



Commentary

Should there be a romance between teams and groups?

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The paper on romance of teams provides a useful and coherent overview of the dilemma presently facing team researchers and practitioners. Teams are popular in organizations and are positively perceived by their members and 'outsiders', but objective evidence does not support such a positive bias. The authors take a clear stance against the invulnerable image of superiority that teams seem to have. To make us all feel a bit better about the apparent societal stupidity of this state of affairs, Allen and Hecht (2004) come up with a list of justifications for keeping teams around. These all seem very reasonable and are consistent with others who have made similar points about the use of groups or teams in organizations (e.g., Furnham, 2000; Hackman, 1998).

We find ourselves in general agreement with their perception of the field—the lack of strong evidence for the effectiveness of teams, the pitfalls of using teams, the potential non-performance benefits of teams, and the need for more research. A parallel perspective comes from the work on group brainstorming (Paulus, Dugosh, Dzindolet, Coskun, & Putman, 2002). In this area of group research, the common finding is that groups do not perform better—they even do worse—than comparison groups of individual brainstormers. Even though face-to-face brainstorming has been shown to be an ineffective procedure in comparison with individual ideation baselines, it continues to be a very common practice in organizations. Some scholars have justified this by pointing out all of the other benefits of group ideation compared with individual ideation, such as commitment to the decision, collective memory, impressing clients, and enjoyment (Furnham, 2000; Sutton & Hargadon, 1996). We think such a broad approach to evaluating the benefits of teams or groups in organizations as suggested by these scholars and by Allen and Hecht makes sense. However, for the sake of inducing a more elaborate perspective about this topic, we

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would like to consider some additional alternatives. In doing so, we will contrast the literatures on 'groups' and 'teams'.

Most theoretically based research on groups is performed within controlled laboratory settings using tasks and contexts that may have little 'real-world' flavour. The groups literature constitutes the core of what is covered in psychology texts on group processes (e.g., Baron & Kerr, 2003) and in most social psychology textbooks. Much of the research on teamwork is done in field settings with groups that work together for extended periods of time, although there are studies of ad hoc groups performing tasks in laboratory settings over a limited period of time that use the term team in their title. The teams literature is typically not covered in the groups chapters of psychology textbooks, and the groups literature typically receives only cursory coverage in organizational texts. We will consider various perspectives on these two distinct but related areas of research.

Alternative 1: Groups and teams are both bad apples and not very romantic.

Teams and groups may both have very ineffective ways of accomplishing most tasks that could be done without collaboration. They may be a tremendous waste of time and resources in many organizations. It would be fair to say that much of the groups literature has exposed the demerits of doing work in groups. Groups often loaf unless there are some salient external or internal incentives for not doing so (Karau & Williams, 1993; Shepperd, 1993). Groups tend to focus on common or shared information during discussion, rather than unique or unshared information (Stasser & Birchmeier, 2003; Wittenbaum & Park, 2001). Groups tend to become more extreme or polarized when they share preferences (Brauer & Judd, 1996). Groups may feel a pressure towards consensus and hence use bad decision practices (Janis & Mann, 1977). Groups tend to be influenced by the majority perspective in groups (Wood, Lundgren, Ouellette, Busceme, & Blackstone, 1994). As discussed earlier, when groups brainstorm in a conventional face-to-face format, they generate fewer ideas than do comparison 'groups' of individual brainstormers (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987). Ironically, interactive group members tend to rate their performance more favourably than do individual brainstormers (the illusion of group productivity; Paulus, Dzindolet, Poletes, & Camacho, 1993; Paulus, Larey, & Ortega, 1995). Some years ago, it was suggested that 'we could do better without groups' (Buys, 1978). A casual review of the groups literature would probably still support such a simplistic view (for an exception, see Laughlin, Bonner, & Miner, 2002). Thus, based on this state of affairs and the equivocal nature of support for the effectiveness of teams, one might suggest that organizations could do better without groups and teams, especially considering the cost of training and maintaining them. This is the perspective that is implied by the Allen and Hecht paper.

Alternative 2: Groups are bad and teams are good—they should not associate with one another.

Probably the most consistent perspective that one would find in the textbooks is that groups are generally bad, and teams are good. It is also consistent with the contrast between the empirical literature on groups and the popular perspective on teams promoted by popular press authors (Kayser, 1994). Does this imply that the literature on groups may simply not be generalizable to organizational settings (e.g., McGrath, 1997)? There is at least some reason to believe that findings from group research cannot automatically be translated to team settings. Whereas most groups

research is done in very controlled settings with ad hoc groups, many team studies are done in real-world settings with groups that have some ongoing connections and functions. Teams that are trained together (Moreland *et al.*, 1996), have some degree of autonomy (Amabile, 1983), and have diverse skills and experience (Dunbar, 1997) may function quite well, as suggested by Allen and Hecht.

Although there is an element of truth to the above perspective, careful reviews of the applicability of laboratory research suggest that it may have much more generality than is often assumed (Anderson, Lindsay, & Bushman, 1999; Mullen, Driskell, & Salas, 1998). Moreover, a survey of the groups and teams literatures will reveal that we may be looking at very similar creatures (Paulus, Nakui, & Putman, *in press*). For example, both literatures have shown the influence of member characteristics, norms, goals, training, facilitators, diversity, and psychological safety. Even though they have been going their separate ways in terms of research traditions, disciplinary focus, and journals, teams and groups are really just the same thing in different forms—they consist of people working together on some common goal. Even if we want to continue to believe that groups and teams may lead to different outcomes with respect to the value of having individuals work together towards a specific goal, Allen and Hecht have demonstrated that the literature on teamwork is thus far also not very compelling about the efficacy of teams.

Alternative 3: Groups and teams just need a little tender love and care to bring out the best in them.

The literature on groups and teams is filled with suggestions for enhancing group and team work. Most of the bad effects of groups can be counteracted by using appropriate techniques, training, support system, coaching, and organizational support (Hackman, 1998; Paulus & Nijstad, 2003). While there is certainly evidence of the benefits of such procedures from controlled research and expert experiences, it is a little premature to suggest that such approaches can easily overcome the problems that typify groups and teams. In order to be both happy and creative, groups need to build a reasonable level of trust, to establish a safe environment and to create a common identity. In order to attain the benefits of group interaction, to reach creativity and innovation, groups need to use the different expertises and insights from group members. This requires a continuous switch among group members between a focus on what joins them and a focus on what makes them unique. If groups fail to reach a reasonable level of trust and safety, this means a high likelihood of emotional conflict. If groups are successful in reaching a state of trust but do not explore the different insights of group members, 'groupthink' may result in too much comfort at the expense of creativity and innovation. It is the balance of both foci that makes teams work.

Teams may be able to learn to be more effective as a result of training. Although there is good evidence for the benefit of team training (Cannon-Bowers & Salas, 1998), few studies of group training exist. Moreover, few studies have systematically compared trained teams or groups with similar training programs for individuals. This of course is a moot point for tasks that require group or team work but is quite relevant for 'optional' group or team work. We have found that most procedures we have used to enhance group brainstorming also help individual brainstormers to a similar or greater extent (Paulus & Brown, 2003; Brown & Paulus, 2002). So, we typically find that the productivity gap between groups and teams is maintained between trained groups and individuals. So yes, if we have to use teams, we should train and support them appropriately. However, if they are not needed, we may be much better off spending our training resources on individuals.

Alternative 4: Group and team researchers have not reached the altar yet.

We think that Allen and Hecht are right that the value of teams should not be derived from the romance that surrounds it. Yet, is it not a bit too early to conclude that there is no productivity gain in organizing work in teams? Both laboratory and field research are slowly moving in the direction of discovering what may eventually prove to be the antecedents of effective group work. The growing amount of work on group diversity has given an important impulse to this field. Nevertheless, many questions are still unanswered, and much work needs to be done. Moreover, there obviously needs to be much more collaborative teamwork between teams and groups researchers. Until now, the scholars in the team and the group traditions have tended to ignore each other intellectually. This is unfortunate, because these two traditions have much to offer one another. Study of longer-term teams provides important insights into the potential of groups in realistic settings and their difficulties. Research on laboratory groups provides much useful information on relevant theoretical processes and techniques that might be used to enhance teamwork. Group research can be seen as a laboratory for developing and assessing team training and enhancement techniques in an efficient and low-cost manner before trying them out in real-world settings. For example, we have found that many of the techniques that are effective in enhancing group brainstorming are in fact being used by practitioners (Paulus *et al.*, in press).

However, even if we could ignite a romantic flame between these two sets of research traditions, there is still one major roadblock to a happy, long-lasting marriage. For some reason, there seems to be little organizational and governmental support for really high-calibre research on groups and teams in realistic settings. By high-calibre research, we mean definitive research that involves the use of controls, manipulations, and detailed assessments of processes. Organizations seem more than willing to take on the latest fad, no matter how costly, but they seem unwilling to invest in good research that could pay major dividends. Organizations tend to be focused on the next-quarter financial bottom line, and there seems to be little support for programs of research that would help the corporation (and many other organizations) in the future. In the USA, and perhaps elsewhere, government funding organizations seem to have little appetite for supporting research that is perceived as supporting private sector interests. The military has had some interest in supporting team or group research, but much of this research recently has focused on ad hoc teams working together on simulated tasks of military interest (e.g., Ellis, *et al.*, 2003). For this 'heavenly' marriage between groups and teams to work, it needs some support by earthly institutions. Another factor that limits the prospects of this love match is the fact that such research is very costly in terms of time and resources. Doing research on groups and extensive coding of interactions are recipes for not getting tenure or having a slow career. So, the couple will have to figure out some ways to make really good research academically feasible. Emerging technologies of data acquisition, coding, and analysis provide hope that, in the near future, this could become a very feasible and intellectually exciting field for methodologically sophisticated scholars.

It would be nice if we were able to have a reality show on which we could see which of these matches would win out. Since that is not feasible, we will have to wait for reality to take its course. We could also have a vote by experts as to their prediction. It would be interesting to compare the predictions of teams and groups researchers. Our own prediction is that a happy marriage between group and team researchers is possible but will take a lot of organizational support. Given the selfish

nature of the business world, their aversion to taking a broad perspective not related to their bottom line, their addiction to 'gurus' of the month, and their lack of patience for the slow process of science, we are not optimistic that this will be an easy process. However, with the support of some enlightened corporations and an enlightened funding establishment, some real progress could be made to make a romantic dream a reality.

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