High Performance Teams: 
Do Perceptions and Reality Match?

Caroline Dominguez, School of Science and Technology, Department of Engineering and CETRAD (Center of Transdisciplinary Studies for Development), University of Trás-os-Montes, Vila Real, Portugal

Isabel C. Moura, Department of Information Systems and Algoritmi Research Center, University of Minho, Guimarães, Portugal

João Varajão, Department of Information Systems and Algoritmi Research Center, University of Minho, Guimarães, Portugal

ABSTRACT

Effective team management is one of the key factors that allow companies to tackle the challenges of today’s demanding business environment. Although high-performing teams have been studied for some time, very little has been written on them from the construction industry’s perspective. Based on the conclusions of previous work and on a project involving 44 professionals of seven teams, this exploratory case study intends to evaluate if there is a gap between what team members and leaders perceive as being (a) the most important features for managing teams into high performance and (b) the features that are present in their teams. The present study shows that, although teams under investigation had some high-performing features at the leadership dimension, there is room for improvement, in particular when it comes to empowering team members, involving them in planning the work, and creating proper reward systems.

KEYWORDS

Construction Industry, High-Performing Teams, Leadership, Performance, Team Management

INTRODUCTION

Although in 2012 the construction sector continued to represent a big percentage of the total number of companies in Portugal (8.4%) and almost 10% of the total labor market (PORDATA, 2015), it has been whipped by the economic crisis. According to recent data (PORDATA, 2015), from 2010 to 2012 Portugal has lost 16.8% of its construction companies and 23.4% of its workers, rates far higher than the average for the total number of firms (7.1% and 8.6% respectively). As the country almost headed toward bankruptcy, so did many construction firms. Recovering from this severe downward cycle requires firms to improve their performance. Increasing the number of high-performing teams working for firms is one of the factors that can contribute to this improvement (Ferreira, 2007). Thus, making leaders take a deep insight into team management issues may help turn teams into effective teams that gather knowledgeable and skillful professionals, on whom firms can rely.

Several factors may affect the performance of teams, whether these are multidisciplinary or designed for specific tasks. For instance, all project managers can benefit from identifying issues that result from putting together different personalities and best practices to overcome unforeseen difficulties. On the other hand, the ability of the leaders to coordinate their teams has a major influence on teams’ performance, as leaders play a decisive role (Burgoyne, Hirsh, & Williams, 2004) when it comes to accomplishing positive results by teams during the execution of a project (Thamhain, 2004).
In fact, with the increasing complexity of organizations which require more complex and extended projects to meet their needs, the selection of well-trained managers ready for the leadership of the projects is a critical success factor (Varajão & Cruz-Cunha, 2013).

Our aim is twofold. Firstly to contribute with a deeper understanding of team management practices and processes in the construction industry. Second, to evaluate in which aspects it is possible to improve the situation so that firms can eventually achieve better results in today’s demanding business environment. Having this purpose in mind, we designed an investigation, through an exploratory case study, to elucidate the most relevant perceived features for managing high-performing teams, aiming to attest if team members perceptions differ (or not) from their leaders’.

Our previous work (Moura, Dias, Dominguez, & Varajão, 2014) showed that the perceived strongest drivers toward managing high-performing teams appeared to differ not only across teams of different specialties but, especially, between teams and leaders. Demographics and some of leaders' concerns explained these differences.

In this article, we intend to find out if there is a gap between what is perceived by teams as being the bases for team’s high performance and what is done in practice. That is, in which aspects there seems to be room to improve team management practices.

In order to achieve our objectives, we first made a brief overview of the literature on team management looking for what possibly characterizes a high-performing team and how it should be managed. We then presented the research methodology mainly based on a questionnaire that was administered to team members and leaders while working on a construction project. Results are presented next. Discussion and concluding remarks finalize our work.

LITERATURE REVIEW: TEAMS AND PERFORMANCE

Several authors (e.g., Bragg, 1999; Ferreira, 2007) agree on a team being a small group of people (two or more persons) whose members: (a) interact socially (Maliea & Baltazar, 2005); (b) are brought together to perform relevant tasks embedded in an organizational context; (c) have complementary skills and different roles and responsibilities (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006); and (d) are committed to a general purpose and goals to reach it, with both purpose and goals being settled by team members, by team members and their leader, or by the team leader (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). Plus, a team is also characterized by its own: (a) direction, momentum, and commitment (e.g., pulling together in the same direction to achieve something); (b) common approach (e.g., particular organizational and motivation methods); and (c) mutual accountability (e.g., with each team member being accountable for his or her actions, as these add to the team as a whole) (Moura et al., 2014).

A high-performing team, in particular, is an ideal one that combines individual talents and abilities into a high performing whole with capabilities that exceed those of its most talented member (Ross, 2008). That is, high-performing teams: (a) range between two and 25 members (Bragg, 1999); (b) possess the right mix of technical and functional expertise and problem-solving, decision-making, and interpersonal skills; (c) shape their purposes usually in response to the firms’ high management; (d) invest a huge amount of time and effort exploring, shaping, and agreeing on a purpose that belongs to them both individually and collectively; (e) translate their purposes into explicit, measurable, and attainable performance goals, with purposes and goals building on one another and being combined with team commitment; (f) develop strong commitment to how they will work together to accomplish their purposes; (g) hold themselves responsible, both as individuals and as a team, for the team’s performance (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993); and (h) have a supporting and encouraging leadership (Hakanen & Soudunsaari, 2012).
Related Content

Service-Oriented Architecture Adoption: A Normative Decision Model for Timing and Approach
[www.igi-global.com/article/service-oriented-architecture-adoption/42122?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/service-oriented-architecture-adoption/42122?camid=4v1a)

Improving Virtual Teams through Creativity
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/improving-virtual-teams-through-creativity/13836?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/improving-virtual-teams-through-creativity/13836?camid=4v1a)
Knowledge Management in a Global Context: A Case Study
[www.igi-global.com/article/knowledge-management-in-a-global-context/143168?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/knowledge-management-in-a-global-context/143168?camid=4v1a)

The Project Management Perspective for a Digital City
[www.igi-global.com/article/the-project-management-perspective-for-a-digital-city/111175?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/the-project-management-perspective-for-a-digital-city/111175?camid=4v1a)