

New Dimensions in Team Learning: A Social Constructionist Approach

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Introduction

This paper explores the relationships between team effectiveness and the importance of improving socially constructed meaning within and around the team. The discussion builds on, and challenges, early scholarly efforts related to team building and team effectiveness. The principle focus of the paper is the need to enable better learning routines so that sense-making and common socially constructed meanings related to team activity are more advanced. The paper considers how improved understandings of teams and their activities will be possible when multiple contexts are scrutinised using a social constructionist approach (Gergen and Gergen, 2003). The main problem with much of the traditional team literature has been the focus of discussion between team building and team effectiveness models. Most models have been imbued with the idea that better team design leads to increased effectiveness (Hayes, 1997; George and Jones, 2005).

Early research centred on team building, in particular the phase (or stage) models of team development and a 'one-best-way' approach to solving process losses. Incremental team building steps suggested that a 'forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning' approach would increase team effectiveness (Tuckman in George and Jones, 2005). Later, research suggested that team members benefited from increased input through empowerment and increased self-actualisation, and that it was impossible to separate the team from the context in which it worked (George and Jones, 2005). While the context in which a team operates has received greater attention over the years, multiple contextual factors have not suggested new models and step-by-step 'one-best-way' approaches remain the most popular models.

Phase models, however, can be contested on the basis of multiple contexts faced and other team processes experienced (e.g. change, leadership, conflict); consequently, team learning has increasingly received greater attention (Senge, 1990). Contemporary research has found that how team members negotiate conflict and self-interests is at the vanguard of team effectiveness. Since teams are a conduit between the individual and the organisation, how a team learns, and what it learns, has become increasingly essential in achieving team effectiveness.

We argue that the potential for effective team learning is linked in an integrated way to the socially constructed routines established by the individual, the team, and the organisation. The paper posits that while team building techniques may be useful, they are subject to different obligations and interpretations and are inevitably built upon what is learnt and shared. On the one hand, member contributions might be coerced, manipulated, or imposed; on the other, they might reflect the deeply held patterns of relationships and socially crafted routines within the organisation that may, or may not, restrict individual input.

Our central proposition in this paper is to examine ways in which social reality is meaningfully constructed by the actors involved within semi-autonomous work teams. Too often, both empirically based and case study approaches have examined team learning or team effectiveness within a structural-functional framework. In so doing, theorists treat the subject of study as a hard, concrete and tangible phenomenon that has been created; organisational rules and structures then become the practical accomplishment of organisational members (Sudnow, 1965; Silverman, 1970), rather than the lived experiences and social reality that can be conceived by team members over time. More recently, theorists have discovered discrepancies between the subject under investigation and the team context within which people work (Edmondson, Roberto and Watkins, 2003; Gersick, 1988) - as one example of the paradox between 'hard' reality and actual lived experiences; structural 'absolutism' in terms of functional as well as research processes ignoring the relationships between subject and object has a long history (Filmer et al., 1972; Silverman and Jones, 1973; Sudnow, 1965).

Following the central proposition, two sub-components emerge. The first is that team learning is possibly impoverished by a structural functional approach to team development. If the quality of team members learning is obsolete, or if teams seldom evolve in a systematic or step-by-step fashion as a rational outcome of the functional paradigm, then how do they learn or evolve? How do team members make sense of their organisation and interpret organisational scenes when they recognise the shortcomings of existing models? These questions pose difficulties for the interpretive researcher since in trying to understand how meaning is socially crafted by actors, interpretations are often matched to the social context in which actors work. It is difficult then to separate social meanings from their functional arrangements suggesting that the

presence of structure such as hierarchical influence “lurks in the background as a force influencing the need for ‘authoritative accounts’ of events and the achievement of ‘correct’ selection outcomes (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 268).

The second sub-component of our discussion concerns the level and quality of social inquiry. How should actors try to interpret their organisational roles? In what ways may social methods of inquiry account for the conflicting views of reality which characterise any situation and how might these impoverish team effectiveness. An understanding of the actor’s social reality is one thing, but how might actors acquire the social skills necessary to advance the level of inquiry against a background of structured processes that all but impose team direction? Following these propositions, we discuss the need to develop and advance socially constructed routines so that team effectiveness will be improved. We illustrate how managers might link socially constructed routines to learning behaviour more accurately reflecting an interpretive paradigm where reality is socially constructed, sustained and changed (Silverman, 1970).

The first part of the paper explores the relationship between team building programs and team effectiveness from a structural-functional lens. This lens provides a basis for exploring the structural domain of team effectiveness where learning is implied in phase models of group development and by an input-process-output approach. The second part of the paper builds on the structural weakness of phase models by describing why team building programs fail to account for multiple processes in different contexts. Different contextual situations of themselves provide multiple meanings and multiple realities exposing structured learning initiatives. Using four case studies the third part of the paper illustrates how structures frame the potential for social learning for teams. We discuss the interactive and interpersonal routines that arise or emerge from an interpretive and constructed reality and demonstrate that managing effective teams is about developing, enabling and managing their learning processes. We suggest that at the level of the interactive and interpersonal, new learning routines and behaviours can be forged and developed in supervised manner. Existing models of social architecture are linked to learning outcomes so that the link between learning and social reality is more plausible.

Methodology

This is a predominantly theoretical paper which aims to reconsider the literature on team learning by linking social constructionism and the structurally managed development of teams. It aims to critique the structural-functionalist paradigm of team learning and consider how, if multiple perspective social constructionist perspective is adopted, it explains some team success and failures in a way which leads to the creation of a substantive level theory which, in turn, seeks to explain, at a basic level, certain phenomena which can then be tested and developed (Creswell, 1994). Such theory building is often an important foundation for new theory development where the researchers are still in the discovery phase and where the relationship between different constructs is not yet defined (Judd, Smith and Kidder, 1991; Sarantakos, 1998); especially in an area where the questions are unclear and the ideas are exploratory (Creswell, 1994). We intend to draw up a tentative research plan from this introductory level theory construction in order to develop middle-range level theory in the next research stage (Creswell, 1994).

Initially, the theoretical background to the topic will be explored. We will then briefly analyse four case studies. The first pair of cases analyse data collected by other researchers and written up elsewhere. Edmondson et al., (2003) have discussed a successful interdisciplinary team undertaking cardiac surgery. They collected qualitative and quantitative data concerning how learning was promoted and supported. Michel (2001) researched a medical research team which had been formed for a specific task from other teams researching in the same area. He collected qualitative data pertaining to why a group, that it was expected would be extremely productive and effective in a short time, failed to deliver initially and what were the structures that prevented the requisite learning.

The second pair is based on data previously collected by the authors of this paper for other projects but has been reanalysed for this paper. In the first case qualitative data was sought to explain why an apparently certain business venture had failed (Blackman, 2005). The focus of the study was the question of how management were able to convince themselves that the project would be, and was, a success in spite of contrary evidence. The design also sought to determine what would have been needed to get the team to doubt the success of the project and what would have had to be different to have

avoided this failure. Such research clearly needed a depth of exploratory data and analysis rather than breadth. This could only be achieved with qualitative methods that would permit exploration and theory building (Creswell, 1994) rather than looking for confirmatory data. Consequently a qualitative case study was developed of the company using in depth semi-structured interviews and company text-based sources in order to gather the stories and ideas of the participants.

Initially company documents enabled an overview of the background and events to be developed. Once an overview of the context had been established the interviews were set up. From the documents nine decision makers had been identified as key to the project and this was specified as the population for this research. The key players were: Managing Director of Case 2, The Director of Flight Services, The Director of Flight Brokerage, The Director of the Project, The Project Manager, The Financial Controller, The Spanish Project Manager, The Costings Manager and the Operational Manager. Of these the first three were still employed by the company and were willing to be interviewed. The remainder were all traced and interviewed, with the exception of the accountant who still found the events and resulting ill feeling too upsetting to discuss. This meant that out of a population of 9, 8 were interviewed. The interviews were structured as open-ended questions designed to explore issues around the failure and how it happened. Once this had been discussed ideas of how such a series of events could be avoided in the future was investigated. Participants were encouraged to describe events, tell their stories and consider ideas for potential solutions. The interviews (which generally lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours) were taped, then transcribed and entered into the NVIVO analysis package. The interview data was coded in NVIVO using thematic and axial coding looking for themes and patterns (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; Morse, 1994). For this paper we considered the themes that considered why the team failed to develop knowledge that would have been prevented the failure, and the structural and learning issues related to this lack.

The last case is based on data collected to establish the status of learning and knowledge within organisations in Western Sydney. One of the companies proved to be successful in developing and utilising new knowledge and their structures have been re-analysed for this paper. The initial project sought to determine the nature and possible success of organisations in terms of becoming Learning Organisations. The objectives of the study

were: to understand how organisations prepare for and meet the challenges of an increasingly complex, competitive and globalised world; to understand how organisations prepare their members for these challenges and to compile an inventory of the key enablers, as well as barriers to learning organisation development. Again it was determined that there was a need to understand the nature of the problem being researched and the cognitive structures within the organisations and so a qualitative approach was adopted (Creswell, 1994). Data was collected from nine case companies ranging in size from 5 to 4000 employees (although this large company is split into divisions and only one product and area were researched), of which some were owner run and managed, whilst others were major corporations. In this paper we focus upon one team which is a regional service company. In order to get as broad an understanding as possible of a range of voices, the method was designed to get a picture of the views held throughout the organisations. 12 semi-structured interviews were undertaken, each lasting approximately an hour, with employees from differing levels within the companies. The questions asked included: Can you outline the types of processes which enable your organisation to develop new ideas and implement them?; Does this organisation encourage you to learn and gain new knowledge and if so how?; Are you encouraged to undertake personal development and /or training and if so how is such development managed?; How much freedom do you have to choose your development and how easy is it to feed it back into the organisation?; Do you believe that learning and development are core parts of your culture?; Do you think your current structure enables individual learning to be transferred within the organisation?; How do you prepare for your organisational future?; How well do you think the organisation reads its environment?; How do you evaluate the changes that you make as an organisation?; How do you ensure you are realistic in your self-perception?; How does the current knowledge base get updated?.

The respondents were then asked to consider a definition of a learning organisation and determine whether they thought that their organisation displayed such behaviours. The definition was “Learning Organisations encourage risk taking, innovation, problem solving and critical thinking in all their members. They continually update and renew themselves in order to enable them to achieve and maintain competitive advantage. They do this by continually enhancing and utilising the skills and knowledge of their members. They foster cultures of career-long learning, continual reflection and

evaluation. They learn from their mistakes and every new program or restructure is evaluated for its effectiveness before implementation. Management listen to employees and actively seek their opinions, ideas and feedback on organisational practices and policies” (Pearn et al. 1995).

The data was then entered into NVIVO and coded for themes. For this paper we concentrated on themes that matched the use of structures, dialogue and supporting mechanisms in order to develop and capture learning and knowledge.

Structural-functionalist paradigm of team learning

The structural functionalist paradigm, as an ontology, has its roots in the work of Gaus (1936), Barnard (1938) and Selznick (1948). The central argument of the approach is that formal organisation is the structural expression of rational action and functional imperative; organisation is presumed to operate in a goal-directed manner, geared to maintaining itself internally and in relation to its environment (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). While it is not the purpose here to discuss the functionalist paradigm and its ontological advances in any great detail, it is useful to locate much of the team literature, such as team effectiveness within the framework. In so doing, one might understand the extraordinary lengths adopted by functional scholars interested in teams to advocate a particular approach or model. Moreover, a structured approach to learning has many critics allowing for the emergence of a new conceptual framework. Traditional functional models help distil the essential features that can be traced and compared to contemporary groups and teams such as high performance work teams, if indeed there is such a thing in terms of an interpretive paradigm.

A key notion of the structural-functionalist is the idea that team learning emerges from a series of action steps. The latter might be forged or artificially created within a closed environment similar to a classroom, laboratory, or workshop. Fundamental to this approach then is the imposition of authority, a unitary concept of power, hierarchy, and technical orientation specific to a function, and the pursuit of organisational goals conforming to a structural-functional approach or ‘positivist’ view biased in favour of what managers want. This is illustrated by a brief review of early team development (discussed next); we later analyse why these structural-functional roles/tasks/behaviours

are problematic when the models upon which they are based, limit, rather than advocate, a more robust team learning environment.

The structural-functional view of teams is embodied in laboratory studies and therapy groups (Bales, 1950; Bales and Strodbeck, 1951; Bion, 1961; Tuckman, 1965). Laboratory studies consisted of a group of people who were given a laboratory task or problem to solve over a few hours (Hare, 1976). The nature of the task was impersonal and concrete, and rapid development of the group followed. Tasks were also dictated by rules and players manuals, and decisions of the group were achieved by a unitary sequence of three stages or phases – communication and orientation about the nature of the problem to be solved, evaluation of the information, and control (Hare, 1976; Poole, 1983; Gersick, 1988). Tuckman (1965) later illustrated how two major aspects of group development (group structure and task behaviour), could be applied. *Group structure* included testing and dependence, intra-group conflict, development of group cohesion, and functional role-relatedness, whereas *task activity* could be described by orientation and testing, emotional response to task demands, discussing one’s ideas with other group members, and the emergence of insight (Figure 1).

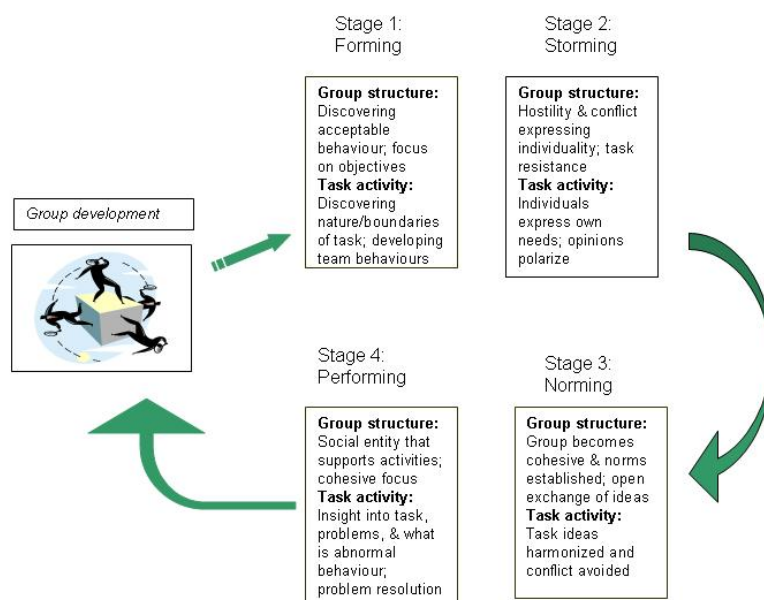


Figure 1: Tuckman's Phase Model of Group Development

Source: Adapted from Tuckman, 1965.

The structural-functional paradigm emerges in these early studies as a 'managed' relationship between structure and task. In conditions which mimic those of open systems, particularly socio-technical systems (Trist and Bamforth, 1951; Rice, 1958), the social, technical, and economic dimensions of the organisation are seen as interdependent with values of their own (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Perhaps the key to understanding how teams learn in these early environments is by acknowledging the need to 'design' the work organisation in such a way that it satisfies the demand of technology and the needs of workers simultaneously.

The team literature is consistent with the idea that group development will evolve in logical steps suggesting that a group cannot proceed to a later stage without having fulfilled earlier ones. An environment may constrain systems' ability to develop, but it cannot alter the developmental stages or their sequence (Gersick, 1988). A number of combined works illustrate the importance of this structural-functional connection. Groups must regularly define the situation, develop new skills, match roles to the task, and carry out the work (Dunphy, 1964; Mills, 1964; Slater, 1966; Mann, 1971), prompting some researchers to suggest that group processes reflect four discrete actions: generating, choosing, negotiating, and executing (McGrath, 1984). In other functional studies, it is possible to divide team tasks as follows: 1) unitary – completed by one member, 2) conjunctive – completed by all members, 3) additive - the summed contribution of all members, and 4) discretionary - a variety of ways exist to solve task problems by combining members contributions (Guzzo, 1986: 38). It is not clear from these models of team development how team learning occurs. What is clear is the researcher's philosophical stance towards neo-human relations on the one hand and a managerial subsystem on the other. Satisfying higher-level needs at work is an imperative for human growth and development at one extreme; at the other is that organisation expresses itself through the trade-off between the bureaucratic and the organic, and between authoritarian and democratic behaviour.

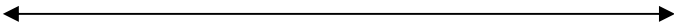
The contingency approaches (Burns and Stalker, 1961; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1970), are also evident in team development since the elements of various organisational subsystems need to be designed in relation to their environment. In two separate studies by Poole (1983a; 1983b) for instance, group development was attributable to multiple development sequences where decision processes are a function of contingency variables that lead groups to take various decision paths (Poole, 1983a). Achieving efficiency in team processes, for instance, is contingent upon new inputs from the environment. Contingency paradigms operating within teams, however, are still limited and bounded by the phase models and structural-functional orientation underpinning team action. They assume that team members ‘know’ the nature and function of contingencies and are skilled enough to handle the diverse range of pressures that teams face from competing organisational interests. In the face of potential arenas of conflict between individuals and groups whose “activities are orientated towards the achievement of their own personal goals, values, and interests” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 202), structural-functional models limit the nature of tasks open to investigation since tasks are restricted by duration, low complexity, and one-shot as opposed to cyclical performance requirements (Guzzo, 1986:39). From a structural-functional lens, the relationship between task and structure appears to represent a ‘reality’ that is located within different managerial subsystems that all but define the nature of a teams work. There is little attention paid to team learning styles, learning routines, and social learning processes that equip team members to better interpret their environment. At best, structural models offer snapshots of groups at different points in their life-spans. They say little about the mechanisms of change, what triggers it, or how long a group will remain in any one stage (Gersick, 1988:11). While different structural models arguably adhere to the subjectivist area of the interpretive paradigm (e.g. socio-technical systems), the relationship between task and structure remains constrained by the reality of task-directed goals and efficiency-driven learning. Table 1 and 2 encapsulate much of the discussion.

<i>New team</i>			<i>Mature team</i>	
Developmental	Forming	Storming	Norming	Performing

Stage				
Group/role process	Orientation	Confrontation	Differentiation	Collaboration
Characteristics	Uncertainty, developing relationships	Conflict over power and influence	Shared expectations	Cohesiveness and commitment

Table 1: Team development processes

Source: Adapted from Thompson and McHugh, (1995),

Structured-functional context	Behavioural continuum 			
Neo-human relations	Lower-level needs			Higher-level needs
Managerial subsystems	Bureaucratic, authoritarian			Organic, democratic
Contingency	Controlled			Contingent

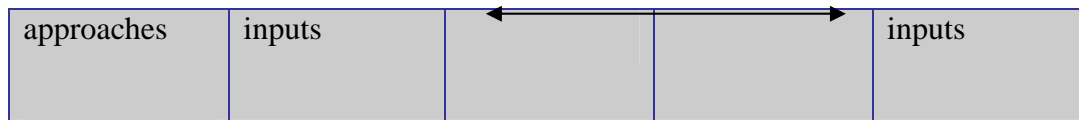


Table 2: Structural-functional influences in team development

Multiple processes, different contexts

In this, the second part of our discussion, many processes and different contexts exist in relation to team development. The structural-functionalist approach alludes to some particularly in relation to an implied learning that occurs free of structural impediments. For instance, in understanding how tasks might be differentiated into a complete meaningful whole, attention is given to the importance of job design. The basis by which members increase their learning capacity is then dependent on the level of skill variety, task identity, and task significance actually evident (Hackman and Oldham, 1980), since a more efficient design possibly increases team member input. Similarly, groups who exercise increased boundary control and greater influence over the physical space in which they work (Guzzo, 1986), may increase their cognitive understanding and possibly learning capabilities. The problem with the ‘design’ approach, however, lies within the managerial subsystem underpinned by the determination to achieve organisational effectiveness. The measure of a more efficient design appears to depend on whether a team has exceeded organisational standards to meet or exceed organisational objectives (Hackman, 1983). Similarly, the idea that “actual group productivity equals its potential productivity minus losses due to faulty group process” (Guzzo, 1986:43), points to the importance of ‘good design’ in the way teams are structured. In the absence of any cognitive or behavioural measure, team member learning depends not so much on what type of behaviours and capabilities exist within team members, but rather, on how well a team moves towards its objectives and exceeds them within an accepted level of social arrangements. While an emphasis is placed on neo-human relations by a call to recognise team social activities such as team harmony, social cohesion, and social interaction, output measures are still very much efficiency based.

Multiple processes are also not easily defined or recognised. A pluralist perspective recognises that any social system is influenced by a plurality of interests (Fox, 1966;

Burrell and Morgan, 1979). We discuss multiple processes in terms of two broad influences from interests, conflict, and power to leadership and change. Here we discuss the first broad grouping: interests, conflict, and power (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), where some paradox exists in relation to organisational goals and competing interests. Our reflection is not to advance these in any great detail since they are already well known in the organisational studies literature. Whereas, the organisation might be conceived as a team striving towards a common goal in a unitary sense, many coalitions of interests exist to thwart even the most efficient systems. Interest asymmetry has been the focus of modern writers where divergent interests potentially reduce the creation of new ideas, undermine efforts to advance shared goals, and lead to the erosion of team relationships (Edmondson, Roberto and Watkins, 2003). In a learning sense, divergent interests result in self-serving and self-sealing behaviour (Argyris, 1993), and an asymmetry to which team members need cognitive and behavioural focus. Similarly, *affective* conflict or the result of disagreements over individual, personal matters (Amason, Thompson, Hochwarter and Harrison, 1995), is believed to be detrimental to team performance leading to impoverished learning (Crossan, Lane and Hildebrand, 1993).

In contrast, although power has been viewed from a pluralist perspective suggesting that groups are the medium through which conflicts are settled, we prefer Clegg's idea that power is an episodic event of multiple circuits of power representing the interests of a variety of agents (Clegg, 1988). Team activities and team events, such as the emergence by the team from a stage of information collection, to a new stage reflecting a degree of revelation about team effectiveness, will depend on the passage points through which team member learning or team decisions must pass. Whichever agent holds the most resources in relation to these may ultimately influence team success and, possibly, team learning. The objectivist nature of the functional-structure paradigm we suggest is inadequate in dealing with the circuits of power that might potentially rob the team coming to grips with its environment and how best to influence it. Individual team members are also seldom trained or skilled enough to deal with divergent interests either because of group think and the influence of other team members over decision contexts (Janis, 1972), or because of inadequate communication and self-sealing behaviours. Overall, they may simply lack both the cognitive intelligence and actual behaviour required to intelligently assess and act on their immediate environment

(Hedberg, 1981; Crossan et al., 1993). Most likely, teams will fall victim to those who hold the balance of power and control resource passage points through which team decisions must travel.

The second group is leadership and change. Traditional leaders in the structural-functional mould are often criticized for deciding what is in the best interests of the team rather than allowing the team to create their own processes (Barnett and Tichy, 2000). The most common leadership style discussed in traditional models concerns an instrumental and transactional one (Bass, 1985; Whiteley and Hessian, 1996). Instrumental leadership is characterised by strong planning coupled with an architectural ability to build the team, motivation of individual team members through rewards and feedback, and an ability to maintain an outside orientation and emotional balance (Kets de Vries, Vriegnaud, and Florent-Treacy, 2002). For example, top management team leaders in this model are known to be ‘architects’ as much as ‘transformers’ in certain change contexts (Kets de Vries and Florent-Treacy, 2002). Traditional structured models of leadership suggest that a transformational effort is required over issues of consequence such as establishing long-term vision (Bass 1995); mostly notably, however, an instrumental approach appears to represent what would be considered as the most ‘appropriate’ leadership style for teams.

Similarly, neo-human relations and managerial subsystems form the basis of understanding team leadership given that an effective team leader will motivate followers by exchanging rewards for service. A follower’s effort depends on the subjective probability, or expectation, that an outcome can be attained by means of one’s performance (House and Mitchell, 1974; House 1996). Similarly, the value of the outcome and how much of it is desired and perceived as instrumental in realizing other desired outcomes is important (Vroom, 1964). The transactional leader approaches a follower with the expectation that rewards can be exchanged for effort and immediate self-interest: increased pay for working harder, or bonuses for achieving above the standard (House 1971). Transactional leaders are concerned about recognizing and clarifying the role and task requirements for followers to reach a desired outcome. This functional-structural leadership model of team development is flawed from our perspective. Once again, what is desired is established in managerial terms, codified and arranged in a manner by which team members are expected to achieve ‘desired’

outcomes. There is little individual discretion other than those goals 'agreed' on between management and workers where the latter must be motivated to achieve. From our central proposition stated earlier, there is little room for a reality that can be socially constructed, socially sustained, and socially changed. Team leadership models appear to be imbued with the idea that social reality is constructed more by the leader than the team. The view that a subjectivist stance is allowed through member input couched within a neo-human relations model does not disguise the fact of hierarchical influence and control over leadership acts.

For change, a similar pattern emerges as a poorly managed context if not most least understood. Change in the traditional phase models is more or less 'managed' as teams progress from one stage to the next. What is assumed is that team members and their leaders are able to negotiate in an efficient way, the multiple contextual influences, both externally and internally. Phase models imply that opinions can be suspended and that other issues can be debated through their own internal devices. What we do know, however, is that team's experience pressure from external contexts such as time restraints and new materials imported into the team (Gersick, 1988). In a study of eight teams in six organisations, Gersick found that teams stay on one course until they experience some form of major change or punctuated equilibrium similar to natural history where systems progress through an alternation of stages and sudden appearance (1988). In concentrated bursts of change, teams drop old patterns, reengage outside supervisors, adopt new work perspectives, and make dramatic progress, which is at odds with the idea that change is internally managed and controlled.

Traditional models of change and how they occur also need to be understood. According to Nadler and Tushman (1989), four types of organisational change are of organisational concern: tuning (incremental and anticipatory change), adaptation (incremental reactive change), reorientation (anticipation of future events), and recreation (change from immediate demands). All of these types of change suggest that organisations continually respond to their environment in different ways. Change responses will either be environmentally driven, performed under crisis conditions, or be senior management led in the anticipation of future events. We note that Nadler and Tushman point to the inadequacies of current systems in dealing with change: "In strategic change, the management process and structure itself is the subject of

change”...[and]...it cannot be relied upon to manage the change” (1990: 81). The structural-functional approach itself becomes the subject of inquiry. Our interest here lies in the capacity and ability of the team to negotiate different change contexts. In the absence of new learning routines and a greater interpretive and integrative ability of the team generally, how do teams approach change? How will a social constructionist approach assist teams to handle different change contexts?

Social interpretations and learning behaviour

While breaking team development down into logical steps and/or functional arrangements is somewhat questionable for reasons discussed, it is useful to separate and analyse individual team social functions (as distinct from functions created by structure), that might help managers reflect on a more interpretive paradigm grounded within a social constructionist approach. More specifically, in this third part of our discussion, our approach is based on the symbolic interactionism of social construction in which interacting individuals employ a variety of practices to create and sustain particular definitions of the world (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). However, we are arguing that, because of this many structures developed to support the development of effective groups will, inevitably fail. We suggest that reality represents a process of interaction and negotiation even when located within the rule-bound and concrete world of the functional paradigm and that, where the structure prevents this from working effectively the team will fail to learn effectively.

Our view of social reality is different from the one expounded by the functional-structural paradigm. The intentional acts of human beings acting individually or in concert with one another as Burrell and Morgan (1979) put it, forms the basis of social reality. Consistent with our central proposition, to examine ways in which social reality is meaningfully constructed, we firmly attack the ontological assumption of team development particularly in relation to the functional-structural paradigm. Our ontological attack suggests that the models, labels, and managerial subsystems upon which team development is based, are artificial creations and should not necessarily be conceived as representative of a real world made up of “hard, tangible and relatively immutable structures” (1979:4). Rather, in a team learning sense, we uphold the view that team members have very little current discretion in shaping the reality to which

they are exposed. In studying multiple realities and multiple interpretations by the actors involved, it is important to comprehend how team members might make sense of any situation they find themselves in. We base the following discussion on what we see as three critical sub-components of symbolic interactionism: information, knowledge, and learning.

Learning and Structure

Situations that display poor information and knowledge sharing are a casualty of poor team interactions (Murray and Blackman, 2004), particularly where the flow of knowledge is restricted. Similarly, the absence of new learning routines impoverishes learners to the extent that an individual's interpretive and cognitive ability is limited (Crossan, Lane and White, 1999). According to some researchers, improving the level of team integration means enabling a process of developing shared understanding between individuals; coordinated action occurs through mutual exchange (Crossan et al., 1999). Poor integrative routines for instance reflect either a contentious or impoverished behaviour on the part of teams to understand their environment (Crossan et al., 1993). They may also simply reflect the structural conditions imposed. A failure to negotiate these conditions, however, may not be the fault of team members only since learning is imposed not only at the individual and team level (Crossan et al., 1999), but also at the organisational level (Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Murray and Donegan, 2003). Organisational knowledge is institutionalised in organisational routines in the form of values, ideologies and practices (Miller, 1996; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). While explicit practices and procedures are one form of knowledge, over time these constrain and inhibit team actions. This is achieved by a strong pull towards the technical core of the organisation that is responsible for generating the efficiency-driven routines that exist (Pawar and Eastman, 1997). When an organisation lacks the capabilities and learning routines to challenge these routines, teams simply replicate past decisions and old knowledge practices. Case studies in British Manufacturing firms suggest that high-involvement routines are required to create an environment where information can be freely shared (Bessant, 2004; Bessant and Caffyn, 1996).

We will now consider four cases – two of successful teams and two of unsuccessful teams. We will consider how they evidence socially constructed learning and how this

is mediated and challenged by the structures and management frameworks they are having to work within.

Case 1 describes an international research team which was formed specifically to develop and share research already being undertaken within different institutions. Because the group believed that it understood what was expected of it quickly began to clarify its norms and systems, sometimes to the detriment of the individuals: *“the group was remarkably quick to neglect carrying out the close examination necessary to refine its functional dynamics. In order to reach a common position, the position of each individual quickly took a back place.”* (Michel, 2001, 213). The cohesion was based upon the creation of a group illusion where ideas were shared and goals were understood. Leaders emerged and others withdrew to let them. The group appeared to have got to the performing level of the stage models (Tuckman, 1965) very quickly. However, dissent and unhappiness began to emerge. The lack of a common understanding began to harm the project, leaders were challenged, work fell behind and the performing team was clearly merely at the storming stage. At this stage external agents were introduced who began to set up structured, focussed group discussions enabling the group to learn about the situation, their goals, each other etc.. Differences were recognised, discussed and understood. Managed reflection was recommended for future groups to enable them to learn the necessary team skills that would enable them to function effectively.

In terms of this paper it became clear that the structures initially set up were not conducive to the team developing the social learning they required and, consequently, the desired changes could not emerge. The systems were designed to develop an effective group and yet, patently failed to do so. The structures needed to encourage and support social learning in a managed way, thereby supporting the group's movement through the stages of development in a slower, but more effective way. The lack of managed social learning in the first group formation led to the need to reform the group at a later date.

Case 2 describes a team which was involved in setting up a new product (a charter airline) within an existing firm. The team was given the autonomy to develop this new product stream and, after a period of time, was moved to a separate site where their

sense of focus and togetherness increased rapidly. The team was told that there were problems with the new airline and that it was losing money. However, the team rejected such ideas and doubted the veracity of the ideas being put forward (Blackman and Henderson, 2004), blaming the messengers and arguing that the 'rest' of the organisation wanted them to fail. There were strong feelings of paranoia and very clear, shared mental models were in place. This might argue against supporting learning, except that learning was not what was occurring after a certain point. During the early stages of the group development there had, apparently, been learning enabling the group to develop and it appeared that the structures were supportive of this. Yet further examination of the interview data gave evidence that this was not the case. The team that was formed had already held strong views about the project and had a pre-constructed view of the world. They had not learned new things about it, but merely strengthened their convictions and already held mental models. The structures enables isolation and introversion and, whilst to the observer, it may have seemed that there was reflection, there was in fact only single loop learning (Argyris and Schon, 1986) which served to confirm already learnt behaviours and routines.

In this case there also needed to be a consideration of how to maintain an open system via structures that would enable social learning and a development of new ideas that would enable the team to be effective long term. The team members were happy together, but effectiveness is about achieving their goals, which they were not doing. When asked how the business failure could have been avoided, interviewees argued that the team needed to remain integrated with the organisation as a whole so they had to adopt new ideas. They should not have been able to be isolated physically or mentally as it prevented social learning from the rest of the organisation being shared within this team. It was precisely because new learning was occurring in a constructivist way that the structures were inappropriate as the team was isolated and, therefore, unable to learn.

Case 3 is a study of 16 operating rooms where new technology was introduced, Edmondson (2003) found that action teams whose members were able to speak up in relation to observations, concerns, and questions, were better able to learn new routines than those who were reluctant (either through imposed values or otherwise), to voice their opinions. The case is concerned with surgical teams which are seen as an

interdisciplinary action team. Many such teams in a medical environment have a history of politics, conflict and are characterised by a lack of openness (Fitzgerald, Lum and Dadich, 2004). In this case leadership behaviours were about demonstrating that there was trust and that it was a non-threatening environment at a time when new, complex tasks were being undertaken by the group. All members were encouraged to ‘speak up’ as it was considered that this would increase the effectiveness and range of care that would emerge within the operating theatre. Only if everyone spoke up could effective learning emerge where all team members could learn and reflect on the work and ideas of others. In this case the structural change was that of how the team was led and supported. The importance of this was that social learning emerged through the effective demonstration of the desired behaviours and the story-telling of certain incidents that made it clear that mistakes were understood and learn from in order to ensure the effective completion of the tasks as a whole (Edmonson, 2003). The importance of learning was reflected in a downplaying of differences between the team members in a context which has historically been hierarchical and power driven. Ultimately, the way that the team was being led and supported enabled effective learning and the attainment of the new behaviours and goals.

Common problems facing interdisciplinary action teams suggest that altering team routines may be particularly difficult particularly when teams are faced with major change (such as new equipment, new practices). Team practices related to speaking up were integral to shared experiences of what works and what does not and in dealing with perceptions of power where more senior members could inhibit the upward flow of information. An account by Emerson (1970) of competing interests found in the gynaecological examination bears witness to the contradictions found in everyday situations emphasising how “individuals have to involve themselves in the deliberate effort to maintain a balance between the conflicting themes reflected in any given social situation and how the social reality which emerges is essentially negotiated by the actors” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 272). This is apparent here as the surgeons, in particular, are managing the balance which ensures that everyone feels safe to share, reflect and learn. Consequently, the outcome of Case 3 is concerns using learning to support and sustain organisational learning. The role of meaning construction is recognised as important in developing effective change and this must be supported in a managed way.

Case 4 looked at a team successful in developing new ways of working together, developing apposite and timely innovations, and seen to be actively learning and acquiring new knowledge. In this case the team members had historically not interacted much together and were, in reality not really a team at all. They did similar jobs in different areas and often re-invented the wheel and undertook the same developments as each other. A new leader came in and began to set up team structures to enable them to be a team. Foremost amongst these was to set up structures which would enable the group to socialise and reflect at the same time. The key output, he argued, was about developing learning systems in order to foster social learning and enable new constructions to be developed over time. He stressed that bringing the group together was not enough; he had to ensure that they undertook specific tasks that would develop learning routines. He also set up processes to be followed when they were not together which would record and capitalise on knowledge development and encourage a learning cycle. The team also mutually agreed ways of supporting each other to make space for personal development and new skills acquisition. The team was formed and then, slowly, went through storming to establish norming and performing after these routines include learning as standard. The interviewees told of being empowered to do their jobs because not knowing was not a problem, as one explained it: *“if I’m not sure what would be best I’ll ask the team in a meeting or on email (depending on time frames) and we’ll all discuss it. I know they will all respond and that their answers will be helpful and no-one will imply I should have known or am in any way not up to my job. I often won’t need to bother [the manager] but if I do he will help me solve it, not do it for me. Then I’ll share what I’ve learnt.”*

As a consequence of these changes the team was able to change and develop what it was doing in these areas. It is important to note, however, that this is not just about leadership, but about enabling socially constructed learning routines in ways which will enable and sustain change. What was recognised as important by all respondents was that all their voices were being heard, welcomed and responded to. The agreed behaviours were accepted by the group as a whole, not just a few members of the team.

Implications

In all of these cases it can be seen that the structures placed around the team directly affect their ability to learn and develop. Issues that have been raised include:

- the need for open communications and open systems
- the need for structures that not only support the managed development of a managed team, but also enables the management of learning potential
- the need to reflect upon how to set up, harness and capitalise on social learning when watching and supporting a new team through the team development stages
- the need to ensure that all voices feel safe and are heard
- that in terms of the stage models learning needs to formally recognised
- that for empowerment and autonomy, recognised in the literature as important for a team to function well, there needs to be managed social learning supporting personal growth

This importance on being able to interact and relate to each other within the team leads to a recognition that the social architecture of the team will need to be developed carefully. Bennis (in Smith et al., 2003) implies that relationships within organisations will potentially support or destroy teams, while Kay (in Smith et al., 2003) suggests that social architecture is a network of relational contacts within and around the enterprise. It can be seen that if a socially constructed nature of learning and knowledge development is accepted as being present within teams, then the need to manage the supporting structures will become important as the focus must be upon enabling interactions between individuals and the individuals and their organisations. Murray and Blackman (2004) argue that for learning and knowledge to be developed and adopted effectively the elements of social architecture routines will need to be actively recognised and supported (See Figure 2). The impact of relationships with peers (as seen in all four cases above) and the ease of flow of information and communication will fundamentally affect the likelihood of the team forming in a way the develops meaningful and useful shared understandings of the world.

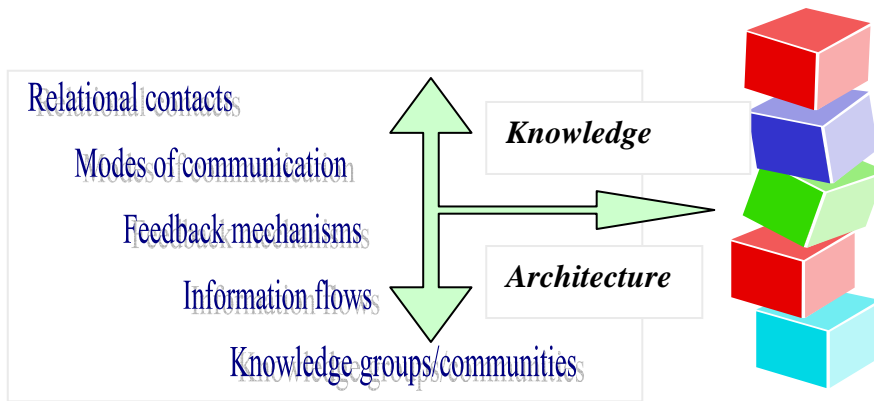


Figure 2: Building blocks in social architecture

Source: Murray and Blackman, 2004

The elements that negatively affected cases 1 and 2 are clear here. In Case 1 communication was not open, information was not flowing and the feedback mechanisms failed. This was not only because they thought they had shared views (which might not be a social architecture issue), but because, once the leaders had emerged information sharing and communication faltered even more; the leaders were unpopular, self-appointed and not focussed upon learning. In case 2 the relational contacts inside the team were very good, but the team was not relating to the organisation as a whole and so new knowledge was not developed.

As a first step forward it can be seen that the most common stage models such as the Tuckman (1965) model shown earlier could be modified to recognise what actually needs to be happening at this stage (see Figure 3).

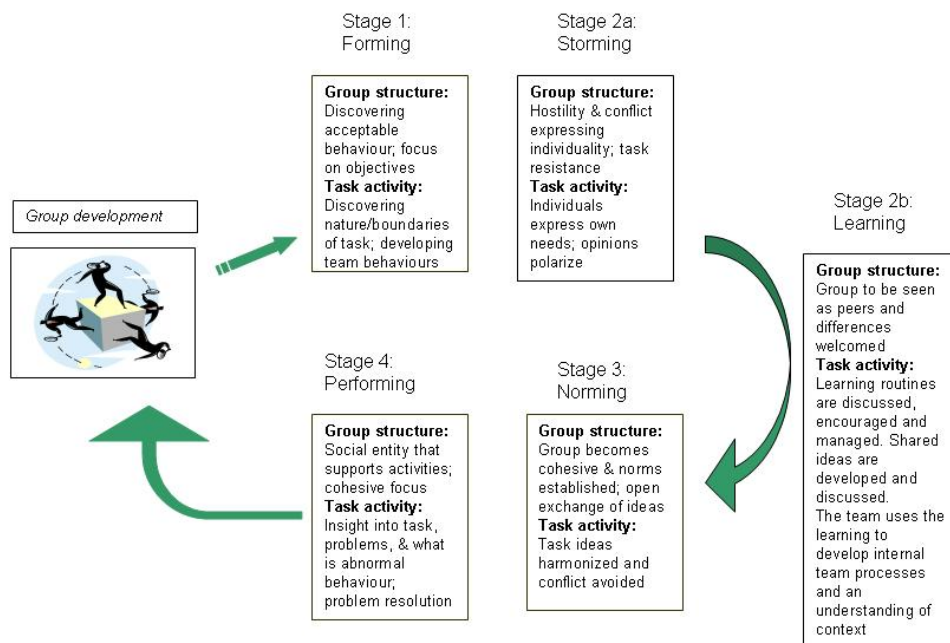


Figure 3: Tuckman's Stage Model Incorporating Learning

Figure 3 now has two elements at stage 2: storming and learning. Learning is what is occurring when storming occurs but it is usually just left to happen with the comfortable assumption that it will lead to useful shared ideas and an effective group. This may occur, but is more likely to occur if the process is overtly discussed and processes for learning are actively fostered. In case 1 letting storming occur without effective learning throughout the team led to false norming and the team being ineffective until they had reformed and re-stormed, this time with active learning in place. In case 2 it can be seen that leaving the storming to occur in a team with strongly preconceived ideas led to insularity and closure to new ideas and, once more, ineffectiveness. What we are advocating is to marry together two already accepted ideas: the notion of managing group formation with ensuring that socially constructed learning is supported as part of these processes. This will develop openness and an effective social architecture structure.

Recent research suggests that the social construction of dramatized narrative (a dialogic approach) can be used to construct, deconstruct, and re-construct meaning (Oswick,

Anthony, Keenoy, Mangham and Grant, 2000). A key point of such analysis is a process of fictionalizing an event in such a way that participants can disengage themselves from the context-specific elements of it; at question here is the traditional notion of human interaction as an information process where meaning is already created. Instead, dialogic communication suggests that meaning is always incomplete and partial, suggesting that it is the interaction itself which provides the individual learning, which then leads to collective or organisational learning. The symbolic interaction of this approach lies in the different ways an organisational event is interpreted. A dialogic approach is similar to generative dialogue (Gergen and Thatchensker, 1996; Kessels, 2001), where dialogue is a meaningful interaction between parties as part of a transformative process. By working collaboratively, participants better understand what each contributor means through a 'dialogue as learning' approach. The symbolic interaction here lies in the different interpretations that are now possible as a result of speaking up and creating a level of psychological safety for team members. This kind of approach is what we consider to be needed to teams to be more effective.

Conclusion

In this paper we have outlined an argument for the acceptance that it is socially constructed learning that affects the potential success (or not) of developing teams. We also argue that learning is not overtly discussed in the literature on team development. It is assumed that learning occurs, but the way that this happens and its impacts are not always made clear; it is not one of the processes that it is outlined. Cases of team development indicate that effective social learning may make the difference between success and failure in teams and, consequently we are advocating that team development processes need to focus on developing ways that will support effective dialogue and learning development. The next stage in this work will be to track cases of team development establishing how they are learning and whether there are processes in place to recognise and develop learning. This should help to establish if managed social learning really is a differential between effective and non effective teams.

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