An Exploration of Approaches to Teach Business Students Teamwork

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Abstract

Teaching business students teamwork is important for preparing them to thrive in today's interconnected and collaborative world. By emphasizing teamwork competencies in the classroom, educators can empower students to become effective collaborators, innovative problem-solvers, and adaptable leaders in the increasingly competitive business environment. Teamwork capability not only enhances business students' employability but also contributes to their personal and professional development. This paper provides a review of scholarly research on teamwork, as well as a review of scholarly research on the teaching of student teamwork. A framework is developed for enhancing business students teamwork capability.

Keywords: Teamwork, Capability, Teaching, Business Students

Introduction

Teamwork has garnered significant attention both academically and professionally due to its critical importance in today's workplaces and educational settings. Teamwork is vital for companies because it drives organizational success, fosters innovation, enhances productivity, and promotes employee engagement and satisfaction (Adair, 1973; Beckhard, 1972; Doukanari, et al., 2020; Hackman, 1987; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Tannenbaum, et al., 2021). Many employers invest in training and development initiatives to enhance teamwork capabilities among employees to meet competitive challenges, seize opportunities, and achieve long-term success (Hackman, 1987; Sezgin & Bektas, 2023). In colleges, instructors increasingly incorporate team-based learning approaches to prepare students for collaborative work environments. To cope with today's interconnected and rapidly evolving business world, it is important to teach business students teamwork capability. The ability to effectively work in teams is not just advantageous but essential for business students to succeed both academically and professionally (Adair, 1973; Hackman, 1987; Sezgin & Bektas, 2023).

Teamwork is a crucial determinant of firm success, fostering synergy, creativity, and collective achievement (Hackman, 1987; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). When employees collaborate effectively within teams, they can leverage their diverse skills, knowledge, and perspectives to provide innovative ideas, make informed decisions, and deliver results that exceed individual capabilities (Adair, 1973; Beckhard, 1972; Doukanari, et al., 2020). By fostering a culture of collaboration, organizations can harness the full potential of their workforce and drive sustainable growth and innovation.

Moreover, teamwork plays a critical role in enhancing employee engagement and job satisfaction (Adair, 1973; Beckhard, 1972). When employees feel valued, respected, and supported within their teams, they are more motivated to contribute their best efforts and actively participate in organizational initiatives.

Collaboration nurtures a sense of belonging and connection among team members, leading to higher levels of loyalty and retention (Asencio, et al., 2023; Beckhard, 1972; Hackman, 1987; Tannenbaum, et al., 2021).

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) stresses that teamwork is one of the most desired skills by employers, which underscores its critical importance in today's competitive job market. Therefore, teaching students teamwork skills is essential for preparing them to succeed in the workplace, fostering innovation and creativity, promoting effective communication and collaboration, and cultivating leadership abilities (Asencio, et al., 2023; Beckhard, 1972; Zhao, et al., 2023).

This paper will research effective approaches for enhancing business students teamwork capability. First, it provides a review of scholarly research on teamwork and teamwork teaching. Then, it will develop a framework for teaching student teamwork. The final part is the conclusion and implications.

Literature Review

Since teamwork is becoming increasingly prevalent in both education and business fields, scholars have sought to understand the underlying mechanisms of effective teamwork and identify strategies for optimizing collaborative performance. Various theories have been developed to provide valuable frameworks for understanding the dynamics, processes, and outcomes of collaborative efforts within teams (Sezgin & Bektas, 2023). These studies include Tuckman's Team Development Model, Hackman's Input-Process-Output (IPO) Model, Belbin's Team Role Theory, Marston's Team DISC Model, Beckhard's Team GRIP Model, Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Model, Lencioni Teamwork (disfunction) Model, McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y, as well as Adair's Action Centered Leadership Model, among others.

Tuckman's stages of group development offers a framework for understanding the evolution of groups over time (please see Figure 1). The model outlines five sequential stages through which teams evolve: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). In the forming stage, team members come together, acquaint themselves with one another, and establish initial goals and norms. As team members begin to voice their opinions and assert their identities, conflicts and power struggles may arise during the storming stage (Zhao, et al., 2023). In the norming stage, consensus is reached, and cohesive relationships start to develop among team members.
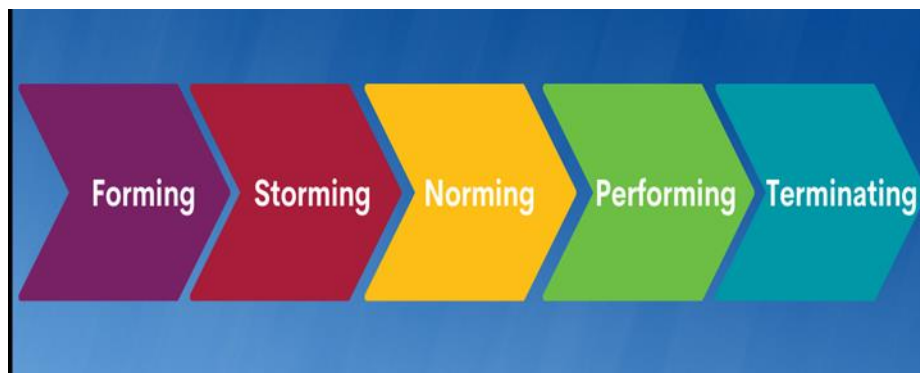

Figure 1. Tuckman's Model of Team Development (adapted from Lee (n.d.))

The performing stage represents the culmination of group development, where members work synergistically towards shared objectives, leveraging their collective strengths and expertise. The adjourning stage occurs when the team disbands or completes its task. This stage involves reflecting on the team's accomplishments, celebrating successes, and acknowledging contributions made by team members (Asencio, et al., 2023; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Overall, Tuckman's team development model remains a valuable framework for understanding the dynamics of team formation and evolution.

Hackman's input-process-output (IPO) model provides a theoretical understanding of the dynamics of teamwork within organizational contexts (please see Figure 2). The theory emphasizes the interdependence and dynamic interactions among system components and posits that team performance is influenced by inputs (such as team composition and task design), group processes (how teams work together), and outputs (performance outcomes) (Asencio, et al., 2023; Hackman, 1987).

By conceptualizing teams as complex adaptive systems, the model underscores the need for a multi-level analysis that considers both individual and collective factors shaping team effectiveness (Sezgin & Bektas, 2023).
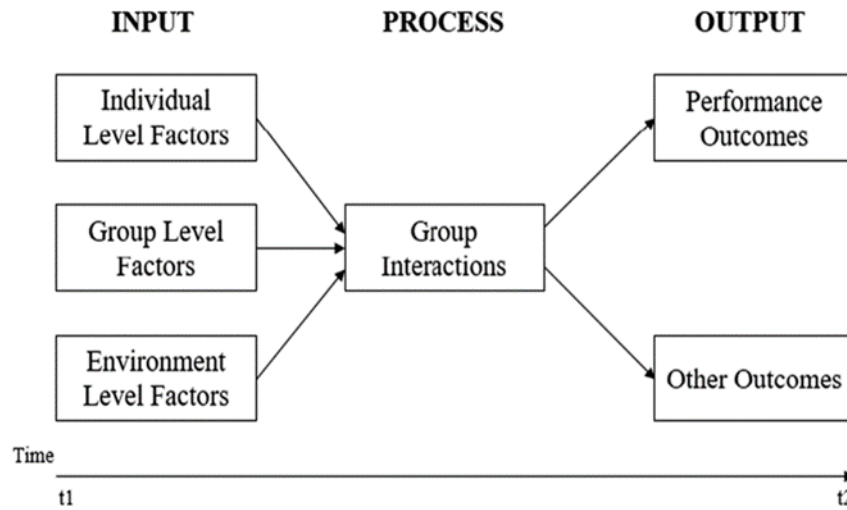

Figure 2. Hackman's Input-Process-Output Framework (Adapted from Hackman (1987))

Belbin's team role theory is an important research in organizational behavior by providing a framework for understanding the diverse roles individuals play within teams (please see Figure 3). The theory proposes that effective teams comprise individuals who fulfill distinct roles that complement one another's strengths and weaknesses (Asencio, et al., 2023; Belbin, 1981, 1993). Belbin (1981) identified nine team roles based on individuals' preferred behaviors, including Resource Investigator, Team worker, Plant, Monitor Evaluator, Specialist, Shaper, Implementer, Coordinator, and Completer Finisher. Belbin's team role theory offers practical implications for team selection, development, and management within organizational settings. The theory suggests that a balanced combination of roles enhances team performance.

Figure 3. Belbin Team Role Theory (adapted from Minute Tools (2017))

Marston's team DISC model offers a framework for understanding individual behavioral styles within teams, facilitating effective communication, collaboration, and leadership (please see Figure 4). The model is based on human behavior and categorizes individuals into four primary behavioral styles: dominance, influence, steadiness, and conscientiousness (Marston, 2018; Price, 2015). Individuals with a dominant behavioral style are assertive, decisive, and results-oriented. They tend to be direct, assertive communicators who focus on achieving goals and taking charge of situations. Individuals with an influential behavioral style are outgoing, enthusiastic, and persuasive. They are sociable, charismatic communicators who excel at building relationships and inspiring others.

Figure 4. Marston's Team DISC Model (adapted from McPheat (2022))

Individuals with a steady behavioral style are patient, dependable, and accommodating. They are calm, supportive communicators who value stability, harmony, and cooperation. Individuals with a conscientious behavioral style are analytical, detail-oriented, and systematic (Marston, 2018; Price, 2015). They are precise, careful communicators who emphasize accuracy, quality, and thoroughness in their work. By understanding these behavioral preferences, teams can enhance their interpersonal dynamics, leverage individual strengths, and mitigate potential conflicts.

Beckhard's team GRIP model proposes a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics of team effectiveness and identifying factors that contribute to high-performing teams (please see Figure 5). The model is grounded in the broader field of organizational development and aims to enhance team effectiveness by focusing on four key dimensions: goals, roles, interpersonal relationships, and processes (Asencio, et al., 2023; Beckhard, 1972). The theory notes that effective teams have clearly defined goals and objectives that are aligned with organizational priorities and stakeholders' expectations (Bruffee, 2003; Wysocki, 2002; Zhao, et al., 2023). Team members are expected to have clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and areas of expertise, which contribute to accountability and task clarity.
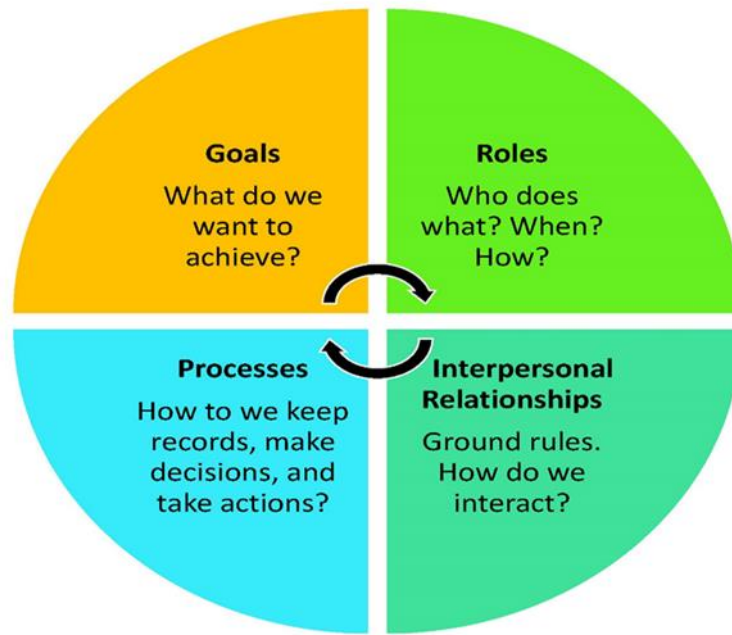
Figure 5. The Team GRIP Model (Adapted from Last (n.d.))

Further, the theory insists that strong interpersonal relationships characterized by trust, open communication, and mutual respect enhance team cohesion and collaboration (Bruffee, 2003; Wysocki, 2002). Efficient and effective processes for decision-making, problem-solving, and conflict resolution facilitate smooth team functioning and task accomplishment. By addressing these core elements, teams can optimize their performance, foster collaboration, and achieve organizational objectives.

Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode model is a widely used framework for understanding and managing interpersonal conflicts within teams (please see Figure 6). Thomas and Kilmann (1974) propose that individuals adopt specific conflict-handling styles based on their preferences for achieving personal goals (assertiveness) and maintaining relationships (cooperativeness) (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Competing is assertive and uncooperative, focusing on achieving personal goals at the expense of others' interests. Collaborating implies being assertive and cooperative, seeking mutually beneficial solutions through open communication and problem-solving (Zhao, et al., 2023).

Figure 6. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Model (adapted from Guzowski (2022))

Compromising suggests being moderate in assertiveness and cooperativeness, aiming for partial satisfaction of both parties' goals through concessions. Avoiding is unassertive and uncooperative, sidestepping or postponing conflict resolution to maintain harmony or avoid confrontation (Asencio, et al., 2023; Simpson, 2006; Thompson & Ku, 2006). Finally, accommodating proposes a cooperative but unassertive alternative, prioritizing the needs and concerns of others over personal goals. The model emphasizes the importance of understanding and effectively managing conflicts to promote positive outcomes and enhance team cohesion.

Lencioni teamwork (disfunction) model develops a powerful framework for building cohesive and high-performing teams within organizations (please see Figure 7). The model is based on the premise that cohesive teams are essential for organizational success. It outlines five dysfunctions of a team: absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results (Lencioni, 2002). It also offers a pyramid framework for addressing these dysfunctions and building strong team dynamics. Lencioni (2002) posits that trust serves as the foundation upon which effective teams are built, followed by constructive conflict, commitment to shared goals, mutual accountability, and a focus on collective outcomes.

Figure 7. Lencioni's Teamwork Model (adapted from Jay (n.d.))

The foundation of the pyramid, trust refers to vulnerability-based trust among team members, where they feel safe to express themselves openly and authentically without fear of judgment or reprisal (Lencioni, 2002). Healthy teams engage in constructive conflict, where diverse perspectives are encouraged, and disagreements are viewed as opportunities for learning and growth rather than threats to harmony (McCahan, et al., 2015). Once decisions are made through productive conflict, team members must commit to implementing those decisions fully, aligning their actions with shared objectives and priorities.

The theory also proposes that mutual accountability ensures that team members hold one another accountable for their commitments and performance, fostering a culture of ownership and responsibility. The ultimate goal of teamwork is achieving collective outcomes that benefit the organization, rather than individual agendas or egos. Teams must prioritize results and be willing to make sacrifices for the greater good. Lencioni (2002) stresses that trust serves as the foundation upon which teams work together (Zhao, et al., 2023).

McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y represent contrasting assumptions about human nature and behavior in the workplace, with significant implications for team dynamics and organizational effectiveness (please see Figure 8). It proposes two contrasting perspectives on employee motivation, behavior, and management practices (McGregor, 1960). Theory X portrays employees as inherently lazy, unmotivated, and requiring strict supervision, while Theory Y posits that employees are inherently motivated, self-directed, and capable of taking responsibility for their work. Theory X reflects a traditional, authoritarian approach to management, characterized by top-down control and coercion, while Theory Y embodies a more humanistic, participative approach that emphasizes empowerment, trust, and employee development (Kopelman, et al., 2008).

Figure 8. McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y (adapted from Smart Group (2016))

Adair's action centered leadership model offers a comprehensive framework for understanding effective leadership within teams (please see Figure 9). It emphasizes the importance of balancing task, team, and individual needs to achieve organizational objectives. The theory focuses on the three core elements of leadership: achieving the task, building and maintaining the team, and developing and motivating individuals (Adair, 1973). Effective leaders know how to clarify objectives, allocate resources, and monitor progress to ensure the successful completion of tasks and goals.
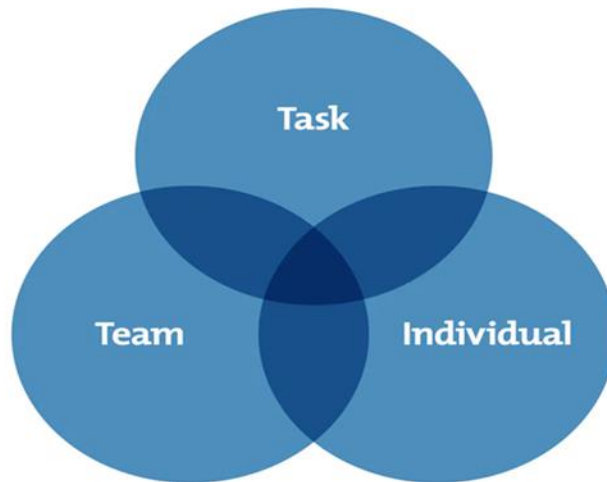

Figure 9. Adair's Action Centered Leadership Model

The theory notes that good leaders foster a supportive team environment characterized by trust, communication, collaboration, and shared accountability. Active leaders also develop and motivate individual team members through coaching, feedback, recognition, and opportunities for growth and development (Braun, et al., 2012). Adair (1973) posits that effective leadership involves balancing the needs of the task, team, and individual, while also providing direction, support, and inspiration to team members.

A Framework for Teaching Business Students Teamwork

Teaching teamwork is a multifaceted and dynamic process that requires careful planning, implementation, and assessment to effectively develop students' collaborative skills and competencies (Asencio, et al., 2023; Williams, et al., 2006; Zhao, et al., 2023). Many scholars address the importance of student active learning. The active learning methods include problem-based learning, team-based learning, and collaborative projects and are commonly used to engage students in hands-on, experiential learning experiences (Sezgin & Bektas, 2023; Wysocki, 2002).

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These approaches provide opportunities for students to work collaboratively, apply theoretical concepts in real-world contexts, and develop critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills (Sezgin & Bektas, 2023; Thompson & Ku, 2006; Zhao, et al., 2023). The framework for teaching business students teamwork is presented in Figure 10.

At the Beginning of the Semester
- Emphasis on the Importance of Teamwork Skills
- Teach Teamwork Theories
- Set Clear Teamwork Goals

During the Semester
- Monitor Team Performance
- Give Frequent Feedback

At the End of Semester
- Measure Teamwork Performance
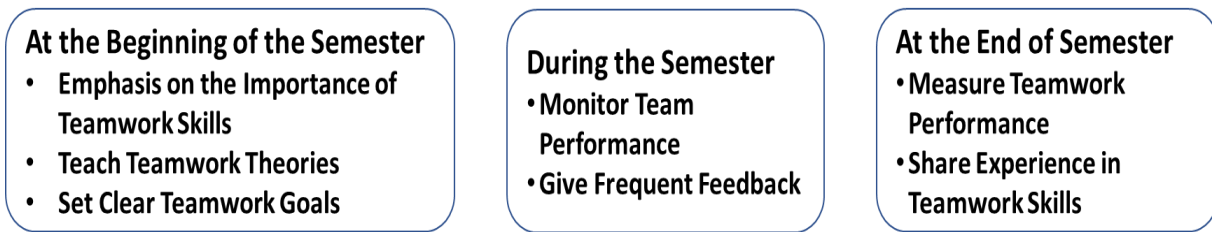- Share Experience in Teamwork Skills

Figure 10. A Framework for Teaching Business Student Teamwork

To teach students teamwork, it is important to familiarize students with different teamwork theories and engage them in interactive and meaningful ways that facilitate understanding and application of theoretical concepts (MaCaha, et al., 2015; Sezgin & Bektas, 2023). At the beginning of the semester, instructors can start by providing context for why teamwork is important in different settings, such as education and business. This helps students understand the impact of effective teamwork on achieving common goals, driving innovation, fostering creativity, and promoting positive relationships among team members. At the same time, setting team goals at the beginning of a collaborative project is crucial for establishing a clear direction, aligning team members' efforts, and motivating everyone toward a common purpose (Sezgin & Bektas, 2023; Zhao, et al., 2023). This involves defining the purpose, identifying specific and clear objectives, prioritizing goals, and assigning responsibility.

In active learning, assessment of student teamwork is integral to evaluating student learning and providing constructive feedback for improvement (Tannenbaum, et al., 2021; Volkov & Volkov, 2015; Zhao, et al., 2023). Assessment methods may include peer evaluations, self-assessments, team presentations, and reflective exercises. Feedback should be timely, frequent, specific, and actionable, focusing on both individual and team performance and highlighting strengths and areas for growth (Tannenbaum, et al., 2021; Viviers, 2016). It is recommended that instructors establish clear evaluation criteria, use a structured evaluation form, provide training, schedule regular evaluations, monitor progress, and reflect on the progress.

When applying active learning methods, students are encouraged to reflect on their teamwork experiences and engage in metacognitive processes to enhance their ability to understand, monitor, and regulate their collaborative behaviors (Zhao, et al., 2023). Reflection activities include debriefing sessions, journaling, group reflections, promoting self-awareness, critical thinking, and continuous improvement in teamwork skills (Volkov & Volkov, 2015; Viviers, 2016).

Instructors play a crucial role in modeling, facilitating, and assessing teamwork performance in the classroom. They serve as coaches, mentors, and facilitators, guiding students through the teamwork process, providing support and guidance, and fostering a positive and inclusive learning environment (Viviers, 2016). They should demonstrate a commitment to teamwork principles and values, promote equity and respect among team members, and serve as role models for collaborative behavior.

Conclusion

In conclusion, teamwork is very important in today's interconnected, fast-paced, and highly competitive business world. By working collaboratively within teams, individuals can leverage their diverse skills, perspectives, and experiences to meet complex challenges, make the right decisions, and achieve desired goals (Doukanari, et al., 2020). Moreover, teamwork promotes a culture of mutual respect, trust, and support, creating an environment where individuals feel valued, empowered, and motivated to contribute their best efforts (Volkov & Volkov, 2015; Viviers, 2016).

In addition to enhancing productivity and performance, teamwork also fosters personal and professional growth by promoting the development of essential skills such as communication, leadership, problem-solving, and conflict resolution (Tannenbaum, et al., 2021). Through collaboration, individuals have the opportunity to learn from one another, broaden their horizons, and expand their capabilities, ultimately becoming more adaptable, resilient, and effective contributors to their teams and organizations (Asencio, et al., 2023).

Effective teamwork teaching involves a combination of active learning pedagogies, structured group activities, thoughtful team formation, assessment and feedback mechanisms, promotion of reflection and metacognition, integration of technology, and supportive educator roles (Volkov & Volkov, 2015; Viviers, 2016; Zhao, et al., 2023). By implementing these strategies and best practices, universities can empower business students to develop the teamwork skills and competencies necessary for success in academic, professional, and personal contexts (Asencio, et al., 2023; Zhao, et al., 2023).

Finally, more research is needed on teamwork teaching to further advance our understanding of effective teaching strategies, assess their impact on student learning outcomes, and explore innovative approaches to promoting teamwork skills development. Future research could be conducted to provide valuable insights into the design, implementation, and evaluation of educational interventions aimed at developing students' collaborative skills and competencies. Through systematic inquiry and empirical investigation, we can advance our understanding of effective pedagogies, strategies, and best practices for teaching teamwork in diverse educational settings.

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