

ORGANIZATIONAL WORK GROUPS AND WORK TEAMS – APPROACHES AND DIFFERENCES

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Abstract

Work groups and work teams represents basic structures of traditional and modern organizations, and during the time they have been intensively researched. However, managers often do not always consider the fundamental differences between groups and teams, which will lead to unrealistic goals and results below expectations. Thus, in the present paper we propose a review of the main researching approaches on groups and teams (psychosocial, socio-technical, and behavioral approach), in the third part of the paper being detailed the fundamental differences between groups and teams in the light of these approaches.

Key words: *work group, work team, psychosocial approach, socio-tehnical approach, behavioral approach*

JEL Classification: *C91, C92, D23, L29, M19*

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of *work group* emerged during the famous research conducted by Elton Mayo and his team at the Western Electric factories from Hawthorne in the **1920's** and early **1930's**. Trying to find answers to a series of founded contradictory facts (increase work productivity even in precarious conditions of work), Mayo concluded that people in industrial environments develop groups, most often as a means of defense against formal constraints, but also to satisfy a range of social and human needs.

In Mayo's conception, work groups, whether they were formal or informal, were natural groups opposed through their genesis, structure, functionality and purpose to other groups which, although they were called *of work*, had distinct features (at that time, any group of people who have to solve a task, even if the group was artificial and the task was experimental, designed in the laboratory, it was nominated through the term *work group*).

II. APPROACHES REGARDING GROUPS AND TEAMS

Psychosocial approach

From a psychological perspective, the group represents a number of people who (1) interact with one another, (2) are psychologically aware of the existence of other group members and (3) perceives themselves as representing a group (Schein, 1965 as cited in Zlate, 2008, p. 398).

Roger Mucchielli, doctor and psychologist, in his study *Le travail en équipe (Working in team)* shows within the first pages that work team is a typical primary group dominated by the spirit of unity, cohesion, human relations, personal commitment, members adherence to group with which they actually identify, the convergence of efforts for tasks execution which will constitute a joint work (Mucchielli 1975 as cited in Zlate, 2008, p. 399). To tinge the delimitation of generic group from team, the author classifies groups according to the phases / stages in group development as follows: *nominal or pseudogroups* constituted by a mix of people united by an external authority; *fusional groups* based on interpersonal trust; *conflictual groups* in which tension is their rule of life; *unitary groups* in which every member contributes to solve problems or carry out the tasks, and membership in them become personal commitment and the dominant feeling is represented by co-responsibility in work. According to Mucchielli work team would be ranked among unitary groups, and it is equally focused on both the task and itself (Mucchielli 1975 as cited in Zlate, 2008, p. 400).

For most of the authors, especially sociologists, work group represents a collection of two or more people who interact with each other sharing some tasks related to a common goal, the interaction and interrelation distinguishing a group from a simple collection of people (Zlate, 2008).

In a more detailed analysis and considering that the initial stage in any team formation is the group, we admit that, from a psychological perspective, any association of persons, in order to be or to become a small group, have to satisfy five conditions (Zlate, 2008):

- 1) to have a certain number of members;
- 2) between them to be established a minimal interaction, the relationship between them to be direct, therefore a *face to face* interaction;
- 3) the interaction of members to be centered on the completion of common activities or goals;
- 4) to exist a minimal articulation between statuses and roles of members, therefore a psychosocial structure;
- 5) to have a specific composition, derived from the characteristics of the members.

According to Zlate, the five features are definitive for small group, the absence of either of them leading to group disintegration, to the presence of only some collective situations, to a random association of people or statistical categories, etc. but not of groups (Zlate, 2008).

Socio-technical approach

Initially developed in the United Kingdom by Eric Trist and his colleagues more than half of century ago, socio-technical systems theory argues that organizations closely combine people and technology into complex forms in order to produce results. Technical subsystem consists of equipment and operating methods used to transform raw materials into products and services. Social subsystem includes employment structures which connects people to technology and between them (Attaran & Nguyen, 2000).

Socio-technical systems theory explains that autonomy lead to increased performance under certain conditions. For example, Trist and Bamforth argue that designing team-based task has a positive effect on the results when common optimization of technical and social systems is properly configured (Trist & Bamforth, 1951 as cited in Yang & Guy, 2011, pp. 531-541). One reason for this is that the technical system and social system influence each other, and one of them may present constraints for the other. In other terms, for optimum performance human relations (that is, the social system), and methods for carrying out the tasks (that is, the technical system) must be properly combined.

Socio-technical systems theory represents a top-down approach, providing a working system in which the product is well defined and efficiently provided, and the primary way for implementing the socio-technical approach was by using the cross design teams (Attaran & Nguyen, 2000).

In a broader view, socio-technical systems redesign work processes. It is not an approach like problem solving in order to improve the organization, but its purpose is to operate in a manner opposed to crisis, in which the system automatically removes the source of many problems (Attaran & Nguyen, 2000).

Behavioral approach

The characteristics of small groups are definitive, in general, for the members' behavior within organization, in particular, for the behavior of group members, and especially for the behavior of team members, being the subject of *organizational behavior* discipline. This domain, as a part of organizational theory, pursues the entirety of behavioral issues in organizational environment through systematic studies of individuals, groups and organizational processes (Bucur, 1999).

According to Gary Johns, "organizational behavior refers to attitudes and behaviors of individuals and groups within organizations" (Johns, 1998, p. 6), being rather a meta-departmental discipline useful to all members of organizations in order to improve their own relationships within and outside the organization, in the organizational environment (Preda, 2006). Along with the development of this approach, having sociology and psychology as foundation, organizational investigations center turns to peoples' attitudes, perceptions, skills and ideals, they becoming important to the organization as members of one or more groups of one kind or another, able to work in teams for achieving the organizational goals.

Studying groups is important for managers whereas the common factor of all organizations is represented by people, and the most common technique for doing the work is to gather people in work groups, which led to the emergence of teams and their performance research (Kermally, 2009). Thus, the use of *work team* concept is due to Leavitt, who advanced the idea that work team is the basic unit of organization. For that matter, Leavitt spoke about the *team-organization* (or organization like a team) (Leavitt, 1975 as cited in Zlate, 2008, p. 398), not far from the Lapassade's opinion, according to which organization is "a group of groups" (Lapassade, 1967 as cited in Zlate, 2008, pp. 395).

In essence, a team consists of a number of two or more persons who have complementary skills which they use for carrying out the common task that have been assigned for them or they voluntarily have assumed it and for this task accomplishment they are jointly responsible (Preda, 2006).

III. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WORK GROUPS AND WORK TEAMS

The concept of *work group* is often used by psychologists, having its origin in social psychology research on structure, processes and group dynamics, while the *work team* is more common in business field. Thus, if for sociologists and psychologists the two terms are substitutable and can be used interchangeably, in terms of modern management work team is seen as integral unit of the organization functioning and the interest for it has increased with over time: many organizations turn to the organization of work in teams, yet they are seen as solutions to organizational problems, including those related to productivity (Zoltan, Bordeianu & Vancea, 2013).

Most of the team definitions consider work team as a special type of group. For some theorists, the distinction between groups and teams is diffuse; teams are simply groups (Parks & Sanna, 1999) and even more, "an effective team can be described as any group of people which has to significantly interrelate in order to meet the common objectives" (Thomas, Jaques, Adams, & Kihneman-Wooten, 2008, pp. 105-113). Other theorists focus on how the teams' behavior differs from that of other types of groups. Thus, teams were defined as structured groups of people working on the basis of well-defined common goals that require coordinated interactions in order to perform certain tasks (Forsyth, 2010). This definition highlights one of the key features of team, that is, its members work together on a common project for the achievement of which they are all accountable.

A common distinction refers to applicability. Usually, teams are engaged in sporting or lucrative activities. They have to apply certain functions, and roles of team members are related to these functions. Also, teams are generally constituted in parts of larger organizations and their members have the knowledge, skills and specialized abilities related to the tasks they have to perform. This distinction also appears in research on groups and teams. Research on groups are made, usually in laboratories, in predetermined conditions, while the studies on teams are conducted "on the field" and focuses on how work teams are actually used or how they function at workplace (Levi, 2001).

Other definitions place emphasis on relations and complementary: "Usually teams refer to a small group in which the members have a common goal, interdependent roles and complementary skills" (Gondal & Khan, pp. 138-146); "A team is a set of interpersonal relationships structured so as to achieve the set of objectives" (Johnson & Johnson, 1991 as cited in Sudhakar, Farooq, & Patnaik, 2011, pp. 187-205); "A team is defined by its unity of purpose, its identity as social structure and shared responsibility of its members for the team results" (Williams & Castro, 2010, pp. 124-147).

Table 1. Differences between groups and teams

<i>Work group</i>	<i>Work team</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal leader is appointed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The function of leadership and responsibilities arising from it are divided and distributed among members.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopts the objective of the organization as its target itself. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certain objectives are specified which gives identity to team and become a stimulating source.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The result comes from the accumulation and coordination of results of each individual activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common result arises from the mixture of individual and collective activities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Its members assume responsibility strictly for the particular results produced by each individual. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Its members share a common responsibility for final outcome.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings are of short duration and conducted by formal leader. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings are the "place" where members discuss, decide, jointly work, and actively solve problems without the pressure of time.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides its members roles appropriate to their professional qualifications. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage its members to assume multiple and diversified roles.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rewards and recognizes individual contributions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes, rewards and celebrates more frequently and with more joy, with all members, collective successes.

Source: Leroy, J.-F., *Dezvoltarea echipei, dinamica grupurilor și coordonarea proiectelor*, in De Visscher, P., Neculau, A. (coord.), *Dinamica grupurilor. Texte de bază*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2001, p. 401

John Adair defines team as "a group in which individuals share a common goal and the skills and competencies of each member match with those of others" (Adair, 1986 as cited in Sudhakar et al., 2011, pp. 187-205), later adding that team work is something more than a group of people who share a common goal, its

superiority coming from the fact that individual contributions are considered not only suitable in a broader context, but complementary. He states that a team is good, that is effective, "if its members can work as a team even when they are not together, contributing rather to a sequence of activities than to a common task that requires their presence in a particular place and at a certain time" (Adair, 2009, p. 97).

Two well-known authors, J. Katzenbach and D. Smith, partners at McKinsey & Company, argue that substantial differences between a *real team* and a *work group*; members belonging to the second category perform their tasks successfully and achieve personal satisfaction, but not necessarily share the same objectives, their coordination is poor, etc.; referring to a real team, the authors enumerate six defining characteristics (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993):

- a small number of members;
- some complementary certain qualifications / skills;
- a full understanding of the purpose;
- a common product / service to obtain;
- a clear conception about task / labor;
- a sense of mutual accountability.

Leroy also points out the differences between work groups and work teams, differences which are presented in Table 1. Thus, team work is a work group but is a special type of group work owning three specific properties (Spector, 2003):

- 1) individuals actions are interdependent and coordinated;
- 2) each member has a particular specified role;
- 3) there are common objective and goals.

There is an extensive literature on the characteristics that distinguishes an efficient team to some ordinary group, on team work, on tools designed for team management, on types of teams, also on ways to implement a system created for make a team functional. However, pragmatically speaking, each organization must "build" their own teams, and each manager must "learn" over time with those he leads (Burciu, 2008).

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The overall picture provided by the literature shows a widespread use of teams in organizations at different levels and in different situations, which is supported and confirmed by extensive background research results (Zoltan, 2014). However, significant differences appear in the results of researches since, on the one hand, sociologists and psychologists address work teams from a broader perspective, often beyond organizational boundaries and by referring often to the variable of interest regarding wider phenomena observed in society; on the other hand, management literature treats them from a pragmatic perspective, the analysis being delimited to organizational context and dealing with issues less difficult to measure, but which aims, ultimately, the essence of team "life", respectively aspects regarding individuals and their relationships within organizational context.

Then, regardless of the approaching manner of work team issue as particular type of group, most authors agree that all work teams are groups, but not all groups are work teams. Work team is a particular type of small group, along with committees, task forces, departments and councils. The team is a group, but the converse is not true (McShane & Von Glinow, 2000). A group consists of people who work together but can work even without each other. A team is a group of people who can not do the work, at least not effectively without the other members of their team (Spector, 2003) and team members are kept together by their interdependence and their need to collaborate in order to achieve the common goals.

Thus, the applied leadership and the modalities of motivating individuals, either individually or at group / team level will vary depending also on the nature of the task that members are expected to achieve. Moreover, success in realization of the common task will depend not so much on technical competencies and skills of the group / team members, but rather on their interpersonal abilities within the collective work.

All these differences involve major changes concerning the management of groups and teams, each requiring a different approach as the goals and objectives they must attain are dissimilar.

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