Research *Will* Evolve, but We Must Do a Better Job of Translating What We Already Know

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The focal article authors question whether research and practice are evolving fast enough to reflect the changing nature of teams and the environments in which they operate (Tannenbaum, Mathieu, Salas, &

Cohen, 2012). Certainly, as the world in which we live continues to evolve, there will always be a place (and a need) for new research inquiries into team-related dynamics. However, I believe the more immediate concern to the functioning of traditional work organizations is translating what we already know about groups and teams into practical insights, tools, and resources that practitioners would do well to implement in their place of work.

For this commentary, I draw upon my somewhat unique experience of working for several years in a lab focused on teams research (and led by one of the focal authors) and then transitioning to my current role as an employee survey consultant in a large, global consulting firm. It's in my current role—where I've had the opportunity to observe up close the inner workings of nearly 50 traditional work organizations—that I quickly realized we have a lot of work to do when it comes to educating organizational leaders and program stakeholders on the value of focusing on teamwork.

Here's the bottom line: For those not deeply immersed in the research on teams, the science of team effectiveness is poorly translated and rarely understood. Consider our understanding of the science behind the task of team composition. For professional service organizations that must continually configure temporary project teams, the primary consideration is often simply availability. What does their workload look like and can they fit this project into their current schedule? Important considerations such as the resulting mix of knowledge, skills, interpersonal dynamics, team member familiarity, experience, and multiple team memberships are generally not considered. In other words, team composition decisions are more often driven by practical constraints (e.g., who has room to take on another project) rather than on an understanding of the science of team effectiveness. This is in line with the focal article authors' observation, ''Many teams are being formed quite rapidly, often without a great deal of forethought.'' In this, I couldn't

agree more. And here, it's not a question of evolving our research paradigm to meet changing team-related dynamics. It's all about translating and actually utilizing what we already know.

To be fair, I believe we've done a relatively good job in several areas. For example, the 100-year history of studying high-performance teams in manufacturing settings has clearly established the business case for applying best practices from the study of team dynamics. As a more recent example, cross-disciplinary teams of researchers and practitioners have been quite successful in providing summary reviews of the science of teams and team effectiveness principles for nursing and medical staff. In both these examples, researchers and practitioners have not only partnered well together, they've also published their work in outlets likely to be read by the target customers who are in the position of actually being able to implement that knowledge. Unfortunately, we've got a long way to go in professional, technical, information, and service-related environments when it comes to educating organizational decision makers regarding the wealth of knowledge we possess about managing work teams.

Why do we do a poor job of translating the science of team effectiveness to real-world solutions? I see at least three reasons. First, I believe we lack practical, user-friendly tools to assist organizations in getting the most out of their teams. It's no longer a question of whether the science can inform team effectiveness best practices. It can, and it does. The question is how we can make this information more accessible to organizational practitioners? Complicating this matter, most organizations lack the internal experts needed to stay up to date and translate the latest research on teams for organizational stakeholders. Many of those who study teams in graduate school either end up teaching or take a job where their primary focus lies somewhere other than team effectiveness. Regarding managers in general, most are not aware of the latest academic research

findings (e.g., Priem & Rosenstein, 2000). In the event they are aware and up-to-date on the latest findings, they are often too busy to put acquired knowledge into action, or they belong to organizations that place too little value on learning and change (e.g., Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). As a result, program stakeholders in organizations must often reach outside their organization to find the necessary expertise to guide team development interventions.

One promising solution is the recent collaboration between SIOP and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), which has three main goals: (a) make the science of industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology accessible to SHRM members, (b) guide SHRM members in evidence-based human resources (HR) practices, and (c) enhance the visibility of the profession in I–O psychology. Initiated under past President Gary Latham's presidency (and owned by SIOP's Professional Practice Committee), the collaboration has already published articles that focus on driving customer satisfaction, as well as HR's role in skill-based pay. We can only hope that one of the next collaboration topic areas will center on leveraging the science of team dynamics.

A second reason we do a poor job of translating the science of team effectiveness is that there is an assumption out there that teamwork is easy. After all, we're taught from an early age to cooperate, coordinate, and communicate with others as we tackle playground games and classroom learning exercises. Moreover, most of us are inundated with the spectacle of sport, and the way in which we follow sports makes us believe we inherently understand teamwork. The focal authors state, ''Teams have become so ubiquitous that many employees, and managers, take them for granted and assume that they will be effective.'' Again, we are in delightful agreement. I also agree that the term ''team'' has come to be used (inappropriately) in reference to many diverse forms of collectives. The result here is that we've oversimplified the science and have not done a good job of making a case for team effectiveness as it contributes to organizational effectiveness. One direct consequence of this oversimplification is that we haven't leveraged teamwork best practices in a way that makes them relevant to organizational leaders who hold the budgets for team training and development interventions. It's just not top of mind in the C-suite dialogue of most organizations. Research is relevant when it generates insights that business leaders find useful for understanding their own organizations better than they did before. One solution here is to publish concise, practical advice in outlets more commonly read by executives (e.g., *Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune*, *Forbes*, and *Harvard Business Review*). Of course, to be of maximum value, this advice must be bolstered by evidence that establishes the business case for team selection, development, performance management, or other interventions.

A third factor inhibiting the successful translation of research on teams into practical solutions for organizational decision makers is our incentive and reward systems, which are generally not set up to support collaboration between researchers and practitioners. Universities generally reward I–O psychologists for publishing in top-tier academic journals but not for publishing in journals and popular press outlets that practitioners actually read (e.g., Thayer, Wildman, & Salas, 2011). On the other end of the spectrum, practitioners are rarely rewarded at all for publishing—especially if that work involves the use of company time or other resources and the impact on the bottom line is unclear. Rewarding one behavior while hoping for something else is no way to facilitate collaboration between academic researchers and organizational practitioners.

In terms of a remedy, greater rewards should be bestowed on researchers studying teams who make it a habit to present the results and implications of their research at professional meetings and conferences that are well attended by practicing managers and industry journalists. As well,

the incentive structures for publishing in scientist-practitioner ''bridge'' journals should be much greater in both business schools and psychology departments. However, academic researchers who study teams cannot accomplish this alone; HR periodicals must be committed to work with academics to truly enable the effective translation of research findings. A greater willingness to publish practical, evidence-based research in outlets commonly read by HR professionals (e.g., *Human Resource Executive*, *Human Resource Management Journal*, and *HR Magazine*) will go a long way. Of note, Rynes, Colbert, and Brown (2002) found that *HR Magazine* is by far the most widely read periodical by HR practitioners.

Historically, too much of our published research in top-tier I–O and management journals is aimed primarily at academics rather than practitioners (e.g., Hambrick, 1994; Oviatt & Miller, 1989). The result is that only a minority of full-time team development practitioners find top-tier Academy of Management journals to be helpful (Offermann & Spiros, 2001). However, there is some evidence to suggest that we are making progress in this area, as the number of top-tier articles that offer explicit implications for practice has risen notably since the early 1990s (Bartunek & Rynes, 2010). Hopefully this is a trend that continues.

My sincerest hope is that we use this opportunity to continue our in-depth discussion on the ways in which we might better translate what we know. In short, we have to make it easier to understand and accessible for those without extensive education and training in this area. We need to make it relevant, make it visible, and expand collaboration with practicing managers to reduce the disconnect between the knowledge that academic researchers are producing and the knowledge that practitioners are consuming.

As team researchers and practitioners, we have an opportunity to create more effective teams. We have an opportunity to improve organizational functioning. And most importantly, we have an opportunity to improve the work lives of every man, woman, and work-eligible child on earth through more supportive organizing structures. However, to capitalize on these opportunities, we must continue to focus on educating practitioners and translating what we know. After all, the evolution of teamwork theories is of little value if we can't effectively translate that work to the wider audience.

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