

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Teamwork Through the Team Context, Morale, and Norms From the Team Members' Perspective

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Abstract – Organisations face the challenge of adapting to rapid change in a world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). They need to seize opportunities faster than their competitors and are therefore increasingly relying on teams to tackle complex tasks and solve challenging problems. The aim of this paper is to identify team members' perceptions on the scales of Context, Morale and Norms of the Team Assessment Survey II (TAS-II) in 85 Slovak work teams - important for effective collaboration. Examination of responses to the individual items using “Heartbeat analysis” revealed relatively fewer favourable votes for all but 2 of 9 items on the Norms scale, for Conflicts and Celebration (Morale scale) and Assumptions (Context scale), in contrast to the Safeguard and Accountability (Norms scale) and Understanding (Context scale) items Proud, Cooperation and Trust from the Morale scale. We discuss the possible causes. The results provide new insights and help to understand how important organisational context, team morale and norms are for the effectiveness of teamwork, as they can promote resilience, sustainable development and competitiveness.

Keywords – TAS-II, team L&D, teamwork, team morale, norms, organisational context.

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1. Introduction

Turbulent times full of unpredictable changes require agility, responsiveness, flexibility and the ability to quickly recognise and seize opportunities. Among the critical challenges facing organisations today are the readiness to reshape, sustain and resist, adapt faster and learn more effectively than the competition and deliver outstanding innovative results to meet stakeholder needs. As a result, there is an increasing emphasis on networking and close teamwork - organisations rely on teams to perform various strategic tasks. The world is changing in almost all areas, and change can be seen as both an opportunity and a threat, depending on how it is viewed and approached. Lopez-Gamero and Molina-Azorin [1] have identified competitive opportunities within (e.g. learning and knowledge sharing, agility) and outside organisations (reputation with stakeholders). Organisations need and demand proactive employee behaviour that enables learning and process improvement and encourages team activities (e.g. mutual discussion of new ideas with colleagues, collaboration, experimentation, etc.) [2], [3], [4]. Understanding employees' perceptions and attitudes towards the effectiveness of teamwork is important for collaboration, resilience and organisational agility. We agree with Lengnick-Hall, Beck and Lengnick-Hall [5] that there is a link between individual and collective organisational resilience and that it can be trained and that developing an organisational resilience capacity requires a set of knowledge at the individual level that includes skills, capabilities and other attributes that are systematically developed and integrated through the human resource management (HRM) system. The study [6] explains that organisational agility is positively influenced and directly affected by organisational learning. Collaborative learning starts at the team level and can benefit from synergies through team learning and knowledge sharing between team members [7], [8].

There is no theory that explains learning in all its details [9]. It is important that we first focus on understanding the person - the learner. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences states that people have specific learning styles and possess a different range of abilities, talents and strengths in particular areas [10]. Appropriate support for each individual helps to create a workplace of learning. Psychological safety can foster trust, enhance confidence, creativity, talent flow, engagement, job satisfaction and motivation rather than focussing on a quick productivity boost. A people-centred approach will provide much more sustainable solutions. Kayes and Kolb [11] affirm that learning is key to six aspects of team development, including purpose, membership, leadership, process, action and context. Previous studies [12], [13] conclude that important factors for workplace innovation and innovative work behaviour are a clear and shared mission, a diversity of talents and backgrounds, and employee trust and empowerment. The study [14] shows that workplace culture has a significant impact on performance, innovation, creativity and engagement, or is most strongly associated with them. Many scholars and research studies [15], [16], [17], [18], [19] focus on the key characteristics and dynamics of team processes that determine/influence effective team performance and job satisfaction, which are important for achieving competitive advantage.

Team learning is a collective phenomenon and thus it is extremely important to focus on team development and identify the key factors for the ability to work together [20]. Therefore, we focus on objective factors that influence individual and team development. Harvey *et al.*, [21] and Lazzara *et al.*, [22] say about training that organisations need to ensure that the skills acquired are developed and used in practise/daily work - this is a safeguard against knowledge amortisation. Regular training encourages collaboration, knowledge transfer and experimentation to increase creativity and improve the ability to innovate in order to face the new reality with enthusiasm and readiness. A broader organisational and team context and a sense of place have a strong impact on team dynamics, performance and effectiveness. In line with Curphy and Hogan [23], internal and external stakeholders include, for example, customers, competitors, regulators, suppliers, the wider organisation and other internal teams. Curphy, Nilsen and Hogan [24] acknowledge that the nature and strength of situational factors can vary by team and that team context influences goals, composition, team member selection and training.

The effectiveness of teams is not a given, but depends on how the team learns and develops over time [19].

The recent study [25] claims that the team context and learning culture, although not directly related to team performance, contribute to the dynamic capability of the organisation. Brion, Mote and Sabatier [26] found a strong moderating effect of competencies on innovative ambidexterity and recommend that organisations adopt long-term practises that encourage risk-taking and creativity, thus creating an organisational context that fosters innovative ambidexterity. A study [27] emphasises the importance of considering the team context as it has a direct impact on the initial conditions under which the team operates, which in turn influences team performance. Guzzo and Dickson [28] and Wendler [29] have also presented compelling data on the power of context.

An openly communicated context and mission can help, even when the transition is difficult, and improve team morale. Morale in a team is influenced by many variables, such as organisational culture, the personality and role model/behaviour of the leader, employee values and attitudes, and relationships can improve or reduce teamwork effectiveness of teamwork. The characteristics of the organisational context can promote positive attitudes and competences among employees and lead to OCB, which facilitates the functioning of the organisation as a social system [30]. The study [31], which examined the impact of team members' moral behaviour on team dynamics, proved that prosocial behaviour towards peer norms is positively associated with task, social cohesion and collective efficacy. The results of the study [32] show that team morale explains a quarter of the variance in project success. Challenging tasks or taking on more responsibility improves work engagement - this contributes to mastery, learning and motivation [33]. Norms, a strong purpose, shared core values and principles (co-)create our social identity, ensure appropriate and expected behaviour within the team and are characterised by predictability, accountability, regulation of behaviour, transparency and, in the case of non-compliance with agreed standards, peer pressure. All teams have formal and informal processes that determine and influence their collaboration, accountability, communication, decision-making and procedures [34]. Team norms determine and guide the behaviour and attitudes of team members. Each team tends to establish its own unwritten social rules. These differ depending on the type of team, the degree of interdependence and the extent of peer reliance. However, norms are not just formal rules. Norms ensure that a team uses efficient processes and procedures to achieve its goals. It happens that many people have selfishly motivated tendencies that have a negative impact on teamwork, interaction and the achievement of team goals.

Therefore, the most important task of a leader is to inspire others and introduce people to the common organisational mission and avoid alienation from the work. Furthermore, accepting social team norms strengthens teamwork as an overall. This also supports the findings of study [35] on the importance of emotional expression and learning social norms. Teams can reduce the potential for dysfunctionality by establishing clear norms. These are rules that define a small number of things that members must always do and a small number that they must never do. Setting such norms is particularly important when team members operate across different national, regional or organisational cultures and may not share the same understanding and perception of (e.g. the importance of punctuality, etc.) [16]. Kniffin *et al.* [36] recommend for future research that leaders need to understand the social norms in the workplace/team and know when to use tightness (in crises or to protect against threats) and looseness for creativity and innovation.

2. Methodology

The main objective was to measure current level of the context, morale and norms scales in Slovak work teams. We used a quantitative research design. The TAS-II questionnaire (Team Assessment Survey II) is a practical (auto)diagnostic instrument that provides feedback on the strengths, weaknesses and benchmarks of teams [23]. Descriptive statistics were applied to the opportunistic sample of 85 work teams

($n = 835$; 740 team members; 75 team leaders; 11 team supervisors; 9 others) from different economic sectors of the Slovak Republic, which were surveyed online using the Slovak localisation of the TAS-II questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 8 interrelated scales (context, mission, talent, norms, buy-in, power, morale, and results) that diagnosed strengths and weaknesses of teamwork effectiveness. Participants expressed their perceptions of team effectiveness by measuring 41 items and focus on teamwork as a whole. The average size of a team was 9.82 (median = 9; SD = 4.58) and ranged from 3 to 25 team members.

Respondents chose one option on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 - strongly disagree to 5 - strongly agree). The data was collected in the period from 12/2014 to 3/2021. The psychometric qualities of the Slovak localisation were partially tested on the sample of $n = 459$ Slovak respondents (403 team members, 43 team leaders, 4 team superiors and 9 respondents from the "Others" category) [37]. The reliability of scales (as estimated by McDonald's omega (ω) as between .72 and .87 and the factor validity was indicated by an RMSEA of 0.033, CFI of .934, TLI of .928.

The following descriptive statistics provide information about teams by the employer's primary industry and have been calculated only for respondents in the role of a team member, as we take into account that their perceptions (of context, mission and norms) may influence their ability to learn and cooperate effectively as a team.

Table 1. Data aggregated by teams' and team members trade sector

Industry	Number of teams	Teams (%)	Number of team members	Team members (%)
Shared Services	30	35.3	336	40.2
Financial	18	21.2	153	18.3
Consultant/Professional Services	8	9.4	84	10.1
IT/Telco	7	8.2	72	8.6
Manufacturing	7	8.2	58	6.9
Non-profit	4	4.7	50	6.0
Media/Advertising	3	3.5	16	1.9
Gastro	2	2.4	15	1.8
Pharmaceutical	2	2.4	15	1.8
Energy	1	1.2	14	1.7
Printing	1	1.2	9	1.1
Public/State administration	1	1.2	8	1.0
Unknown	1	1.2	5	0.6

Table 2. Distribution of scores on three TAS-II scales - related to teams' ability to learn and cooperate effectively

Scale	N	Missing	Mean	SD	SE	Q1	Med	Q3	MIN	MAX
Context	835	6	3.87	0.72	0.025	3.33	4.00	4.33	1.00	5
Morale	835	4	3.86	0.70	0.024	3.40	4.00	4.40	1.40	5
Norms	835	3	3.77	0.63	0.022	3.33	3.89	4.22	1.25	5

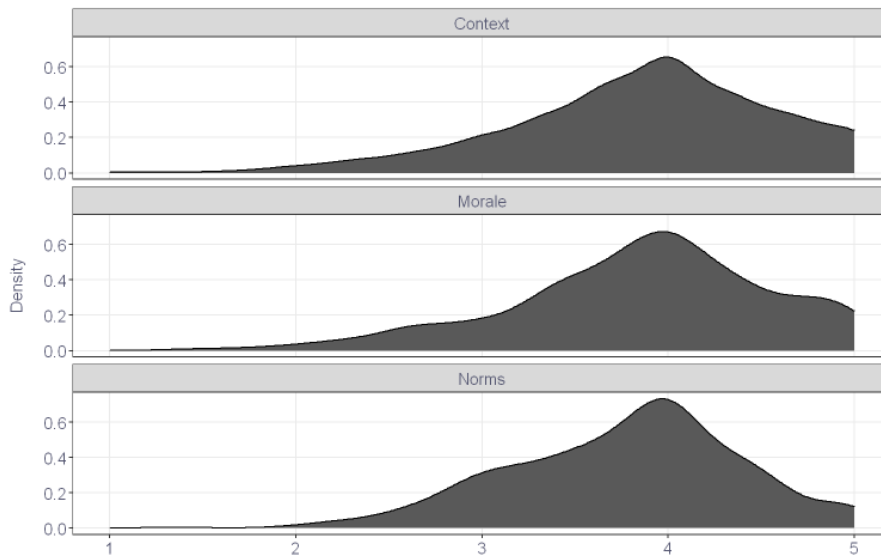


Figure 1. Distribution of scores on TAS-II scales related to teams' ability to learn and cooperate effectively

The data is analysed through the descriptive statistics of un/favourable responses and the "heartbeat" analysis. We use the "heartbeat analysis" of the responses to the individual items of the context, morale, and norms scale, which takes into account the fact that the participants differ in the central tendency of their responses and enable better pinpointing of responses that express respondents' positive and negative attitudes. The "Up" and "Down" votes are calculated as follows: First, the average response and the standard deviation of the responses are computed for each participant. Then the participants' responses are converted into z-

scores, and if these are greater or less than 1 or -1, the answer is counted as an "Up" or "Down" vote.

3. Results

The descriptive analysis of the study sample shows that the results are generally quite satisfactory (Figures 2 - 4 with the distribution of (un)favourable and neutral responses to each item). The visualisation of the responses to each item of the context, morale and norms scale (4-5 are counted as favourable responses, value 3 is counted as neutral and unfavourable responses are 1-2).

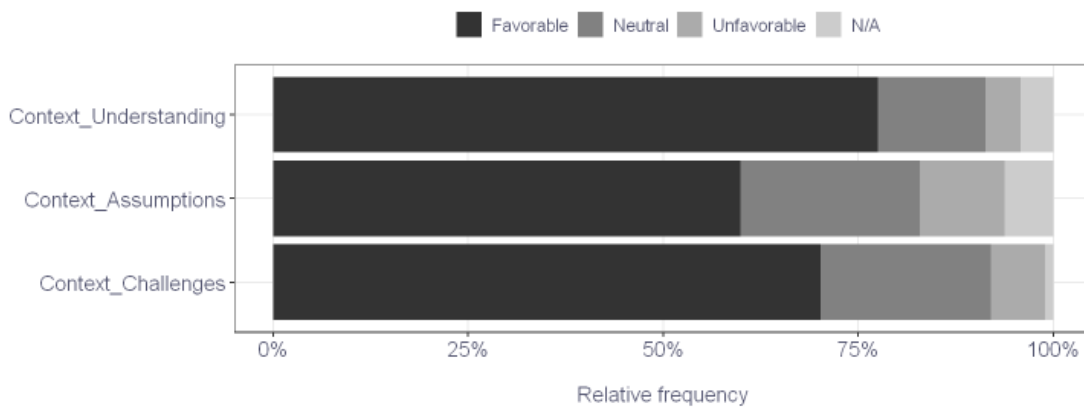


Figure 2. Distribution of favourable responses to individual context scale items

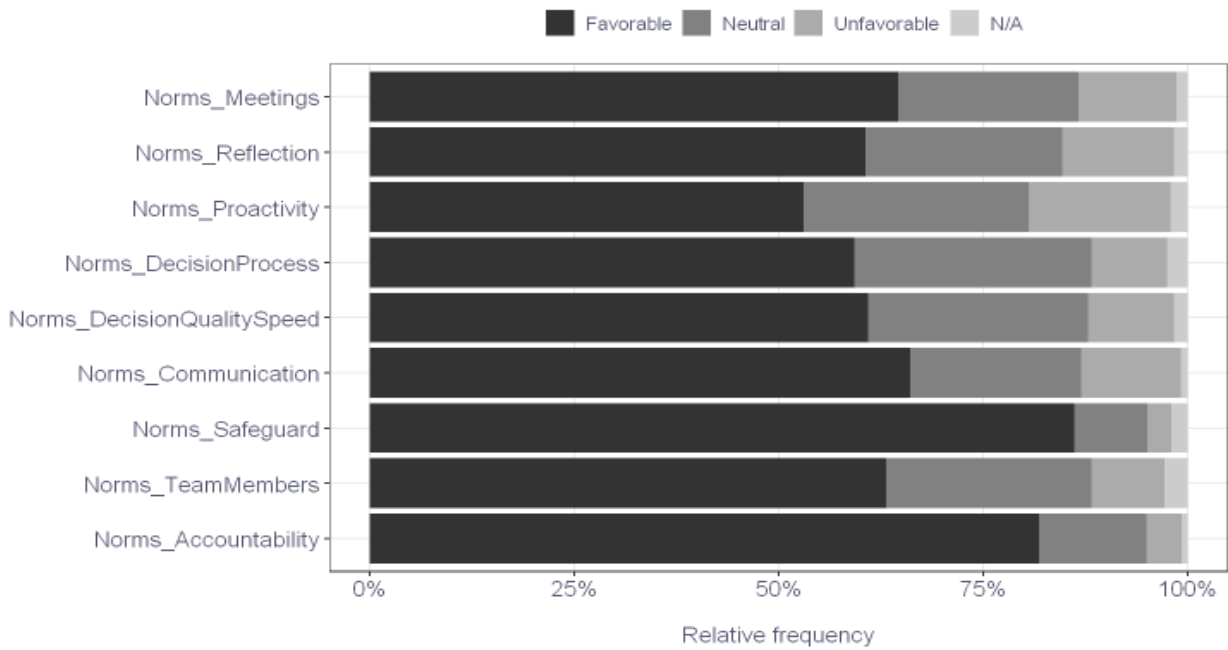


Figure 3. Distribution of favourable responses to individual norms scale items

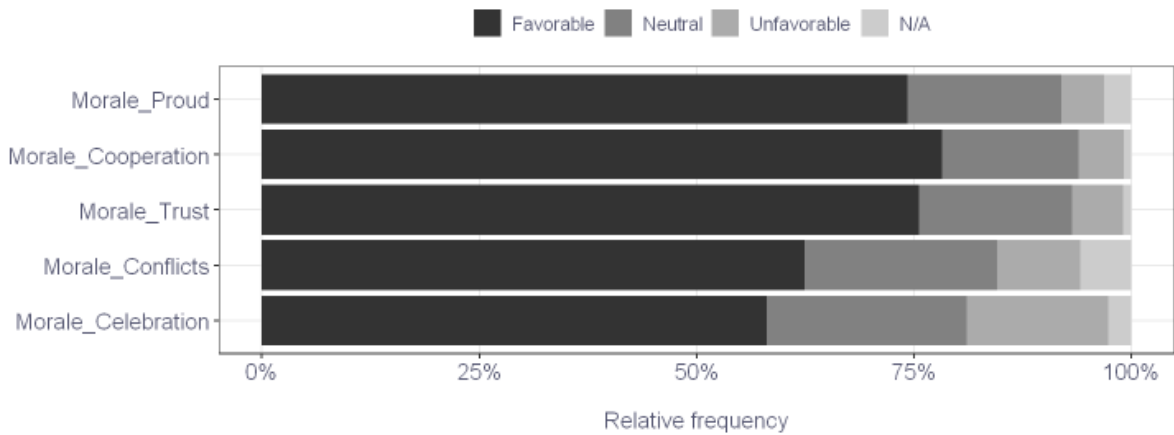


Figure 4. Distribution of favourable responses to individual morale scale items

The “heartbeat analysis” of the responses to the individual items of the context, morale, and norms scale revealed some unfavourable votes on several items. The votes were less favourably skewed for 7 out of 9 items in the norms scale (with the exception of the accountability and safeguard items), conflicts

and celebration (morale scale) and assumptions (context scale) items, in contrast to the safeguard (norms scale), accountability (norms scale) and understanding (context scale) items proud, cooperation and trust from the morale scale.

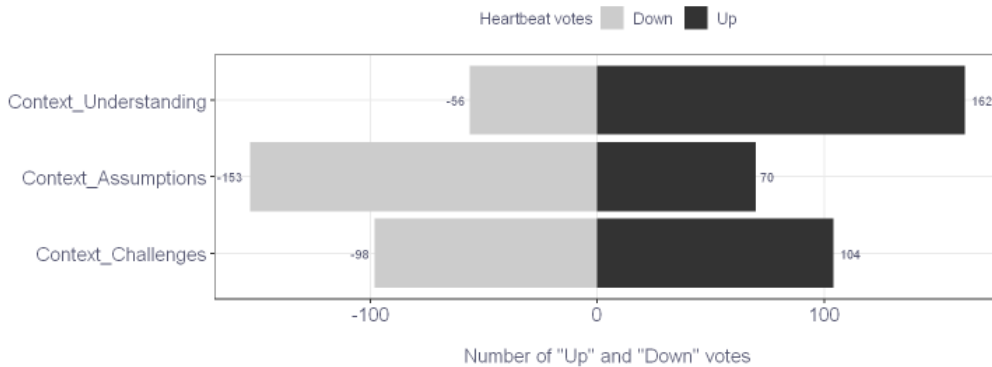


Figure 5. Number of “Up” and “Down” votes for individual context scale items

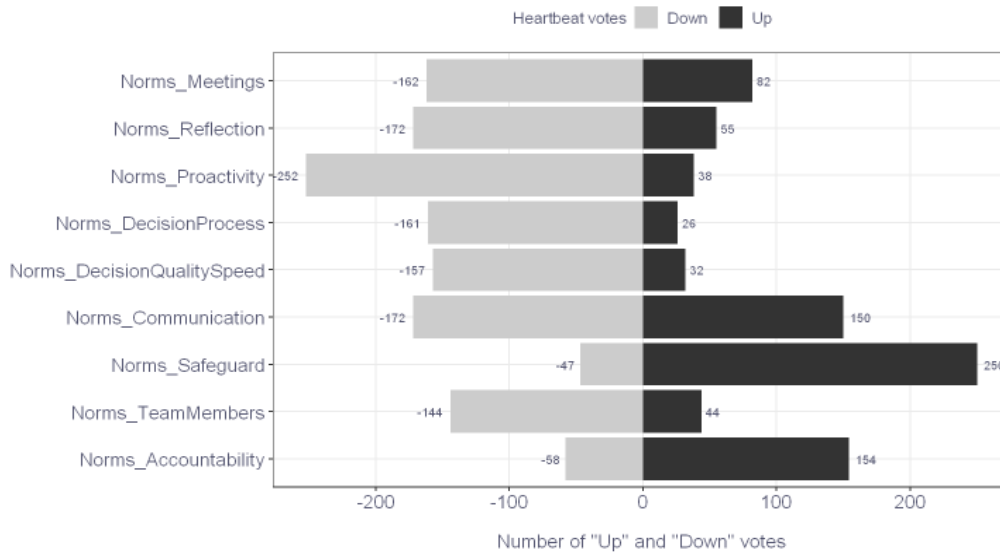


Figure 6. Number of "Up" and "Down" votes for individual norms items

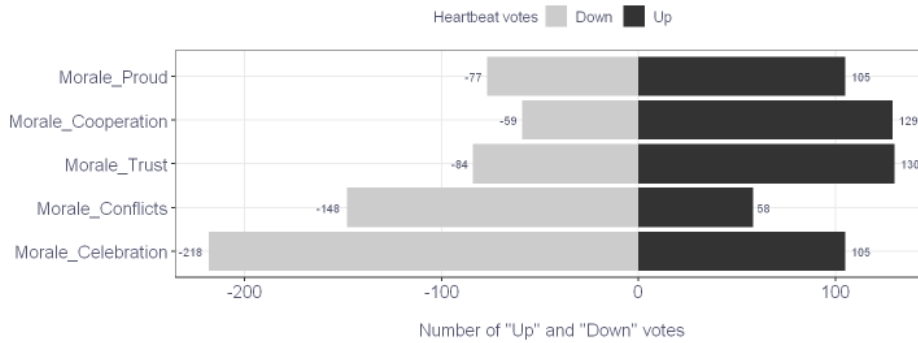


Figure 7. Number of "Up" and "Down" votes for individual morale scale items

Table 3. Proportion of "Up" and "Down" votes for context, morale and norms scale items. Items are listed in descending order of the proportion of "Down" votes

Items	Down	Up	Down Proportion	Up Proportion	N Votes
Norms_Proactivity	252	38	0.87	0.13	290
Norms_DecisionProcess	161	26	0.86	0.14	187
Norms_DecisionQualitySpeed	157	32	0.83	0.17	189
Norms_TeamMembers	144	44	0.77	0.23	188
Norms_Reflection	172	55	0.76	0.24	227
Morale_Conflicts	148	58	0.72	0.28	206
Context_Assumptions	153	70	0.69	0.31	223
Morale_Celebration	218	105	0.67	0.33	323
Norms_Meetings	162	82	0.66	0.34	244
Norms_Communication	172	150	0.53	0.47	322
Context_Challenges	98	104	0.49	0.51	202
Morale_Proud	77	105	0.42	0.58	182
Morale_Trust	84	130	0.39	0.61	214
Morale_Cooperation	59	129	0.31	0.69	188
Norms_Accountability	58	154	0.27	0.73	212
Context_Understanding	56	162	0.26	0.74	218
Norms_Safeguard	47	250	0.16	0.8	297

4. Discussion

We were interested in team members' perceptions of teamwork effectiveness on the TAS-II scales of context, norms and morale to learn about the context in which the team operates (e.g. their assumptions, challenges, etc). Whether the norms/rules for team meetings, communication, decision-making and accountability help or hinder the team's performance and how the team's morale, psychological safety in the team and effectiveness in dealing with conflict are like. The respondents' perception of teamwork effectiveness of teamwork in the context, mission and norms scales shows that the votes were least favourable for 7 out of 9 items in the norms scale (with the exception of the accountability and safeguard items), for conflicts and celebration (morale scale) and for assumptions (context scale), in contrast to the safeguard (norms scale), accountability (norms scale) and understanding (context scale) items proud, cooperation and trust from the morale scale.

The results indicate that team members perceive the processes between team members in handing over work as inadequate, as well as the regularity of reviewing assumptions and (self)reflecting on their successes and failures. They also point to a lack of meetings for planning and management to use time efficiently and to communicate directly and openly. Obvious displeasure is also evident in the morale-conflict and morale-celebration items. Teams do not take the time to resolve conflicts between team members or celebrate team successes on a regular basis. Although the results suggest that communication within the team is not sufficient and effective. The data shows that members do not disclose confidential information and have a shared understanding of the team context. In contrast, there were "Up" votes, which stood for strengths in the areas of morale-proud, morale-trust, morale-cooperation, norms-accountability, context-understanding and norms-safeguard.

Team members need to be open-minded in order to develop a shared self-image and create appropriate conversational space, respect different points of view, see the bigger picture and have a desire to improve and grow [38]. Positive work experiences and using one's strengths at work contribute to internal customers' job satisfaction and happiness at work [39]. Operational freedom and diversity can increase the effectiveness of teamwork, but they can also limit it, depending on individual preferences. Setting team standards affects the core of the norms for collaboration, i.e. the team's level of proactivity (whether it spends enough time working on proactive issues, the decision-making process, and the quality and speed of decisions) [23].

Although the drivers of effective team collaboration consist of three of Hackman's conditions - compelling direction, strong structure, and a supportive context - they remain particularly critical to team success [16]. Furthermore, the study [40] supports the importance of psychological safety and norm clarity being positively related to job satisfaction and team performance, but team norm clarity is an even stronger predictor than psychological safety. It is closely linked to the context of the team and creates essential conditions from which all team members can benefit.

5. Conclusion

Complexity places new expectations on teamwork, leadership style, organisational culture (norms), the right balance between novelty and stability and the psychological empowerment that can reduce ambiguity. Organisational factors can either foster the development of talent, the quality of relationships and the confidence that people can achieve common goals in their own way, or they can inhibit creativity, hinder and slow down autonomy and innovative. This paper contributes to a better understanding of the role of context, norms and morale in workplace collaboration and sheds light on team members' perceptions of the effectiveness of teamwork in these areas.

Our research has confirmed the gap in empowerment (norms related to proactivity, speed and quality of decision-making processes), but also the lack of communication, norm reflection, meetings, team celebrations and the resolution of team members' morale conflicts. Despite the deficits, they rate the items morale-proud, morale-trust, morale-cooperation, norms-accountability, context-understanding, and norms-safeguard items as favourable.

Our results confirm that it is important to focus on team morale, organisational values and norms as they can promote team learning. It is crucial to create a suitable environment for teamwork and appropriate working conditions, a culture that enables continuous learning over time and the ability to make decisions and apply what has been learnt in practise. The further implications for practise are to focus primarily on the communication of the teams', their needs, the observation of current team norms and morale as well as their context and to analyse the situation. Based on regular measurements of the effectiveness of teamwork, skill deficits are addressed through appropriate training programmes aimed at closing skill/competence gaps. Self-direction is a trait that develops gradually over time and can also be influenced by motivation in a particular learning environment and situation.

It is possible to acquire the ability to learn independently so that one becomes more self-directed in various areas of life by learning how to learn, how to perceive and how to act. It is important to break down the tasks and find the right solution through the current perception of teamwork in order to achieve desirable results. Reward what is valuable in and for the organisation (e.g. prosocial innovative behaviour, team values, team learning and development, collaboration, organisational commitment, etc.). In this way we can influence the perception of others and help to manifest norms, a clear mission, internal values and a sense of purpose, as well as strengthening the psychological contract and commitment to the organisation. We emphasise continuous team learning (e.g. through appropriate training, experiential learning, improvement actions, etc.), experimentation with different case studies/scenarios and trusting relationships as these are important for knowledge sharing and provide feedback at a broad level. The limitation of the study is the relatively small sample, so that the results cannot be generalised. There is no localisation of TAS-II for the Slovak population yet.

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