# Putting the 'I' back in 'team': Harnessing team dynamics to maximise individual performance and behavioural change

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**Key digested message**

This paper challenges us as practitioners to reconsider the importance of taking a systems approach to development at work and provides a recent case study to illustrate the value and importance of incorporating both individual and team development to support learning and change at work.

## Harnessing team dynamics

AS BUSINESS PSYCHOLOGISTS within the UK, we are at risk of focusing too much on the individual and losing sight of the power of team dynamics on the performance of each individual. There is a strong theoretical and research basis for working with whole teams as well as individuals. Indeed, as individuals perform in increasingly complex and changing organisational contexts, it is more important than ever to harness the power of collaboration and teamwork. We have been able to demonstrate how this works in practice with a team at a UK national insurance business. We worked systemically with both individuals and the whole team to enable them to support one another through an organisational change.

## Our individualistic perspective

What do people want from the places they work? Increasingly we recognise that people want to be embraced, encouraged, valued, rewarded, supported and empowered for the true person they are and could be. Some might say that the 'millennial' generation, in particular, are fixated with 'self' and driven by 'what's in it for them'. It is risky, however, to stereotype the young as being more self-serving. There is in fact a consistent global trend for society as a whole towards greater individualism (e.g. Santos et al., 2017). Most societies, not only accept, but even encourage greater individualistic values and practices; for example, encouraging people to exercise greater personal choice or individual expression through their careers or relationships. There are a lot of benefits to this, not least of which is to create more inclusive cultures that value individual diversity.

In studies of Hofstede's cultural dimension of Individualism-Collectivism, the UK has one of the most individualistic cultures of all, in which people prioritise the interests of the individual over the interests of the group. It's not surprising then that business psychologists, HR practitioners and academics often focus on the individual too. There are, in fact, very few books and articles published on 'team performance' and 'team dynamics' compared to the vast number for example on 'leadership'. We lay the responsibility of teams at the feet of the individual leader. Even though in modern organisations we see a growth in the practice of distributed leadership where groups collectively are responsible for setting and implementing new directions, our cultural preference for the individual leaves us with a blind-spot to taking a more holistic or systemic perspective.

## Recognising the holistic nature of team performance

Fundamentally, we know that teams are important. However, we tend to reduce this to an individual level. We focus on equipping individuals with portable 'team skills'; for example, to support better collaboration. The assumption is that as long as individuals have team skills, then any team they find themselves in will function well by drawing on these skills. In reality, the most effective teams can accommodate people who are more collaborative and also people who are more independent or task-focused (e.g. Wagner et al., 2012). The issue is how they use the best of each individual for the range of activities required and pull these individuals together to function effectively as a whole. The team's success cannot simply be defined by the individual skills of its members.

## Connecting individual and team performance

Whether or not an individual has team skills, they are not able to perform effectively unless there are favourable interactions with the wider team. Bandura's model of Reciprocal Determinism (Bandura, 1978) highlights that group members are dynamically interdependent and, therefore, the group has collective responsibility for each individual's performance. Maximising performance requires not only an individual focus but also an holistic whole-team focus to optimise these interactions.

An excellent demonstration of the influence of group dynamics on individual performance can be seen in research on the impact of inclusive cultures. If members of a team exhibit micro-incivilities (such as interrupting, avoiding eye-contact and ignoring contributions) towards a particular individual in the team, perhaps because the individual belongs to a different ethnic group, this will interfere with that individual's ability to perform. Even the most extravert individual might shrink back from contributing ideas and energy to that team. In turn, their reticence could signal a lack of interest or capability and reinforce the group's reluctance to invite their contribution.
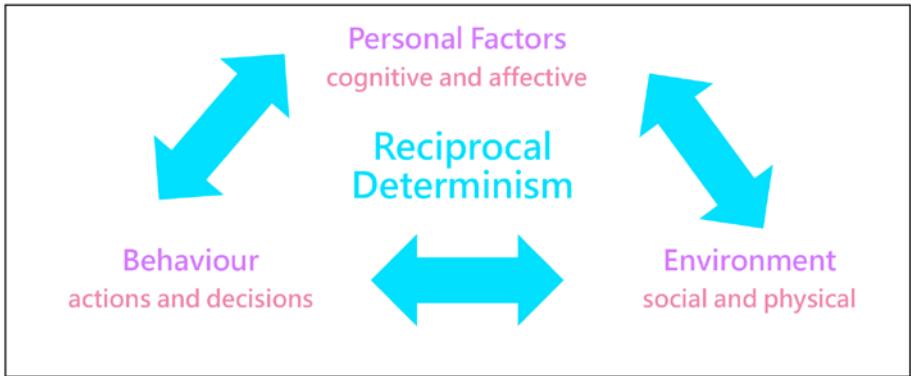
Source: Bandura 1997

The issue can too easily be seen as a performance problem for the individual rather than the result of interactions between the individual and the whole team dynamic. This situation cannot be put right by simply developing the individual. Rather, the whole team must embrace a more collective and inclusive mindset to enable that individual to contribute and thrive. The problem is best solved by a systems approach that addresses both the individual and collective perspectives.

### Using a systems approach in organisations

In other fields of psychology, a systems approach is commonplace. For example, when working with children or adolescents, a clinical psychologist is likely to concurrently work with the whole family. It is accepted that you cannot 'fix' a child and then return them to the system that, at least in part, contributed to their difficulties. There have been efforts to apply this thinking to organisations, such as Kott (2014) and Wilke et al. (2015). Practitioners can, however, struggle to see how this can be achieved in practical ways.

Just as modern families are not always stable nuclear structures, teams today are more fluid and complex than ever: teams can be ephemeral with constantly changing membership; an individual may well belong to more than one team at a time; or belong to a team within a team. These complexities make team development hard to handle and raise questions about the utility of investing in any one particular team. However, these modern organisational complexities also mean that now more than ever people need support in coming together as effective teams.

### A case study example

Pearn Kandola worked over a six-month period with a specialist training team within the Learning and Organisational Development Department of a national insurance business. The team was undergoing a realignment exercise which affected team structure, team culture and individual competency requirements. Building on initial successes within the team the programme adopted a strong positive approach that engaged all team members in understanding what they needed to do as individuals, as a team and with respect to one another to achieve further change. This created a strong sense of mutual accountability within the team with each person sharing responsibility for helping others to succeed. Culturally there was to be a marked shift towards greater cross-collaboration, understanding and support between all team members. Client feedback highlighted the

value of the approach both in terms of immediate impact and sustained change for the team.

The programme included a two-day event with one-to-one coaching both before and after the event. It culminated in a six-month follow up day where the whole team could review its progress and recommit to further individual and team development goals. Participants and stakeholders completed team inventories, personality questionnaires and 360-degree feedback to highlight individual and collective strengths and weaknesses. Then, as a team, they worked through a simulation of a training project that incorporated discussion, role-plays and a presentation. They received individual competency-based feedback but were also observed and given feedback collectively against a team performance framework. A range of powerful team exercises helped to integrate individual performance into an effective whole.

The role of coaches was critical in supporting individuals through the programme and exploring the interactions between team dynamics and individual effectiveness. Working together with the team over an extended period enabled coaches to help participants prepare, reflect and commit to action. It also helped the team to learn how to navigate natural changes in team membership over time.

## Future steps

Looking forward, as we seek to add value to organisations, business psychologists should embrace opportunities to broaden out their natural focus on individuals and take a more systemic approach. Doing so reflects a clearer appreciation of the impact group dynamics have on individual performance. It also gives appropriate emphasis to the more complex collaborative ways in which people work in modern organisations. With a multi-levelled systems approach, we might also support individuals and teams more effectively to become adaptive to change. Finally, although individualism helps us celebrate diversity, a stronger appreciation of collective processes is at the heart of how we ensure deeper inclusion.

## The author

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