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Experience feedback as an enabler of coordination: An aerobic military team case



Cécile Godé ^{a,*}, Jean-Fabrice Lebraty ^{b,1}

^a *Institut des sciences de l'homme, 14/16 avenue Berthelot, 69363, Lyon, Cedex 07, France*

^b *IAE Lyon, Ecole Universitaire de Management, 6 cours Albert Thomas, BP 8242, 69355, Lyon, Cedex 08, France*

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Abstract Although significant contributions have already opened the “black box” of coordination practices, the question of how these practices are articulated and interplay with coordination remains understudied. Our article investigates the effects of experience feedback on team coordination. We examine the way that members of the French Air Force Aerobatic Team (AFAT) exploit prior experiences to coordinate their knowledge and expertise in an extreme environment. Our findings demonstrate that experience feedback enables coordination. This feedback improves team coordination by promoting the articulation of communication, socialisation and reflexive practices and provides teammates with knowledge integration and a collective understanding of the extreme circumstances they manage.

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Introduction

According to recent studies on coordination (Bruns, 2013; Vashdi, Bamberger, & Erez, 2013), improving our comprehension of whether, how and under what conditions teams coordinate is a central research topic. In this article, we investigate experience feedback as a collective experiential process that may affect the way team members coordinate. Experience feedback is related to how teammates use what they know and capitalise on it to avoid repeating errors (Hollenbeck, Ilgen,

LePine, Colquitt, & Hedlund, 1998), linking the past to possible future scenarios (Lorino & Mourey, 2013). We propose to answer the research question, “how does experience feedback influence coordination within teams?”

That question is both of theoretical and managerial interest. First, as Okhuysen and Bechky (2009) state, our understanding of coordination is still messy and fragmented. Drawing on the recent practice-based view of coordination (Faraj & Xiao, 2006; Jarzabkowski, Le, & Feldman, 2012), we go deeper into the “black box” of coordination to refine our appreciation of coordination practices, individually and in combination. Second, our research question has relevance for organisations, especially for those managing teams in extreme environments – i.e., under highly unstable, uncertain and dangerous situations (Aubry, Lièvre, & Hobbs, 2010; Bouty et al., 2012). These conditions raise important coordination challenges for teams working in unpredictable environments

* Corresponding author: Tel.: +33 472726551; +33 612547856 (mobile); fax: +33 472726530.

E-mail addresses: cecile.gode@univ-lyon2.fr (C. Godé), jean-fabrice.lebraty@univ-lyon3.fr (J.-F. Lebraty).

¹ Tel.: +33 603137088 (mobile).

(Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). Our article offers insights as to how team members can anticipate coordination issues and dynamically adjust their actions.

To achieve our objective we studied an aerobatic military team, the French Air Force Aerobatic Team (AFAT). Facing extreme conditions, the AFAT members develop a particular experience feedback called “à chaud” that consists of a very short cycle of action learning, both during and immediately after the action experienced. Findings from the study show that experience feedback enables coordination by promoting the articulation of three coordination practices, highlighted in the practice-based literature: socialisation, communication and reflexivity. The AFAT members also display particular features of teams that take advantage of experience feedback: involved and motivated teammates, proactive managerial postures and a feedback-oriented organisational culture.

This article contains four major sections. Section 1 elaborates on the background literature of this research that sheds light on both the practice-based approach of coordination and past experience under extreme situations. Section 2 presents context settings and methods. Section 3 depicts our case study and results. Finally, section 4 discusses both the theoretical and managerial implications from the case analysis and concludes the article.

Background literature

A practice-based approach of coordination

At its core, coordination is about “*managing interdependencies between activities*” (Malone & Crowston, 1994, p. 90). Emphasizing the primary role played by interdependence, such a definition is consistent both with our intuitive sense of what coordination means (as the authors argue, there is nothing to coordinate if there is no interdependence) and seminal contributions on coordination (Fayol, 1949; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). Over the past few years, several authors have refined our understanding of what coordination is by highlighting its temporal and knowledge-based dimensions. For example, Faraj and Xiao (2006), (p. 1155) state that coordination represents “*an unfolding process of linked know-how and interrelated actions*” and address knowledge exchange within organisations and teams. More recently, Bruns (2013) investigated coordination as an on-going process of integrating diverse contributions and knowledge flows within changing and uncertain contexts.

Assuming that coordination is much more than the configuration of specialized operational work (Chandler, 1962) or the design of management systems that specify exchanges through dedicated structures (Gupta, Dirsmith, & Fogarty, 1994), such studies were engaged in examining further contingency perspective limitations. In particular, due to a change in the nature of organisational work, interdependencies between processes, structures and actors may be difficult to pre-identify and plan (Faraj & Xiao, 2006; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). Moreover, the contingency theories failed at capturing the on-going nature of coordination (Jarzabkowski et al., 2012) and do not explore how coordination is generated by actors themselves regardless of the organisational design.

The practice-based approach of coordination considers then that our appreciation of coordination remains partial and limited (Rico, Sánchez-Manzanares, Gil, & Gibson, 2008). It pays particular attention to practices enacted by actors, providing insights into the micro-processes of coordination. Rooted in contemporary social theory (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984), practices are viewed as “*knowledgeable collective actions that forge relations and connections among all the resources available and all the constraints present*” (Gherardi, 2010, p. 505). They are observable phenomena (Orlikowski, 2010) describing the specialized activities that professionals pursue in their occupations. As such, they question individual actions as social building blocks (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001). Analysing practices to investigate coordination responds to the question of how it is concretely done by actors and acquires meanings in a “*temporally unfolding and contextualized process*” (Faraj & Xiao, 2006, p. 1155). As argued by Jarzabkowski et al. (2012), (p. 909), the practice lens of coordination allows for an examination of the way actors construct coordination through their daily and dynamic social activities.

Such a perspective opens up a space for new studies. In favouring the exploration of how the work of coordinating is done by actors, the practice-based literature has shed light on three major coordination practices over the last decade: (a) shared languages (Berman, Down, & Hill, 2002; Bruns, 2013; Kellogg, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2006), (b) reflexivity (Rico et al., 2008; Vashdi et al., 2013; Zohar & Luria, 2003) and (c) socialisation (Bechky, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2012; Klein, Ziegert, Knight, & Xiao, 2006).

First, the authors emphasise the importance of shared languages and communication practices for coordination. For instance, while observing the ways medical teams coordinate in a U.S. Trauma Centre, Faraj and Xiao (2006) demonstrate how epistemic contestation and verbal (face-to-face) discussions operate as situated responses to coordination under unexpected circumstances. For their part, Kellogg et al. (2006), (p. 32) found that shared forms of communication, drawing on “*a repertoire of socially recognized and legible templates*”, allow project members to coordinate across the boundaries of their different communities. Finally, despite the fact that they do not explicitly focus on coordination issues, Berman et al. (2002) state that tacit knowledge shared between players of the National Basketball Association allows them to perform tasks according to their interpretation of others’ actions. Sharing group knowledge through nonverbal communication (placement of players’ feet, arm curve, etc.) helps the actors to adjust and synchronize their tasks.

The second major coordination practice highlighted by the literature is reflexivity. Reflexivity can be viewed as feedback-based learning from which teammates systematically assess failures and discrepancies to their improve coordination. It is a way to learn from past errors and to challenge the usual patterns of actions. For example, Zohar and Luria (2003) studied the effect of debriefing sessions on coordination and reliability in an Israeli Army armoured brigade. Past actions are examined in a safe but tense atmosphere, with particular attention paid to errors. The authors especially demonstrate how coordination is increased through repeated performance feedback during debriefings, with relevant

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