

Team adaptation in dynamic environments

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Impact paragraph

As emphasized by the current COVID-19 crisis, our work environments have become increasingly uncertain, fast-paced and complex over the past decades. Companies therefore frequently face changes in their environments forcing them to adapt existing structures and procedures. As organizations increasingly employ teams to deal with the dynamism and complexity of their environments, team adaptation is critical for team and organizational functioning and a topic of central interest for scholars and practitioners. The primary aim of this dissertation is to extend knowledge on team adaptation by investigating how team members effectively adjust their behaviors to changing conditions, what influences team members' ability to adapt, and what are the boundary conditions to the effectiveness of adaptive processes. In this paragraph, I will outline how the obtained research findings add value to science and society by focusing on three key points: (1) Improved understanding of the behavioral processes and cognitive structures required for team adaptation, (2) Examination of team adaptation from a followership angle, (3) Foundations for training interventions aimed at increasing team adaptation.

The first way in which this dissertation adds value to science and practice is by extending knowledge on cognitive structures and behavioral processes that improve team adaptation in dynamic environments. To date, many team adaptation studies adopt survey methods that rely on perceptions of behavioral aggregates, providing limited insights into what actually happens during the team adaptation process, and making it difficult to derive concrete practical suggestions on how to increase team effectiveness in dynamic environments. Findings of this dissertation suggest that team adaptation can be facilitated if team members flexibly adjust their information-processing behaviors and leader-follower interactions in accordance with situational demands. More specifically, when unexpected complexities arise, teams can improve their effectiveness by switching to a decentralized leadership structure in which team members systematically share, ask for and interpret available information, remain cautious about one another's inputs and actively voice suggestions, expertise and concerns. On the other hand, when processes become more routinized, teams can increase their efficiency by switching to a centralized leadership structures in which team members follow their leaders' instructions and rely on the routine exchange of information. These insights can be used for designing or improving interventions and training programs aimed at increasing team effectiveness in dynamic environments. For example, HR practitioners may complement traditional team-building activities with training elements

that promote a critical mindset when complexities arise or managers may combine situational awareness and reflexivity interventions; for instance, team members could collectively reflect upon how their team interactions influence team processes and outcomes in a specific situation.

Another way in which this dissertation adds scientific and practical value is by examining team adaptation from a followership angle. While studies on team adaptation and organizational development programs often focus on the role of the team leader, findings of this dissertation highlight the importance of followership in enabling and facilitating team adaptation. Specifically, findings suggest that followers can increase team adaptive performance by sharing their expertise and suggestions. At the same time, when tasks become routine, followers can facilitate adaptation by deferring responsibility back to the leader, thereby signaling when a switch in leader behavior is required. Additionally, our findings show that team leaders and followers need to have compatible mindsets regarding which leader and follower behaviors are required or appropriate in a specific situation, as incompatibility in behavioral expectations may lead to cognitive or behavioral inertia (see Chapter 3). Together, these findings emphasize that team adaptation is not a one-way street but a *co-constructed* process, based on the interaction of *all* team members. This dissertation thereby provides new directions for organizational-development practice. For example, instead of solely focusing on the individual leader, organizations may include followers in their development programs and pay attention to the situational context when evaluating effective leader-follower interactions. Such programs may thereby encourage team leaders and followers to be aware of and to develop in their roles and help them to behave in a more conscious, adaptive way.

Finally, this dissertation provides important insights into the foundations required for effective training interventions aimed at increasing team adaptation in dynamic environments. Such trainings may be particularly beneficial for teams working under time pressure in a fast-pace context, in which they need to interact efficiently but have to find new effective solutions in short amounts of time as soon as complications occur (e.g., medical surgery teams, military teams, crisis management teams). In Chapter 4, we developed and showed the effectiveness of an adaptive followership training. The elements used in this training may thus provide guidance for instructional designers and HRD practitioners. Findings suggest that an effective team adaptation training should focus on developing

team members' situational awareness, on explaining team members the importance of adaptive leader- and followership, and on training team members to flexibly adopt behaviors in accordance with situational demands. To achieve this, it is not necessary, and often unfeasibly, to train members on all potential events they may encounter; instead, adaptive team trainings should focus on teaching metacognitive behavior (cf., Marks, Zaccaro, & Mathieu, 2000). That is, team members should be trained in being aware of, interpreting and responding to situational demands and should therefore develop a wide behavioral repertoire that allows team members to flexibly choose an appropriate response. This may be achieved by showing exemplary video or audio fragments and by engaging in video-based acting or role-playing. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Stachowski, Kaplan, & Waller, 2009), our findings further suggest that high-fidelity simulations may be particularly suitable to train team members in effective interactions and to foster training transfer.

References

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