

GROUP EFFECTIVENESS IN THE AUTOMOTIVE SECTOR: TASKS AND GROUP PROCESSES

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En nuestro país, desde la década de los 90, las empresas líderes del sector de la automoción comenzaron a modificar sus estructuras para hacerlas más competitivas. La introducción de tecnología permitió modificar el contenido de los puestos y trabajar en equipo. En este contexto, nuestro grupo de investigación inició hace diez años el estudio de las variables implicadas en la eficacia grupal siguiendo un modelo input-process-output. Este artículo tiene un doble objetivo: presentar algunos de los resultados obtenidos relacionados con las tareas y los procesos grupales y, avanzar en el estudio incorporando nuevos análisis desde una perspectiva transcultural. Concretamente se comparan los procesos y resultados grupales en dos filiales de una empresa multinacional ubicada en México y España. Desde una perspectiva aplicada se formulan algunas propuestas de intervención para mejorar la introducción de equipos de trabajo en este sector.

Palabras clave: Equipos de trabajo, Empresas de automoción, Eficacia grupal

In our country, during the 90's, leading companies in the automotive sector began to modify their structures to become more competitive. The implementation of technology allowed the modification of job content and the introduction of teamwork. In this context, ten years ago, our research group started to study the variables involved in the effectiveness of groups, following an input-process-output model. The purpose of this article is twofold: to present some obtained results related to group tasks and processes and to advance in its research, adding new analyses from a cultural perspective. Specifically, to compare the group processes and outcomes in two subsidiaries of a multinational company located in Mexico and Spain. From an applied perspective, some proposals are made to improve the effectiveness of work teams in this sector.

Key words: Work teams, Automobile companies, group effectiveness, Tasks, Group processes.

During the 90s, globalization was a fact in the automotive industry. The implementation of complex machinery governed by computerize processes allowed the modification of job content, the inclusion of tasks of greater added value and the adaptation of the production system to team work. This permitted the improvement of the processes and the manufacturing of more and better products to satisfy clients' demands.

In this context, an important multinational company implemented work teams in a factory in our country and also in that of its main suppliers. Members of the research team participated in this process as external consultants. First, the objective was to raise awareness regarding its advantages, with *outdoor* training and after, to select and train team members and to design processes of continuous improvement. The teams were composed of multiqualified and multifaceted blue collar workers, who perform manufacturing, work management, quality control, logistics, and maintenance and improvement

tasks. They had a mean size of 15 employees, with a high level of autonomy on decision-making and with interdependent members.

Given the magnitude of the changes that were being implemented, it was decided to conduct a study to analyze its efficacy, and, this is how this line of research began ten years ago. Following the proposal by McGrath (1984) and its later developments (Hackman, 1987; Tannenbaum, Beard and Salas, 1992) the *Input-Process-Output* model was used as the starting point. This model includes personal, group and organizational variables as *inputs*; in line with Marks, Mathieu and Zaccaro (2001)'s classification, an *action process*, communication, an *interpersonal process*, conflict management and another *transition process*, orientation toward group tasks, as *processes*; and finally, objective and subjective maintenance and performance measures (Fig. 1), as *outputs*.

The objective of this article is twofold. First, to summarize some results on the role played by group tasks and processes, highlighting their recommended applications, and second, to advance in its investigation presenting a study that compares group processes and outcomes in

two subsidiaries of a multinational company.

GROUP TASKS AND PROCESSES

Morgan, Salas and Glickman (1993) divide group activities into two categories: the tasks to perform, and the processes that allow teams to be efficient. Following this line of reasoning, three contributions are summarized in the next section, one regarding task design, another on group processes and the third is dedicated to organizational support in team implementation.

Group task design

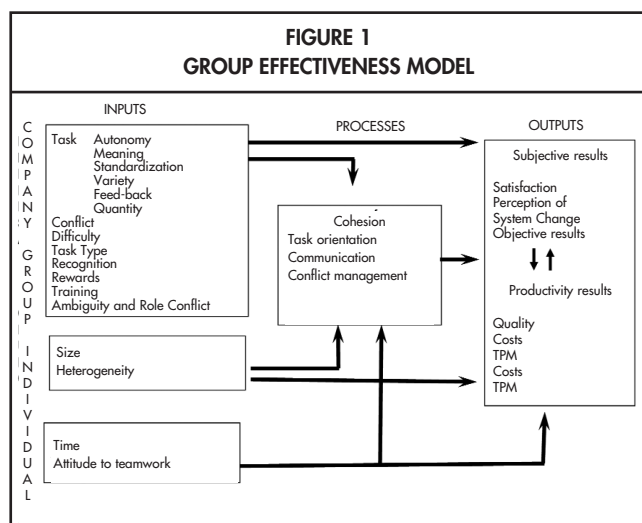
According to Parker and Ohly (2008), research on work design has been focused on two proposals: job demands and the *job characteristics model* by Hackman and Oldham (1976, 1980). In accordance with this, two studies are presented; the first on the changes produced in the tasks due to team implementation, and the second on the characteristics of these tasks.

As has been shown in the reviews, most group efficacy models include tasks as the *input* variable (e.g., Burke, 2004); however, there is little research on its impact due to the difficulties that its analysis in real contexts entails. This fact led us to propose a study in four companies in the sector (Urien and Osca, 2001a) with a double objective: to analyze how tasks change with team work and to determine how much these tasks affect satisfaction and interest for the new work system. To do this, an analysis of jobs was performed through observations, interviews and questionnaires, and 24 tasks were identified. The employees were asked to indicate how often they performed those tasks before and after the

implementation of teams. According to their answers, all tasks increased in frequency and almost 80% of these increased significantly. Specifically, the greatest increases were in the following: “negotiate ideas for improvement with colleagues”, “identify aspects to improve in the job” and “comment ideas for improvement with the supervisor”. These results are coherent with two of the objectives sought by companies when they implement teams: to reduce the number of employees assigned to the production line and to achieve multifaceted employees.

The tasks that best predicted satisfaction and interest in the new work system are grouped in the factors “tasks with tools”, “improvement tasks” and “tasks of precision and order”. As expected, those of a more cognitive and social character, such as the manipulation of tools and the proposal of improvements, influenced positively, and the more arduous and that required more concentration, influenced in a negative manner.

In a second investigation, Osca and Urien (2001) studied the repercussion of the characteristics of the new jobs on employee satisfaction and performance, following Hackman and Oldham (1976, 1980). Specifically, they analyzed the influence of variety, meaning, autonomy, feed-back and quantity on three maintenance and four productivity indicators provided by the company. The regression analyses results showed that these characteristics explained percentages of the variance in the maintenance results (satisfaction, interest for the new work system, and perception of change) that ranged from 36% to 58%, and specifically, the variables that most contributed were autonomy and feed-back. Later studies confirmed these results and highlighted the importance of these variables (e.g., Langfred, 2007; Parker, Williams and Turner, 2006; van Mierlo, Rutte, Vermunt, Kompier and Doorewaard, 2006). However, none of these job characteristics were related to the productivity measures provided by the company (quality, quantity, costs and *Total Production Management*). This would coincide with the *performance paradox* (Meyer and Gupta, 1994) given that, on occasion, improvements in management do not mean immediate and significant increases in productivity, as there are intervening variables that are not controlled. In our case, in order to promote collaboration, productivity measures included the performance of a group of teams on different shifts, reducing the variability of the results and limiting the possibility of finding significant relationships. Regardless, and as has been indicated (e.g., Kozlowski and Ilgen,



2006), we believe that it is relevant to integrate these measures into the analyses and prove their congruency with other measures more used in psychological research.

From an applied point of view, the relevance of tasks as a key aspect in the implementation of teams should be confirmed. According to our data, it is essential to study how tasks change and affect employees' attitudes. Increasing the number of tasks does not necessarily have negative consequences if they are designed with sufficient variety and meaning, and especially, with autonomy and feedback. As has been seen, these are crucial in explaining satisfaction and interest in team work.

Group processes

In the last few years, research has highlighted the role played by group processes (Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp and Gilson, 2008), given their relationships, both direct and indirect, with group efficacy. Marks et al. (2001) classify these in three dimensions, *transition*, *action* and *interpersonal* processes. The *transition* processes include activities such as the planning and establishment of group goals and objectives. The *action* processes aid team members in achieving their objectives and, finally, *interpersonal* processes facilitate the management and solution of the problems that may arise. According to these authors, most studies do not include more than one group process or use a compound measure, which limits the results. García-Salmones and Osca (2004) analyzed the role played by three processes, the orientation toward group tasks, group cohesion, and the efficient management of conflicts, on satisfaction and group efficacy in a Mexican automotive company that is introducing teams.

It has been pointed out that uncertainty and stress generate organizational changes (Andersen, 2006), reduce employees' motivation (Jimmieson, Terry and Callan, 2004; Schabracq and Cooper, 2000), and consequently, their performance (Eby, Adams, Russell and Gaby, 2000; Mansell, Brough and Cole, 2006). Ambiguity and role conflict, characteristic of a situation of change, have negative consequences (Glazer and Beehr, 2005), and this is shown by the meta-analyses conducted on the subject (Jackson and Schuler, 1985; Tubre and Collins, 2000). In the team environment, it has also been found that ambiguity (e.g., Cunningham and Eys, 2007; Jones, 2006) and conflict (e.g., Langfred, 2007) reduce group outcomes. For this reason, in addition to the processes, García-Salmones and Osca (2004) studied

employees' ambiguity and role conflict in a situation of change, such as the implementation of teams. Specifically, they analyzed the role played by group processes, both as a direct influence and as a modulator of the effects of these stressors.

As was expected, the results showed that ambiguity and conflict were negatively related to satisfaction, and only ambiguity was related to group efficacy. Regarding the role of the processes, their direct influence on satisfaction (e.g., Maynard, Mathieu, Marsh, and Ruddy, 2007) and group efficacy (e.g., Mathieu and Schulze, 2006) proved to be very relevant, in line with the meta-analyses on the subject (LePine, Piccolo, Jackson, Mathieu and Saul, 2008; Marks et al., 2001), and significantly increased the weight of the stressors. Finally, the data indicated that cohesion and task orientation behaved as modulators of the negative effect of ambiguity, though the percentages of explained variance were low, and therefore, they should be interpreted with caution.

Observing these results from an applied perspective, it should be highlighted that, when working as a team, it is very important to offer information regarding the roles to be performed and minimize the incompatibilities that may arise. At the same time, group processes should be optimized, especially the development of positive norms (e.g., Williams, Parker and Turner, 2010), and the adequate management of conflict (eg., Langfred, 2007), given its contribution to satisfaction and the perception of efficacy.

Longitudinal study on the role of support in the implementation of teams

According to the *norm of reciprocity* (Gouldner, 1960) of the *social exchange theory*, employees who feel supported tend to act in a reciprocal manner with their organization. Organizational support generates positive work-related attitudes and behaviors and, as the meta-analysis by Roadhes and Eisenberger (2002) indicates, it is positively related to satisfaction and performance. Organizations can help teams by providing material and non-material resources such as technology, training, and recognition (Rentsch and Klimoski, 2001), which affect performance directly or through the improvement of group processes (e.g., Tata and Prasad, 2004).

The importance of maintaining support over time has been verified in other fields (e.g., Lowe, Chan and Rodhes, 2010); however, we do not find similar studies in the field of group efficacy. Osca, Uríen, González-

Camino, Martínez-Pérez and Martínez-Pérez (2005) proposed a longitudinal investigation regarding support in team implementation, with two data collections separated by a year. The sample was composed of Spanish employees of a multinational company. Following Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli and Lynch (1996)'s differentiation, three types of support were measured (support by colleagues and supervisors, training, recognition and reward), and relationships with three consequents (satisfaction, involvement with the new work system, and performance) were analyzed. In addition, the hypothesis of the modulating effect of support was tested (Cohen and Wills, 1985) to verify if it buffered the possible negative effects of role ambiguity and conflict in team work.

The regression equations indicated that the three support dimensions held significant relations with attitudinal measures, explaining around 50% of the variance of the satisfaction and interest for the new work system dimensions, though the most important dimension was support from supervisors and colleagues. The high percentage of explained variance stands out, which was much higher than that found in other studies (e.g., Baruch-Feldman, Brondolo, Ben-Dayana and Schwartz, 2002). Moreover, a significant interaction was found indicating that, when role conflict is experienced, training reduces satisfaction, which is understandable as in these cases it is perceived as a demand and not as a resource. The longitudinal analysis reinforced the importance of the support from supervisors and coworkers, as it continued to have a significant effect a year later, both in a direct manner and buffering the effects of conflict.

With respect to the prediction of performance, differences were observed depending on whether production or performance was measured; however, support, as a whole, explained around 10% of the variance. Nevertheless, the support evaluated at first did not influence productivity measures collected a year later.

From an applied point of view, these results reassert the necessity of providing support in teams. Its general importance, and especially, the relevance of support from supervisors and coworkers, both on teams' attitudes and performance, should impel companies to include it in their intervention programs. The importance of follow-up to verify that it is maintained over time should also be emphasized, given that, as has been observed, although its influence on attitudinal measures remains, this is not true for performance measures.

IMPLEMENTATION OF TEAMS IN MEXICO AND SPAIN

Globalization and the increase in the number of multinational companies, involves exporting management systems to third countries, in many cases without before proving its efficacy. As Triandis (1989) points out, more than 90% of organizational research is conducted in Europe and North America; therefore, it becomes essential to analyze the validity of the theories in other contexts

Most transcultural studies are based on the dimensions of individualism (subjects expect to be treated based on their personal value and not on their belonging to a certain group) and the power distance (individuals accept the differences between people in management and their subordinates). According to Hofstede (1980), Spain holds the eleventh position in individualism and tenth in power distance, and Mexico is the sixteenth in individualism and the country with the greatest power distance. In addition, important differences are found in the investigation by Schwartz (1992): Spain holds the third position in *autonomy*, as opposed to Mexico's seventeenth position, and on the contrary, Spain is the seventeenth in *conservatism* and Mexico the seventh.

Cultural values may increase or reduce the impact of practices such as team work. According to Kirkman and Shapiro (1997, 2001) problems in Mexico are derived from its resistance to self-management. This is verified by Nicholls, Lane and Brehm (1999), who found that for 70% of the Mexican managers polled, the main difficulty when incorporating teams is the lack of congruence between the culture and the concept of a self-managed team. In this vein, when employees are asked what they highlight about team work, Mexicans indicate socio-emotional aspects and harmony among its members, whereas Americans prefer instrumental aspects and their contribution to the task (Gomez, Kirkman and Shapiro, 2000; Sanchez-Burke, Nisbett and Ibarra, 2000). Recently, Watson, Cooper, Torres, Neri and Boyd (2008), when comparing teams of students from the US and Mexico, obtained differences as Mexicans present less team cohesion and orientation and more conflict.

Culture also influences the results of the *empowerment* or enrichment of jobs (e.g., Lee, Pillutla and Law, 2000; Lee-Ross, 2005). The intrinsic characteristics of the job are related to satisfaction, especially in countries with individualistic cultures and with a low power distance, while extrinsic characteristics are related to it in all countries (Huang and Van de Vliert, 2003).

Based on these antecedents, Osca, Uríen and Rodrigo (2010) compared the group processes and outcomes of two subsidiaries of a multinational company located in Mexico and Spain. Following Kirkman and Shapiro (2001)'s proposal of analyzing other aspects and not only differences among countries, the possible differences due to group tasks were also analyzed. To do this, three subsamples were selected, two in Mexico with mechanized tasks and services, and one in Spain, with mechanized tasks. This allowed the analysis of the differences between the countries and also between tasks. A triple objective was pursued. First, to analyze if the high power distance, the lower autonomy and the greater conservatism of Mexicans would make them show greater resistance to teams, and as a consequence, more problems with group processes and outcomes. Second, to study if Mexican groups, who have more enriched tasks, that is, those dedicated to services, present better group processes and outcomes than those groups with mechanized tasks. Third, to address whether the variables that explain group efficacy are similar in both countries.

Data collection was conducted under the same conditions in both countries, and although they did not coincide in time, employees had been working as a team for about a year. Moreover, during this time, there were no special circumstances that could affect the results; therefore, the comparisons are pertinent.

As the Spanish sample was composed of 121 employees dedicated to mechanized tasks, two subsamples were selected from the Mexican sample: one mechanized like the Spanish sample, and another dedicated to services, with 121 employees in each. The mechanized tasks consist in making and assembling different parts of the automobile engine and the services tasks of providing help to the rest of the groups, repairing machinery, etc.; therefore, they are more *enriched* positions. However, in both cases, the groups are characterized by being composed of multiqualified and multifaceted employees. As we are dealing with the same company, the other organizational variables are considered to be identical.

In line with the bibliography, the analysis of variance conducted to test the differences between Mexico and Spain revealed the presence of more problems in Mexico with employees indicating a lower orientation toward group tasks, worse communication among group members and more complications in resolving conflicts. They also reported being less satisfied with their jobs and that they perceived their teams to be less efficient than the Spanish teams.

In the analysis of the differences between tasks, as it was designed following the job enrichment theory (Hackman and Oldham, 1976, 1980), Mexican employees who were in more enriched jobs, that is, those jobs dedicated to providing services to their coworkers, showed better group processes and outcomes; that is, they communicated better, were more group oriented, satisfied and were considered to be more efficient than employees in mechanized jobs. These results offer support to the validity of this theory in the Mexican context.

When both antecedents, country and task, are considered jointly, the differences between Mexico and Spain are shown to be more important than those found between more or less enriched tasks, which reinforces the necessity of using specific cultural approaches when management systems are exported (Aykan and Kanungo, 2001).

In the third place, following this line of reasoning, it was proposed to examine if the variables that explain group efficacy were similar in both countries. To do this, an analysis of how processes influenced group outcomes was performed through regression equations in each subsample. Although the explicative mechanisms are fairly congruent, differences between countries and tasks were found, which we consider interesting. The regressions performed to predict satisfaction showed that the results depended more on the tasks performed than on the country of origin. Specifically, Spanish and Mexican employees dedicated to mechanized tasks, that is, those who performed the same tasks, were more satisfied when they communicated more and solved their conflicts in an adequate manner, whereas in Mexican employees dedicated to services satisfaction was essentially explained by adequate conflict resolution. However, the regressions to predict group efficacy showed more similarities between countries than between tasks. Thus, while in Spanish employees satisfaction was explained by group-norm orientation, in all employees, independent of work characteristics, it was explained by group size and by adequate conflict resolution. That is, Mexican employees perceived themselves as more efficient in small groups (e.g., LePine et al., 2008) and adequately solving their problems. Therefore, as Gómez and colleagues (2000) and Sánchez-Burke and colleagues (2000), we detected that in more individualistic countries, in group work, employees value the orientation of their members toward group tasks, whereas in more collective countries, the maintenance of harmony and good relations among its members is favored.

Nevertheless, at this point, it is advisable to remember the suggestion made by Triandis (1995) of paying attention to the organizational context when talking about cultural values. It seems that Mexican employees, despite being more collective than Spanish employees, tend to be similar to individualists in organizational contexts that demand it, or that through selection and socialization processes, the company hires or retains those employees who adjust better to the desired cultural values. Hence, future studies should collect more information on the cultural values of the samples, as the terms *transcultural* and *transnational* are not synonymous (Drenth and Groenendijk, 1998) and not all differences among countries can be considered cultural differences and vice versa. Moreover, it is probable that the employees who participated in the study are not representative of the population of their countries. It would also be interesting to contrast our data with those from teams who perform more cognitively demanding tasks and in other organizations, given that although the variables considered have proven to be very relevant in explaining group efficacy, the analysis should be extended to include other predictors. However, despite these limitations, we believe that our data shed some light regarding the aspects that should be considered when teams are implemented in multinational companies. From an applied perspective, knowing the national culture allows us to understand the employees' reactions to certain management practices; in addition, organizational changes must be conducted according to the norms and values of the community where they are being applied, as a key element in achieving success.

AS A FINAL REFLECTION

Throughout this article, some of the investigations conducted by our team on team efficacy in the automobile industry have been reviewed. We started from an Input-Process-Output model to study this complex theme in depth. Although the relevance of other variables, such as group size and diversity (Osca and García-Salmones, 2010) or attitudes toward team work (Uríen and Osca, 2001b), have been verified over the years, we have focused on the role played by group tasks and processes, aspects which are central and mutually related. Thus, congruent with the literature, the relevance of an adequate design of group tasks and especially the importance of providing employees with autonomy and feed-back, have been verified. Moreover, the development of positive group processes allows the

improvement of group efficacy, increasing the explicative power of task characteristics. Group-norm orientation, communication, cohesion, and efficient conflict management have been shown to be excellent predictors of satisfaction and performance. In essence, our data confirm with real data, the importance of psychological intervention in the implementation of teams.

Before concluding, it must be pointed out that one of the main contributions of this article is also a limitation: the characteristics of the analyzed sample and the work performed. It has been very interesting to have manual workers and evaluate them in real situations. Nevertheless, and as seems logical, this has brought about certain restrictions that could condition the results (group size, sample homogeneity, measures, etc.) and that should be taken into account in future studies. The demands of the company managers forced us to adjust to their reality and review some of the assumptions we were going to start on as researchers; however, we are thankful for the opportunity we were offered and we believe it was a very enriching interaction for everyone.

If we contemplate the current situation of the companies that participated in the study, it can be observed that one of these, despite its good results, ceased to be a supplier of the multinational company and disappeared; another relocated and the rest continue to work as a team. In general, teams in our country are implemented in multinationals and their direct suppliers, although they have not been expanded to the industrial sector, and perhaps this is one of the reasons why productivity levels have not improved as in other European countries. We believe that, in the highly competitive current situation, companies should promote these practices given that, as we have verified, they are very motivating for employees and, if well managed, they aid in the improvement of organizational outcomes.

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