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# Teamwork: comparing academic and practitioners' perceptions

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**Abstract** *Teamworking is a multi-dimensional concept which has gained recent popularity and some success in manufacturing, but there is little evidence that large numbers of firms in the service sector have espoused teamworking methods. This paper explores this dilemma by comparing academic perceptions of teamworking, through a review of the literature, with a study of the perceptions of practitioners. Although much has been written about group behaviour, the more recent literature on teamworking is inconclusive and is often derived from anecdotal rather than empirical research. Using information obtained from a recent study, this article suggests that the richness of the teamworking experience is not captured by some of the academic literature. It argues for a view of teamworking that is both grounded in the literature and which represents the views of managers and employees in the service sector.*

## Introduction

Firms of every kind are constantly looking for strategies that will help them to cope with an increasingly complex and competitive business environment. One way of achieving competitive advantage is to review the part that employees, both individually and in groups, can play in the business. In the current climate of corporate downsizing, some of the literature suggests that an organisation's human resources can create effective links between business activities through the way in which they work together in groups. The first section of this paper examines how some writers define and describe groups, teams and teamwork, in order to explore the perplexing phenomenon of teamwork and to develop a theoretical framework that encapsulates the characteristics of effective teamworking. The second section reports on the results of research about the perceptions of teamworking of some service sector managers and employees. Finally, the academic view is compared to the practitioners' perceptions and implications are drawn for service firms.

## Groups

### *The nature of groups*

Groups are an important instrument of socialisation. Sociologists such as Goffman (1959) showed clearly the highly regularised nature of human social behaviour and the strongly felt need to express their personality through their choice of group. In addition, groups serve as the focal point of social life and provide an important source of direction to the individual for understanding social values and norms. People work, play and socialise in

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groups and express views and attitudes through them. In short, as Cooley (1909) suggests, groups “are fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual”.

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### *Characteristics of groups*

It is clear that people take care in mixing in those groups which accord with their values and goals and derive a great deal of social satisfaction through interaction of like-minded people. Groups may be characterised by the following terms:

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- *Aggregation*: collections of individuals who are aware of group membership.
- *Proximity*: the face-to-face association with other group members contributes to socialisation and friendship.
- *Purpose*: groups come together for a purpose to attain a common goal.
- *Interaction*: group members interact with and influence each other.
- *Interdependence*: group members become dependent on each other.

Groups are able to fulfil personal needs for security and social affiliation, for status and self-esteem and for power. In the work situation, group affiliation can help to reduce feelings of exploitation and frustration. In summary, it may be suggested that the need to collect in groups is a fundamental social characteristic that satisfies and rewards individual social needs.

### *Groups in organisations*

Formal groups are deliberately created by organisational leaders for a specific purpose and represent building blocks in the structure that is created by an organisation with the aim of implementing plans and achieving objectives. Often such formal groups are disposed by work function or task, for example, housekeeping or food production departments in hotels. Some writers recognise that intergroup relationships can lead to conflict, and sometimes violence. One of the best documented experiments of this type was carried out by Muzafer Sherif and colleagues in a summer camp in the USA (Sherif *et al.*, 1961), where intergroup conflict led to fights and property damage. In the hospitality industry too, Dann and Hornsey (1986) note that inter-department conflict is common and can affect the quality of communication in work units.

Hartley (1997) suggests that work group processes operate at three different levels. The “interpersonal underworld” refers to the covert patterns of likes, dislikes and resentments that exist between group members and which often lead to hidden agendas. At the overt level, the group can be analysed by the work or social tasks which it is carrying out and in the context that it operates. For example, groups at work and play behave very differently in Japan and the USA. Culture and background affect group behaviour both at covert and overt levels.

## Teams

This section explores the meaning of the word “team” and the way that it can be distinguished from a group. Subsequently, definitions will be offered for teamwork and the characteristics of successful teams.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1979) defines a team in terms of:

- “a set of draught animals ... harnessed to draw together”;
- “a number of persons associated in some joint action, especially forming a side in a match, e.g. in a football match or ‘tug-of war’”.

### *Work teams*

What, then, is the difference, if any, between work groups and work teams? Some authors argue that teams are more focused groups that exhibit a unitary perspective. Larson and LaFasto (1989) suggest that:

a team has two or more people; it has a specific performance objective or recognisable goal to be attained and that co-ordination of activity among the members is required for the attainment of the team goal or objective.

Schermerhorn *et al.* (1995) remark that:

It is increasingly common to-day to use the word “team” when referring to various types of formal groups.

Other authors contend that teams must possess a definable membership, group consciousness, a sense of shared purpose and interact in a unitary manner. Teams are seen as a small group of people with complementary skills who work together to achieve a common purpose. Teams are effective work groups, and all groups cannot necessarily be described as teams. The defining characteristic of a team is that its members voluntarily co-ordinate their work in order to achieve group objectives. Teams seem to exhibit unimposed unitary behaviour that distinguishes them from arbitrary work groups.

### *Teamwork*

The work of teams is termed as “team work”, “team-work” or most recently as “teamwork”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1979) defines “team-work” as:

- (1) work done by a team of beasts;
- (2) the combined action of a team of players;
- (3) work done by a team of operatives.

Team-work is “organised co-operation”, which captures the contemporary notion that work is increasingly being done by teams who can perform in a cohesive way. These definitions suggest that teamwork is a collaborative and shared activity that is directed towards a common goal.

One way of mapping the characteristics of teams is through the systems approach proposed by Schermerhorn *et al.* (1995). Groups can be regarded as “open systems” that interact with their environment to transform resource inputs to product outputs. Inputs include the organizational climate and group

configuration, which are usually under the control of management. Once formed, group processes such as communication, task and maintenance activities shape the way in which the group operates its outputs. Group outputs include task achievement as well as organizational, group and member satisfaction. Such an approach enables group behaviour to be analysed and predicted, but group effectiveness cannot be guaranteed. Firms play their part in providing suitable inputs, but it is often up to the group to operate in such a way that it achieves the desired outputs in an enjoyable way.

This first section has explored some of the meanings and characteristics for groups and teams. The literature stresses that individuals fulfil needs for social expression and interpersonal relationships through group affiliation. Groups at work have gained in perceived importance through the work of human relations researchers such as Elton Mayo and Douglas McGregor and many writers emphasise the complexity of group behaviour. Despite the wealth of literature on these concepts, there are no generally accepted frameworks for predicting group behaviour or for assessing the importance of group characteristics. Further, although the literature emphasises the benefits of teamworking, little research has been carried out in service sector contexts, and this calls into question the general applicability of teamworking concepts in the context of all business settings. There are many examples of effective teamworking in manufacturing settings, but few in service contexts, and this may be due to the comparative intangible nature of service work. In an attempt to address this research gap, the next section reports on an exploratory study that maps the perceptions of workers in the hospitality industry towards teamworking.

### *The study*

The aim of the study was to investigate the perceptions of both teams and teams' members of employees in six branded hotels owned by a major multi-unit hospitality organization. This was achieved through 19 semi-structured interviews and by means of a series of 26 action research meetings that took place at monthly intervals. These action research meetings were designed to focus the problem-solving energies of six teams of hotel employees as well as to observe their team processes at work. The teams were based in branded hotels and ranged in composition and responsibility, including both mixed teams and teams of executive managers, heads of department and operational staff. Some of the issues to be explored were employee perceptions about the following issues:

- the importance of teamworking in the units;
- the nature of teamworking;
- problems which constrain effective teamworking;
- possible solutions to these problems.

*Study findings*

Most respondents in the study recognised that teamworking was important to their work and that communication was also central to its effectiveness. One respondent summed teamworking in the following way:

A team is not just one, it's a number of people all working together and communicating with each other, not just within the team but communicating to the staff.

The importance of teamworking was generally recognised and many said that there was a relationship between effective teamworking and the satisfactions of employees and customers. For example, some respondents reinforced the views posited in the literature that teamworking could be characterised by friendliness or camaraderie. For some respondents this friendliness was an important part of their job satisfaction and extended outside working hours. One housekeeper expressed the link between friendliness and teamwork as:

If it wasn't for that, because of the hard work and the amount of rooms they clean, if it wasn't for the teamwork I don't think it would work.

Other respondents, particularly in managerial roles, said that they did not wish to socialise with colleagues after work.

The study findings reinforce writers' views about the significance of communication to effective teamworking. A lack of communication caused frustration when important information was not known, and this could adversely affect the guest experience. Quality was felt to be an important objective in the hotels, and some front-of-house staff expressed discomfiture at dealing with unnecessary guest complaints. Some respondents related the scale of problems to the size of the unit and degree of specialisation:

The bigger the place, the worst, because the departments are so much bigger.

This suggests that the effectiveness of teamworking may be related to situational factors and firm size that are not addressed by the literature.

As suggested in the literature, conflict is the antithesis of teamwork, and the study identified that intergroup conflict was prevalent and caused problems of communication. There was conflict in the study between teams in the same department, between departments and between teams at different levels. For example, in one hotel, the three restaurants that comprised the food and beverage department seldom helped each other out, despite experiencing different work patterns. The study identified that the greatest perceptions of conflict and lack of communication existed between managers and staff, who expressed dissatisfaction with each other. The managers complained that staff were not sufficiently motivated while the employees felt that management should resolve long-standing operational problems. This situation reinforces some views expressed in the literature that teamwork is possible only when employees espouse the vision that is clearly expressed by management. The groups in the study did not possess a definable membership, group consciousness, a sense of shared purpose and failed to interact in a unitary manner. Accordingly, these work groups did not display effective teamwork

and do not fall within the definition of “teams” as suggested in the literature. This begs the question as to the extent of effective teamwork in other service-related contexts, because there is little documentary evidence and research done on the subject.

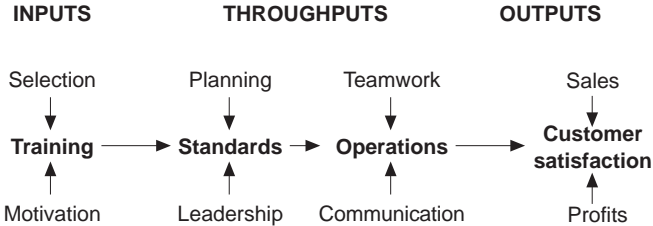
The theoretical systems framework suggested by Schermerhorn *et al.* (1995) can be used to map the issues raised by respondents in the study and these are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 reflects the practitioners’ views that the key inputs to effective teamworking were motivated staff who could be trained to offer high-quality operations so that customers were satisfied and high profits resulted. It is interesting to note that the respondents were clear on the components of effective working in their units, but at variance as to how this could be achieved. Depending on whom we asked, poor teamwork was blamed on managerial leadership or lack of employee motivation. Hospitality, like other service industries, is heavily reliant upon co-operation to achieve complex, consumer-related objectives. Although the scope of this study is small, there is supporting anecdotal evidence to suggest that internecine conflict in hospitality is widespread and militates against effective teamworking. More research is needed to reconcile the theories of teamworking to the realities of the industry as expressed by these practitioners.

**Conclusions**

It seems clear that both academics and practitioners perceive teamworking as an important means to effective working, but that it is difficult to achieve. Both see that teamworking can help to achieve objectives in groups, reinforcing the theories that socialisation is a powerful force in humans. Camaraderie, especially at operational level, is a great source of work satisfaction and helps to get the work done.

The units in the study supported the views that conflict and ineffective communication are the enemies of teamworking, leading to sub-optimal performance and feelings of frustration by many respondents. The literature emphasises the complexity of team processes and that teambuilding takes time to nurture and grow. Factors such as high staff turnover in the hospitality industry may tend to act against the continuity and relationships that support effective teambuilding.



**Figure 1.**  
A systems view of  
effective working in  
the study

It is interesting that respondents in the study showed that they had a clear understanding of team inputs and outputs, and that the theoretical framework developed by Schermerhorn *et al.* (1995) proved a useful tool with which to map these perceptions. On the other hand, there was no consensus on solutions, reinforcing the fact that co-operation is at the essence of teamworking.

Many academic writers stress the benefits of teamworking, especially in the manufacturing sector, but there is insufficient evidence to suggest that many firms in service industries have adopted teamworking in the same way. This may be due to the complex nature of service processes and this is emphasised by the practitioners. Perhaps the existing theories do not fully explain the complexity of this concept nor reveal the richness of its experience, much of which is human interaction. All of this cries out for more rigorous academic research, rather than some of the anecdotal evidence which is currently on offer. Most people seem to agree that teamworking is both desirable and valuable, but it is an elusive concept.

In summary, it is suggested that the literature on teamworking may not fully reflect the rich experiences of the actors in this human drama. Although much has been written about the theories of teamworking, the literature needs to reflect the reality of those practitioners who have experienced teamworking in practice. This suggests that collaborative new research in this subject should take account of the distinctive nature the working context, such as in service industries, and of the way that teamworking can frustrate or facilitate. Breakthroughs must surely begin with a new dialogue between industry, researchers and academia. If teamworking is to be a more potent force in a range of industries, it must be better understood, reflecting the reality that theory and practice must walk hand in hand.

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