Team Viability: Mission Impossible or Feasible? Threats for Team Viability in Contemporary Polish Organizations

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Abstract Current state of knowledge literature offers numerous studies of the team viability construct perceived as the main dimension of team's effectiveness. The paper aims to identify threats to team viability in today's conditions of operation of Polish organizations and to specify means to reduce their impact. The empirical part is based on the results of the survey conducted in the first half of 2019 on 242 representatives of teams. The authors conducted their own research using a questionnaire. The research allowed to identify key threats to team viability in the following areas: engagement in the team, team building, team management, communication with the team, and team atmosphere. The paper concludes that with the understanding of viability of a given team and with the knowledge of threats and their impact, managers can take a proactive approach to effectively guide their teams toward successful performance. The findings should help Polish companies, team leaders, and their members collaborate in the way to enhance team viability.

Keywords Team viability · Team effectiveness · Leadership · Threats of team viability · Poland

1 Introduction

For many years, organizations, both private and public, tend to structure their work around teams and work groups to perform more rapidly, flexibly, and adaptively (Katzenbach and Smith 1993; Kozlowski and Bell 2001; Gibson et al. 2007; Mathieu et al. 2008). The interest in teamwork and in determinants of teamwork effectiveness has intensified even more (than before) due to dynamically changing conditions in which modern organizations operate these days. The literature on the

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subject of teamwork and its effectiveness is very extensive (Sundstrom et al. 1990; Goodwin et al. 2009; Ilgen et al. 2005; Mathieu et al. 2008). However, it still does not provide comprehensive answers to long-asked questions why some teams are more effective than the other and what factors, in what arrangement, and with what force determine team's effectiveness. This state of affairs is primarily determined by changes taking place in the world of work as well as transformations within the nature of contemporary teams (Tannenbaum et al. 2012; Hass and Mortensen 2016).

Over time, as enterprises were gaining experience in the use of teamwork, research projects were conducted that focused on team effectiveness (Sundstrom et al. 1990; Goodwin et al. 2009). These resulted in the development of a number of models of team effectiveness (McGrath 1964; Ilgen et al. 2005; Mathieu et al. 2008; Goodwin et al. 2009). As part of the teamwork efficiency models developed over two decades ago, the concept of team viability was introduced as one of dimensions of team effectiveness. Team viability as a construct has not yet received a unified definition nor has been operationalized and thus requires further work in this scope. Today, team viability is understood as "the capacity of a team to be sustainable and continue to succeed in future performance episodes" (Bell and Marentette 2011, p. 279).

The construct of team viability is mainly undertaken by psychological researchers in foreign literature. Unfortunately, this construct is still not enough recognized in Polish literature and business practice. Therefore, the authors decided to explore team viability in the conditions of functioning of Polish teams.

The paper aims to identify threats for team viability in today's conditions of operation of Polish organizations and specify means to reduce their impact. This paper is organized in the following manner. Section 2 provides literature review as a theoretical foundation for undertaking an own empirical research, in order to better understand and grasp the problem. The aim of the theoretical part is to bring the concept of the team viability construct and show its place in the wider context of the team's efficiency. In this part, the applied method consisted in analyzing state of the art. The authors of the article referred there to the theoretical achievements in foreign and Polish literature. Section 3 illustrates the sample and the research methodology. Section 4 describes research results, while Sect. 5 provides conclusions. References are provided at the end.

The empirical part used the results of the survey conducted in the first half of 2019, which covered 242 representatives of teams. The authors conducted their own research using a questionnaire. This part focused among others on leaders' and team members' opinions about 28 threats to team viability, which were grouped into five areas: engagement in the team, team building, team management, communication with the team, and team atmosphere. The vast majority of all potential threats to be evaluated in the study was considered by the respondents as posing threat to team viability. The items that referred to the three areas of "communication with the team," "engagement in the team," and "team management" were reported as particularly threatening. The threats from the areas of "team atmosphere" and "team building" were relatively the least threatening. Additionally, both leaders and team

members exhibited a high degree of agreement (convergence) in relation to most of threats.

2   Team Viability: Literature Review

The effectiveness of teamwork is a complex, multidimensional construct conditioned by many factors. This is illustrated by teamwork efficiency models developed to date (Pyszka 2015). One of the dominant ways of thinking about effectiveness of teams is the input-process-output (IPO) model (McGrath 1964). The model posits that a variety of inputs combine to influence intragroup processes, which in turn affect team outputs. Other models, most frequently cited in the literature, include the IO model, IMOI model, ecological model, T7 (Sundstrom et al. 1990; Campion et al. 1993; Ilgen et al. 2005; De Meuse 2009; Rico et al. 2011), and models of team performance created by Rubin et al. (1977), Katzenbach and Smith (1993), LaFasto and Larson (2001), Hackman (2002), and Lencioni (2002).

The models of team effectiveness point to multiple dimensions of team effectiveness. Team performance has been found fundamental for understanding team effectiveness (Kożusznik 2002). Over time, however, it was pointed out that the effectiveness of a team should be assessed not only through the perspective of its results but also through other measures. For example, Hackman (1987, p. 323) proposed three general criteria of team effectiveness:

1. "The productive output of the work group should meet or exceed the performance standards of the people who receive and/or review the output.
2. The group's experience should satisfy rather than frustrate the personal needs of group members.
3. The social processes used in carrying out the work should maintain or enhance the capability of members to work together on subsequent team tasks."

The above proposal indicates that there is a need for a construct, which will enable to evaluate not only the teams' performance but also how well the team will perform on subsequent tasks, and that the team is capable of future success. Team viability is such a construct.

Several definitions of team viability have been proposed over the past few decades. It was first paid attention to by Hackman (1987), though he did not call it "viability" directly. From among his criteria for team effectiveness, the following theme captures the essence of viability: "the social processes used in carrying out the work should maintain or enhance the capability of members to work together on subsequent team tasks" (p. 323). Three years later, Sundstrom et al. (1990) also highlighted the significance of team viability as an effectiveness criterion and proposed a wider understanding of viability. In their opinion, a more comprehensive definition of viability might include, besides members' satisfaction, participation, and willingness to continue working together, constructs such as cohesion, norms, intermember coordination, mature communication, and problem-solving. Later

researchers built their definitions of team viability predominantly on the works of Hackman (1987) and Sundstrom et al. (1990). Some of them extended the concept by adding further elements. For example, Balkundi and Harrison (2006, p. 52) defined team viability as "team's potential to retain its members through their attachment to the team, and willingness to stay together as a team." Aube and Rousseau (2005) added to the team's capacity to work together in the future also the ability to adapt to internal and external changes, to solve problems, and to integrate new members, as important aspects of team viability. Due to the lack of definitional unambiguity, further researchers attempted to clarify the construct of viability (Mathieu et al. 2008). Bell and Marentette (2011, p. 279) defined it as follows: "it is the capacity of a team to be sustainable and continue to succeed in future performance episodes." By defining team viability, this way they retained the spirit of previous definitions focused on the ability to work together in the future and continued success over time (e.g., Hackman 1983; Barrick et al. 1998), emphasizing the team's sustainability, growth, and development. The authors highlight in their study that considering longevity of most organizational teams and the dynamic context within which teams exist resulting in membership and other changes, it is most useful to conceptualize team viability as a holistic property of a dynamic system rather than a property of specific individuals. In other words, team viability is a global team property, which characterizes a team as a whole unit and does not necessarily originate from the characteristics of individual team members (Bell and Marentette 2011; Kozlowski and Chao 2012). The subject literature highlights that team viability is related to variables of different nature. It is a function of various team inputs, processes, and dynamics and is a unique construct with multilevel antecedents and outcomes (Costa et al. 2015; Cooperstein 2017; Tu and Liu 2017).

On the one hand, the most common team viability antecedents are:

- Individual member characteristics (e.g., cognitive ability, motivation).
- Individual and team affect (e.g., satisfaction).
- Shared perceptions (e.g., potency).
- Team processes and behaviors (e.g., communication, adaptation).
- Emergent states (e.g., cohesion, confidence, team climate).
- Performance.
- Resources (e.g., supervisor support and performance feedback).

On the other hand, among the most frequently appearing, the team viability outcomes can be mentioned: effectiveness, performance, resources, less managerial intervention, organizational support, satisfaction, and commitment (Cooperstein 2017).

Considering the above, it is important to identify how team viability is related to and distinct from constructs: performance, cohesion, satisfaction, resilience, adaptability, and potency. These constructs are highly correlated with team viability, but they don't adequately capture the team's capacity for sustainability and growth required for success in future performance episodes. The constructs in most cases are antecedents or outcomes of team viability (Bell and Marentette 2011).

3 Research Methodology

In the empirical part, the authors used the results of the survey conducted in the first half of 2019. Ultimately 242 questionnaires completed by the representatives of teams (43.4% leaders; 56.6% members) were qualified for analysis. The scope concerned selected issues pertaining to the viability of contemporary, functional, ongoing teams and in particular concerned the issues that pose threat to viability. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part aimed to identify whether and how the respondents understand the concept of team viability. The second part focused on leaders' and team members' opinions about 28 threats to team viability, which were grouped into five areas: engagement in the team, team building, team management, communication with the team, and team atmosphere. In order to measure and assess the real opinions of respondents, both leaders and team members, against potential threats to the team's viability, a two-pole, interval five-point Likert scale was used.

For the purposes of this article, the following research questions were formulated:

- RQ 1. How do the respondents define the concept of team viability?
- RQ 2. What factors pose serious threat to team viability?
- RQ 3. In case of which threats there is a convergence of leaders' and team members' opinions?
- RQ 4. In case of which threats there is a divergence of leaders' and team members' opinions?

4 Results

The first question addressed to respondents, both team members (M) and leaders (L), was to identify whether their organizations were testing the effectiveness of teams. The majority of the enquired respondents, both leaders (L) (88.6%) and team members (M) (52.6%), answered "yes" against "no" (L, 11.4%; M, 27.7%) and "I don't know"(L, 0.0%; M, 19.7%). Further, they were asked to indicate the effectiveness dimensions under study. In the opinion of the majority of the enquired respondents, both leaders (L, 88.6%) and team members (M, 71.5%), the key measure of their teams' effectiveness was their current performance, i.e., the degree to which the results obtained by the team complied with established quantitative and qualitative standards. Over 60% of leaders (63.8%) and nearly every second team member (48.9%) indicated an additional dimension, which was the satisfaction of team members, i.e., the degree of satisfying their needs and expectations. Only a few people (L, 11.4%; M, 4.4%) pointed to the third dimension of team efficiency, i.e., the ability and willingness of its members to continue cooperation. In view of the above, the question "Have you ever heard about the construct of team viability" was

considered as key. Over half of the surveyed leaders (53.3%[1]) and only every third team member (33.6%) had already come across this concept; however, as emphasized, that was not synonymous with using this measure in practice. And so members most often described viability in terms of the length of time of shared and effective work, for example, "willingness of individual team members to take part in its activities," "the way the team functions, whether it can get along and if the team has a lot of problems, and how people try to solve them and work on them," "the period in which the team brings results," and "time from the teams set up until its liquidation/disintegration." In addition, the members of teams emphasized the importance of mutual relations and persistence in pursuing the assumed goals, namely, "the team's ability to maintain relations," "team maintenance when it comes to striving for a goal," "good atmosphere in the team," "maintaining motivation in the team," "achieving goals by the team and common communication," "dealing with problems, well-coordinated team," and "cooperation and commitment of team members."

In turn, leaders defined team viability more in terms of efficiency, pointing to its various dimensions such as work efficiency, achievement of objectives set by the team, satisfaction, and time of the team's functioning together, rather than strictly viability, for example, "a group of people who work together despite problems and conflicts within the group," "the ability to constantly develop and increase productivity, efficiency, and quality of work," "the team's ability to maintain relations," "time in which the team works well together, when team is effective, and its members do not think about changing jobs," and "the period in which the team brings results."

Another question to the surveyed respondents concerned problems which can potentially threaten team viability. The respondents using five-point Likert-type scale[2] assessed a dozen or so items in the questionnaire. Table 1 shows threats to team viability according to the respondents assed as "very important" and "important."

When analyzing Table 1, it can be seen that almost all the threats listed in the questionnaire were considered by the respondents as very important or important for the team's viability. Only three of them were considered relatively less important (percentage of responses below 70%): time pressure (69.0%), stagnation in the team (66.1%), and large diversity of team members (age, nationality) (44.2%). Such distribution of answers, according to the respondents, points to the existence of many potential threats to team viability in their organizations. The identified threats to team viability were assigned, by the authors of the article, to five areas: engagement in the team, team building, team management, communication with the team, and team atmosphere. Figure 1 shows the average impact on team viability of the threats assigned to the abovementioned areas.

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[1]46.7% of leaders and 2/3 of team members (66.4%) provided negative answers.

[2]Five-point Likert-type scale (1, "does not matter"; 2, "not important"; 3, "neither important nor important"; 4, "important"; 5 "very important").

Table 1 Threats to team viability according to the respondents assed as "very important" and "important"

Threats	Opinions of both leaders and members (%)
1. Lack of team members' engagement	100.0
2. Lack of team leader engagement	99.2
3. Lack of effective communication	98.3
4. Lack of relevant competences of the team leader	97.9
5. Lack of atmosphere for cooperation	96.7
6. Lack of feedback about results of work	96.3
7. Incorrect division of roles and responsibilities	95.0
8. Improperly recruited team members	92.1
9. Incorrectly defined goals	92.1
10. Lack of competences of team members	91.7
11. Incorrect planning and organization of teamwork	91.3
12. Lack of development opportunities	90.9
13. Lack of consistency in the perception of the team's goals	90.9
14. Unsatisfied needs of team members	90.5
15. No desired effects	88.0
16. Excessive competition between team members	88.0
17. Lack of knowledge sharing	87.6
18. Lack of adequate resources to carry out tasks	83.9
19. Divisions within the group	83.9
20. Internal conflicts in the team	82.6
21. Employee resistance of change	82.2
22. Lack of a friendly working environment	78.1
23. Lack of control and evaluation of the team's work	74.4
24. Lack of implementation of new team members	70.7
25. Excessive number of team members	70.2
26. Time pressure	69.0
27. Stagnation in the team	66.1
28. Large diversity of team members (e.g., age, nationality)	44.2

Source: study based on the self-conducted research

According to Fig. 1, all identified areas pose a significant threat to team viability, with team communication being the most threatening (93.3%). Table 2 shows detailed distribution of opinions of team leaders and team members regarding individual threats assigned to the abovementioned areas.

Table 2 shows that both groups of respondents agree in their opinions. Very high response rates were assigned to threats in the area of "communication with the team" such as lack of effective communication (L, 99.0%; M, 97.8%), lack of feedback about results of work (L, 98.1%; M, 94.9%), lack of consistency in the perception of the team's goals (L, 93.3%; M, 89.1%), and lack of knowledge sharing (L,
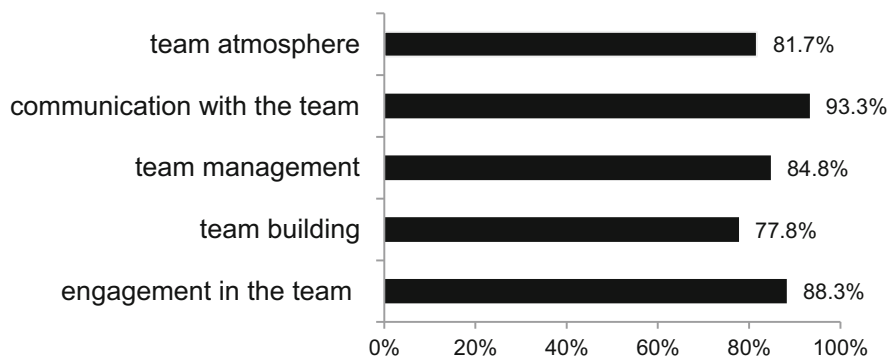
Fig. 1 Areas that threaten team viability according to the respondents. Source: study based on the self-conducted research

92.4%; M, 83.9%). Another area identified as crucial for team viability is "engagement in the team" (88.3%—Fig. 1). Both surveyed groups of respondents are almost fully in agreement that the lack of engagement of team members (L, 100.0%; M, 100.0%) or leaders (L, 98.1%; M, 100.0%) is the greatest threat to team viability. It is worth noting that only slightly lower percentage of indications were assigned by respondents to two further threats—lack of development opportunities (L, 89.5%; M, 92.0%) and unsatisfied needs of team members (L, 97.1%; M, 85.4%). Given the above, only 2/3 of both leaders and team members considered stagnation in the team (L, 65.7%; M, 66.4%) to be the least threatening to the viability. The next analyzed area is "team management" (84.8%—Fig. 1). Quality, efficiency, and responsibility for the majority of actions and decisions taken in the area stay, due to their nature, the domain of the leader. Nevertheless, the obtained results point to the high awareness of both examined groups of the existence of a strong threat to team viability resulting from incorrectly defined goals (L, 100.0%; M, 86.1%), division of roles and responsibilities (L, 94.3%; M, 95.6%), planning and organization of teamwork (L, 84.8%; M, 96.4%), and lack of desired effects (L, 83.8%; M, 91.2%). The fourth analyzed area is "team atmosphere" (81.7%—Fig. 1). It often determines whether individuals still want to continue work in the team or if they prefer to leave. According to Cooperstein (2017), team climate is a kind of emergent state in addition to cohesion, empowerment, trust, and confidence, which significantly determine team viability. According to the respondents, the significant threat that hinders development of viable teams is primarily the lack of atmosphere for cooperation (L, 100.0%; M, 94.2%) and the related excessive competition between team members (L, 83.3%; M, 91.2%). These two threats may trigger internal conflicts (L, 95.2%; M, 73.0%), divisions within the group (L, 79.0%; M, 87.6%), and the lack of a friendly working environment (L, 81.0%; M, 75.9%). The last analyzed area was "team building" (77.8%—Fig. 1). Despite it was considered by the respondents as the relatively least significant area threatening team vitality, it should be emphasized that they indicated four important threats: lack of relevant competences of the team leader (L, 100.0%; M, 96.9%), improperly recruited team

Table 2 Threats to team viability according to roles in the team (leaders/members) assessed as "very important" and "important"

Threats	Leader's opinions (%)	Team members' opinions (%)
Engagement in the team		
Lack of team member engagement	100.0	100.0
Lack of team leader engagement	98.1	100.0
Lack of development opportunities	89.5	92.0
Unsatisfied needs of team members	97.1	85.4
Stagnation in the team	65.7	66.4
Team building		
Lack of relevant competences of the team leader	100.0	96.4
Improperly recruited team members	94.3	90.5
Lack of competences of team members	84.8	97.1
Lack of implementation of new team members	80.0	63.5
Excessive number of team members	67.6	72.3
Large diversity of team members (e.g., age, nationality)	10.5	70.1
Team management		
Incorrectly defined goals	100.0	86.1
Incorrect division of roles and responsibilities	94.3	95.6
Incorrect planning and organization of teamwork	84.8	96.4
No desired effects	83.8	91.2
Lack of control and evaluation of the team's work	76.2	73.0
Lack of adequate resources to carry out tasks	91.4	78.1
Time pressure	56.2	78.8
Communication with the team		
Lack of effective communication	99.0	97.8
Lack of feedback about results of work	98.1	94.9
Lack of consistency in the perception of the team's goals	93.3	89.1
Lack of knowledge sharing	92.4	83.9
Team atmosphere		
Lack of atmosphere for cooperation	100.0	94.2
Excessive competition between team members	83.3	91.2
Divisions within the group	79.0	87.6
Internal conflicts in the team	95.2	73.0
Employee's resistance to change	85.7	79.6
Lack of a friendly working environment	81.0	75.9

Source: study based on the self-conducted research

members (L, 94.3%; M, 90.5%), lack of competences of team members (L, 84.8%; M, 97.1%), and lack of implementation of new team members (L, 80.0%; M, 63.5%). In addition to indicating the convergence of opinions of leaders

Table 3 Threats to team viability according to the role in the team—rating of the biggest divergence of opinions between leaders (L) and team members (M)

Threats	L/M	Very important (%)	Important (%)	Sum of very important and important (%)	Difference (%)
Large diversity of team members (e.g., age, nationality)	L	7.6	2.9	10.5	59.6
	M	13.9	56.2	70.1	
Time pressure	L	7.6	48.6	56.2	22.6
	M	29.2	49.6	78.8	
Internal conflicts in the team	L	61.0	34.3	95.3	22.3
	M	28.5	44.5	73.0	
Lack of implementation of new team member	L	37.1	42.9	80.0	16.5
	M	20.4	43.1	63.5	
Incorrectly defined goals	L	55.2	44.8	100.0	13.9
	M	59.1	27.0	86.1	
Lack of resources to carry out tasks	L	7.6	83.8	91.4	13.3
	M	37.2	40.9	78.1	
Lack of competences of team members	L	43.8	41.0	84.8	12.3
	M	54.0	43.1	97.1	
Unsatisfied needs of team members	L	52.4	44.8	97.2	11.8
	M	27.0	58.4	85.4	
Incorrect planning and organization of teamwork	L	26.7	58.1	84.8	11.6
	M	46.0	50.4	96.4	

Source: study based on the self-conducted research

and team members about threats to team viability, the research also shows differences in their opinions. Table 3 presents the rating of the biggest divergence of opinions between leaders and team members. The opinions of respondents differed most in relation to large diversity of team (L, 10.5%; M, 70.1%). Other threats, in which relatively large differences of opinions of respondents were identified, include time pressure (L, 56.2%; M, 78.8%) and internal conflicts in the team (L, 95.3%; M, 73.0%). As regards other threats listed in Table 3, the reported differences of opinions of the respondents are quite smaller compared to the above.

5 Conclusion

Nowadays, in the context of globalization and digitalization, which increasingly require people to collaborate, the construct of team viability seems very important. In order to become successful, these days, many teams operating in Polish organizations should take continuous effort to build viability. Numerous changes of diverse nature occur both inside and outside the organizations. They pose a huge challenge and the need to anticipate and recognize these changes for leaders. The changes can

trigger many serious threats to the aforementioned viability, which is such an important and desired property of teams. The research carried out by the authors of the article allowed to take a closer look at the viability of teams in Polish organizations and to identify and analyze potential threats. First of all, the empirical research confirmed the definitional chaos exhibited in literature and concerning the construct of team viability. Moreover, it turned out that the concept is not well known to the researched practitioners and they defined it in a subjective and intuitive manner. As the authors of the paper mentioned, both leaders and members showed a high level of awareness of various threats which influence team viability.

The vast majority of all factors listed in the survey questionnaire was considered by the respondents as posing threat to team viability. The items that fell in the area of "communication with the team" were reported as the most threatening. Items classified in the areas "engagement in the team" and "team management" were reported only slightly less threatening. Relatively the least threatening, but equally important, were the threats from the areas of "team atmosphere" and "team building." It is worth mentioning here that respondents, when assessing individual threats, exhibited a high degree of agreement (convergence) in relation to most of threats, despite the existence of differences in their opinions regarding some other threats (divergence).

This means that leaders and members of the Polish organizations under this study acknowledge that building team viability is a big challenge for both leaders and team members. This involves parallel attention to reliable communication in the team, building engagement, caring for the atmosphere, motivating, and development. The authors of the article observed that Polish teams often lack mutual support, especially in situations of emerging threats or a more serious crisis. That is why, considering the perspective of viable teams, it is so important to develop a shared mechanism for accepting and overcoming failures and conflicts. Leaders play a special role in this respect. They should act as visionaries in the area of continuous improvement and development of their teams, as well as their support and building the involvement of its members. Unfortunately, as the research has shown, the leader is often the weak link. That is why in respondents' opinions, team viability is unfeasible when leaders exhibit problems with lack of their own engagement, communication, ethical standards, showing respect and appreciation of members' work, and building their commitment. Respondents perceive leaders as an overriding and necessary element with key responsibility for building viability. According to the team members, viability is feasible, first of all when leaders provide support and sufficient freedom to act to team members, create atmosphere of trust, motivate, support development, provide a sense of security, respect the diversity of individual team members, and do not allow for routine and unhealthy competition in the team.

In summary, the identified threats open space for an in-depth research on their influence on team viability. In the future, the authors of the paper plan to broaden the research scope in terms of object, gender, sample size, area scope, and issues related to challenges for management and HR departments. Due to the limitations of the research sample, it is important to underline that generalizing the research results must be done with caution.

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