

# Collective Staff Performance Management: Benefits, Drawbacks and Conditions

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## Abstract

Work being more and more complex and interdependent, organizations have started to use team goals and rewards since over 10 years. The collective staff performance management includes team goals (sometimes organizational goals), tasks to reach them, and financial or non-financial rewards. Research has studied the effect of team goals and incentives but mostly within laboratory contexts. There is a need for more empirical research on the subject in order to better understand the group dynamics that the collective management process fosters (Kleingeld, van Mierlo, & Arends, 2011), in particular over time. Research on group goals or incentives has observed team dynamics and their impact on performance or effectiveness but, to our knowledge, no study has yet asked the management process' actors what they think about it. This is why we interviewed 46 persons working in a communication company in Switzerland and who work with team goals and rewards. Our results confirm those from the literature but they also identify new consequences of the collective management process (team spirit, mutual motivation) as well as new conditions for its success (team agreement).

## The benefits of the collective staff performance management process

Team goals lead to a better group performance (Kleingeld, et al., 2011; Lam & Schaubroeck, 1999) while individual rewards improve quantity and team rewards work quality (Beersma, Homan, Van Kleef, & De Dreu, 2013). Collective staff performance management improves cooperation (Northen & Kurland, 2013), mutual learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1989), mutual support in particular from the stronger members (LePine, Hollenbeck, Ilgen, & Hedlund, 1997). It leads to more efforts from individuals due to group pressure, altruism, shared responsibility and need for social identify (Charness, Karni, & Levin, 2007; Sutter & Strassmair, 2009; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Wagner, 1995). As for any incentive, the collective management process makes individuals more committed to the goal and the organization (Azfar & Danninger, 2000; Wilson & Peel, 1991). It fosters trust, collaboration, cohesion and mutual aid (Beersma, et al., 2013; De Dreu, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 1989). It leads people take strategic decisions, that is to say in the interest not only of their own but that of the others in the group (Sutter & Strassmair, 2009). Overall, the management process fosters a group "chemistry" (trust, cooperation, communication, getting along well) which is hoped to be positive. This "chemistry" is also a condition for the management process to succeed, acting as a virtuous circle on the team dynamics.

## **The drawback of the collective staff performance management process**

The main drawback of the collective management process is the free-rider who does not participate and counts on the others to reach the common goal. This effect is stronger when the group is large as individuals do not see the sense of their contribution (Olson, 1965). It is also stronger when the individuals cannot collaborate with the others and when the task is difficult (Besedes, Deck, Quintanar, Sarangi, & Shor, 2012). Free-riders seem to be more often the strong elements of the group (Besedes, et al., 2012), in particular since it is unfair to them to be rewarded as the weaker ones (DeMatteo, Eby, & Sundstrom, 1998). Free-riders can be yet neutralised by the group (Crifo-Tillet, Diaye, & Greenan, 2002; Kandel & Lazear, 1992). The group suffers from the collective process if it cannot punish the free-riders (Casari & Plott, 2003; Fehr & Gächter, 2002).

The other drawback of the collective management process is dilution. Individuals are less visible and personally thanked for (Williams, Harkins, & Latané, 1981) and they are not personally responsible for the outcome (Karau & Williams, 1993; Latane, Williams, & Harkins, 1979), which make them reduce their efforts.

## **Conditions for the collective staff performance management process to work**

To be successful, the collective management process needs to be congruent between the tasks, the goals and the rewards (Wageman, 1995). In other works, interdependent goals must be linked to interdependent tasks and rewards. Also, there should be a mix of individual and collective rewards in order to capitalise on both competition and cooperation (Lawler, 1992). The rewards should be interesting enough for the group members and linear, that is to say that it should exceed 100% when the group outperforms (DeMatteo, et al., 1998).

The group should not be too large, otherwise individuals are less motivated to participate (Vroom, 1964). Conflicts should be limited as they negatively impact group performance (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004; Labianca & Brass, 2006). The group members should know and trust each other (Costa, 2003; Erdem & Ozen, 2003; Mach, Dolan, & Tzafirir, 2010; Politis, 2003). Without cooperation and behaviour norms, the new group is less efficient (Northen & Kurland, 2013). Group cohesion (interpersonal attraction, task commitment, group pride) also improves performance (Davis, 1969; Gully, Devine, & Whitney, 1995). Group and organization identification improves commitment and OCBs (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006) and as a consequence group performance (Van Knippenberg, 2014), if individuals are conscious that they belong to a group, which the collective performance management systems fosters. The success of the management process depends on the manager's abilities to set and control objectives and to have an appropriate leadership style (Callow, Smith, Hardy, Arthur, & Hardy, 2009; Sauer, 2011). Finally, it depends on the organizational values and culture, which may be individualistic or collectivist (Kirkman & Shapiro, 1997).

In light of the above, there seems to be many conditions for the collective management process to work, but it not clear whether these are conditions or mediators of the collective management process – team performance / dynamics relation. In other terms, can the collective process work without them or not? Is it possible to implement it when there is zero cohesion or identification for instance? How do individuals change their behaviours when working collectively? Do they change the group? How can organizations limit individuals' tendency not to participate to the collective good (Olson, 1965)? When do they

cooperate or compete (Deutsch, 1949)? In order to answer these questions and to better understand what the process brings to the organisation, we interviewed 46 persons who experience it.

The aim of this paper is to provide a listing of the benefits, drawbacks and conditions of the collective process in order to compare our findings with the literature. A second paper on the causes of the respondent's views (individual and team characteristics) will be published later.

## **Methodology**

To identify new elements, we opted for a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews discussing the benefits, drawbacks and conditions of the collective management process. Question on the individuals' personal data (age, sex, nationality, job, job tenure, identification to the group and organization) were also asked. The interview approach seemed to be appropriate for the topic as people did not seem to understand it easily. Clarifications on what the collective management process is were often needed so that we could collect useful answers. The individual interviews were all around 45 minutes long. We interviewed 5 persons in 3 shops, and 5 persons in 5 call centre teams. We also interviewed their managers and HR in order to understand the context.

Interview data were analyzed with NVivo software. We performed an interpretive content analysis, which allows taking into account not only denotative but also connotative meaning (Ahuvia, 2001). For example, for the conditions of a successful process we didn't code only the answers to the corresponding question but also any comment describing hypothetical or real, past or present situations as well as their positive or negative consequences in terms of motivation or performance in the team. The typical statement begins with words like "if", "provided that", "when" or "it needs".

We adopted an inductive approach inspired by the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Responses concerning the benefits, drawbacks and conditions were coded without theoretical presuppositions by a member of the research team in as many categories as needed. Then, two researchers reviewed the categories thus created – getting back to the original data when needed - until they began to identify recurring themes and to see general categories emerging from the data. For the sake of validity, the same two members of the research team proceeded separately to the grouping into larger categories. Finally, divergent results were discussed until reaching consensus.

### **The AA company**

AA is a large international communication company which has been active in Switzerland for over 10 years. AA works with call centres and shops in order to sell its products and services. It is a young and dynamic company with a rather young workforce. Shops are composed of teams of 5 while call centres are composed of teams of 15. Shops are usually based in the city centres while the call centre is located outside a little town. Call centre staff work in large open spaces with music and a rather relaxed atmosphere. This being said, work in the call centre is rather stressful due to the client's complaints, performance statistics imposed on the staff (no more than 3 minutes with one client, client satisfaction must reach a fixed amount, number of new clients as well, changing every month, real-time performance statistics appears on screens). Work in the shops is more relaxed as individuals have more control on the clients since they face them, even if performance objectives are

demanding (number of new clients per month, number of products sold, changing every month). AA has implemented its collective staff management process 2 years before our interviews. The management process consists in team objectives and rewards, and of individual ones, each of them counting for 50% in the overall appraisal. The team reward is distributed every 3 months and may amount to half a monthly salary. Individual appraisal does not lead to a bonus but to development programs.

## Results

**Table 1: Benefits and drawbacks of the collective staff performance management process**

Benefits	N=46	Drawbacks	N=46
1. Team spirit	20	12. Free-rider	29
2. Mutual aid	19	13. Top performers are penalised	12
3. Sharing competencies	15	14. Weak members bring down team performance	6
4. Mutual motivation	13	15. Weak members are excluded	5
5. Group pressure	12	16. Group pressure	2
6. More task commitment and participation	12	17. Lack of individual recognition and demotivation	1
7. Less top-down pressure	12		
8. Competition between teams	11		
9. Fairness, justice	9		
10. Service quality	5		
11. Easier work for the manager	4		

Among the most cited benefits deriving from the collective staff performance management there are the strengthening of team spirit (improved group agreement, cohesion and atmosphere; *Table 1, no. 1*), of mutual aid (professional and moral support; *no. 2*) and of competencies (knowledge, skills) sharing (*no. 3*). This transfer of information and knowledge within the group fosters mutual learning and benefits particularly the weak members of the team. With a collective process, staff members are also more committed to their work. They show more interest in the company results, more proactivity, identify with the goals and feel empowered (*no. 6*).

This increasing commitment is probably due to some group effect. Staff members encourage each other (*no. 4*), or even put pressure on their co-workers in a direct (injunctions, calls to order) or indirect way (moral obligation to the others) (*no. 5*). Some respondents consider group pressure as a drawback (*no. 16*) but the vast majority thinks it's a benefit (*no. 4*), this last result appearing as counter-intuitive in the first place. In fact, it is especially the team leaders who valued group pressure since this kind of self-management by the staff makes their work as managers easier. This aspect is precisely emphasized in category no. 11. As for the decreasing top-down pressure coming from the management, this positive consequence of the collective process is praised particularly in the shops (*no. 7*). Collective remuneration replacing individual commission on sales, there is less pressure for "raking it in" or at least this pressure is better distributed among the salesmen.

Furthermore, intergroup contests are often mentioned as a benefit. Competition reinforces group identification and cohesion and maintains motivation, though some

respondents regret that its effects vanish as soon as the contest is over (*no. 8*). Finally, 9 respondents appreciate the fairness of the system (« everybody gets the same reward»; *no. 9*).

Concerning the drawbacks of the collective process, the focus is mainly on the “free-rider” problem (*Table 1; no. 12*). A free-rider’s attitude differs from a weak member’s one (*nos. 14 & 15*) since the former doesn’t want to play his part in the collective effort while the latter would like to, but can’t because of lack of competences. In our survey responses, the low-performers are more often pictured as free-riders than as weak members.

Some take the view of those supposed to be penalized by the collective system, namely the top performers (*no. 13*). From this perspective, those who work better than the others are considered punished. Their bonus decreases, they work for the others for an equal pay and are not duly recognized for their contribution. This situation results in frustration, loss of commitment and the risk of a race to the bottom for the company. Others focus on the penalization of the team in general, of themselves or of a non-specific person by the use of the indefinite pronoun *on* (“we”, “one”) in French (*nos. 14 & 17*). Finally, a third category of respondents takes the side of the weakest (“exclusion”; *no. 15*).

### **Conditions for a successful collective staff performance management**

***Table 2: Conditions for a successful collective staff performance management***

<b>Conditions</b>	<b>N=46</b>
1. Unified team	25
2. Good manager	21
3. Good communication	13
4. Reliable performance appraisal and follow-up of performance	10
5. Motivated team	9
6. Valuing individual performance as well	8
7. Common vision, going in the same direction	7
8. Inter-teams competitions	7
9. Similar competencies and values in the team	6
10. Respect, open-mindedness, listening skills	6
11. Coaching the weak members and mutual aid	6
12. Adhesion from all to the objectives	5

It can be noted that some topics are found to be similar in the conditions and the benefits of the collective process. Thus, a unified team is viewed as a prerequisite for the collective system to work properly (*Table 2; no. 1*) and at the same time, as an advantage of the latter (*Table 1; no. 1*). The same applies to mutual aid (*Table 2; no. 11* and *Table 1; no. 2*). In our opinion, this finding shows a retroactive effect of the collective process: a cohesive team and a spirit of mutual support are necessary for the smooth functioning of the system, and the latter in turn fosters more cohesion and mutual aid. We can thus speak about the “virtuous circle” of the collective process.

In order for the system to be successful, staff members must be motivated (*no. 5*), go “in the same direction” (*no. 7*), respect each other, be open-minded and good listeners (*no. 10*). Communication is essential both within the team and with the management (*no. 3*). Lastly, the team must be homogeneous in terms of competences and values (*no. 9*).

The role of the manager is also important (*no. 2*). Manager advises, supports, motivates and if necessary trains team members. She supervises them, get them back on the straight and narrow and control the individual performances, particularly among the low-performers. He congratulates, promotes and offers career prospects to those who are doing good work.

As for the inter-group contests, they are viewed by some employees at AA as a condition rather than as a benefit of the collective process (*Table 2; no. 8*). However, the arguments are similar: contests are necessary as they maintain motivation and cohesion in the team.

Finally, some respondents underline the need to continue considering and valuing individual performance, showing therefore their preference for a hybrid if not an individual system (*no. 6*).

## Discussion

The collective performance management process fosters team spirit, a benefit that has not yet been identified in the literature, perhaps as it is difficult to observe. Some authors however identified team cohesion, trust or collaboration as benefits (Beersma, et al., 2013; De Dreu, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 1989). The management process pushes individuals act together for a common result, which fosters ties between them. It develops sense for belonging. The management process ties individuals together and capitalises on their complementary strengths. People help each other, which is part of cooperation (Northen & Kurland, 2013). They share their competencies (LePine, et al., 1997). The process sets information sharing. In our knowledge based economy, the management process is thus a powerful human resources management tool.

The collective management process makes individuals more committed to their work, which work incentives are done for (Locke & Latham, 1990). It implies that individuals motivate each other, a benefit not yet much identified in literature. The process ensures a group auto-control for a constant motivation level. When some members are less motivated, the others push them up. This benefit is also an important one for the organisation.

Group pressure to act (Sutter & Strassmair, 2009) is seen as a benefit by the managers. The management process facilitates their work as the group manages its work in full autonomy. As such, it is an interesting tool. Inter-teams competition for its part seems to be well appreciated. It fosters sense of belonging to the team *against* the others and pushes for action, due to solidarity with the others. Our findings also show that equity and justice is not so often cited as a benefit. Need for equity would not be that strong in organisations? Or, does the need less appears when individuals feel that their employment conditions are satisfactory? Our findings also show that the process reduces pressure on the individuals as they are not personally in charge. As a result, less stress leads to more work quality.

The drawbacks of the collective management process we identify confirm literature. The main danger is the free-rider (Olson, 1965) who benefits from the others and demotivates them. Also, the management process penalises the stronger ones in the group as their reward is reduced (DeMatteo, et al., 1998) and their participation less visible (Williams, et al., 1981). The management process may push talents to leave the organisation and individuals to do

less. It is for that reason that a hybrid management process seems to be the best one. The question remains to know what balance between individual and collective incentives and objectives to choose. It is probable that the balance is contingent on the profession, salary practices and organisational culture. Our findings show that organizations opting for a pure collective management process risk to reduce their overall performance level.

The purpose of this paper is also to report on the conditions for the management process to work, given that few studies have looked into this question from a qualitative perspective. Our findings show that a solid team, where individual agree, cooperate and communicate is a main condition (Beersma, et al., 2013). This condition is yet slightly different from team cohesion (Davis, 1969; Gully, et al., 1995) as group pride has not been mentioned by our respondents. Group pride may not be required for the management process to work. Team agreement make people perform and stay in their position. Getting along with the others seems to be a central element for the collective management process to succeed. Although this condition is related to group dynamics, organisations may manage to influence it, focusing their recruitment process on competencies related to team interpersonal attraction (e.g. team spirit, collaboration and communication skills, no individualism, extraversion, etc.).

Team agreement/getting along with the others fosters communication, another condition that we find. For the management process to work, group members must communicate. The question remains whether team agreement fosters communication or whether it is the reverse. It would be interesting to observe *in situ* how teams that are forced to communicate develop interpersonal attraction and under which circumstances. Furthermore, it would be interesting to observe which communication process takes place when group members go along well and which one takes place when they do not. Our finding show that team agreement (sealed team) seems to be the most important condition for the management process to work, which may mean that it is the starting cause.

We note that trust and knowledge of each other (Erdem & Ozen, 2003; Politis, 2003) do not come out as conditions. Nor do group or organization identification (Van Knippenberg, 2014). Without saying that these elements do not matter, our findings show that they are not the most important ones, or that they result from team agreement, the first condition for the success of the management process.

Manager's role is also crucial. The manager accompanies, recalibrates the less performing members, recognises and rewards the top performers (Hirak, Peng, Carmeli, & Schaubroeck, 2012) and gives trust (Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011). Even in a collective management process, he/she supervises individual performances. The manager's role is to manage the individual level in order to ensure the success of the collective one. His/her style (Callow, et al., 2009) does not seem to matter much from our findings. His/her presence and ability to guide seems to count before all.

Finally, to be successful, the management process needs to include objectives and rewards both at individual and collective levels (Lawler, 1992). Hybrid systems enable to sanction the free- riders and to reward good performers. AA actually uses such a system.

## Conclusion

The collective management process pushes individuals to have common interests. It fosters team spirit. Team spirit takes place if individuals go along well initially, and the latter further develops thanks to the collective management process, which acts as a virtuous circle. The question remains what to do in order for individuals to go along well. Team agreement is a complex process which depends on the group members' characteristics and the group dynamics. Our results show that team agreement is a main condition for the collective management process to succeed. Team agreement is defined differently according to the respondents (sealed team, good ambiance, no competition, no individualism). Given its importance for the collective management process, it would be interesting to better understand what it means within the work context. A definition might be useful. Team agreement and communication are the main conditions for the management process to foster cooperation, mutual aid and information sharing.

. Managers seem to play an important role in order to monitor individuals, but in the same time, the management process seem to push them motivate each other in full autonomy. The manager would therefore only need to focus on task monitoring, motivation being self-managed by the teams. If this is the case, the management process is quite an interesting tool for human resources management.

Collective staff performance management leads to numerous benefits but it relies on a basis that is difficult to ensure and manage (team agreement / get along with the others). We will go on with our analysis in order to understand when team agreement fosters, and when it does not. We will also study whether the management process fosters team agreement or whether the latter is an absolute pre-condition.

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