



## Self-management competencies in self-managing teams: Their impact on multi-team system productivity

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### ABSTRACT

This research examined how composition of individual capabilities within self-managed teams translates into greater effectiveness for multi-team systems (MTS) in which teams are embedded. We investigated how a broad range of self-management competencies by team members aggregate to form a collective construct that influences productivity of a team network. In a semiconductor plant, we surveyed 716 members from 97 self-managed teams in 21 MTS. We found that MTS comprising teams whose members widely practice self-management strategies attain higher productivity gains and that multi-team systems consisting of highly cohesive teams of self-managers are the most productive.

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The emergence of self-managing work teams (SMWT) in corporate America during the past 25 years has been variously proclaimed a management transformation, paradigm shift, or corporate renaissance (Druskat & Wheeler, 2003; Manz & Sims, 2001; Sundstrom, De Meuse, & Futrell, 1990). Katzenbach and Smith's (1993) long-standing projection that "teams will become the primary unit of performance in high-performance organizations" (p. 119) is now a fact of organizational life (Morgeson, 2005). Yet scholarly inquiry into SMWT effectiveness still lags behind such popular acclaim. As SMWT pervade places of work, the question becomes less "are they effective?" but rather "what differentiates more effective from less effective teams?" The current research takes an additional step toward bridging this knowledge gap by considering an array of team members' self-management competencies and how team composition of such individual skills translates into greater performance for multi-team systems (MTS)—multiple teams that interface and interdependently accomplish collective, superordinate goals (Mathieu, Marks, & Zaccaro, 2001).

### 1. Self-managed work teams and their results

SMWT mark a radical departure in how work is organized and done by assuming responsibility for doing whole tasks and decision-making authority traditionally reserved for management (Banker, Field, Schroeder, & Sinha, 1996; Guzzo & Dickson, 1996; Moorhead, Neck, & West, 1998). American business has increasingly embraced such empowerment structures, which are currently deployed by nearly 75% of the top 1000 US firms (Douglas & Gardner, 2004). Self-managing teams are increasingly transplanted abroad and to virtual team settings (Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk, & Gibson, 2004; Kirkman & Shapiro, 2001). Since inception, mounting evidence affirms that SMWT enhance work-life quality, customer service, and productivity (Beekun, 1989; Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Cohen & Ledford, 1994; Emery & Fredendall, 2002; Goodman, Devadas, & Hughson, 1988; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993).

In contrast with such favorable findings, several literature reviews concluded that SMWT vary considerably in effectiveness (Beekun, 1989; Cohen & Ledford, 1994; Guzzo & Dickson, 1996). At times, such team structures have undermined work-life quality

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(Barker, 1993) or failed to outperform traditional work groups (Bailey, 1998). Indeed, Gibson and Tesone (2001) alleged that purported SMWT productivity gains are overstated, while Spreitzer, Cohen, and Ledford (1999) conceded that “the promise of SMWT may be oversold in the literature” (p. 359). In the wake of such uneven success, SMWT proponents are now acknowledging how certain conditions, such as groupthink or directive leadership, can threaten team productivity or viability (Alper, Tjosvold, & Law, 1998; Kirkman & Shapiro, 2001; Moorhead et al., 1998). At the same time, prescriptions for overcoming roadblocks to team performance proliferate (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Manz & Sims, 2001), though most practitioner suggestions are speculative and lack empirical grounding (Moravec, 1999).

## 2. Revisiting a theoretical foundation of SMWT performance: Individual self-management

We explore conditions when SMWT succeed or fail to live up to expectations by studying how and when team participants' self-regulatory strategies underpin collective effectiveness. Various SMWT frameworks (Cohen, Ledford, & Spreitzer, 1996; Manz & Sims, 1987; Neck & Houghton, 2006) contend that team members who adroitly manage self-processes advance collaborative endeavors. In particular, Manz and colleagues (Houghton, Neck, & Manz, 2003; Manz & Sims, 1987, 2001; Neck & Manz, 2007) maintained that self-regulating teammates effectively complete their own tasks as well as team tasks. When individuals display more self-discipline over their behavior, build intrinsic motivation (by acting autonomously and assuming ownership for collective outcomes; Deci, 1975; Druskat & Wheeler, 2003; Hackman, 1987), and mentally cope with frustrations and setbacks (Kanfer & Heggstad, 1997), personal and team performance both improve.

Despite its centrality in SMWT formulations, self-management does not invariably facilitate team functioning according to research on self-management leadership (SML, leaders encouraging team-generated controls; Manz & Sims, 1987), team self-management (TSM, teams self-regulating group processes; Wageman, 2001), and individual self-management (ISM, team members self-managing themselves; Uhl-Bien & Graen, 1998). To illustrate, SMWT studies uncovered mixed findings that SML underlies team success (Cohen et al., 1996; Cohen, Chang, & Ledford, 1997; Manz & Sims, 1987; Spreitzer et al., 1999; Wageman, 2001). Similarly, other inquiries showed that TSM promotes SMWT performance (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Mathieu, Gilson, & Ruddy, 2006; Wageman, 2001) but not the performance of retail store teams (Chen, Kirkman, Kanfer, & Allen, 2005), manufacturing teams (Stewart & Barrick, 2000), and construction road crews (Tesluk & Mathieu, 1999). Further, investigations of traditionally managed work groups observed that average ISM levels within teams (or team-mean ISM, another self-management construct) inconsistently improve collective effectiveness (Langfred, 2000; Uhl-Bien & Graen, 1998). Given such equivocal results, identifying how and when self-management augments team effectiveness is imperative (Morgeson, 2005; Pearce & Manz, 2005; Wageman, 2001). From a practical standpoint, delineating such contingencies can help set the stage for SMWT success.

This project extends SMWT research in several ways. Specifically, we assess a broader array of self-influence strategies identified by contemporary self-leadership perspectives (Houghton & Neck, 2002; Manz, 1986; Neck & Manz, 2007). Past explorations of a limited set of strategies likely underestimated their benefits (Cohen et al., 1997; Manz & Sims, 1987). Moreover, we examine collective ISM constructs—namely, average ISM levels within teams and team networks—derived from team-member traits (Barrick, Stewart, Neubert, & Mount, 1998). Through composition processes, team participants' self-regulating actions may collectively emerge as isomorphic ISM constructs at team and MTS levels (Chen, Bliese, & Mathieu, 2005; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Previous SMWT work has scrutinized SML (Cohen et al., 1996, 1997; Manz & Sims, 1987) and TSM (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Wageman, 2001) but not collective ISM constructs, though the latter have been shown to impact traditionally managed groups (Langfred, 2000; Uhl-Bien & Graen, 1998). Exploring a “homologous multilevel model” (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), we investigate average ISM levels within self-managing teams and multi-team systems in a semiconductor plant. By so doing, our study thus generalizes MTS research beyond simulated laboratory and R & D teams (DeChurch & Marks, 2006; Hoegl, Weinkauff, & Gemuenden, 2004; Marks, DeChurch, Mathieu, Panzer, & Alonso, 2005) and validates a basic but untested premise that aggregate-level ISM enhances functioning of SMWT collectivities (Manz & Sims, 2001). Further, we heed Kozlowski and Bell's (2003) call for further efforts to map the boundary conditions for team self-management by probing how team cohesion moderates self-management effects (Morgeson, 2005; Wageman, 2001). All told, we evaluate a model of how collective ISM influences MTS performance depicted in Fig. 1. Below, we furnish theoretical and empirical evidence for a broader and emergent MTS ISM construct and its direct and interactive effects on productivity of empowered team collectives.

### 2.1. Self-leadership: Extending traditional views of self-management strategies

Drawing from social learning and behavioral modification theories (Luthans & Kreitner, 1985; Manz & Sims, 1980), early SMWT thinkers conceived how team members exert self-control by manipulating environmental antecedents and consequences of behavior (Cohen et al., 1997; Manz & Sims, 1987; Uhl-Bien & Graen, 1998). Specifically, they delineated various “behavior-focused” strategies, by which individuals manage their behaviors (e.g., self-goal setting and self-reinforcement) to complete necessary—but often unpleasant—tasks (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Manz and associates (Houghton et al., 2003; Manz, 1986; Manz & Sims, 2001) later argued that individuals can also use “natural reward strategies” (Neck & Houghton, 2006) to motivate themselves by noticing or embedding intrinsic rewards into their work. For example, nurses can appreciate mundane tasks, such as bathing patients, by realizing how such tasks promote patient comfort and health (Gagné & Deci, 2005). They further prescribed “thought self-leadership” as a means by which people can shape their own thoughts (Manz & Neck, 2004; Neck & Manz, 1996). That is, employees can use positive self-talk, visual imagery of performance executions, and rational counterarguments to

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