Context Matters

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In their focal article, Tannenbaum, Mathieu, Salas, and Cohen (2012) raise a concern that there is a disconnect between what researchers are investigating with regard to group or team processes and what appears to be salient or important in light of the

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contemporary environment in which teams operate. In this regard, they highlight three significant themes that capture key features of this discrepancy: dynamic composition, technology and distance, and empowerment and delayering.

In support of their claims and to make their case more concrete, the authors offer no fewer than eight ''suggestions'' for new directions in team research for each of the three themes that they explore. Certainly, the lists of suggestions provided must be considered as illustrative. That is, it would be hard to make a case that their list summarizes all the implications that follow from their review. There would seem to be many more plausible ''emerging team-based work arrangements'' captured by the three themes than they can cover. Instead, it seems reasonable that we should see their list as a rhetorical device to motivate future research.

One way to think about the arguments put forth by Tannenbaum et al. is to build on the notion that often new ''knowledge'' is, in fact, ''the knowledge of differences'' (Runkel & McGrath, 1972). That is, if we observe that some phenomenon such as the composition of teams is increasingly dynamic in the world of work and we belief that it fundamentally changes how we must think about team work, it would then be important to set up conditions to empirically test this assumption.

Certainly, translating the observations made by the authors into new research designs is indeed one way to take up the challenge that they put out for us. Future researchers might thus create conditions, for example, of more or less stable team membership and then empirically examine the impact of member turnover or ''churn'' on one or more key dependent variables (e.g., team member participation, member influence, and conflict). But in the absence of a well-developed theory or conceptual framework guiding these future team studies (e.g., Busche & Chu, 2011), it is quite likely that even those investigators motivated by the focal article will choose to look at the dynamics of membership changes differently. The problem is that there are many ways to frame the notion of ''dynamic composition.'' For example, some authors might want to investigate the impact of the *cause* for membership change (e.g., predictable norms of rotation, termination of members based on poor performance, reassignments or retirements, new client demands calling for adding people, performance set backs, or even changes in performance requirements calling for different talents). Or one may focus on the immediate *consequences* of such changes (e.g., membership addition, membership reduction, resulting demographic differences, and resulting human capital differences). Still others might want to emphasize the *timing* of membership change (early or late in the team mission or life cycle). Clearly, more approaches regarding what to study in the area of dynamic membership can be envisioned (e.g., focus on key *processes* that are thought to be affected by team membership changes). This leads to another way to summarize my point: We must have some ideas regarding just what ''differences'' are likely to matter (to practice or theory) to craft such designs.

Note that I am not rejecting the potential value of conducting future research that directly examines the implications of one of the team developments put forth in this article. But I would like to offer an extension. I start with the observation that Tannenbaum et al. adopt the premise that what is happening in the world of work when it comes to team practices is important. That is to say, current team work arrangements should be factored into the conduct of both our basic and applied research (e.g., via research designs or conceptual models). Accordingly, I propose that as a needed step, team-oriented researchers in our field should adopt a more conscientious approach to document the *operational contexts* in which the teams that they study must perform.

Implementing this suggestion would require that investigators be much more careful in describing (or even measuring) the status of the teams in their study relative

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to the potentially important contextual variables identified in this article. For example, if the composition of a team in a particular study underway was stable or changed, the specifics would be made a matter of record. When team composition changes, investigators would specify such things as *how* (team got larger in response to client demands for embedding key people), *when* (at the middle of an assignment), and *why* (client concern for quality) this change came about (Johns, 2006).

Similarly, teams in the study would be characterized relative to working virtually. If working virtually, the reader would be able to know the nature of its ''virtuality'' and the circumstances accounting for its virtual status (its context). Along these lines, an executive that I know who works for the BP Corporation was in a position of authority to choose her team members and to determine that the members of her global project team would work virtually using phone, e-mail, and skype and not working from a company office. She also decided that in addition to using a variety of technologies to work together virtually, they would regularly meet face to face and on a rotating basis at a place where one of her team members lived and worked. In this example, we have an instance of a manager and her team working virtually but as a result of their being empowered to do so. The findings of a study interested in the interpersonal processes involved in virtual teaming that included her team along with others that came about in a more traditional manner (e.g., format prescribed by company policy) would be potentially misleading if such contextual information was missing. In contrast, future team researchers who capture such descriptive information in their methods section, irrespective of the main purpose of their study, would be in a better position to interpret their results. Moreover, having such team features documented and treating them as potential measured variables would allow the researcher to do additional analyses, which, if reported, may contribute to insights relative to the three problematics identified by Tannenbaum et al..

The need for better documentation of ''context'' is not unique to research on work groups or teams. In a definitive paper on context, Johns (2006) laments how often context is ignored or played down in the fields of organization behavior and human resources. Among other things, this limits our understandings of the true ''boundaries'' regarding our theories (e.g., the parameters outside of which our theory would no longer be valid) or limits to our generalizing to different sample or cases. Further, he argues, major differences in context may have their own direct and powerful effects on a phenomenon of interest. In fact, Johns argues that context plays such a major role in affecting ''opportunities'' and ''constraints'' on the behavior of people (and teams) that without careful documentation, reports of findings typically found in our journals are not particularly helpful to those required to make informed choices in practice (see also Bartunek & Rynes, 2010; Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007). Similarly, I argue (Klimoski, in press) that cumulative advances in leadership theory and practice also require such context information. For example, in a study of the effects of the ''composition'' of top management teams (TMTs), it would be very useful to know the amount of discretion the CEO has had in staffing his or her team. Acts of leadership, their nature and their impact, would certainly be affected. To illustrate, compare the case of a new leader coming in with low power to make changes and thus having to work with and through a large proportion of TMT members who were beholding to a previous CEO with one where the leader can build (compose) his or her own team (e.g., Galvin, Balkundi, & Waldman, 2010). In this example, the effects of demographic composition may well be modest relative to the effects of the legacy.

Having better documentation on key features of the context of the work groups and teams being investigated in future research would have other benefits. When it comes time to summarize what we know about a phenomenon (such as effective team leadership) using meta-analysis, the data

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would be there to do so in a more precise or efficient manner (Hunter & Schmidt, 1990). In this scenario, future researchers would be very systematic regarding the nature of the context of the teams being studied relative to (among other things) the three problematics highlighted in the focal article. Thus, investigators would document changes in team composition, the use of technology by team members to accomplish their mission, and the extent to which team members or leaders had power to self-manage. Were such a change in publication habits to be adopted, in the not too distant future, our field would be in a much better position to ascertain if, when, where, and how differences in the three critical team practices highlighted in the focal article actually do make a major difference on team processes and outcomes.

I do recognize that there are challenges to following up on my ideas. One might easily fall into the trap of assuming that everything outside the team would be considered ''context.'' Certainly one cannot measure and describe each and every aspect of a team's total environment in the method section.[1] However, in response I would suggest, that collectively, we in the field might agree to use what we already know regarding the parameters involved relative to the three team problematics described in the focal article. For example, there are reasonably well-described common variations in practice when it comes to virtual team arrangements (e.g., Malhotra, Majchrzak, & Rosen, 2007). As a starting point (and perhaps being encouraged by journal editors), investigators would characterize the context for the virtual teams in their sample using a list generated from such sources. Over a short period of time, our field might thus accumulate studies that report the kind of documentation that I advocate. Finally, such a list could be modified to include emerging features of virtual working arrangements as the world of work itself changes.

1. I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this point.

The developments highlighted in the focal article regarding the emerging features or ''ecology'' of contemporary work teams rings true. But the authors are not the first to point out that we are a field in transition (e.g., Busche & Chu, 2011; Cordery, Soo, Kirkman, Rosen, & Mathieu, 2009; Lipman-Blumen & Leavitt, 2009). Instead of stressing the differences among the work teams of the past, the present, and the future or merely advocating for ''different research,'' I feel that mine is a more pragmatic approach: Those investigating the dynamics of work groups and teams must do a better job in documenting context. In addition to being responsive to the call put forth in the article by Tannenbaum et al., a focus on better documentation would contribute to the accumulation of potentially useful knowledge in our field. Importantly, investigators would not (necessarily) have to transform their research agenda nor seek out new research sites. All that would be required is a sincere effort in capturing on paper the key features of the work team that have heretofore been assumed or ignored. Finally, better documentation would help us to go about addressing the question of if, when, where, how, and why such team-related differences actually make a difference for theory or for practice (Bartunek & Rynes, 2010).

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