

# Team Leadership

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## DESCRIPTION

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Leadership in organizational work teams has become one of the most popular and rapidly growing areas of leadership theory and research. A team is a specific type of group composed of members who are interdependent, who share common goals, and who must coordinate their activities to accomplish these goals. Examples of such teams include project management teams, task forces, work units, standing committees, quality teams, and improvement teams. Teams have an applied function within an organizational context. A team has specified roles for its members with requisite knowledge and skills to perform these roles (Levi, 2011).

Reviews of the historical roots of group research provide a clear explanation of the long and diverse study of human groups (Levi, 2011; McGrath, Arrow, & Berdahl, 2000; Porter & Beyerlein, 2000). Porter and Beyerlein (2000) indicate that the study of groups actually began in the 1920s and 1930s, with the focus of the human relations movement on collaborative efforts at work, as opposed to the individual efforts previously advocated by scientific management theorists. In the 1940s, the focus shifted to the study of group dynamics and the development of social science theory. In the 1950s, the focus moved to sensitivity training and T-groups, and the role of leadership in these groups. Much of this early research was based on laboratory studies of experimental groups, frequently ignoring the contexts in which the groups were embedded (McGrath et al., 2000).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the era of organizational development, researchers focused on developing team and leadership effectiveness



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through interventions in ongoing work teams. In the 1980s, competition from Japan and other countries encouraged the focus on quality teams, benchmarking, and continuous improvement. In the 1990s, the focus on organizational teams, while still focusing on quality, shifted to a global perspective focusing on organizational strategies for maintaining a competitive advantage. Organizations have faster response capability because of their flatter organizational structure, which relies on teams and new technology to enable communication across time and space (Porter & Beyerlein, 2000). Mankin, Cohen, and Bikson (1996, p. 217) referred to this new organization as being “team-based, technology-enabled.” The organizational team-based structure is an important way to remain competitive by responding quickly and adapting to constant, rapid changes.

Much research has focused on the problems confronting organizational work teams and on ways to make them more effective (Ilgen, Major, Hollenbeck, & Segó, 1993). Research on the effectiveness of organizational teams has suggested that the use of teams has led to greater productivity, a more effective use of resources, better decisions and problem solving, better-quality products and services, and greater innovation and creativity (Parker, 1990). However, for teams to be successful, the organizational culture needs to support employee involvement. Many teams have failed because they exist in a traditional authority structure that does not promote upward communication or decision making at lower levels. Teams will have great difficulty in organizational cultures that are not supportive of collaborative work and decision making. Changing the organizational culture to one that is more supportive of teams is possible, but it takes time and effort (Levi, 2011).

A review of team research suggests that studies since 1996 have become more complex, focusing on more team variables, and no longer focusing exclusively on the outcome of team performance. Current research is also investigating the role of affective, behavioral, and cognitive processes in team success and viability. The role and impact of mediating processes such as trusting, bonding, planning, adapting, structuring, and learning are also being studied in terms of team performance and viability (Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005).

It is important to focus on and understand the necessary functions of leadership in teams. Zaccaro, Heinen, and Shuffler (2009) urge the development of conceptual frames or models that differ from traditional leadership theory by focusing on *leader–team interactions* (team-centric) instead of *leader–subordinate (leader-centric) interactions*. Traditional leadership

approaches do not explain how leaders develop their teams. “A focus on *team* leadership necessitates attention to the *process* by which teams develop critical capabilities. Contingencies that necessitate shifts in leader action are linked to task and team development *dynamics* that vary within teams and over time” (Kozlowski, Watola, Jensen, Kim, and Botero, 2009, p. 114).

Equally essential is understanding the role of leadership within teams to ensure team success and to avoid team failure. “Not surprisingly, the totality of research evidence supports this assertion; team leadership is critical to achieving both affective and behaviorally based team outcomes” (Stagl, Salas, & Burke, 2007, p. 172). Other researchers have claimed that “effective leadership processes” are the most critical factor in team success (Zaccaro, Rittman, & Marks, 2001, p. 452). Conversely, ineffective leadership often is seen as the primary reason teams fail (Stewart & Manz, 1995).

These leadership functions can be performed by the formal team leader *and/or* shared by team members. Day, Gronn, and Salas (2004) referred to this shared or distributed leadership as *team leadership capacity*, encompassing the leadership repertoire of the entire team. Distributed leadership involves the sharing of influence by team members who step forward when situations warrant providing the leadership necessary and then stepping back to allow others to lead. Such shared leadership has become more and more important in today’s organizations to allow faster responses to more complex issues (Pearce, Manz, & Sims, 2009; Solansky, 2008). Much of the early work on teams has focused on the traditional role of the formally appointed leader of the team; future research needs to focus more on the distributed or shared leadership within the team. Leadership is provided by anyone who meets the needs of the team (Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010).

### **Team Leadership Model**

The team leadership model proposed in this chapter places leadership in the driver’s seat of team effectiveness. The model provides a mental road map to help the leader (or any team member who is providing leadership) diagnose team problems and take appropriate action to correct these problems.

Hill’s Model for Team Leadership (Figure 12.1) is based on the functional leadership claim that the leader’s job is to monitor the team and then take whatever action is necessary to ensure team effectiveness. The



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model provides a tool for understanding the very complex phenomenon of team leadership, starting at the top with its initial leadership decisions, then moving to leader actions, and finally focusing on the indicators of team effectiveness. Hill's model attempts to integrate mediation and monitoring concepts (Barge, 1996; Hackman & Walton, 1986) with team effectiveness (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphey, 1993; Larson & LaFasto, 1989; Nadler, 1998). In addition, the model prescribes specific actions that leaders can perform to improve team effectiveness (LaFasto & Larson, 2001; Zaccaro et al., 2001). Effective team leaders need a wide repertoire of communication skills to monitor and take appropriate action. The model is designed to simplify and clarify the complex nature of team leadership and to provide an easy tool to aid leadership problem solving.

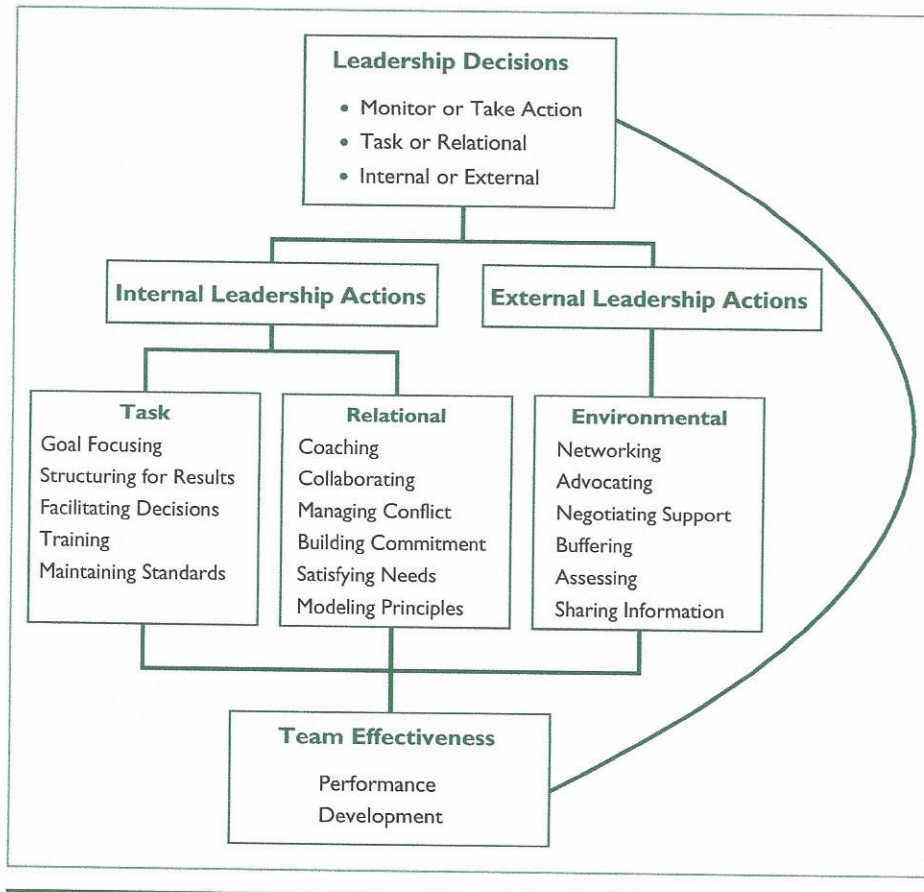
Effective team performance begins with the leader's *mental model* of the situation. This mental model reflects not only the components of the problem confronting the team, but also the environmental and organizational contingencies that define the larger context of team action. The leader develops a model of what the team problem is and what solutions are possible in this context, given the environmental and organizational constraints and resources (Zaccaro et al., 2001).

To respond appropriately to the problem envisioned in the mental model, a good leader needs to be behaviorally flexible and have a wide repertoire of actions or skills to meet the team's diverse needs (Barge, 1996). When the leader's behavior matches the complexity of the situation, he or she is behaving with "requisite variety," or the set of behaviors necessary to meet the group's needs (Drecksel, 1991). Effective team leaders are able to construct accurate mental models of the team's problems by observing team functioning, and can take requisite action to solve these problems.

The leader has special responsibility for functioning in a manner that will help the group achieve effectiveness. Within this perspective, leadership behavior is seen as team-based problem solving, in which the leader attempts to achieve team goals by analyzing the internal and external situation and then selecting and implementing the appropriate behaviors to ensure team effectiveness (Fleishman et al., 1991). In addition, Zaccaro et al. (2001) indicated that leaders must use discretion about which problems need intervention, and make choices about which solutions are the most appropriate. The appropriate solution varies by circumstance and focuses on what should be done to make the team more effective. Effective leaders have the ability to determine what leadership interventions are needed, if any, to solve team problems.



**Figure 12.1** Hill's Model for Team Leadership



### Leadership Decisions

Figure 12.1 outlines the team leadership model. The first box at the top of the model, Leadership Decisions, lists the major decisions a leader needs to make when determining whether and how to intervene to improve team functioning. The first of these decisions is whether it is most appropriate to continue to observe and monitor the team or to intervene in the team's activities and take action. The second decision is to choose whether a task or a relational intervention is needed (i.e., does the team need help in accomplishing its tasks, or does it need help in

maintaining relationships?). The final decision is whether to intervene at the internal level (within the team itself) or at the external level (in the team's environment).

*Leadership Decision 1: Should I monitor the team or take action?* The first decision confronting the leader is whether to keep monitoring the team or to take action to help the team. McGrath (as cited in Hackman & Walton, 1986) outlined the critical leadership functions of group effectiveness, taking into account the analysis of the situation both internally and externally and whether this analysis indicates that the leader should take an immediate action. Figure 12.2, McGrath's Critical Leadership Functions, demonstrates these two dimensions of leadership behavior: *monitoring versus taking action* and *internal group issues versus external group issues*. As leaders, we can diagnose, analyze, or forecast problems (monitoring), or we can take immediate action to solve a problem. We can also focus on the problems within the group (internal) or problems outside the group (external). These two dimensions result in the four types of group leadership functions shown in Figure 12.2.

The first two quadrants in Figure 12.2 focus on the internal operations of the team. In the first quadrant, the leader is diagnosing group deficiencies, and in the second quadrant, the leader is acting to repair or remedy the observed problems. The third and fourth quadrants focus on the external operations of the team. In the third quadrant, the leader is scanning the environment to determine and forecast any external changes that will affect the group. In the fourth quadrant, the leader acts to prevent any negative changes in the environment from hurting the team.

Therefore, the first decision confronting the leader is "Should I continue monitoring these factors, or should I take action based on the information I have already gathered and structured?" To develop an accurate mental model of team functioning, leaders need to monitor both the internal and external environments to gather information, reduce equivocality, provide structure, and overcome barriers. Fleishman et al. (1991) described two phases in this initial process: information search and structuring. A leader must first seek out information to understand the current state of the team's functioning (information search), and then this information must be analyzed, organized, and interpreted so the leader can decide how to act (information structuring). Leaders can also help their information search process by obtaining feedback from team members, networking with others outside the team, conducting team assessment surveys, and evaluating group outcomes. Once

**Figure 12.2** McGrath's Critical Leadership Functions

	MONITOR	EXECUTIVE ACTION
INTERNAL	Diagnosing Group Deficiencies <b>1</b>	Taking Remedial Action <b>2</b>
EXTERNAL	Forecasting Environmental Changes <b>3</b>	Preventing Deleterious Changes <b>4</b>

SOURCE: McGrath's critical leadership functions as cited in "Leading Groups in Organizations," by J. R. Hackman and R. E. Walton, 1986, in P. S. Goodman & Associates (Eds.), *Designing Effective Work Groups* (p. 76). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

information on the team is gathered, the leader needs to structure or interpret this information so that he or she can make action plans.

All members of the team can engage in monitoring (information search and structuring) and collectively provide distributed or shared leadership to help the team adapt to changing conditions. In fast-paced, rapidly changing situations, the team leader and members might have to work in concert to assess the situation accurately. The official leader of the team might be too busy processing information from the environment to process information internal to the team. The team members can help the leader by staying on top of internal problems. Together, they can form an accurate mental model of the team's effectiveness.

In addition to gathering and interpreting information, team leaders also must take the right action based on this information. "Action mediation is at the heart of leadership because it involves selecting from among competing courses of action and helping the group create a system of organizing that allows it to make quality decisions" (Barge, 1996, p. 324). Leaders differ in their tendencies to take action quickly or to delay taking action by analyzing the situation at length. Leaders who prefer to take action might prevent problems from getting out of control. However, they might not



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make the right intervention because they do not have all the information, and such fast action might undermine the development of shared leadership. Leaders who prefer to carefully analyze the situation might encourage other team members to emerge as leaders, but the problem might become unmanageable. The exact timing of a leadership intervention is as important as the specific type of intervention (Wageman, Fisher, & Hackman, 2009).

*Leadership Decision 2: Should I intervene to meet task or relational needs?*

The second decision confronting the leader is whether the team needs help in dealing with relational issues or task issues. Since the early study of small groups, the focus has been on two critical leadership functions: task and maintenance. Task leadership functions include getting the job done, making decisions, solving problems, adapting to changes, making plans, and achieving goals. Maintenance functions include developing a positive climate, solving interpersonal problems, satisfying members' needs, and developing cohesion. Later scholars studying intact work teams also refer to these functions in terms of performance and development (i.e., how well the team has accomplished its task and how well the team has developed effective relationships).

Superior team leadership focuses constantly on both task and maintenance functions (Kinlaw, 1998); both types of leadership behaviors (task-focused and person-focused) have been found to be related to perceived team effectiveness (Burke et al., 2006).

Task (performance) functions are closely interrelated with maintenance (development) functions. If the team is well maintained and has good relationships, then the members will be able to work together effectively and get their job done. Similarly, if the team is productive and successful in accomplishing its task, it will be easier to maintain a positive climate and good relations. Conversely, failing teams often take their lack of performance out on each other, and fighting teams often accomplish little.

In virtual teams connected across time and space by electronic media, focusing on building team relationships is even more critical than in traditional colocated teams. "Virtual team leaders must be able to 'read' all the personal and contextual nuances in a world of electronic communications. They must be able to understand the possible causes of silence, misunderstanding, and slights without any of the usual signs to guide them. Leaders must be sensitive to the 'flow' of team processes, paying attention to the smallest matters to head off potential troubles that could derail the team's

