HOLDING THE HOUSE OF CARDS TOGETHER: POSSIBLE PITFALLS WITH SELF-ORGANIZING TEAMS IN ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract: *Self-organizing teams are becoming increasingly popular in recent years, especially in the most advanced industries, such as in software development companies and other organizations within the tech industry. There is an increased interest of researchers and academics, and so far, numerous positive effects of self-organizing teams have been identified and presented by various authors. Fragility of systems with self-organizing teams are not yet fully explored nor specifically addressed in the literature. Issues and challenges do appear sporadically, disconnectedly scattered across various papers that predominantly focus on positive results of self-organizing teams. This paper examines the most common problems and pitfalls identified within the existing literature, by reviewing the most relevant works within this topic. Ten most commonly found and repeated pitfalls of self-organizing teams are identified. It has been found that the ten pitfalls mostly affect work efficiency and employees' satisfaction. Furthermore, it has been found that the communication is a key piece of the puzzle, as it connects and affects all aspects of an organization. Finally, even though the described pitfalls are not mutually compared in order to determine how much impact each individual of them has, this is certainly a possibility for more detailed research in the future.*

Keywords*: self-organizing teams, employee satisfaction, efficiency, communication, organizations.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Different working groups such as committees, councils and task forces are not necessarily teams and they do not become teams simple because someone calls them "teams" [1]. In compare to working groups, teams require both individual and mutual accountability, sharing of information and they rely on group discussion, debate and decision which in addition makes possible performance output greater than the sum of all the individual performance outputs of team members [1] This relates to quote from Aristotel, who lived in 4th century BC, that *"the whole is greater than the sum of its parts"*, in this case team and teamwork represents the whole. As noticed by Tannebaum et all [2] highly quoted definitions of teams, such as the ones from Salas et all [3], Kozlovski et all [4] or Katzenbach and Smith [1] presumes that all teams share some common characteristics such as stable membership, common goals, predefined roles and tasks, and in some cases one location.

Recently there have been many changes concerning how teams are organized and how they are operating. For example, we now have much more use of temporary teams, usually when they have a task of developing new product or service. Team members are not always on the same location, often not in the same country, and they are successfully operating as virtual teams. One can be member of multiple teams, sharing its time evenly or unevenly between different teams. There are three big changes that are affecting the nature of teams and the environment in which they operate: (1) dynamic composition of teams, (b) use of technology and distance and (c) empowerment and de-layering [2]. Depending on who has the authority for the following four functions: 1. execute the work, 2. monitor and manage the work process, 3. design the performing unit and arrange for needed organizational supports for the work, and 4. set direction for the team; Hackman [5] identified four levels of increasing team self-management. First level is traditional manager-led team, where team members' duty is just to execute the work, everything else is performed by the manager. Second level is self-managing team, where team members have also responsibility for organizing their work and for monitoring and managing their performance. Third level is self-designing team, team members have freedom to choose and change the design and structure of their team. These self-designing teams are also called self-selecting [6], because they can select their members. Finally, most autonomous teams are self-governing teams; they have responsibility for all four of the major functions. Terms of self-managing teams and self-organizing teams are often use as equivalent. Appelo [6] argue that "self-organizing" is more adequate term, because "self-managing" term is more closer to the description of self-governing teams. He also suggests avoiding the term "self-managing team" because it is misleading. Authors agree that the use of "self-organizing" term is more appropriate. Following this analogy, we can add that self-designing teams and self-governing teams are also self-organizing teams but with additional autonomies.

This paper focus is on challenges in implementing self-organizing teams in organizations and their possible pitfalls. In the opinion of the author, implementing self-organizing teams in organizations can be the driver of positive effects in all organizations, but the path to their successful implementation is complex and more difficult in compare to classical manager-led teams [7].

Research on self-organizing teams have provided a lot of positive results such as high productivity and effectiveness [8]–[17]; quality of output [8], [18]; customer service [18], [19]; safety [8]–[10]; job satisfaction [18], [20]–[24]; organizational commitment [6], [21]; adaptability [14], [16], [25], [26]; and success of innovative process [7], [16], [23], [27]–[29]. Beside the long list of positive effects, fragility of systems with self-organizing teams are not yet fully explored nor specifically addressed in the literature. Issues and challenges do appear, but they are scattered across various papers that predominantly focus on positive results of self-organizing teams.

In a survey conducted on a relevant sample in the Republic of Serbia, we found that software development companies very often have at least some type of self-organizing teams. On the other side of the spectrum, are public companies and

governmental institutions have close to zero. In software development companies, worldwide, most popular methodology for development of software is Scrum methodology, which is used by more than 60% of companies [30]. Main characteristics of Scrum methodology are incremental software development and cross-functional self-organizing teams [31]. Besides Scrum methodology, there are also organizational models based on the self-organizing teams. Some of these models are highly structured with precise rules and roles and with interconnected autonomous teams like Holacracy [32], or complex hybrid model with mix of functional and cross-functional teams [6] like the one used by Spotify company [33]. Other models are more simpler and involve functioning of multiple self-organizing teams that are mutually independent, such as the award-winning model used by the Dutch company Buurtzorg [34]. Self-organizing teams are not reserved only for industries that feature rapid technology advances, excellent examples can be found among organizations involved in education, automotive industry, clothing, tomato production, media, consulting, production, production of electricity, metal and hydraulic components, and even in the patients home care as well as the mental health care institutions [18].

If an organization decides to introduce self-organizing teams in its structure or to empower its already existing teams, great care must be put in preparation and implementation [35]. Implementation of self-organizing teams is very complex and its success depends on number of elements. Most common mistake is believing that employees can just shift from working in traditional hierarchical organizations to some type of self-organizing, without training and preparation [18]. Providing trainings and coaching for employees is very important. Additionally, for most people, the more time they spent in hierarchical organizations the more training they will need. However, for some excessive training would not be enough. Not all people can successfully function in situation where they act without an approval from "above" or with increase responsibilities [6]. After couple of months from implementing Holacracy model in Zappos.com, online shoe and clothing retailer with more than 1,500 employees, 18% of employees decided to accept the offered severance packages "for whom self-management was not a good fit – or who wished to leave for any other reason" [36]. Middle managers are also not very supporting in introducing self-organizing because it is usually followed with loosing a part of their authority or sometimes loosing their position when flatting down the organizational structure. Appelo [6] suggests two dimensional empowerment model for self-organizing teams which includes: 1. Maturity level (low, moderate or high) and 2. Authority level (tell, sell, consult, agree, advise, inquire and delegate). This model can be used to analyze and establish different amount of empowerment for different tasks.

The goal of this article is not to cast vote for or against introducing self-organizing teams in organizations, but to share some of the challenges and possible pitfalls in implementing self-organizing teams in organizations. We did a literature review using most popular academic search engines and found ten most commonly identified and repeated pitfalls of self-organizing teams across the existing literature. They have been analyzed each one against the specific aspect and context it can possibly affect or endanger.

2. POSSIBLE PITFALLS WITH SELF-ORGANIZING TEAMS IN ORGANIZATIONS

In this article, we did not measure which pitfall is more crucial than the other. However, one of them has separated from others as the most important because it connects all other factors.

2.1 Goals

It is a responsibility of organization's management to develop the vision and mission of the organization, as well as for setting goals, but it is necessary to give freedom to self-organizing teams to independently develop their own mission and corresponding set of values, in order to achieve the set goals [6]. It is very important that all team members have the same understanding of the team's mission, even as important as having a mission at all [7], [25]. Setting up challenging goals but for which the perception is that they are realistic and feasible is a powerful motivator, and defining clear expectations of performance increases employee satisfaction during the work process [37], [38]. When team members actively participate in the goal setting process, the team is more committed to team goals and acts as a more homogeneous entity [20], [25], [39]–[42].

2.2 Leadership

Pearce and Sims [12] found that shared leadership is an important predictor of team effectiveness and that willingness to make it a part of conscious strategy will lead to improvement of team effectiveness. There are four different sources of team leadership, depending whether the leader/s is/are formal or informal, or whether he/they is/are internal or external, and regardless of the source, leadership is focused on satisfying team needs with the goal of enhancing team effectiveness [25]. In self-organizing teams leadership is internal and informal because leadership responsibilities are shared among the team members [43]. In order to develop high levels of mutual influence and sharing of leadership responsibilities, self-organizing team has to have clear and unifying direction, strong sense of interpersonal support, and a high level of voice and involvement within the team [19]. Combination of knowledge, talents and interests of several people will certainly increase the success of the team as more resources are dedicated to the management function [44], because one manager, no matter how smart and capable, cannot be right all the time [45]. In order to succeed in the distribution of leadership, it is necessary for the team members to have a strong sense of mutual support and equal status in the team [19]. In compare with traditional manager-led teams, teams with shared leadership have more complex environment and because of that communication is much more important [44]. One alternative is rotating the function of a leader among the members, such teams have achieved a higher level of communication and cooperation, and these relations further contribute to improvement of team's results [46].

2.3 Transparency

Transparency in organizations means sharing of all internal information among all employees, from business results, plans, decisions, to the salaries of all employees. Depending on the level of transparency. Transparency does not mean that these information will be available to stakeholders outside the organization. Laloux [18] points out three main reasons for total transparency in organizations with self-organizing teams. First, when there are no hierarchies and superiors, the self-managing teams must have all the information available in order to be able to make the best decisions. Secondly, any information that is not public will cause suspicion. Third, as long as there are people who know something, while others in the same organization do not know it, there will be some kind of hierarchy. Additionally, enabling unlimited access to information for all team members improves team performance [47]. Using some of the software solutions for team communications can help provide greater transparency followed with possibilities to control other team members [2]. One of the possible solutions for large companies is developing its own intranet or social network, which can be used for all communication and to provide employees with all available information from performance data to financial information, following the "no secrets" formula [48].

2.4 Conflicts

The quality of interpersonal relationships is undoubtedly one of the cornerstones of any environment where more than one person, let alone whole teams, is in charge of making decisions and managing and carrying out relevant activities. Being unavoidable in any interpersonal relationship, we would argue that conflicts should not be automatically seen as negative, which seems to be frequent tendency. They should rather be assessed based on their type and the way they are managed by participants, as well as on the possible outcome such conflicts can produce. Appelbaum et al. [24] divide conflicts within self-organizing teams into two main categories: negative or dysfunctional conflicts, driven by emotions and affective reactions, negatively impacts teams' creativity and quality of work on the one side, and positive or functional conflicts, motivated by a challenge of one's existing attitudes on the other. The latter is seen by the authors as a bust to the effectiveness of the team by drawing their attention to what really matters, such as key activities or important issues that need to be solved. In addition, negative conflicts can lead to a decline in confidence and autonomy, as well as increased control [14], [26]. Increased stress among team members negatively affects quality and amount of communication within the team [47].

2.5 Trust

Self-organizing teams can be defined as groups of inter-dependent individuals that can self-regulate on relatively whole tasks [49]. Having this in mind, issues of trust and autonomy are of primary importance [50]. If the level of trust is low, team members will waste their energy and time on their own protection and checking of others, instead of cooperating with other members without delay [47]. When there is a lack of trust, team members will not be willing to share information, especially if there is a possibility or fear, that others will consider them incompetent [23]. Trust is a prerequisite for shared or rotating leadership, sincere feedbacks and communication in general. On the other hand, high level of trust between team members can lead absence of control in self-organizing teams [50].

2.6 Control

When there is shared or rotated leadership, organizations must establish clear processes and instructions for measuring performance that will almost certainly differ from traditional approaches [2]. In traditional bureaucratic organization, employees must come to work in due time, because it is defined with internal documents or because their manager requires it from them, but within self-organizing teams "employees might come to work on time because their peers now have the authority to demand the workers' willing compliance" [14]. In a research done by Langfred [50] results shown that if a self-organizing team has high levels of individual autonomy, some monitoring of individual team members needs to be in place if process loss and coordination errors are to be avoided, because self-organizing team members may choose not to monitor one another when the level of trust is high. Interestingly, when comparing self-organizing team with manager led teams, monitoring is dropping more rapidly as trust increase. It is crucial to find some balance in monitoring and trust. Once the monitoring is lost in self-organizing team, it is much harder to properly introduce it again, because teams with high cohesiveness and trust have powerful influence on team members to conform to the groupthink [50]–[52]. Therefore, high trust cannot result in completely removing the monitoring process, especially when there is a high individual autonomy. In efficient self-organizing teams, members are focused on monitoring for problems, they try to act on them as soon as they appear, because big problems usually started as small problems and it is easier to fix them in the beginning [6], [43].

2.7 Balance

Team behavior and performance is a function of characteristics and attributes of the team members and how those characteristics and attributes are distributed within the team [4], [25], [53], [54]. Having a well-balanced team have proven to be a one of the key component to team success but it is not always easy to find the right balance. For different situation there is a need for different kind of balance, for example when task interdependence is high it is better to have demographically diverse team, but when task interdependence is low the opposite is much better [25], [55]. Belbin [56] researched how likely was that high-intellect teams would succeed where teams with lower intellect would not, but outcome of the research did not support his idea. Instead, having a balance mix of different people was proven to be more important and will lead to greater team successes. In case of tasks that are not routine, expertise diversity is more likely to lead to better performance [57]. Van Der Vegt and Bunderson, found that under the right conditions, expertise diversity can be a key activator of intra-team learning and thereby promote overall team effectiveness [58].

2.8 Learning

In order to quickly and accurately adapt to changes in their environment, self-organizing teams should allocate a lot of their focus on learning. With great autonomy, comes great responsibility. Self-organizing teams have responsibility to actively invest time and effort for learning and trainings. More experienced teams learn from their experience. In their extensive research on teams, Day, Gronn, and Salas [44] have come up with four interesting conclusions. First, the characteristics of team members' personalities are important: if in one team, there are team members who are high on Agreeableness, one of the five main personality trait [59], that will affect level of learning. More team members who are high on Agreeableness means a lower level of learning. Second, the structure is important: teams whose members often work in pairs learn more than teams in which this is not the case. Third, workload: if teams have the same workload distribution they will learn more in compare to uneven distribution. Fourth, "truth supported wins": in order for team to learn, it is necessary that more than one person receive the same information or to discover the truth [43]. The mutual knowledge sharing further contributes to improving team learning, improving team performance, creating shared mental models and allowing better coordination among team members [60].

2.9 Location

The development of technology has enabled forming of teams of culturally and geographically diverse employees from any point of the Earth's globe, also technology has enabled people to be involved in the work of multiple teams at the same time, the only condition is that they have access to the Internet [2]. Virtual teams were formed, where team members use technology to communicate with each other via video or audio call, or via message exchange. They now have options to store and share data in cloud, making it available for viewing or editing simultaneously by all team members in any moment. Additionally, with instant messaging, asking for and getting input in seconds, even after the regular working hours can produce information overload [2]. Researchers argue that virtual teams are no match with traditional (face-to-face) teams [61], but with technological advancements use of virtual teams continues to rise [62]. Main difference, regarding the location of team members, is the quality and richness of communication, even if team members use video calling for all of theirs communication, a big part of nonverbal communication is lost in the process. With emails and instant messaging it is even worse, and people often use emoticons to avoid misinterpretation. In his famous series of research, Mehrabian [63] found that communication is only 7% verbal, while 93% is nonverbal, like facial expressions, gestures, posture, proximity, tone of voice, pitch, etc. In similar experiments, Birdwhistell [64] found that the ratio is 35% and 75%, but either way nonverbal communication carries a lot more information in compare to verbal communication. It is no surprise that productivity is higher when all team-members are collocated [65], for self-organizing teams doing software development it is suggested to sit in the same room in order to get the best results [6], [23], [66]. Team members with closer interaction distance are more likely to mutually communicate and achieve interconnection compared to geographically dislocated members of the team.

2.10 Communication

Communication is a transversal component of particular importance because it links and impacts all of the previously described pitfalls [23]. Communication is essential for the timely availability of information. The frequency of interaction within the team is perhaps the most important variable affecting the performance of the team, regardless of the type of team [67]. When teams have problems in communication, they will probably have problems coordinating their work, which leads to decline in efficiency and effectiveness [23], [68]. When creating new teams, putting too much effort in finding team members who have high level of complementing technical skills is not a good strategy if you ignore their interpersonal skills like active listening, helpful criticism, objectivity, recognizing the interests and achievements of others, etc [1]. Interpersonal skills are foundation for achieving common understanding and effective communication [1]. The communication is found to be an essential component in majority of studies on self-organizing teams, yet in practice companies usually rarely invest enough resources in training of peoples' communication skills. Research have found that teams who had some kind of communications trainings perform better than the one without any kind of communications trainings [47], [69].

3. CONCLUSION

In our work, we manage to identify ten possible pitfalls regarding the implementation and work of self-organizing teams in organizations. They are: Goals, Leadership, Transparency, Conflicts, Trust, Control, Balance, Learning, Location and Communication. These pitfalls are not the only one that can influence the success of self-organizing teams, but they are the most common. We found that communication is a key component and it is connected with all aspects of organization, including all other identified pitfalls. We believe that even if all pitfalls are avoided and self-organizing team is set to go, quality of communication will have the biggest impact on its fate. Will it blossom in glory or perish in oblivion. In practice, although there is no clear distinction between successful and unsuccessful self-organizing teams, small number of self-organizing teams fulfill their full potential. Suggestions for further research would be to try to determine performance indicators regarding these possible pitfalls and try to measure their impact in compare to each other. Other suggestions would be to research possible strategies and actions that can develop and foster communication within self-organizing teams. Self-organizing teams are not for every organization and not for all individuals, neither are teams. In one interesting research it is found that people who prefer working in teams also have greater job satisfaction than those who are more into lone crusading [70]. If some of the coworkers have a problem in their daily work they will also have problems in self-organizing teams [23], because self-organizing is not solution for problems. Prerequisite for implementation of self-

organizing teams are desire and willingness of decision-makers and stakeholders to make the necessary organizational changes. For some, this means also paradigm shifting, changing perception of employees from negative to positive, like drifting from Theory X to Theory Y [71]. In order to achieve this, stakeholders need to be familiar with all the benefits of self-organizing teams, but also of with possible pitfalls. In fast changing industries, stakeholders usually do not have enough patients to wait for promised benefits so they give up to quickly. Self-organized teams can bring a lot of benefits for organizations but the system is fragile and must be taken with care, also benefits comes slow and than faster and faster, so patience is important [6]. Most important benefits are efficiency and employee happiness. They are in strong correlation, because focusing on increasing employees' happiness will lead to increase in productivity [72]. Currently, majority of self-organizing teams can be found in software development companies, but we believe that organizations from other industries could also benefit with implementation of self-organizing teams.

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