



# A Conceptual Framework for Team Social Capital as Basis for Organizational Team Synergy

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to outline a conceptual framework of team social capital as a basis for reaching organizational team synergy. The dimensions of team social capital and the basic conditions required for organizational team synergy enable the extension of current model of team social capital by including of other variables. Today's managers must consider these variables since the team tends to be the basic structural unit of current organizations and synergy, the key to achieving high performance in global competition.

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## 1. Introduction

Organizational teams, as work groups which has attained a higher stage of development, constitute an area of outstanding interest for modern organizations given the potential benefits they have compared to individual work: they are best suited to solve complex problems requiring different knowledge and opinions, make effective use of individual resources, encourage delegation because provides the assurance of the control of its members' behavior through their own norms, facilitate learning within them, promote creativity and innovation etc.

The transformation of organizational team potentiality into practical results, respectively into performance, requires a dynamic approach of synergy that is specific to a complex and opened system as team, especially since in many modern organizations team is the basic work unit (team-based organization). Such a dynamic approach involves considering team social capital and analyzing its components in relation with other factors that determine team performance such as motivation, job satisfaction and team leadership.

To highlight the conditions necessary to achieve synergy and the extent to which they are found in the team social capital, the present paper is structured as follows: the first part presents the concept of synergy and the organizational team synergy considering firstly Hackman's model and Conner's researches. Then follows a brief overview of the concept of social capital in general and of the team social capital in particular with the emphasis on the current model of team social capital and the proposal of an extended model given the conditions necessary to achieve synergies identified by Hackman and other researchers.

The consistent part of the paper is dedicated to particularization of the components of dimensions that form the team social capital in order to argue the proposed model both theoretically, as a framework for future research and practical, for those interested in team synergy issues and its importance in getting remarkable performance.

Articles and studies on which this paper is based can be found both in the area of management and organizational behavior as well as in the area of sociology and organizational psychology.

## 2. Defining synergy and team synergy

### 2.1. Definitions for synergy

Popularization of the term *synergy* belongs to Buckminster Fuller according to whom synergy refers to "means behavior of whole systems unpredicted by the behavior of their parts taken separately" [www6].

The concept of *synergy* is inextricably linked to notions of process and information system [29, 166]. Synergy means the global, nonlinear, cooperative and / or competitive effect of the parties in order to achieve the characteristics of the whole, unlike energy, which is associated with separate effect of the parties and it is built up additive, linear, by within the whole [8, 170].

Definitions less sophisticated and more focused on the positive purpose of self-organizing subsystems (in this case, teams) are provided by dictionaries, according to which synergy is:

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- the interaction of two or more agents or forces so that their combined effect is greater than the sum of their individual effects [www7];
- the enhanced result of two or more people, groups or organizations working together. In other words, one and one equals three! It comes from the Greek “synergia”, which means joint work and cooperative action. The word is used quite often to mean that combining forces produces a better product [www3];
- the hypostasis in which two or more entities working together in a very fruitful way that produces a greater effect than the sum of the individual effects, also formulated as “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” [www5].

## 2.2. Team synergy

*Team synergy* is the combined cooperative action within the team that generates additional energy beyond what could be achieved at individual level. The result of the interaction between team members will always be different from what could be done by team members on an individual basis because people “energize” and inspire each other when working together, and the diversity of ideas and openness to these ideas is the starting point in identifying new solutions and creative approaches.

According to Hackman, synergy refers to group-level phenomena that (a) emerge from the interaction among members and (b) affect how well a group is able to deal with the demands and opportunities in its performance situation [13, 24].

Hackman has proposed a model that underlies many current research regarding team performance and its influence factors. In this model, synergy is considered one of the conditions necessary to ensure effectiveness of the group (along with the design group and organizational context) and take different forms depending on the dimensions considered in the model, namely [13, 23]:

- a) the level of effort group members collectively expend carrying out task work;
- b) the amount of knowledge and skill members bring to bear on the group task;
- c) the appropriateness to the task of the performance strategies used by the group in its work.

Generally, achieving synergy effects focuses on two main areas of action, namely:

- group members can find innovative ways to avoid “process losses” and thereby reduce waste of time and misuse of members' time, energy and talent;
- members can interact synergistically to create new internal resources that can be used in group work, capabilities that did not exist before the group create them.

By “process” we mean all team interactions towards the desired performance or exceeding it. According to Hackman [13, 28-29, 33, 38-39]:

a) Regarding group effort, respectively the behavior related to task completion, group synergy can contribute to group effectiveness:

- by minimizing “process losses”, which refers to insufficient coordination and decrease or loss of motivation;
- by “synergistic gains” or process gains, respectively, the shared commitment to the team and team work itself.

b) In terms of knowledge and skills used in the task group accomplishment, group synergy refers to:

- diminishing inappropriate assessment of individual contributions (avoiding the losses related to the use of members' expertise and to the credibility enjoyed by their ideas in the group in the situation where are taken into account factors that have nothing to do with the task, such as demographic attributes or behavioral style);
- fostering collective learning.

c) Regarding the application of adequate strategies, group synergy takes into account:

- minimizing slippage in strategy implementation;
- creating innovative strategic plans (when group members work in a creative environment, interesting and useful ideas can emerge, ideas that did not exist before the group invented them).

Also, Conner's research led to the conclusion that the basic elements to develop synergy in a group are (a) willingness, arising from the sharing of common goals and interdependence (i.e. mutual dependence and genuine cooperation), and (b) ability, growing from member and group empowerment and participative involvement [7]. Therefore, there are four prerequisites which managers and leaders must begin with in order to achieve team synergy and they refer to [23, 91]:

- (1) seek, create and continue to focus on clear common goals for the group;
- (2) operate interdependently in the group in a genuinely cooperative and mutually dependent fashion;
- (3) function in the group so as to empower all members. People are empowered when they feel that they have something of value to contribute and that what they offer may have a bearing on the final outcome;

(4) provide participative involvement where members are expected, encouraged and free to openly and fully share their skills, knowledge and ideas in a balanced approach in the group.

Synergistic relationships are both powerful and productive, but most groups do not function synergistically. This is mainly due to some group phenomena well known in the scientific literature as arising from imbalances in social capital composition of the team (such as the phenomenon of group thinking as a result of “extreme” cohesion of the team).

Thus, obtaining positive team synergy refers essentially to diminishing the process losses and increasing the process gains. These two directions of action involve, on the one hand, a good coordination and a high degree of team cohesion and on the other hand, the existence of collaboration between members, mutual trust and members’ engagement toward task team. The purpose of an organizational team is mostly the achievement of a complex task that requires knowledge, skills and abilities which varies in a highest degree and their valorization requires continuous deployment of learning processes.

Collective learning, specific to team work, derives from knowledge sharing between team members and lead to generation of a “common fund” of information and knowledge which remains in the control of the team regardless of changes that occur (the departure of some members, the arrival of new ones etc.). These “ingredients” (and not only these) required to obtain team synergy constitute the elements that embody the team social capital, as we shall see in the following sections.

### **3. Team social capital**

#### **3.1. Short definition of social capital**

*Social capital* refers to the quality of the relationship between people in a community, to the way in which these individuals carry out joint activities, the collective compliance with collective norms and the reliability of the social environment as a source of rights and obligations for community members.

Although the social capital influences individual behaviors, it remains a collective phenomenon or a group phenomenon. Because it is relational and is generated by social networks, social capital does not involve dyads or small groups, but large groups, communities, neighborhoods, ethnic or national groups [www2].

However, *social capital* “refers to features of social organization such as social networks, norms and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit”, the “sum of actual and virtual resources that accrue at individual level and group level by virtue of involvement in a sustainable network of relationships of mutual acquaintance” [www1].

#### **3.2. Current acceptance of the concept of team social capital**

Recent studies use the term of team social capital, which includes three dimensions: a structural dimension (for example, cohesion), a relational dimension (for example, trust) and a cognitive dimension (related to a common code, paradigm thinking or shared mental models) [12].

At team level, social capital is embedded in the linkages and relationships between individuals and the actions and behaviors that help to build its three dimensions provide benefits to the entire team [28].

Several researchers have suggested that social capital is an intangible resource team, which can have a major influence on overall performance, and it is all the most valuable as “creates value, it is difficult to imitate, rare to find and very sustainable”[2].

Finally, capital is critical for maintaining organizational competitive advantage because it forms the bases for trust and cooperation within and between work groups.

#### **3.3. The extended framework for analyzing the team social capital**

Although the social capital is intangible, the variables that compound it obviously produce consequences [www2]; these consequences are evaluated in the literature dedicated to the study of small groups, in general, and of organizational teams, in particular, to demonstrate their influence on various group phenomena – the field of sociology and social psychology – and on team performance – the field of management and organizational behavior.

Taking into account the characteristics of social capital and its dimensions, formed from the interaction of team members – in the extent of performing the activities needed for the task team – we can say that synergy effects, as maximizing the positive aspects related to performance and minimizing the negative ones, are placed at this conceptual level.

Along with the above-mentioned components, a broad perspective on social capital allows the inclusion of:

- coordination in structural dimension of social capital;
- collaboration and engagement in relational dimension of social capital;
- transactive memory in cognitive dimension of social capital.

Figure 1. summarizes the main components of team social capital, including team norms, which are developed as the team grows up. Regarding the behaviors involved in norms setting, we noticed that norms are deeply dependent on other elements included in the team social capital, especially on team cohesion, and therefore we will not treat them separately in the following lines. Then, the order of team social capital components in figure 1. is not random, but can be different according to team needs at a certain moment because, in fact, all these elements influence and potentiate each other.

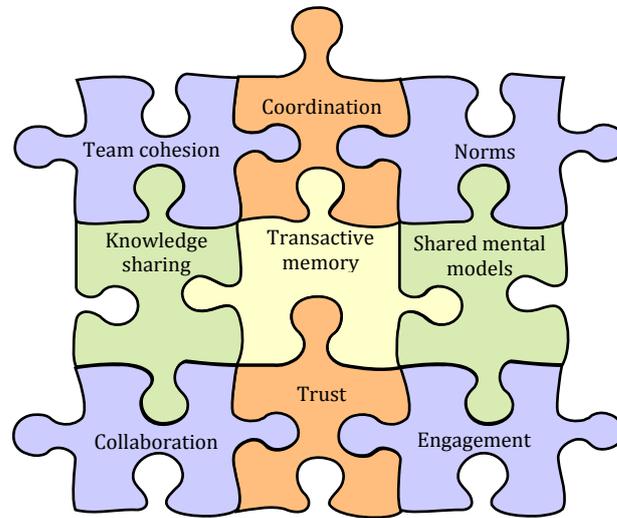


Figure 1. The extended framework of the team social capital

#### 4. The team social capital dimensions and team synergy

##### 4.1. The structural dimension: cohesion and coordination

The basic components included in the structural dimension of social capital are team cohesion and team or group coordination. Regarding the specific coordination at team level we talk about mutual monitoring and back-up behaviors. (figure 2)

Group *cohesion* develops closely related to its normative system, but is not limited to it, so we can differentiate three types of cohesion [9, 316]:

- a normative and cultural cohesion, which refers to common attitudes, rituals, norms and values of the group;
- a functional cohesion, which refers to the operation of the group and depends on the adopted organizational structure, communication networks, and nature of the task;
- a socio-emotional cohesion which corresponds to affinities between participants.

“Cohesion of a group is constantly associated with more intense communication between group members” [26, 108] facilitating cooperation, which leads to a high degree of consensus reached in cohesive groups. In these groups with high morale, self esteem and mutual respect give rise to feelings of security and trust which promote the involvement and engagement.

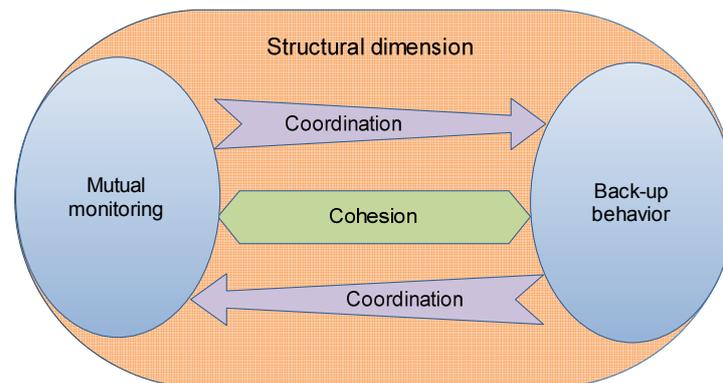
At the same time, however, cohesion of norms which can cause prejudice to goals achievement or which become obsolete in relation to environmental requirements can impair group effectiveness or adaptability. The pursuit of consensus at any cost neutralizes critical spirit, which may harm especially the search for solutions to complex problems or the decision making, creating the well-known phenomenon of “group thinking” [9, 312] or “group think”.

Scholars have focused on the role of cohesion as a mechanism linking team composition to team performance. To a certain degree, this focus on cohesion is not surprising given meta-analytic evidence supporting a positive relationship with major aspects of team functioning and performance [4]. Barrick et al., for example, argued that social cohesion acts as a general indicator of many of the intragroup processes that transform team inputs into outcomes [21], stating specifically that “cohesion reflects synergistic interactions between team members, including positive communication, conflict resolution, and effective workload sharing” [3, 382].

*Coordination* is described as the orchestration of the sequence and timing of interdependent actions. It involves pacing activities within determined temporal boundaries [25]. Coordination is a team level process, and can take place explicitly, implicitly, or in some combination of the two [31], and the two behaviors which provides it are the mutual monitoring and back-up behaviors.

*Mutual monitoring* is a cognitive process in which team members observed the actions and behaviors of their peers, team members, in order to identify and correct deviations from performance. Formally defined, it is the “team members' ability to keep track of fellow team members' work while carrying out their own to ensure that everything is running as expected and to ensure that they are following procedures correctly” [31]. Mutual monitoring facilitates the coordination of actions through perception and mitigation of deviations from desired performance.

Team members participating in mutual monitoring perceive when other members need help and subsequently engage in assisting behaviors known as *back-up behavior* [31]. Back-up behavior can take many forms, such as providing verbal feedback or aid granted in an operation or in a completion of a task that belongs to a colleague. If a team acknowledged that a team member is overloaded, work can be transferred to underutilized team members in order to balance the workload.



**Figure 2. The structural dimension of team social capital**

#### **4.2. The relational dimension: collaboration, trust and engagement**

The relational dimension of team social capital refers to collaboration, trust and engagement. (figure 3.)

*Collaboration* is seen as an activity where a task that requires a lot of work is carried out by a team. Often, the task is accomplishable only if collective resources are assembled [11].

Successful collaboration requires effectiveness in a number of areas: cognitive synchronization/reconciliation; developing shared meaning; developing shared memories; negotiation; communication of data, knowledge information; planning of activities, tasks, methodologies and management of tasks [19].

A fundamental premise of collaboration in the workplace is that teams whose members work together will be more productive than teams whose members are focused on themselves and therefore more concerned with their individual results than the group results [24].

*Trust* is an essential element in the functioning of the team and can be enhanced through good communication and enthusiasm [1].

Trust has two distinct dimensions: trusting, which means openness and sharing, and trustworthiness, which means support and acceptance [15, 3]. These dimensions are distinct constructs and low trust is not the same as mistrust. But even if they are different or not, mistrust is a primary barrier to collaboration [15, 4], irrespective of direction in which it manifests: members' mutual trust, members' trust in leaders or leaders in the team members' skills.

A high level of trust leads to “synergy and performance” [10, 16]. Therefore, it is in the interest of each leader to develop a high level of trust in relation to his or her subordinates [18, 12]. Most of the existing studies state that the process of building trust between leaders and subordinates lies in the hands of leaders. Thus, at team level, taking into consideration the task team and the members' expertise, the distributed leadership is recommended in order to get a high level of trust.

*Engagement* is the foundation for synergy in the team, and teams that have members with a high-level of engagement and motivation tend to put more effort into their work [30, 17].

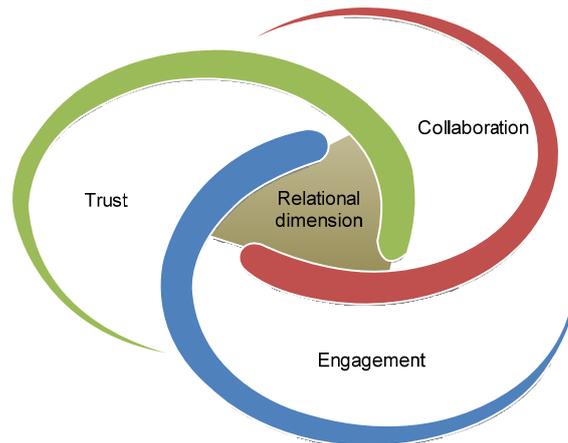
Based on his ethnographic study, Kahn suggested that three psychological conditions serve as antecedents of personal engagement: psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability [17]:

Psychological meaningfulness refers to one's belief regarding how meaningful it is to bring oneself to a role performance. It is associated with incentives to engage and the perception that one is receiving a return on investment of one's “self-in-role”. Psychological meaningfulness is achieved when people feel worthwhile, valuable, and that they matter. The three factors that found influenced meaningfulness were task characteristics, role characteristics and work interactions.

Psychological safety involves one's perception of how safe it is to bring oneself to a role performance without fear of damaging his self-image, status or career. It is associated with reliable, predictable social environments that have clear boundaries of acceptable conduct in which people feel safe to risk self-expression. There are four factors that have an impact psychological safety: interpersonal relationships, group and intergroup dynamics, management style, and norms.

Psychological availability pertains to one's perception of how available one is to bring oneself into a role. It is associated with the physical, emotional and psychological resources people can bring to their role performances. There are four distractions which affect psychological availability: depletion of physical energy, depletion of emotional energy, insecurity, and outside lives.

These conditions must be known by managers or leaders as long as high commitment and trust is associated with team-level performance [5, 20]. Also, good communication and enthusiasm increase the level of trust, which leads to positive interaction, shared goals achievement and team effectiveness [16].



**Figure 3. The relational dimension of team social capital**

On the other hand, the less trust a manager has in its team members, the more he feels the need to monitor them. This also happens within a group and can result in the team members not monitoring each other at all due to high trust. Further, getting monitored by a team member can be perceived as lack of trust, leading to fear and anger. Combined with an individual's level of autonomy, amount of freedom and discretion, too much trust can be considered negative to team performance. Even though surveillance in this context is indicating negative effects, most researchers find that monitoring enhances performance and reduces process loss. Leaders need to be aware of this obstacle with high trust, but they still have to understand that a certain level of monitoring is necessary for team performance [20, 21].

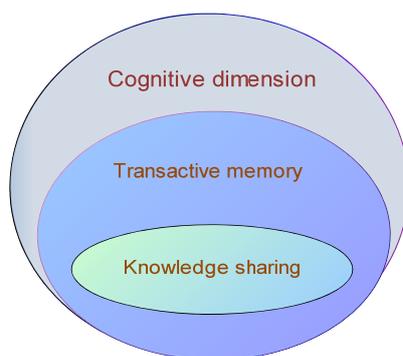
Beyond that, trust and cooperation are essential for effective knowledge-sharing to occur. Moreover, research has demonstrated that psychological safety is an important antecedent to knowledge sharing. Team members must possess shared beliefs that the team environment is trustworthy and that interpersonal risk will be rewarded rather than punished. Logically, the team leader plays an integral role in facilitating high levels of psychological safety [24]. For example, Costa et al. studied 112 health and social care teams and showed that trust is positively related to team performance, satisfaction and commitment [15, 4].

#### **4.3. The cognitive dimension: knowledge sharing and transactive memory**

The cognitive dimension refers to knowledge sharing, shared mental models and transactive memory (figure 4).

In the literature, the affective, behavioral and cognitive aspects or a combination of these three within the team are understood to be defining characteristics of teams and an important contingency condition [14]. Srivastava et al. consider knowledge sharing between team members as sharing task-relevant ideas, information, and suggestions with one another. This process helps codify the repository of available knowledge in an organization and increases it over time [33]. This repository was conceptualized under the name of *transactive memory*.

*Transactive memory* is a psychological hypothesis first proposed by Daniel Wegner in 1985 as a response to earlier theories of "group mind" such as groupthink [www4]. A system of transactive memory is a system by which groups collectively encode, store and retrieve knowledge.



**Figure 4. The cognitive dimension of team social capital**

Transactive memory suggests an analysis of how teams, larger groups and organizations come to develop a “group mind” [www4], a memory system which is more complex and potentially more effective than the memory of any individual member of a group, team or organization. The transactive memory system provides team members with information regarding the knowledge they have access to within the team. Group members learn who knowledge experts are and how to access expertise through communicative processes. In this way, a transactive memory system can provide the group members with more and better knowledge than any individual could access on his own [34].

Transactive memory may enhance performance through three major mechanisms [22]:

- division of responsibility for different kinds of knowledge among team members allows each one of them to broaden his own knowledge in a specific area while maintaining access to relevant required task knowledge possessed by others;
- developing transactive memory system will shorten the time needed for seeking the appropriate knowledge: when each team member knows who to turn to for the required information, less time is wasted in the search for relevant task knowledge;
- the shared understanding of the team members regarding the interpersonal relations within the team and the different expertise domains, enables them to better predict and anticipate how their colleagues would behave, leading to well coordinated and efficient interactions.

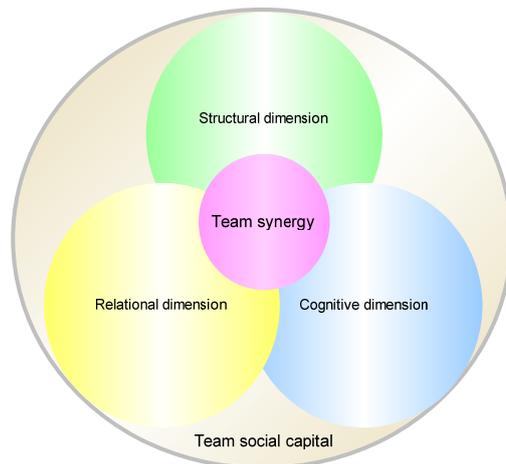
It has been found that transactive memory allows a quicker access to a larger amount of knowledge, improves processes of information integration, improves decision making processes [6] and even predicts members’ perceptions of team effectiveness, and also affective outcomes such as job satisfaction and team identification [27].

Teams are groups of individuals with experiences and knowledge both different from and complementary to those responsible for a work process or goal. When the complementarities of team members’ knowledge are shared and transferred from one to another within a team, then synergy occurs. [24]

*Knowledge sharing* is likely to contribute to enhanced collective knowledge through which the integration of the individuals’ knowledge will surpass the sum of what each member can do on his or her own. In any interdependent work process, no single individual can carry out all the activities necessary to produce improvements and innovations. Only by combining individuals with different and complementary skills and perspectives, and by achieving cooperation among them, can this process be carried out to its fullest potential [24].

Knowledge sharing in the formation of *shared mental models* enables task execution with beneficial effect on team coordination and achieves higher team performance. Smith-Jentsch et al. have illustrated the positive effects of shared mental models on team performance in a study of air traffic controllers. Repeated interactions facilitate learning about other members’ areas of expertise and knowledge exchanges in teams lead to the formation of transactive memory which is instrumental in high-performance teams. [32]

A schematic representation of the relationship between team synergy and team social capital is presented in figure 5. The basic idea is that we can not talk about synergy within the team and even less about remarkable results of the team in the absence of the elements representing the above described three dimensions of team social capital.



**Figure 5. Team social capital and team synergy**

## 5. Conclusions

Highlighting the social capital components that influence group processes by which team synergy is coming to fruition has allowed for the extension of the current model of team social capital. This brings into focus the main elements needed for creating new resources, as the main result of synergy within the team. Most of these resources are intangible, but have real repercussions on organizational performance and effectiveness, as demonstrated by various qualitative researches on small groups, in general, and on work teams, in particular.

The success of modern organizations is based on the efficient use of all resources available. Among them, human resources are the most important because they place other valuable resources in new combinations. Achieving synergy, the added value of these combinations is only in the power of people involved in the organization, and especially in their relations.

The name of “capital” associated with social issues which govern the relations between people points out the importance of links that are formed between employees in the work process. Their study is of great benefit for today’s organizations as labor have become increasingly complex and people are not willing to blindly believe the formal authority and they are increasingly more specialized in narrow fields. Thus, to reap the benefits afforded by teams as stand alone organizational structures in the innovative organizations, there should be considered the social relationships which are formed in the organization and which constitute the social capital.

The two main areas of action to achieve synergy refers essentially to reduce process losses and increase process gains - “process” refers to the sequence of activities that team members carry out to achieve common tasks. Process losses can be reduced by:

- increasing team cohesion;
- proper coordination (through mutual monitoring and back-up behavior);
- fruitful collaboration (using the expertise of all team members);
- the sharing by team members of relevant knowledge about the task.

Process gains can be achieved by:

- team members commitment to team tasks;
- trust in and between team members and confidence that each member can have a valuable contribution in the common work;
- stimulating joint learning in order to create the “group mind” so that all relevant information to team work can be quickly accessed by any member.

Any of these courses of action must take into account the right “dosage” in correlation with the other team’s actions and with the team goals because excesses can lead to the opposite effect: a positive synergy effect can turn into a negative synergy effect. For example, too much cohesion results in a reduced critical spirit and the rise of “group thinking”, with adverse effects on team work effectiveness; too much trust leads to the absence of any monitoring behavior of the members and can lead to errors or conversely, excessive monitoring may be perceived as lack of trust etc. Achieving this “dosage” required to obtain positive synergy effects in work team is a continuous process of mutual knowledge of team members as they build relations between them and increase the psychological safety that they need to obtain team performance.

The proposed framework implies a dynamic approach and it is necessary to understand the behavior of organizational team members as long as the team is seen as a dynamic and complex system. That is because not so much the material resources and conditions (fixed assets) of the organization, but rather the quality of

relationships between organizational team members determine nowadays the companies' success. In a highly fluctuating socio-economic environment these relationships embedded in the team social capital are the only assets that can become relatively stable over time and can provide long term benefits to the organization.

Certainly the present undertaking requires in the future further analysis and also consideration of other factors specific to work team, such as the nature of the team task, members' roles within the team, the existence of shared or distributed leadership, the team reward systems etc.

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