IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Team learning in the context of learning organizations

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Team learning is one of Senge's (1990) learning organization disciplines that has attracted considerable interest in both academic research (interdisciplinary research) and practice (in terms of developing effective teams). Due to the rapid changes in the organizational internal and external environment, teams have become the most important organizational building block. Teamwork is studied both as a process and as an outcome with the purpose to identify the conditions that contribute to and lead to team effectiveness. Team learning is a process that contributes to and leads to effective teamwork. Team learning is particularly important for organizational learning and effectiveness because anything a team learns or achieves can be transferred to other units and eventually to the entire organization. It is well known that many organizational change projects start at the team level and are later transferred to the entire organization. Team learning can also contribute to the development of a learning organization, as it is the process by which team members, through their interactions and joint sense-making, explore and exploit new knowledge in "the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire" (Senge, 1990, p. 236). Team learning is therefore a special kind of individual and organizational mastery that builds on personal mastery, requires continuous assessment of existing mental models, calls for a common vision and thrives on systems thinking. In this way, teams are organizational primary complex, adaptive, learning systems that influence organizational dynamics by creating their own dynamics and momentum for change. However, uncertain, dynamic and ambiguous situations have a particular impact on teamwork and team learning, and deserve a closer look at their dynamics. Therefore, they are particularly important for learning organizations, which prompted guest editors Teresa Rebelo, Paulo Renato Lourenço and Isabel Dordio Dimas to take a closer look at their dynamics in Special Issue (issue one) of volume 29 of *The Learning Organization* journal (Rebelo, Lourenço, & Dimas, 2022).

More specifically, in this Special Issue, de Groot, Leendertse, and Arts (2022) addressed the problem of focused project team learning which has limited impact on organizational learning. The solution could lie in program management, which could promote learning and knowledge transfer from project teams to other organizational units and the parent organization as a whole. In this regard, a case study was conducted on project-based organization involved in five infrastructure programs. Marques-Quinteiro, Uitdewilligen, Costa, and Passos (2022) examined virtual teams and the role of team reflexivity on team performance in decision-making teams. Ryymin and Lamberg (2022) looked at

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interdisciplinary research teams and their learning potential in crossing disciplinary boundaries in facilitated workshops. Witherspoon (2022) examined how team processes are related to employee team learning that leads to innovation in higher education institutions (HEIs). Finally, Kérivel, Bossard, and Kermarrec (2022) examined team learning processes used by soccer players in a professional training context.

Learning across teams through programs

Many organizations are project-oriented, which helps them deal with the need for change. Projects are also a valuable source of new knowledge and learning that is often underutilized throughout the organization. Project-based knowledge and its sharing could be very important in increasing the learning capacity of the organization. However, project work is often narrowly focused and designed to achieve specific results or solve specific problems within a specific timeframe and budget. In addition, project work does not usually involve sharing the knowledge gained during project work with other project teams (interproject) and with the parent organization (metaproject) (de Groot, Leendertse, & Arts, 2020; de Groot et al., 2022). However, de Groot et al. (2020, 2022) suggest establishing program management to overcome the problems of limited interproject and metaproject learning. A program refers to multiple projects that are grouped to achieve specific outcomes or benefits. Programs are particularly common and important when complex project endeavors are realized and/or when organizations face rapidly changing contexts, such as in transport infrastructure. The question arises as to what program infrastructure can influence learning between project teams and between project teams and their parent organization. This question was addressed by de Groot et al. (2022).

Learning within and between projects can be viewed using Crossan, Lane, and White (1999) 4I framework. The process begins with intuiting at the individual level and continues with individual and collective interpretation. The insights and knowledge gained can then be integrated at the group level, which, given the time-limited duration of projects, preferably leads to institutionalization at the organizational level as metaproject learning. Practitioners should therefore pay particular attention to the collective sense-making or interpretation of new insights and carefully decide what knowledge should be integrated into new work practices and later institutionalized as new organizational routines. The role of a program management office and a program management officer is central to this process (Rijke et al., 2014). In addition to coordinating, monitoring and controlling project performance, they are also responsible for facilitating, coordinating, capturing and sharing knowledge (Owen, 2008) to enable its further use in other situations and contexts. Practitioners might consider these activities in this context:

- establish learning as a project goal;
- establish a center for coordination and knowledge management at the program level;
- establish procedures for reporting on new knowledge gained;
- establish stable structures for knowledge sharing.
- facilitate self-organization for knowledge transfer
- establish cross-project collaboration for knowledge transfer;
- establish learning platforms for shared sense-making and knowledge sharing;
- organize knowledge sharing events;

- organize meetings to facilitate information and knowledge transfer between projects and with organizational units;
- rotate staff between projects;
- develop a learning culture;
- encourage experimentation and learning from mistakes;
- identify and share best practices;
- organize communities-of-practice for specific topics or problems;
- increase the learning capacity of the people involved through training and education;
- invest in motivating employees to learn; and
- stimulate, support, and facilitate the institutionalization of new valuable knowledge.

The role of team reflexivity in team performance

The tasks that modern companies have to complete are becoming increasingly complex. Therefore, many tasks should be performed by teams and in teamwork. Team learning is a part of this process whenever a task of significant novelty is to be completed. Team learning is a process in which individuals working together engage in joint sense-making and discover and share knowledge to achieve desired results or assigned outcomes. However, many teams today work virtually due to various constraints or due to their international affiliations. Team virtuality refers to the use of information and communication technology to share information and make decisions (Kirkman and Mathieu, 2005). Joint sense-making, discovering and exchanging knowledge is challenging in such a context. In addition, virtual teams are subject to higher levels of uncertainty and ambiguity than face-to-face teams (Mesmer-Magnus, DeChurch, Jimenez-Rodriguez, Wildman, and Shuffler, 2011). Problems such as lack of communication initiative, spontaneity, limited information and knowledge sharing, and information processing errors (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2011) are very common, resulting in a flatter learning curve compared to face-to-face interactions. Virtual teams have been shown to be less effective in decision-making than teams working face-to-face (Baltes, Dickson, Sherman, Bauer, and LaGanke, 2002). However, virtual teams are becoming more popular and necessary, so it is important to consider how to optimize and maximize learning in this context. In this regard, Marques-Quinteiro et al. (2022) examined the role of team reflexivity in virtual team performance and decision making.

Virtual teams need to stimulate team learning practices as processes in which teams align and develop their capacity to achieve specific outcomes (Senge, 1990). One of them is team reflexivity as a process in which team members collectively reflect on and make sense of the goals, activities, processes, strategies and environment in which the goals are to be realized (West, 2000). Reflexivity enables team members to raise their awareness of the task contingencies. When team members reflect on issues that affect the team, they are more likely to explore new information, share it, build new knowledge and integrate it into their value creation process. However, team members should be encouraged to engage in team reflexivity. In virtual teams, team reflexivity is even less likely to occur spontaneously. This could be remedied by "guided reflexivity", i.e. a targeted and deliberate intervention in which team members are encouraged and guided to engage in sense-making of everything they receive as information or feedback and to change and align their goals and activities accordingly (Gurtner, Tschan, Semmer, and Nagele, 2007).

Guided reflexivity also allows team members to identify new meanings, insights and ideas that can significantly impact not only the team's adaptation but also its innovation and ultimate performance. Team reflexivity is also very useful in helping team members internalize past experiences and identify future perspectives (West, 2000). In this way, the team's learning curve could be remarkably high and keep increasing until the desired outcome in terms of performance is achieved. However, practitioners should not be concerned if the learning curve fluctuates in their teams, especially in virtual teams, as it is possible that the rate of learning is slower during periods when a lot of feedback is received or the situation changes significantly. This is even more pronounced in virtual teams, where interaction can lack spontaneity. However, more intensive use of ICT tools, especially on video calls, such as chats, text messages, surveys, questions and answers, and visuals, can significantly increase team interest and interaction. If practitioners notice a drop-off in activity and feel that the work has reached an impasse, they could try soliciting some type of feedback from team members, which would produce three effects:

(1) team members would be re-engaged;

(2) team members would feel valued and respected; and

(3) team members would realize that more feedback is needed for the team to move forward.

The key is to help team members be on the same page, feel and act aligned despite the distance. When teams work in an environment where communication is predominantly synchronous and supported by a media richness, their communication, and therefore decision-making, tends to be more successful (Baltes et al., 2002). It is important that virtual communication resembles face-to-face communication as much as possible. If this is not the case, team performance would deteriorate.

Virtual team leadership is critical in this process. Leaders should be very careful to notice any kind of tension or ambiguity in communication and address it immediately to avoid further misunderstandings. It is also important that team leaders ensure that a high level of shared understanding of the tasks, their nature and goals is achieved. Team leaders should also work to identify and prevent free-rider situations. It is to be expected that some team members are introverts and will soak up the atmosphere and information before speaking up. Team leaders should be careful that their contribution does not go unnoticed or unspoken. For this reason, it is possible for leaders in virtual teams to set up some sort of team structure, especially if the team is large, and appoint task managers for better performance. Leaders should also be mindful of what teamwork guidelines are in place and what procedures should be followed for team success (Maynard, Mathieu, Rapp, & Gilson, 2012). Organization and procedures should also be used to promote reflexivity. For example, it could be determined that before moving on to a new task or part of a new task, the group should conduct a team reflection to see if a shared understanding of previous outcomes has been achieved.

Challenges of interdisciplinary research teams

Many problems that plague society today, such as alienation, unemployment, inflation, deterioration of health and quality of life and climate change, are very complex and ambiguous. Many of them have remained largely unquestioned and unexplored over a long period of time, which has contributed to the escalation of their manifestations. As a result, they are often referred to as "wicked problems" or problems whose social complexity means that they have no determinable stopping point (Tonkinwise, 2015). They consist of a

multitude of interdependent variables whose relationships are unclear, difficult to discern or contradictory. Therefore, solving them requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates knowledge from different scientific disciplines. When an interdisciplinary team is assembled, its performance could be challenging because of the different perspectives involved. However, any team, including interdisciplinary teams, relies heavily on team learning, which was addressed in this issue by Ryymin and Lamberg (2022).

Teamwork is always difficult at first. Practitioners have probably encountered problems such as different assumptions that team members have when they join the team, different approaches, values, cultures and also misconceptions and prejudices that people may have about each other, especially if they belong to different disciplines. Such an environment can be challenging for learning and knowledge sharing. Moreover, team members learn not only internally, within team boundaries, but also externally, beyond team boundaries, where ideas for best practices may emerge. A boundary is also a sociocultural difference that leads to discontinuity in action or interaction (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). When a person interacts across different locations, this is referred to as boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).

Boundary crossings can occur at the institutional level, where interactions take place between organizational units or between organizations. At the interpersonal level, boundary crossing occurs when there are interactions between groups of people from different fields, usually in interdisciplinary teams. At the intrapersonal level, boundary crossing can occur when people simultaneously participate in overlapping practices. A particular artifact can also cross boundaries and serve as a bridge, which is referred to as a boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989). The creation of a boundary object can be critical to the management of interdisciplinary teams and research.

When multidisciplinary teams begin their collaboration, it is important that they start with joint problem definition. The way the problem is defined has a significant impact on the approach to solving it. The more team members participate in the shared problem definition, the more likely they are to reach a common understanding about the shared purpose and engage in project work. Boundary crossing can be very beneficial in this context, as it can provide new insights and perspectives. Practitioners may particularly benefit from the multilevel boundary crossing framework (Akkerman & Bruining, 2016), which shows how individuals collaborate across multiple practices by developing new ways of doing or sense-making through learning mechanisms of identification, coordination, reflection and transformation. Dialogue is central to this process, as diverse individuals should have the freedom to express a variety of ideas and views.

During identification, various practices are discussed as members engage in joint sense-making through dialogue. This is a powerful initial learning experience. During coordination, partners engage in dialogue about means and procedures, but consensus is not required. Reflection follows, highlighting differences among practices, which helps to understand perspectives and gain new insights and knowledge. Members often benefit from taking different perspectives, resulting in a range of views and often a new construction of reality and identity. Transformation leads to changes in established practices and sometimes to the creation of new, so-called in-between practices or boundary practices. In this process, concepts and perspectives from different contexts may be combined into something new, such as new concepts, models, practices, tools or techniques.

In their study focused on boundary crossing, Ryymin and Lamberg (2022) found that dialogue and dialogical learning at boundaries was present in all activities – identification, coordination, reflection and transformation. Team members also relied heavily on coordination and it was their most important work mechanism that helped them integrate research at the boundaries of different disciplines. Interpersonal relationships among researchers were

apostrophized particularly in terms of their values, experiences and interests. Interdisciplinary differences depended largely on the communication skills of the members involved.

Team learning leading to innovation in higher education

HEIs present a special challenge when it comes to organizational learning. They face the demands of multiple internal and external stakeholders and attempt to balance them with limited resources challenged by fragmentation and advances in science and technology. Universities are trying to meet the challenges by introducing innovations supported by teamwork. In this issue, Witherspoon (2022) examined factors related to team learning that contribute to innovation in HEIs as learning organizations.

Practitioners should keep in mind that individuals and teams benefit from experiential and action learning (Kolb, 2015) so that they:

- learn from practice and experience;
- engage in reflective dialog;
- ask insightful questions;
- brainstorm;
- conceptualize their experiences; and
- actively experiment.

Reflective action learning (Yeo, 2013) is particularly important because it encourages members of teams and organizations to engage in inquiry and contemplate what helps them formulate beliefs and achieve expected outcomes. Creative tension, which may be the result of reflective action learning, could stimulate the team to change. Kotter's (1996) model can be used in this context. Practitioners could pay attention to the following phases:

- creating a sense of urgency;
- creating of a guiding coalition;
- developing a vision and strategy;
- communicating the vision of change broadly;
- empowering employees;
- achieving short-term successes;
- consolidating successes; and
- embedding new approaches into the culture.

These processes lead to organizational learning by creating shared understanding and producing innovative solutions that improve adaptability, flexibility and competitiveness.

Witherspoon (2022) used the model PROPEL, based on the above approaches, in her study. PROPEL is an acronym for the following process:

- Preparation in training including examination of values, priorities, and processes
- Reflective activity by team members regarding factors that might affect innovations, strengths, and weaknesses of the group
- Originating ideas for improvement
- Planning a proposal for implementation
- Engaging other stakeholders to solicit feedback
- Leading the implementation of the innovation.

By answering the following questions, "How do PROPEL team processes impact innovation?" and "How do the outcomes of PROPEL team processes impact innovation?", Witherspoon (2022) developed the following framework that may be useful for practitioners as they engage in team learning to foster innovation:

(1) Welcoming:
- serves to build collegiality and foster collaboration; and
- outcome:
  - team culture is built in the form of a safe and receptive space for all to work together; and
  - roles and responsibilities are established.

(2) Ideating:
- serves to identify ideas that may have innovative potential; and
- happens iteratively.
- how:
  - by gathering input from stakeholders;
  - by gathering data;
  - by searching for best practices; and
  - vy conducting research.

(3) Synthesizing:
- synthesize collected data, information and insights; and
- result:
  - adjustment of roles and responsibilities;
  - adjustment of goals, if needed;
  - building innovations;
  - critically examining innovative proposals for feasibility;
  - questioning vision;
  - designing implementation of the innovation; and
  - obtaining support from key stakeholders.

(4) Mentoring:
- seek mentor guidance as you brainstorm ideas and formulate proposals; and
- use feedback to improve suggestions.

Practitioners should keep in mind that this process can lead to great team learning outcomes when supported by strong leaders who facilitate learning, knowledge sharing, experimentation and learning from mistakes. Leaders should be patient because the process is highly iterative rather than sequential, and valuing contributions at each stage is especially beneficial for new iterations.

Team learning in professional training

In this Special Issue, Kérivel et al. (2022) examined team learning processes in situations with high temporal pressure, such as those found in sports. They focused on processes that occur during on-field learning in a long-time training program. In this way, the focus is on team learning as a process rather than team learning as an outcome or result. In their study, they used the input-process-output (IPO) model (Decuyper, Dochy, & Van den Bossche, 2010), in

which inputs refer to the elements in the environment, teams and team members that can influence team learning and its outcomes; processes refer to the mechanisms used to transform resources into outcomes; and outputs refer to the outcomes of team learning. In this way, team learning can be understood as a process involving the transformation of team learning inputs into specific team learning outputs using specific team learning mechanisms. Practitioners could particularly benefit from using seven team learning processes within the IPO model (Decuyper et al., 2010):

- sharing during which team members share thoughts, opinions, knowledge and skills;
- co-construction, in which shared meaning and knowledge is developed;
- constructive conflict is a process in which differences of opinion and identity are revealed through negotiation and dialogue;
- team reflexivity is useful for deconstructing and reconstructing shared mental models about the team's reality, goals and methods;
- team activity, finally, is a process of mobilizing resources to achieve specific goals;
- boundary crossing is a communicative process in which members learn across team boundaries and between team members belonging to different groups; and
- storage and retrieval, in which ideas, procedures, knowledge and plans are stored to be available for retrieval.

Practitioners in sports teams might particularly benefit from a model developed by McEwan and Beauchamp (2014) that provides four phases of team learning:

(1) Preparation, which includes:
   - mission analysis, in which the team's purpose is defined along with tasks, environmental conditions, team capabilities, time constraints and available resources;
   - goal specification, where the desired level of performance is established; and
   - planning, where process objectives are formulated and the team is prepared to work to accomplish its mission.

(2) Execution, where plans are put into action and includes the following:
   - coordination, which involves managing members' independent actions with regard to sequence and timing;
   - cooperation means that team members should work together during collective tasks; and
   - communication as sharing of task-related information.

(3) Evaluation refers to questioning if the team is on the right path, which includes the following:
   - performance monitoring as tracking progress and identifying the need for action; and
   - system monitoring in terms of the internal and external environmental conditions required to perform the tasks.

(4) Adjusting processes and activities to achieve goals, including:
   - problem solving, in which team members brainstorm to find a solution that will enable achievement of goals;

- backing up as a process in which team members help each other perform their roles;
- intrateam coaching, where members share constructive feedback; and
- innovation, where teams develop new approaches to achieve goals.

When talking about team learning activities in sport, it is important to note that they take place both off the field in the form of team meetings and team debriefings and on the field when members perform and learn from actions (Richards, Collins, & Mascarenhas, 2016). Kérivel, Bossard, and Kermarrec (2021) also suggested five team learning processes that take place on the playing field, while performing tasks in sport:

- communication with teammates;
- perceiving teammates' behavior and adapting to it;
- evaluating and validating collective behavior;
- sensing task constraints; and
- assessing individual task difficulty.

In this issue, Kérivel et al. (2022) also focused on team learning processes "on the field" during six training sessions of eight players over a 22-month period and collected data without activity disruption. They identified 13 team learning processes during the transition situation:

(1) visualizing the situation, during which team members gather information from different elements of the situation;
(2) planning, during which team members mentally determine the behavioral steps that need to be taken in the situation;
(3) visualizing the opposing organization, during which team members visualize the strengths and weaknesses of the opposing team in a situation;
(4) assessing own activity, comparing actual behavior with the coach's expectations;
(5) adaptation of own behavior, in which one imagines actions that might work in the situation;
(6) sense-making, in which the player recognizes what to do and how;
(7) identifying mistakes or successes in relation to the situation;
(8) identifying task limitations/difficulties in a situation due to training limitations;
(9) sharing information, ideas, and processes to support teamwork;
(10) individual testing, where a person experiments with a new behavior to achieve success;
(11) identifying situational goals, which are used to identify the trainer's goal and what should be done to be successful;
(12) validating the collective behavior in terms of the situation and its outcome; and
(13) communicating to the other players what should be done in a situation.

The results of Kérivel et al. (2022) show that team learning is both individual and collective. In some cases, players learn alone; in other cases, they engage in joint sense-making and learn together. This is because their goals can be shared, not shared or individual, but still complementary. For this reason, sometimes they are independent and sometimes their actions are interdependent. For example, team players have been found to communicate and

share information at the team level, plan and make sense at both the individual and team levels, and test and visualize the situation at the individual level. However, all actions within the team are driven by the common team goal – to improve team performance. To be successful and learn from a situation, players should show a high degree of cognitive flexibility, while coaches should place more emphasis on developing collective becoming rather than focusing on analyzing past mistakes.

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