

## Group Dynamics for Teams

By Daniel Levi. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001. 322 pp.

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When I retired from the corporate world and began teaching, I was not surprised to see project teams used extensively in the business school at my university. After all, teams are an integral part of contemporary business, and learning teamwork skills is important for individual career success. What did surprise me, however, was how little time was spent teaching the students *how* to actually work in teams. In many classes, the focus was on project content, and teams were left to their own devices to figure out how to work together. My assigned courses on managerial communication and leadership seemed like a good platform to address this issue. With support from the curriculum committee, I set out to integrate skill development for team competencies into my two courses. I was familiar with the popular literature (e.g., Katzenbach & Smith, 1994), but given my new academic setting, I wanted to make sure my course content was theory-and research-based. That turned out to be quite a challenge, given the huge body of research on group dynamics in psychology, the social sciences, and the management disciplines. Fortunately, I found Daniel Levi's book, *Group Dynamics for Teams*, which provided just the review and synthesis I needed.

Levi, a professor in the psychology and human development department at Cal Poly, has conducted research and worked as a consultant on the development of teamwork skills for a number of major corporations, such as Hewlett-Packard and Philips Electronics, so he brings a business-world perspective to the table. His purpose for the book is straightforward: "[to] organize research and theories of group dynamics so that this information can be applied . . . [to] help people become more effective team leaders and members" (p. ix). As such, Levi does not seek to expand our knowledge of group dynamics, but rather, to organize that knowledge for practical application. Thus, his book provides an excellent framework for teaching team skills. As I provide an analysis of the main ideas, I will also share some specific examples of how Levi's work has influenced my own classroom instruction.

The 17 chapters are organized into four parts: characteristics of teams, processes of teamwork, issues teams face, and teams at work. Each chapter contains learning objectives in the form of questions to be answered, a good review of the literature, sections on application to the workplace, a summary, and an application activity. Part One, "Characteristics of Teams," introduces group dynamics and teamwork. Chapter 1, "Under-

standing Teams” explains the differences between groups and teams and documents the importance of teams in organizations. Chapter 2, “Defining Team Success,” explores the characteristics of successful work teams. Drawing on Hackman’s (1987) work, Levi explains three criteria for evaluating team success: completing the task, maintaining social relations, and benefiting the individual. Levi summarizes the research on the characteristics of successful teams by using a matrix that lays out the success factors identified by different researchers. This approach makes a compelling case for the six key factors that lead to successful team outcomes: clear goals, appropriate leadership, organizational support, suitable tasks, and accountability. As Levi notes, Chapter 2 establishes the goals for team members, and the rest of the book explains how to reach the goals.

Part Two, “Processes of Teamwork,” explores the underlying practices of teamwork, including team formation, task and process roles, cooperation, and communication. Chapter 3, “Team Beginnings,” provides a good example of Levi’s useful reviews of research. Most educators are familiar with Tuckman and Jensen’s (1977) stages of group development model: forming, storming, norming, and performing. While Levi provides a thorough discussion of the Tuckman-Jensen model, which was derived from work with therapy and learning groups, he also examines other views of group stages based on research with actual work teams. These theories, developed in the workplace, provide an alternate view based on the characteristics of the project itself—a paradigm that may be more useful in a business school context. For example, Levi introduces the stage model developed by McIntyre and Salas (1995), which is based on the skills that team members develop when trying to complete a project. In this model, a team works on role clarification during the early stages, moves on to coordinated skill development, and finally focuses on increasing the variety and flexibility of its skills as a team. The model uses the changing relationship between the team and the project as the driver of change throughout the stages.

Levi also explores alternatives to stage theories, such as Gersick’s (1988) theory of *punctuated equilibrium* drawn from her research on project teams. In Gersick’s study, each team had its own pattern of development, but all of the teams experienced periods of low activity followed by bursts of energy and change. In addition, each team had a midpoint crisis where its members realized that half of their time had been used but the project still was in the early stages of completion. This led to a period of panic, followed by increased activity as the team focused on completing the task. I see this pattern in my own students, who really relate to this theory!

Based on his review of the research related to team beginnings, Levi provides specific applications for jump-starting project teams, such as the use of team warm-ups, the purposeful creation of group norms, and time spent on project definition. Levi’s emphasis on the socialization process and the importance of group norms has influenced my teaching in a

number of ways. For example, I now devote more time over the first part of the semester taking the teams through a variety of exercises and activities designed to build camaraderie and trust within each group. Levi provides some team warm-up exercises (p. 54) that I have found useful, such as developing a team name and the use of conversation starters (e.g., "What do you do when you want to relax?"). Based on Levi's recommendations, I also coach my class project teams through systematic development of team norms, which establishes ground rules for operating meetings, how team members will interact, and what types of behaviors are acceptable. This process includes a series of brainstorming sessions to identify and reach consensus on important behaviors, culminating with a written document that is signed by each team member.

Chapter 4, "Understanding the Basic Team Processes," also provides good research-based content to use in teaching members of a student project team how to work together. The chapter delivers a good discussion on motivation and how to deal with social loafing – one of the biggest problems in academic project teams. Levi's review of team roles and his list of relevant task and social behaviors are also useful. Drawing from this chapter, I created role-play cards, each with a specific behavior, and deal them out to team members to "play" during team planning sessions. Chapter 5, "Cooperation and Competition," addresses the inevitable conflict between individual and team goals. While Levi offers some suggestions for encouraging cooperation, such as the promotion of superordinate goals (a common goal that the entire group accepts as important), I did not find the application section of this chapter particularly useful, at least in a student team context. I feel the same about Chapter 6, "Communication." This chapter highlights the three parts of the communication process (sender, receiver, and message) and explores how teams develop communication patterns and climates. Levi also presents advice on how to facilitate team meetings and reviews the basic skills needed for team meetings (e.g., asking questions and active listening). All this, of course, is contained within the basic communication texts we use for our courses.

Part Three, "Issues Teams Face," focuses on a variety of issues that teams face in learning to operate effectively, including managing conflict, power and social influence, decision making, leadership, problem solving, creativity, and diversity—the titles of Chapters 7 through 13 respectively. While each of these chapters has practical content to help student teams, I found the chapters on conflict, decision making, and problem solving to be the most useful. Chapter 7, "Managing Conflict," was of particular interest to me, since conflict avoidance seems to be a characteristic of most student teams I have observed. Again, Levi's survey of the research is instructive. The bottom line is that conflict should be a normal part of a team's activity and is a healthy sign. Teams are formed to gain the benefits of multiple perspectives, so team members can learn from each other in the

process of resolving the differences. The key is equipping students with some tools and skills to facilitate the resolution of differences. For example, Levi provides a research-based model on conflict resolution that relates the dimensions of assertiveness and cooperativeness to identify five different approaches to conflict resolution: avoidance, accommodation, confrontation, compromise, and collaboration (p. 122). I use this model to help students compare and contrast their own individual approaches to conflict. This creates learner readiness and sets the stage for skill building on conflict resolution. Levi draws from the negotiation literature (e.g., Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991) to create a useful outline for resolving a conflict.

For most teams, the central purpose is to make decisions while avoiding polarization and "groupthink." Chapter 9, "Decision Making," examines the literature related to group decision-making processes, and the key part of this chapter is Levi's section on the advantages of consensus decision making. I use Levi's guidelines as the basis for several activities to help my student teams learn how to reach consensus at key points in their project work. Teams also need problem-solving skills, as the biggest problem most student teams have is jumping to conclusions and generating a solution before they fully understand a problem. Chapter 11, "Problem Solving," provides a good review of the various approaches to problem solving (e.g., the rational model) and the various techniques such as symptom identification, the criteria matrix, action planning, and force field analysis.

Part Four, which addresses team issues in context of actual work organizations, does not seem as useful as the preceding parts. The chapter titled "Organizational Culture" (Chapter 14) documents how cultural norms can either support teamwork or limit a team's ability to operate effectively, but beyond a brief explanation to my students of this phenomenon, I did not find any useful skill-building applications. I was similarly disappointed with Chapter 15, "Electronic Teams," since Levi documents the growing use of communication technologies and the impact on teams, but does not provide an application section. I am continuing to search the literature for studies that document specific skills and behaviors that make a difference in a virtual environment.

Chapter 16, "Work Teams," looks at different types of teams in the workplace. As expected, this chapter does not have much application to the student environment. Levi's final chapter, which has the slightly misleading title of "Team Building," is about ways to improve the operation of teams. The most practical section for student teams is on the use of evaluation and feedback. Levi points to several studies that provide useful guidelines for developing team performance evaluations and using the information to provide feedback. One cue I took from this section is the importance of making the development of team performance measures a participative process; participation helps gain acceptance and ensures the measures are meaningful and context specific.

As businesses increasingly rely on teams to conduct short- and long-term projects, our students need to be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to teams that will give them a competitive edge in the marketplace. This requires more than just working in team projects and learning about team theories. Students need practice in applying useful team facilitation tools and purposeful development in a variety of team skills. Plus, as professional educators, we want our instruction to be based on sound research and proven practices. *Group Dynamics for Teams* can help achieve that goal, serving as a valuable instructional resource for business communication faculty.

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