

HOW TO DRIVE INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVES TO ADAPT AND ALIGN IN SELF-MANAGING TEAM-BASED ORGANIZATIONS. AN ABDUCTIVE APPROACH

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Understanding how organizational design and structure can explain differences in individual initiative and learning has become a topic of growing interest, especially if self-managing team-based configurations are considered (Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Macy & Izumi, 1993). These new organizational forms have, in fact, promised to increase individual motivation, satisfaction and innovation performance (e.g., Cohen & Ledford, 1994; Cohen, Ledford, & Spreitzer, 1996; Cordery, Mueller, & Smith, 1991; Langfred, 2004).

Starting from the broad notion of organization context proposed by Ghoshal and Bartlett (1994) seen as engendering individual-level behaviors, this research aims to identify the micro-organizational elements that, within the self-managing team-based configurations, act together to influence individual behavior within teams. For this purpose, we discuss the components of the four core elements – discipline, trust, stretch and support – describing the organizational context of Ghoshal and Bartlett within self-managing team-based configurations. Specifically, we carried out a qualitative study to abductively identify which micro contextual elements drive an individual's choice to adapt and align. Given the changing authority structures, and ambiguous interdependence characterizing collaborations within teams and across teams, we combined our collected evidence with existing theory regarding the primacy of social informal networks in changing individual dispositions within self-managing team-based configurations

(Gibbons, 2004), and the main forms of relational processes that evolve through interactions between team members (e.g., Yukl, Gordon, & Taubner, 2002). Through an intuitive and interpretative process, relying on the interaction between Ghoshal and Bartlett's model and the interpretations of the collected evidence in light of social network theories, we identified the central micro-elements of the organizational context with the potential to influence individual initiative within self-managing team-based configurations.

In contrast to the founding research of Bower (1970), Burgelman (1983) and Ghoshal and Bartlett (1994), who described organizational context mainly through process variables that are influenced by changes in structure and systems (cf. Bower, 1970) or by an array of macro- and micro-level interventions initiated by managers at all levels of the organization (cf. Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1994), our analysis focused on the way the work environment is changed by informal interactions of individual events and actions. In fact, we argue that individual initiative to adapt is also determined by the relative position of an individual in the informal networks of contact and the type of interactions that exist within the organization. Therefore, we consider self-managing configurations rather than teams, as team members' movements in and out of groups constitute a key element of their self-management. In self-managing configurations, team members need to fight for informal dominance, or at least be active in the daily battle for survival since their formal positions do not give them security in these configurations (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011). As these configurations are more fluid than traditional organizational contexts, team members autonomously search for new equilibria even outside the team.

To understand the effect of the work environment on individual initiative within a self-managing configuration, we selected an industry with highly interconnected organizational actors working in self-managing configurations since their interconnections make motivation to action quite different from motivation to action in individualistic contexts (e.g., Kozlowski & Bell, 2003). A research design that includes the involvement of autonomous individuals who can self-set their own goals constitutes the best setting for investigating individual differences in goal choice (Locke et al., 1981). However, although individual initiative relates critically to the self-regulation of behavior (Button, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1996; DeShon & Gillespie, 2005), most studies investigating factors affecting goal orientation have used a research setting with assigned goals rather than self-set goals.

The existence of collaboration and knowledge exchanges among actors was another important pre-requisite for the selection of the field. Therefore, we chose a company where individuals, from different teams, assembled and dispersed in episodic events, as the

organizational knowledge base was not stored in an organizational repository but instead was part of its members' experiences and backgrounds. Our qualitative analysis was based on three main data sources, which are summarized in Table 1.

Data source	Type of data	Use in the analysis
Agile & lean-related documentation	Articles in national & international press Academic literature Conferences & seminars on agile & lean management	Understand Agile specificities Understand Agile implementation cases
Interviews	34 semi-structured interviews (see Table 2)	Investigate how interactions and learning dynamics were reinforced
Archival sources	Internal presentations and documents Project documents Product publications available on the intranet	Triangulate with data

Table 1. Qualitative data collection

First, we acquainted ourselves with the way the company was organized; its specificities; and its main organizational roles through process-related documentation, including internal presentations, project documentation, and some product internal publications either available on its intranet or accessible through its repositories. Second, we attended several conferences and seminars on agile and lean management since the company had recently begun to apply these new management approaches. Third, we conducted 34 individual interviews involving individuals in different organizational roles to investigate how interactions and learning dynamics were enforced. We also used past studies as input to triangulate the interview data. We interviewed team members and other individuals who served in other organizational roles in both new development and maintenance projects. Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of our informants. Following traditional methodologies for data collection (e.g., Lee, 1999), all interviews included at least two of the authors of this current study, enabling the triangulation of opinions (Patton, 2002). The interviews lasted from 60 minutes to two hours.

Round #	No. of interview	Roles	Timing
<i>1st round of interviews</i>	24	1 Head of the organization 3 Staff Members 10 Product Owners 10 Team Members	September-November 2016
<i>2nd round of interviews</i>	10	2 Staff Members 5 Product Owners 3 Team Members	January-February 2017

Table 2. Informants' characteristics

Anonymity was promised to all the respondents to create more favorable conditions for the data collection process (Siegel, Waldman, & Link, 2003). We recorded and transcribed all

the interviews. Data were analyzed following an iterative content-analysis process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles et al., 1994). After several interactions, a theoretical framework emerged from the evidence collected in subsequent interviews. It became clear that the (formal and informal) interlaced social networks that developed outside the teams reflected distinct interaction patterns: (1) task-oriented behaviors that were centered on reaching high-quality task outcomes, (2) change-oriented behaviors for which the fundamental objective was to trigger action to change the status quo, and (3) relations-oriented behaviors that aimed to increase the quality of relations. Inside the teams, however, interactions aimed to concentrate individual efforts on the accomplishment of both individual and collective tasks. In particular, due to the inherent and continuous need to balance between focusing on individual and team goals, the strong effect of team identification and self-efficacy was visible. In line with Ghoshal and Bartlett (1994), we organized the elements regulating the internal and external dynamics discussed above into the following four dimensions of organizational context, which are seen as theoretical second-order categories: (1) discipline, (2) stretch, (3) trust and (3) support. Table 3 reports the key components of the framework, with definitions and examples.

Component	Definition	Example Comment
<i>Discipline</i>		
Performance-feedback loops	Performance feedback refers to the measurement and feedback of job performance. A feedback loop is a reciprocal form of improving communication in the workplace, in which both parties must be fully engaged.	“Every day, in the morning, we run a daily stand-up meeting, to show the progress in the execution of our assigned tasks and to receive indication if there are some specific actions to address. [...]. Every two weeks, we have the grooming meeting where we received an explanation about the task to accomplish [...]. Then we have the demo meeting where we show the work done to our stakeholders and we know if we need to modify the software we produced.” “During the daily stand-up meetings, we try to understand if we can tackle the emerging problems internally within the team or if we need to ask for a help outside the teams [...]. At the end of grooming meeting, we decide what we can do within a specific time frame and, in case of high complex task, we decide if to go outside the team for a help or support [...]. During retrospective meeting, we ask ourselves if there had been inefficiencies to the way we worked as team or problems in the software product we worked on and, in case, we autonomously decide which changes to bring forwards in the next steps.”
Self-efficacy	Self-efficacy is an individual estimation of own capacity to achieve performance on a certain task.	“We have clear targets and key performance indicators, as soon as we see that, in term of performance, we are quite far from them, we start asking ourselves: why did we perform so badly this month? First, we go and analyse more in details the performance trends to see which specific key performance indicator could reveal us where the problem was. Secondly, we examine, one by one each specific customer support request to understand better the root cause of our problem and try to reflect to determine which action can be taken to further improve from our mistakes.”

<i>Stretch</i>		
Team identification	Team identification refer to the extent in which people perceive themselves as belonging to the same group (or groups), which entail also the affection and the self-esteem of individuals.	<p>“The organization pushes us to work on innovation, however we experimented many times some difficulty in arranging a meeting to discuss about innovation and learning.”</p> <p>“Team members consider innovation and learning quite far from the work they do on current products. I am not saying that they are not good in doing that. I mean that it is matter of team’s priorities.”</p> <p>“We, as team, must have the care of the customer. Being focused on the customer’s issues, I tend to consider anything else as stealing my time.”</p>
<i>Trust</i>		
Centrality of the individual in the friendship network	<p>The friendship network is individuals who are good friend of yours, someone you socialize with during your free time.</p> <p>Degree centrality of an individual refers to the number of edges attached to the individual.</p>	<p>“About the instruments that we use for sharing information, basically when we discover an article on a good practice or we find an interesting document coming, for example, from outside our company, we immediately share it via email: ehi, look at this interesting thing I found! And this is just thrown in the lake, like a stone, but it’s shared this way, most of the times.”</p>
<i>Support</i>		
Self-efficacy	Self-efficacy is an individual estimation of own capacity to achieve performance on a certain task.	<p>“Sometimes individuals within teams are a bit closed, and I have the possibility, instead, to look around and see with a broader view what it’s happening, I suggest connections, to encourage that they team up each other in order to solve problems or to improve.”</p>
Brokerage position of the individual in the advice network	<p>The advice network is individuals to whom you go for work-related advice.</p> <p>Individuals’ brokerage position (i.e., ego’s structural holes) is people connecting individuals who are themselves not connected to each other’s.</p>	<p>“We have appointed knowledge knights as experts for the implementation of specific software functionalities, and system cancelers as having a more holistic view about the entire solution.[...] we have defined these roles, we have described what they can do for the organization and then we have encouraged team members to use these people to secure product integrity and knowledge knight to properly support the evolution of the product.”</p>

Table 3. The emerging framework: components uncovered by the qualitative study

Results suggest that performance feedback loops, advice networks, team identification, and friendship networks are the dominant components of Ghoshal and Bartlett’s (1994) model related to discipline, support, stretch, and trust, respectively. In contrast to other existing theories, which are too restricted to accommodate the emerging organizational changes of the last few decades that have affected not only organizational forms but also structures, processes and people (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1993), Ghoshal and Bartlett’s (1994) model of organizational context, which was adopted in this study, allowed us to describe new organizational characteristics engendering individual-level behavior that results in initiative and learning. Through the flexibility offered by Ghoshal and Bartlett’s (1994) model and by relying on our qualitative evidence, we showed that in self-managing team-based organizations, organizational effectiveness in preparing the environment for individuals to learn mostly depends on the personal characteristics and perceived self-efficacy of individuals that lead them to have initiative and the factors of the social structure, especially the broker’s network of individuals, the existence of performance feedback loops occurring across the borders that exist

between individuals and teams and within teams, and the level of cohesion within groups as perceived through individual identification. More specifically, our results show the impact of the networks of autonomous individuals belonging to cohesive groups; these networks include other team members of other cohesive groups. In line with Simmel's (1955) idea of network circles, we conclude that individual orientation is a product of the unique intersection of network cycles. Thus, this paper proposes that social structures are likely to encourage goal orientation at three levels: membership in intra-organizational advice networks, involvement in exchange relationships based on the achievement of tasks and intra-team cohesion. By neglecting the environmental and institutional context of individual decisions to learn, previous research may have provided incomplete or misleading descriptions of behavior by focusing on the cross-level influence of individual differences and the team context.

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