

Team-Focused Leadership Education: How Emerging Insights Inform Our Practice

Abstract

The demand for high-quality team leadership education continues to increase. While many post-secondary leadership education programs have incorporated teamwork skills into their curriculum, there has been limited awareness of how team-focused leadership courses are being updated and adapted in response to emerging research and insights on team effectiveness. This panel session explores team-focused leadership education at multiple institutions and examines teamwork pedagogy in light of recent scholarship on best practices. Specifically, panelists will discuss the root causes of the persisting teamwork skills gap among college graduates, the benefits and pitfalls of utilizing team-based pedagogy, and course content changes from emerging theories, such as followership and shared leadership.

Session Learning/Participant Objectives

This session is designed to achieve the following objectives:

1. Highlight emerging research and frameworks leadership educators can use to guide team-focused leadership education; and
2. Explore leadership pedagogies applied in team leadership education at different universities.

Panelists

Panel Chair/Moderator:

- Eric Kaufman, PhD: Professor & Associate Department Head at Virginia Tech

Panelists:

- I. Dami Alegbeleye, PhD: Assistant Professor at University of Southern Maine
- D. Adam Cletzer, PhD: Assistant Professor at University of Missouri
- Ilya Gokhman, PhD: Lecturer at Oglethorpe University
- Laura Greenhaw, PhD: Assistant Professor at University of Florida

Introduction

Our society is increasingly reliant upon groups making quality decisions, whether that be a team of surgeons deciding between competing procedures, an executive board selecting a new strategic initiative, policymakers deciding on legislation to better society, or astronauts responding to an imminent threat to life (Gokhman, 2021). Furthermore, globalization and workplace trends in the 21st century require modern organizations to increasingly rely on dynamic teams (Davis et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2018). Consequently, organizations are prioritizing recruitment of college graduates with teamwork skills (Chowdhury & Murzi, 2020; Finley, 2021). According to the Job Outlook 2021 survey of the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2021), employers ranked the *ability to work in a team* as their most desired competency in college graduates. However, while teamwork skills are crucial to

today's organizations, there seems to be a skill gap, as many employers believe that college graduates are inadequately prepared to work effectively in teams. An employer survey conducted by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and Hanover Research revealed 62% of employers deem "work effectively in teams" as "very important," yet only 48% of those same employers report recent graduates are "very well prepared" (Finley, 2021). Similarly, an Association of Public & Land-grant Universities study recently identified teamwork skills among critical growth areas for college graduates based on a survey of employers, alumni, faculty, and students (Crawford & Fink, 2020). The teamwork skill gap underscores the need for team-focused leadership education that has the potential to impart students with team leadership skills.

Recognizing the need, leadership educators have regularly affirmed the importance of coursework or instruction on team leadership (Chowdhury & Murzi, 2019; de Cruz, 2019; Fair & Kondo, 2020; Morgan et al., 2013; Raymer et al., 2018; Seemiller, 2021). Indeed, among agricultural leadership education coursework, team and organizational leadership-focused courses account for 14% ($n=31$) of all leadership courses (Cletzer et al., 2022). Leadership education students also highly value instruction on developing teams (McKim & Velez, 2017; Polmear et al., 2020). However, research suggests potential benefit from further examining teamwork pedagogy across higher education institutions (Riebe et al., 2016).

Background

Although leadership educators are enthusiastic about their subject matter, opinion polls indicate younger generations are neither motivated nor equipped to lead effectively (Shollen & Gagnon 2019). Such apathy and insecurity contribute to the "leadership crisis" perceived by many (Shahid, 2015). Across all regions of the world, "collaboration" emerges as an essential quality for improved leadership (Gergen, 2015, p. 54). However, our success with improved collaboration and our overall potential may be limited by our views of the current situation and our perceptions of what is possible (Koonce, 2016). While leadership educators may be aware of evolving leadership discourses, adapting curricula and instructional behaviors to meet emerging needs is a constant challenge (Coleman et al., 2021). Furthermore, our colleagues in higher education are depending upon us to model the way. As Halonen and Dunn (2021) shared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "too many of us operate under the comfortable delusion that we are teaching teamwork skills merely by assigning group projects" (para. 1). In response, Halonen and Dunn offered the following advice:

- Link group projects to future success on the job,
- Improvise a model of a dysfunctional group,
- Have students practice how *not* to cooperate in a group,
- Guide their group discussions with a structured list of questions,
- Dedicate precious class time to group projects,
- Enlist students to provide feedback to one another,
- Ask groups to rotate the leadership role,
- Conduct equity reviews at the end of major projects, and
- Require self-assessment.

While these tips may be helpful, each strategy involves transaction costs (Riebe et al., 2016), and leadership educators may be held accountable to a more empirically-grounded approach to team-focused leadership education.

Collaboration can take many forms, but it is commonly experienced in a team setting, and challenges are placing increased attention on team collaboration quality (Boughzala & de Vreede, 2015; Nurius & Kemp, 2019). Research suggests teams need more “emergent interdependence”—the desire and expectation for synergistic collaboration (Caruso & Woolley, 2008, p. 245). Unfortunately, many conventional approaches to team leadership focus attention on individual leaders more than interdependence. Recent research on astronaut teams reveals teams perform better when leadership roles are distributed across the team, rather than being the responsibility of one or two team members. According to Gokhman (2021), “when teams did not distribute the roles, the roles were poorly performed or abandoned altogether by the single or few individuals expected to execute them” (para 5). Jiang et al. (2021) encourage us to consider more dynamic approaches to team leadership, noting that “leadership and followership may shift or coexist conditionally in the same person” (p. 11). Teamwork, especially in teams where leadership is distributed, involves the exchange of influences between team members who interchangeably act as leaders and followers (Alegbeleye & Kaufman, 2019; Carson et al., 2007; Epitropaki et al., 2017). Alegbeleye’s (2020) study on student project teams suggests that both leadership and followership are distributed in effective teams. Based on these insights, it may be useful for leadership educators to engage in what Adam Grant (2021) calls “collective rethinking.” By having more nuanced conversations, we can build a learning culture and fulfill the Association of Leadership Educators’ potential as a lifelong learning community.

Description

The panel session will begin with each panelist describing their recent work related to teamwork pedagogy and team-focused leadership education. Each panelist will have 7-10 minutes to highlight their respective contributions and framing:

- Dami Alegbeleye will begin by sharing key points from a forthcoming book chapter on “Leadership and Followership in Teams,” and he will share how related concepts are being integrated into the classes he is teaching at the University of Southern Maine.
- Adam Cletzer will highlight his approach to leadership education at the University of Missouri, including details of his class on “Team & Organizational Leadership,” as well as team-based learning in other classes.
- Ilya Gokhman will share insights from his research using hidden profiles in training four-person teams participating in NASA’s Human Exploration Research Analog (HERA) at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas.
- Laura Greenhaw will describe her approach to leadership education at the University of Florida, including details of her class on “Communication and Leadership in Groups and Teams,” which was recently highlighted in the *Journal of Leadership Education* (Coleman et al., 2021).

Following the introductory remarks (~30 minutes), the panel chair/moderator will facilitate dialogue among the panelists through a semi-structured approach. Questions for discussion during this 30-minute block of time include the following:

- As you think about the recent employer surveys (e.g., Crawford & Fink, 2020; Finley, 2021; NACE, 2020), why do you believe there is a persistent gap between employers' expectations and perceptions of graduates' readiness for working effectively in teams?
- Considering advice on “why and how to teach teamwork” documented in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Halonen & Dunn, 2021), what would you recommend to colleagues that assign group projects?
- In your experience, how are the transaction costs of teamwork pedagogy (Riebe et al., 2016) justified by the outcomes?
- How are the emerging insights on followership shaping your perspectives on teamwork and team-focused leadership education?

The final 30 minutes of the panel session will be more open for attention to questions from the audience. Session participants will each receive a notecard at the start of the session and be encouraged to write their questions on the notecard as ideas emerge. That way, a variety of questions will have been documented prior to this final block of the panel discussion.

Foreseeable Implications

Participants in this panel session will surface a variety of considerations for practitioners engaged in team-focused leadership education. As leadership educators embrace more attention to collaboration, there may be related shifts in signature pedagogies (Jenkins, 2012). While the primary focus within this panel will be on undergraduate courses, the insights may be useful for those developing graduate-level courses, since many universities currently lack team-focused leadership courses at the graduate level (see Muscato et al., 2021). The panel's insights may also be relevant for practitioners that facilitate professional learning outside of higher education, including those in organization development that are making use of learning teams (see Raelin, 2021).

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