which groups can vary** and which make them more or less team-like.
- There have been many attempts to **identity different types of teams and find ways in which they can be organised into taxonomies**. This is potentially useful for both research and practice, however there are several challenges to developing such taxonomies: For example, teams may be a mix of different types and, given their unstable natures, may often be shifting from one team type to another.

- In addition to identifying types of teams, there have also been attempts to specify the **types of tasks** done in teams (e.g., managing others, human service) along with **higher level characteristics** of teams (e.g., task interdependence, leadership structure). This enables a distinction to be drawn between **what teams do and how they do it**.
- Identifying and defining teams is further complicated as we must also consider **multiteam systems** (organisations may contain multiple, interacting teams), that **individuals may belong to several teams** (multiple team membership) and the **blurring of boundaries between teams**.
- **While defining teams can be challenging, multiple definitions, dimensions and taxonomies are available** which allow us to more clearly describe, understand and manage teams across a range of contexts and specific team forms and functions.
- **Team effectiveness** partly refers to whether **team outcomes are acceptable to those who set standards for team outputs**. In other words, the precise meaning of an assessment of team effectiveness will depend on the context.
- However, team effectiveness also refers to **team processes** - the ways in which the team members work together and their behaviours. Teams may be doing everything "right" but still not achieve the desired outcomes, particularly when those outcome are not much within the control of the team. Hence, team processes are a part of team effectiveness.
- Some definitions also suggest that **individual-level team member outcomes** such as satisfaction or well-being are a part of team effectiveness.
- While the team outcomes as an aspect of team effectiveness is very context-specific, team processes that can be considered to indicate team effectiveness may be somewhat more general.
- **Measuring team effectiveness can be quite an elaborate process**, particularly given the role of context and the dynamic and unstable nature of teams. It can be made more manageable by focusing on only those aspects of team processes and behaviour that are most likely to lead to team outcomes. This, in turn, requires a good understanding of the team and the task.
- **There are very many influences on team effectiveness**. This means that focusing on just one or two is unlikely to be helpful. Also, which factors have the strongest influence is likely to depend heavily on context. Therefore claiming one or two as generally the most important is also unlikely to be helpful.
- There are also **many models of team effectiveness** which have evolved historically from relatively simple cause and effect approaches to highly complex models which include a large number of variables. Here too, the dynamic and unstable nature of teams makes it difficult and unrealistic to develop a comprehensive and reasonably accurate model of how teams function.

- Given the very large number of influences on team effectiveness work psychology researchers have attempted to **categorise such influences** into, for example, structural features, mediating mechanisms and compositional features.
- There have also been attempts to identify a **smaller and more manageable number of influences that are most likely to be important**. Sometimes these are described as enabling conditions (e.g., a real team, compelling purpose, norms of conduct). The idea of a Big Five of teamwork has also been proposed, including team leadership, mutual performance monitoring and adaptability. While it seems practically useful to simplify in this way, the extent to which these frameworks are based on empirical evidence is somewhat unclear.
- In order **to create and improve team effectiveness, a four stage approach is proposed**. **This** first deals with the most fundamental mistakes that inhibit team effectiveness before discussing setting conditions for effectiveness and then fixing team effectiveness problems:
  1. **Tackle and remove misconceptions about teams.** Misconceptions about teams appear to be widespread. For example, that harmonious working leads to team effectiveness. Such misconceptions need to be challenged otherwise they will lead to practice decisions that do not lead to team effectiveness.
  2. **Create awareness of common mistakes and how they can be overcome.** Researchers have identified what they believe to be common mistakes made in managing teams which are less likely to happen if practitioners are made aware of such mistakes. Such mistakes include using a team for work that is better done by individuals and assuming team members already have all the skills they need to perform well.
  3. **Set the conditions for team effectiveness before the team is created.** Rather than take remedial action when things go wrong it is argued that it is more useful to set initial conditions that are likely to lead to team effectiveness.
  4. If something appears to be going wrong consider ways of fixing the problems. Taking remedial action is best done in a structured way using a range of frameworks:
    1. Some sort of assessment of team effectiveness issues: What is going wrong?
    2. Some sort of diagnosis or analysis of causes: why is it going wrong?
    3. Identify actionable solutions or interventions that are likely to help: What can we do about it? Followed by an evaluation of whether or not these actions have been effective.
- Teams are unstable and dynamic. They may also have self-regulating properties. For this reason, it is difficult to “tweak” factors in real time that we assume will help fix team effectiveness issues. Setting conditions for team effectiveness before the team is formed requires more initial investment but is also likely to lead to higher and more sustainable levels of team effectiveness.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of a “team” can evoke many thoughts and feelings. There’s something almost innately positive about a team, even though we also know they don’t always work so well. There’s a sense that teams must be changing as the world of work is changing – itself partly driven partly by the changing nature of teams. However, pinpointing exactly what these changes are is not straightforward.

The work psychology literature on teams and team effectiveness is large, as is the commercial activity which aims to support how organisations create and manage teams. At the same time, both researching and managing teams is challenging as they are dynamic and unstable phenomena: How can you research or manage something that’s constantly on the move?

In the introduction we briefly consider the context of teams and team effectiveness and then describe the structure of the report.

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## 1.1 ARE TEAMS ALWAYS A GOOD THING? THE ROMANCE OF TEAMS.

What’s the point of teams? That may sound like an odd question, particularly given that teams are sometimes the only way to get work done – when it simply cannot be completed by individuals working alone. For example, the task may require a combination of specialist knowledge and skills which no one person is likely to have. Or the task may be so large or so complicated that it needs to be divided amongst a group of people working together.

It makes sense to create a team if a team is required to do the work, though as discussed below, organisations create teams even if they are not required or helpful. However, it does not follow that team or group working is necessarily more effective than individuals working alone, particularly where some parts of the task can be more effectively completed individually.

Some of the reasons why teams are less effective have been known for decades in work and social psychology and include inefficiency, errors, social distraction, groupthink, social loafing, interpersonal conflict and polarisation (Campbell, 1968).

However, the continued widespread use and popularity of teams as a way of organising employees to complete tasks might suggest that their value remains largely unquestioned.

The appealing nature of teams has been described as the “romance of teams” (Allen & Hecht, 2004) which they define as:



*...a faith in the effectiveness of team-based work that is not supported by, or is even inconsistent with, relevant empirical evidence. We argue that this faith is commonly - although, obviously, not universally - held among managers, their employees, and the general lay population.*

### **They go on to discuss three negative practical consequences of this misplaced faith in teams:**

**Over-application of teams:**<sup>1</sup> The assumption that teams are always or usually effective means that teams are widely deployed without too much thought. This, in turn, means that: (a) teams are used without taking into account the organisational context, which is a major determinant of team success; (b) there is little consideration of whether teams are an appropriate way of doing the work; (c) everyone is put into a team whether or not it makes sense to do so or has any meaning for them, creating pseudo teams (see later definitions section).

**Poor organisational alignment:** Deploying teams based on the assumption they will just “work” means that the organisational support, resources and structure teams need to be effective are not put in place.

**Lack of cost/benefit analyses:** All practices and interventions have costs and benefits. However, in the case of practices deployed largely because of faith in their benefits – such as teams – the costs are unlikely to be considered. Without considering both the costs and benefits it is not possible to determine whether implementing teams is worth it.

<sup>1</sup>The over-application may also have occurred because “the term “team”, at least in part, became a buzzword that managers would utilize to highlight a focus on a collective (rather than individualistic) work orientation.” (Humphrey & Aime, 2014)

A related aspect of the romance of teams – or the positive bias towards teams - is not only the belief that team-based work is effective but also that it's easy to do and it's obvious how to do it well. Klein (2012) offers an explanation of why this may be the case:



*...there is an assumption out there that teamwork is easy. After all, we're taught from an early age to cooperate, coordinate, and communicate with others as we tackle playground games and classroom learning exercises. Moreover, most of us are inundated with the spectacle of sport, and the way in which we follow sports makes us believe we inherently understand teamwork.*

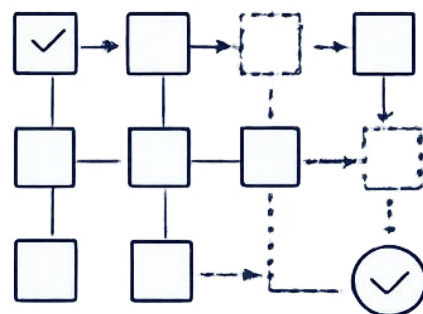
**The assumption that teams are simply a good thing and so should be widely used is not justified and may have negative consequences for organisations and employees.** This assumption is also relevant to understanding and evaluating the work psychology theory and evidence around teams and their practical implications.

## 1.2 WHEN DO TEAMS MAKE SENSE?

Given teams are probably over-used, what are the circumstances in which it is helpful to organise work into teams? This will be discussed in more detail later, but for now we can identify some general circumstances, some of which have already been mentioned.

### IT MAKES SENSE TO USE TEAMS WHEN THE WORK OR THE TASK:

- Requires a combination of skills or knowledge no one person is likely to have.
- Is so large and/or complicated that it cannot be completed by employees working individually.



## 1.3 HAS THE NATURE AND USE OF TEAMS CHANGED? AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The idea that teams and teamwork are quite different now compared to some (usually unspecified) point in the past is mentioned frequently in both academic and practitioner literature.

For example, Tannenbaum et al (2012) suggest that:

*Today, most teams operate in a more fluid, dynamic, and complex environment than in the past. They change and adapt more frequently, operate with looser boundaries, and are more likely to be geographically dispersed. They experience more competing demands, are likely to be more heterogeneous in composition, and rely more on technology than did teams in prior generations.*

Hackman (2012) states that:

*Now, groups handle a much wider variety of tasks that often have considerable complexity and uncertainty, such as providing organisational leadership... carrying out negotiations... and managing organisational change initiatives. Traditionally, groups operated within a single organisational context. Now, groups often include members from two or more different organisations that may have different policies, practices, and Cultures...And, finally, groups traditionally have been created top-down by an organisational manager...Now, increasing numbers of groups are self-created, often using electronic technologies, to explore shared interests...*

It is important to note that, in general, **claims about the ever-changing nature of work organisations are rarely supported by a sufficient quantity of good quality evidence.** It is undoubtedly true that things have changed, but what exactly has changed and how much has it changed? This is also the case when it comes to claims about changes in teams:

*Many scholars have pointed to evidence of new team forms in today's interconnected and fast paced world...Despite calls over several years for empirical research to examine, explore, and define new teamwork forms, empirical papers that do so directly remain few enough to prompt continued calls for more research. - **Kerrissey et al (2020)***

While traditional ways of defining and thinking about teams may be challenged by phenomena such as multiteam systems, multiple team memberships and blurred team boundaries (discussed in the definitions section below), such phenomena are not necessarily new, even if research and practice have tended to ignore them.

Another change currently taking place is the increasing use of AI in the workplace. This too is likely to have impacts on the ways in which teams work (for recent reviews see Bankins et al, 2024 and Khakurel & Blomqvist, 2022) but, here too, it is not yet clear what the implications will be.

Organisations and workplaces change, which can also change the way teams work. Such changes in the economic context and technology may profoundly and fundamentally change our understanding of teams and team effectiveness. However, much more likely is that the work psychology fundamentals of teams – both research and practice – will remain largely unchanged. At the same time, we must be aware when elements of our research and practice are no longer relevant or when new approaches are required.

## 1.4 HOW USEFUL IS THE SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE AND THEORY ABOUT TEAMS?

As mentioned, there is now a large body of work psychology research about teams. It should be noted that this area, like all areas of work psychology, has methodological and other limitations which sometimes limit its practical value.

Compared to some other areas of work psychology, studying teams is much more challenging. Their dynamic nature means that much more elaborate research designs are required to gather data that might reveal these dynamics. Explaining how teams work also requires similarly elaborate theories.

However, even the practically useful teams research may be having little impact on organisational practice. Klein (2012) suggests that:

*For those not deeply immersed in the research on teams, the science of team effectiveness is poorly translated and rarely understood.*

One reason for the poor translation and lack of understanding could be the complexity and size of the body of work on teams. Salas et al (2005) suggest that the literature has become “unmanageable”:

“

*Although a remarkable amount of research has been conducted to determine how to make teams function maximally, no one has been able to clearly define exactly what is teamwork. The study of teamwork has been fragmented over the years and has not lent itself to being used practically.*



The scientific evidence and theory about teams is useful, but making practical use of this body of scientific work is not as straightforward as it might be in other areas. The many widely-used tools, techniques and models of teamwork and team effectiveness that have limited scientific support may be one consequence of this.

## 1.5 TEAMS ARE UNSTABLE, DYNAMIC ENTITIES

It should go without saying that teams are unstable and dynamic. However, it seems that much teams research and practice proceeds as though this is not the case.

Research focuses heavily on simple x causes y accounts of team effectiveness which often include consideration of moderation or mediation. Practice focuses too much on over-simplistic models such as Tuckman's (1965)<sup>2</sup> four stage model of team development (Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing) or Belbin's (1981)<sup>3</sup> Team Role Inventory (Chairman/Coordinator, Shaper, Plant, Monitor-Evaluator, Company Worker/Implementer, Resource Investigator, Team Worker and Completer-Finisher).

Throughout this report, as we discuss work psychology theory and evidence around teams and team effectiveness, it is important to bear in mind the unstable and dynamic nature of teams, even if this is mostly not reflected in the research we discuss.

We will, however, return to this theme at several points throughout the report, and particularly when we discuss interventions for improving team effectiveness.

<sup>2</sup>For a historical overview see Bonebright (2010)

<sup>3</sup>For a validation study see Fisher et al (2001)

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