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Team Structures and Workflow Patterns[1]

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Introduction

Teams are commonly used in the workplace and organizations to effectively manage complex or large projects that require input from multiple individuals. Organizational leaders or team leaders often form teams to share responsibilities among multiple parties and delegate workload. While organization or team leaders may consider who should be on the team and what strengths they possess to add positively to the team, it is also important that they consider the team structure and workflow patterns that assist in the team's success. This publication introduces different types of team structures, highlighting how member roles and leadership within the team are organized. Additionally, different types of workflow patterns that may occur in teams and groups are described.

Types of Team Structures

The context of leadership in the United States has shifted from a hierarchical perspective to a more relational or systemic approach (Wielkiewicz, 2002). A hierarchical approach to leadership designates a leader based on position with a top-down approach (Wielkiewicz, 2000). A hierarchical perspective of leadership views the individual in a position of power as the person who is responsible for the outcomes of the team and places importance on rules and structure (Wielkiewicz, 2000). A more systemic or relational approach to leadership does not place any single individual in charge, regardless of position. Teams that use relational or systemic thinking tend to view decisions and collaboration as a team effort (Wielkiewicz, 2000). While an organizational hierarchy may still exist, leaders with a relational or systemic approach view others as having capacity for leadership and provide opportunities to engage in leadership through the team process.

Based on your organizational configuration and the team assembled, it is important to determine the most effective structure for your team and whether leadership will be instituted from a hierarchical or systemic approach. While team structures relate to organizational structures and organizational structures impact the organizational culture, team structures are distinct and should be determined based on the complexity and needs of the specific skill differentiation, authority differentiation, and temporal stability (Hollenbeck et al., 2012; Mathieu et al., 2017).

The Dimensional Scaling Framework (Hollenbeck et al., 2012) is an approach determining team structure based on the three dimensions below.

- **Skill differentiation** is the extent to which team members have unique, needed skills versus similar skills. A team with high skill differentiation has members with specialized skills that do not overlap others' expertise. For example, a team developing a precision agriculture curriculum may include soil scientists, curriculum experts, plant science experts, etc. Alternatively, a team with low skill differentiation has members with similar skillsets and knowledge levels, where individuals can substitute for one another (e.g., 4-H volunteers, 4-H youth, Master Gardeners, etc.). While all these individuals may have different levels of experience, their expertise or role is similar on the team.
- **Authority differentiation** relates to how decision-making power is distributed. Teams with high authority differentiation have a clear hierarchy with centralized decision-making (e.g., an owner of a large commercial farm operation). Low authority differentiation is where decisions are shared or distributed (e.g., a farm cooperative or organization run by a board of directors).
- **Temporal stability** is the consistency of team members over time. Teams with long-term stable membership, such as executive teams, have high temporal stability. Teams with frequent changes in membership, such as appointed representatives who change yearly, have low temporal stability.

These concepts are important to keep in mind when designing a team and building a team culture. For instance, if you aim to increase efficiency in your work, then low skill and authority differentiation with low temporal stability may be appropriate. Alternatively, responding to emergencies may require high skill differentiation, high authority, and a midlevel temporal stability (based on the length and type of emergency). These considerations are also important when assisting teams who are struggling (Alcover et al., 2021). If there is misalignment of defined

structure, tasks, goals, and leadership within the team, members may struggle to collaborate and achieve synergy.

Team Workflow Patterns

The predetermined structure should also align with the workflow of your team. Workflow patterns are determined by how task and project work moves throughout your team (Franz, 2012). Arthur Jr. et al. (2005) described five workflow patterns (Figure 1).

- The first pattern is when the work is received by the individual and completed solely by that individual (Arthur Jr. et al., 2005). This does not include working with others and is not considered a team workflow pattern. Example: Your supervisor assigns you a task and you create the output.
- The second pattern is when work enters through the team and is completed individually by team members using delegation or a division of labor. While completion of the tasks is additive at the end, this also does not require a high degree of collaboration or teamwork. Example: Individuals meet to complete a group project and realize that each person can complete a designated portion without input from others.
- The third pattern includes work moving from one individual to other team members in a specific pattern prior to completion (Arthur Jr. et al., 2005). This may include "passing it up the chain" or working with individuals whose assigned task relies on a previous task being completed before they can begin their work. Example: A team is planning an event in which Teammate A must confirm speakers before Teammate B can finalize the agenda and print programs.
- The fourth pattern involves work moving back and forth between different individuals in a reciprocal nature before completion. This type of workflow may include email threads where individuals provide feedback on a project to build for completion, but the work moves from one individual to the next and does not ever include a simultaneous collaboration session.
- The fifth pattern requires that individuals work together with information moving between all team members in a collaborative process (Arthur Jr. et al., 2005). All team members contribute to the work in a way that makes individual contributions indistinguishable in the final output. An example of this could be creating a community garden for youth 4-H projects where the team meets to brainstorm locations, crops, division of labor, etc., and makes collaborative decisions.

Typically, the fourth and fifth patterns are more consistent with a decentralized, divisional structure and necessitate the level of interdependence required for a group to be considered a team. While all teams may use different workflow patterns at different times for different tasks, it is important to consider the workflow pattern both required for the task and instituted by the team and the way that relates to the structure and culture of your team and organization. As with structure, misalignment can cause frustration with tasks and conflict among teammates.

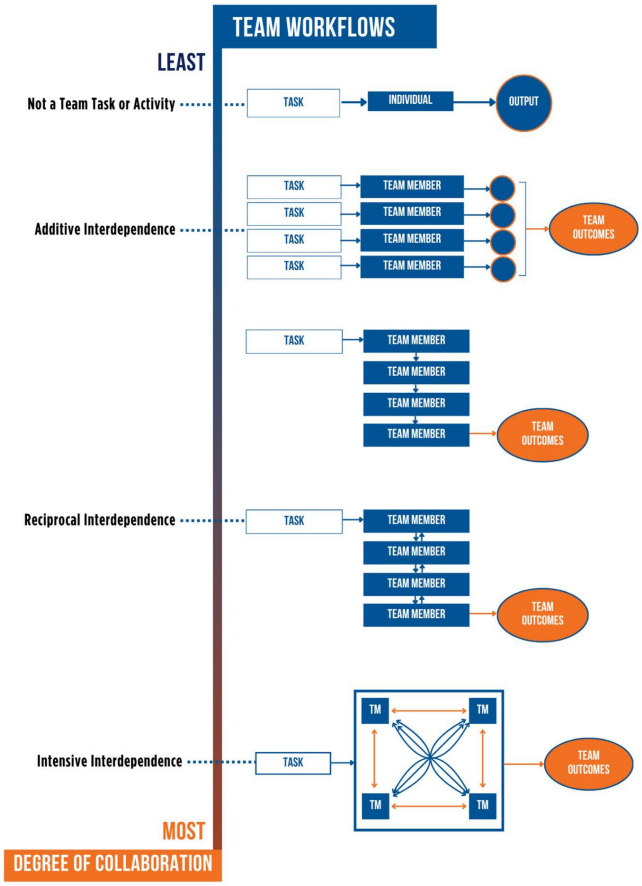

Figure 1. Workflow patterns adapted from Arthur Jr. et al.'s (2005) five workflow patterns, which are discussed in the Team Workflow Patterns section of this publication. Credit: Carrie N. Baker, UF/IFAS.

Conclusions

Every team and team leader must make decisions about team structure, team member roles, shared power, goals, etc. Decisions on how to structure your team, who holds the decision-making authority, and how clearly roles are defined and assigned vary from team to team. This may be based on organizational culture, defined by leadership style and process, based on the assigned task, and/or vary based on the preferences of the team members. Team leaders should carefully consider who should serve on their team, and how to structure their team. Additionally, team leaders should clearly define expectations for information dissemination and reporting of results.

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