



Team effectiveness in sport teams: A theoretical review

Dr. Amanendra Mann¹, Dinesh Kumar Kaushik²

¹ Associate Professor, D.A.V. College, Chandigarh, Punjab, India

² Research Scholar, Panjab University, Chandigarh, Punjab, India

Abstract

A commonly held belief in sports is the need for team members to be able to work well together in order for that team to be successful. Despite this assumption, research in the field of sport psychology has yet to formally or sufficiently conceptualize what is meant by teamwork. In this theoretical and integrative review, we draw from the extant organizational psychology and team development literature to present a multidimensional conceptual framework of teamwork in sport. We provide a working definition of teamwork in sport and discuss how teamwork sits within a broader model of team effectiveness. We conclude by providing an overview of salient research avenues on teamwork and team effectiveness in sport, which have potential implications for guiding interventions with sports teams.

Keywords: teamwork, group dynamics, teams, effectiveness, sport, success

Introduction

The sports industry contributes great amounts to the economy in terms of business volume, investments, taxes and jobs. Transfers of athletes cost millions of dollars. Olympics, World and Europe championships host best athletes of the world who compete with each other in these challenging sports events. Most of the countries are competing with each other by their athletes and sport teams. Athletes and sport teams must achieve their best performance to honor the millions in their countries. When we look for the studies about factors that facilitate sport team effectiveness and success, we see team effectiveness is dependent on many factors. Initially in sports sciences literature most of the studies give importance to the athletes' physical conditions, characteristics and training backgrounds. But nowadays studies focus on athletes' psychological factors that facilitate performance. When some athletes are under pressure, their performance level may increase. For instance, they apply tactics and line of attacks more efficiently, bear distress, focus better, detect additional original solutions to sport circumstances, force themselves to perform better, discover new abilities rapidly or set up themselves to contest more advanced than their substantial comparable peers (Brewer, 2009) [1].

In spite of the intuitive belief, as well as anecdotal evidence, that team members need to work well together in order to achieve their desired outcomes, research into the distinct components of teamwork – and, more broadly, team effectiveness – in sport has been fragmented at best (Carron, Martin, & Loughhead, 2012) [6]. Indeed, as recently pointed out by Carron *et al.* (2012) [6], 'Although some progress seems to be happening in business and the military, so far the nature of teamwork has not aroused much interest in sport' (p. 323). So what exactly makes for an effective sports team? In particular, what behaviors does teamwork consist of? Are the answers to these queries obvious or straightforward? Have they already been resolved using different terminology? Research from other areas of psychology – most notably from organizational settings –

suggests that the nature of teamwork is a complex phenomenon that is far from resolved (Carron *et al.*, 2012) [6].

Inputs of team effectiveness

A wide range of individual-, team-, and external-level input variables have been studied in team effectiveness research. At the individual level, inputs involve team member attributes such as personality, attitudes, achievement orientation, teamwork orientation, and competencies (Mathieu *et al.*, 2008) [2]. Inputs at the team level include variables such as task interdependence, team size, leadership, and team training (Mathieu *et al.*, 2008) [2]. The highest level comprises external variables, which include both organizational (e.g., resources available for the team, organizational policies) and environmental factors (e.g., cultural or political influences; Mathieu *et al.*, 2008) [2].

Outcomes of team effectiveness

Hackman and Katz (2010) [3] suggest that the simplest way to assess the outcomes of team effectiveness is to determine the extent to which the team has achieved its pre-defined purposes. In sports, these purposes may include individual- and/or team-level behaviors, cognitive states, and affective states. At the individual level, an important behavioral outcome to assess is youth sport dropout rates, since adolescent participation in organized team sports is in current decline (e.g., Canadian Heritage, 2013; National Sporting Goods Association, 2011). At the group level, perhaps the most obvious behavioral outcome of team effectiveness is team performance (e.g., win-loss records or important team statistics)

Multilevel and multivariate assessment of team effectiveness

It is important that research progresses toward using multivariate analyses (e.g., assessing the effects of several independent variables on multiple dependent variables) rather than merely using univariate analyses (e.g., bivariate

correlations between an independent and dependent variable) when examining teams (Carron *et al.*, 2012) ^[6]. Despite the large number of team effectiveness studies that have been conducted in organizational psychology, many of these studies have merely tested whether a single process variable (e.g., coordination) affects a particular team outcome (e.g., performance), rather than testing the effects of multiple processes (e.g., coordination as well as cooperation and communication) on multiple team outcomes (e.g., team performance as well as member satisfaction). Teams, by nature, are complex. A multivariate approach helps account for the complexity of group phenomena and acknowledges the simultaneous inter-relationships that typically occur among variables (Carron *et al.*, 2012) ^[6]. In sum, although simpler univariate analyses in team effectiveness research in sport may provide some initial insight into the relationships between certain variables, in order to make theoretical progress and gain a thorough understanding of teams, research must also progress to making use of multivariate analyses

Temporal considerations of teamwork and team effectiveness

Teams are not static entities that simply progress in a linear manner. Rather, they are dynamic, evolving over time through developmental processes as well as episodic cycles. As such, temporal and situational factors that impact the various components of team effectiveness (including teamwork) should be taken into account when conducting team research. A consistent theme in numerous 'Future Directions' sections of team effectiveness articles is the need for studies that utilize time-sampling and longitudinal approaches. Despite these recommendations, the dynamic influence of episodic cycles and developmental processes in team research has not been sufficiently accounted for (Mathieu *et al.*, 2008) ^[2]. For instance, the majority of empirical studies of teamwork have taken on a static perspective, where researchers examine teams at a single point (Marks *et al.*, 2001) ^[4]. Furthermore, even when authors examine teams over an extended period of time, they often aggregate data into a summary index (Marks *et al.*, 2001) ^[4]. As a result, variance across time is collapsed into a simple, static indicator, whereby temporal factors are eliminated (Marks *et al.*, 2001) ^[4]. Consequently, we are left with an incomplete (and perhaps inaccurate) account of team effectiveness. Consider the typical case of an adolescent sports team. The team will go through several phases over the course of their season, including (but certainly not limited to) meeting each other for the first time, practicing together, spending time together outside of their sporting venue, competing together in intense games, resolving conflicts, and reaching the conclusion of their season. Each of these episodes will vary in terms of duration and intensity. This raises the question of when the most ideal times for researchers to collect data may be. The answer to this question will most inevitably vary across studies and research questions, and may present logistical challenges. Indeed, this type of research is not a trivial undertaking and researchers may need to be creative in their methodological approaches. However, given the potential benefits in terms of understanding the complexities of sports teams and how best to improve their effectiveness (e.g., through teamwork interventions), we encourage researchers to embrace the challenges involved in conducting studies

that take temporal and situational factors into consideration.

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