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Mutual accountability and its impacts on cross-functional teams

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**MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND
ITS IMPACTS ON CROSS-FUNCTIONAL TEAMS**

**A Research Project
Presented to the Faculty of
The Graziadio Business School
Pepperdine University**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
in
Organization Development**

**by
Lori E. Simms
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This research project, completed by

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under the guidance of the Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the faculty of The Graziadio Business School in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE
IN ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The intent of cross-functional teams is to bring together diverse individuals of relevant functional expertise from across an organization to solve problems rapidly and efficiently. The difficulty with cross-functional teams is in establishing and maintaining mutual accountability because individuals come with their respective individual accountabilities and the methods for which those accountabilities were established. This qualitative study explored mutual accountability, how it is established, and its impact on cross-functional teams. Nine individuals participated in semi-structured interviews to explore how mutual accountability is established, barriers to establishing and maintaining it, and the impact of its presence or lack thereof on the overall effectiveness of cross-functional teams. Four dominant themes emerged: clarity of expectations, management support, cultural norms, and the role of a team driver. The results showed that creating and upholding mutual accountability in cross-functional teams is challenging because it relies on multiple elements that are often interdependent of one another.

Keywords: Mutual, Accountability, Cross-Functional, Teams, Expectations, Culture, Manager, Management

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Talented individuals can produce great results when they work on their own. While individual talent may lead to individual success, talent without teamwork is insufficient to generate organizational success (Berger & Berger, 2011). Individuals must be able to effectively collaborate with others because “organizations are only as productive as the interactions that take place among individuals, teams, and work groups” (Katz & Miller, 2013, p. 14). Unfortunately, dysfunctional teams “still far outnumber the [effective] ones. And as rare as [effective] teams are, truly accountable teams are rarer still” (Coryell, 2019, p. ix). A key issue keeping teams from moving from effective to accountable is the inability of individuals to hold each other accountable for performance or behaviors that are counterproductive to the overall good of the group (Lencioni, 2002).

Teams, at their most basic level, are “a number of persons associated together in work or activity” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2019). Effective work groups must do more than just associate; they must work together, utilizing a high degree of interdependence (Parker, 2003) to achieve a common goal for which “they hold themselves mutually accountable” (Katzenbach & Smith, 2006, p. 44). Beyond that broad definition, there are several specific types of teams. Among the most common are functional and cross-functional teams. Functional teams are comprised of employees with different responsibilities within vertical levels of the organizational hierarchy who work to achieve results for the same organizational function, like an information technology, operations, or customer service department (Study.com, 2019). Cross-functional teams combine diverse individuals of relevant functional expertise at horizontal levels of organizational hierarchy to solve problems, because linking an organization’s functional departments at

the development level allows for more flexible decision making and rapid integration (Lamb & Munsing, 2011). For example, an organization might examine and then execute the acquisition of another company by forming a cross-functional team consisting of representatives from finance, marketing, sales, and human resources departments.

The idea of mutual accountability in teams differs from that of individual accountability in that members must share the burden of successes and failures for the projects they work on and, unlike in other types of collaborative work, it is not enough that a given member does their part acceptably well (Katzenbach & Smith, 2006). Instead, the consequences of overall success or failure rest upon the team as a whole. In functional teams, the manager sets and holds each team member accountable for their specific goals and the team's common goal. The difficulty with cross-functional teams is that individuals come from various departments and bring their own specific accountabilities related to their original teams and personal goals (Katzenbach & Smith, 2006) and the methods for which those accountabilities were established. Mutual accountability within the team may become an issue because team members often focus on achieving personal or department goals at the cost of the cross-functional team's goal. According to Coryell (2019), for a team to be successful, the success of the team must become more important than that of the individual team member. To build an environment where productive interactions take place, cross-functional teams must develop a keen sense of commitment and build trust, which is core to establishing expectations and holding one another accountable (Katzenbach & Smith, 2006). More research is needed into how mutual accountability is established in cross-functional teams and the effects of its existence, or lack thereof.

The current study seeks to address this gap. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to explore mutual accountability, how it is established, and how it impacts cross-functional teams. Chapter 1 offers an overview of the study. A general history provides context on current organizational team issues as they relate to mutual accountability. Next, this chapter expands on the purpose of this research. This is followed by related research questions and an assessment of the importance of this study. An overview of the research methods is provided, followed by a concluding preview of remaining chapters.

History

The key role in establishing individual accountability on functional teams usually falls to an employee's direct manager (Katzenbach & Smith, 2006). It is the manager's role to create an environment where employees will become responsible for their own actions, behaviors, and results (Thompson, 2018). In the functional team model, this concept expands to include mutual accountability, wherein the entire team is held accountable for the combined output of the individuals in question. This comes with the assumption that managers foster the correct environment for ensuring group accountability; this dynamic may break down under certain conditions. This often occurs in cross-functional teams because they do not operate under a single department's authority. In some cases, a project management approach is employed, creating a unified team authority in the person of the project manager (Kerzner & Kerzner, 2017). However, the project management approach is far from universally adopted or consistently applied in business.

When organizations build cross-functional teams without a unified governing authority, the standards of individual accountability (Dekker, 2016) and how mutual

accountability is established are often applied inconsistently across the team. This lack of standardization creates inconsistencies when certain members bear a disproportionate amount of the team's responsibility. A small number of individuals carrying the burden of a task assigned to a larger team is not only unsustainable but may also have practical implications for the team's overall effectiveness. This imbalance can have significant effects on the team's overall ability to meet its stated objectives (Barclay, Bashshur, & Fortin, 2017); therefore, more research is needed surrounding teams and accountability to address the cultural norms associated with how mutual accountability is established and how individuals hold themselves and their peers accountable in cross-functional teams (Martin, 2016).

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore mutual accountability, how it is established, and its impact on cross-functional teams. To serve this purpose, the study will conduct qualitative interviews with individuals who have participated in cross-functional teams. Four research questions will guide this study:

1. What is an individual's experience with mutual accountability as a member of cross-functional teams?
2. How is mutual accountability established in cross-functional teams?
3. What are the barriers to establishing and maintaining mutual accountability in cross-functional teams?
4. What is the impact of mutual accountability, or lack thereof, on the overall effectiveness of a cross-functional team?

Importance of the Study

The current study has both theoretical importance and practical implications. Theoretically speaking, it fills a research gap with respect to the effects of mutual accountability on cross-functional team members. Rashid (2014) studied mutual accountability as a way to improve team performance. Limitations prevented an examination of the evolution of mutual accountability; Rashid (2014) stated that more research is required regarding how “mutual accountability develops, sustains, or erodes over the life of a team” (p. 71). Martin (2016) studied teams and the factors affecting their performance, noting that more needs to be done to examine the effects of cultural norms on accountability in teams. Functional departments often have differing standards for establishing mutual accountability, which represents an issue of inconsistent cultural norms. Practically speaking, the current study is important because:

What makes a team a team is the existence of a real and meaningful shared fate [or team objective]. A shared fate exists when what happens to one happens to all. It means my success (or failure) is tied to your success (or failure). Under pressure, a team without a real or meaningful shared fate will fracture. Team members will worry first about themselves, and the team will break down.

(Coryell, 2019, p. 26)

Team members exhibit a clear preference for establishing consistent and standardized criteria for accountability, because inconsistent methods for establishing expectations can negatively impact the effectiveness of the group. Inconsistent criteria can make it difficult to hold team member's accountable which can be have a negative effective on a team. Holding the team member's accountable for not meeting expectations will add to the

effectiveness of the team and commitment of its members for the long term (Brent & Dent, 2017). The results of the present study will thus be valuable to organizations employing cross-functional teams, as the results will inform them of the importance, if any, of setting consistent and standardized expectations for which team members will be held accountable and the effects they have on the success of cross-functional teams if they should fail to establish and uphold them.

Research Methods and Setting

The current study utilizes a qualitative research approach, which is ideal for exploring participants' experiences, opinions, and perceptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). By drawing on subjective, descriptive, humanistic data, qualitative research explores a theory and asks open-ended questions.

The specific qualitative research design for the current study will be phenomenology. A phenomenological study seeks to explore a phenomenon through the lived experiences of those who have encountered it first-hand (Moustakas, 1994). By examining the experiences of these participants and seeking to interpret what they shared between them, phenomenology can construct an understanding of what it means to have experienced that phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological design is ideal for the current study because it seeks not only to explore participants' experiences with cross-functional organizational teams, but also the ways in which those experiences have affected them (e.g., how successful their teams were at achieving their respective goals).

In keeping with this research design, a small, purposive sample size is appropriate (Moustakas, 1994). The goal was to secure a minimum sample size of six participants. In general, qualitative research does not require large sample sizes and does not draw upon

the type of power analysis used in quantitative research (Mason, 2010). Instead, qualitative studies deeply analyze the perceptions of a small number of participants through interviews and other long-form, open-ended sources of data. Meta-analysis suggests that six participants is an appropriate sample size in phenomenology (Mason, 2010).

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 offered a comprehensive overview of the project, including the context/background, the purpose of the study, the research questions, its overall importance, and the research method. Chapter 2 details the background context through a review of the academic literature pertaining to cross-functional teams and mutual accountability. Chapter 3 expands upon the research methods discussed in the previous chapters. Chapter 4 provides the qualitative analysis performed to determine the themes associated with the participants' experiences with cross-functional teams and mutual accountability. Chapter 5 presents the findings in context, and from this develops their implications, including overall conclusions and specific implications for practice and for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore mutual accountability, how it is established, and its impact on cross-functional teams. This chapter reviews several concepts within the existing literature related to the various forms of accountability and how they are established in cross-functional teams.

The Concept of Accountability

“We take the need for accountability for granted and assume that everyone understands what the concept means and why it is so important” (Dubnick, 1998, p. 68). The term accountability developed when the need arose to describe, at a semantic level, the distinction between political responsibility and legal liability in institutional structures typical of democracies in Anglo-American culture (Castiglione, 2012, Family Resemblances: Accountability, Responsibility, Liability section, para. 2–4). Through its application in various institutional structures, many definitions emerged, creating ambiguity due to potential complexities derived from the environments in which an individual is held accountable (Williams & Taylor, 2012). For the purpose of this research study, I rely on the definition of the word in the Oxford English Dictionary, which states that it is “the quality of being accountable; liability to account for and answer for one’s conduct, performance of duties, etc. (in modern use often with regard to parliamentary, corporate, or financial liability to the public, shareholders, etc.); responsibility” (OED Online, 2019), which weaves in the original terms of liability and responsibility, as well as the root word accountable.

At its core, accountability represents the willingness to accept responsibility for one’s actions, while simultaneously being held liable for the results, or lack thereof.

While everyone can agree that accountability is necessary in society, it exists in many forms (Sinclair, 2005) based on the context in which an individual is held accountable. To be effective, accountability must connect to a person, exist within a governing entity, and be bound by a consistent set of cultural frameworks to provide context before it can be operationalized (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011; Williams & Taylor, 2012).

Personal Accountability

Many definitions of accountability rely on external controls to hold someone accountable for their actions. By contrast, personal responsibility relies on the individual to internally police themselves. Rosenblatt (2017) states that internal accountability, or personal accountability, relates to inner standards and goals set by individuals, driven by personal values and ethics, in which individuals hold themselves accountable, serving both roles in the accountability construct. Wakeman (2013) contends that true personal accountability is comprised of four factors:

1. **Commitment:** The willingness to do whatever it takes to get the results you desire.
2. **Resilience:** The ability to stay the course in the face of obstacles and setbacks.
3. **Ownership:** Unwavering acceptance of the consequences of your actions, with zero blame or argument, whether working individually or collectively.
4. **Continuous learning:** Using both success and failure consciously as fuel for future success (pp. 81–82).

While some individuals possess a higher inclination toward being personally accountable, it is a skill that can be learned by anyone (Wakeman, 2013). When an individual is personally accountable, they often exceed expectations because of their internal

discipline, which creates a stronger willingness to put in the necessary effort to complete a given task. Because personal accountability is enforced by an internal dialogue rather than external controls, personal accountability is regarded as particularly powerful and binding (Sinclair, 2005).

While personal accountability comes from within, the proper context and environment created by the leader is important for employees to want to hold themselves personally accountable for their actions, behaviors, and outcomes (Thompson, 2018).

From an early age, the initial concept is established by:

[O]ur parents, teachers, ministers, and other elders [who] emphasize individual responsibility as paramount from our earliest days onward. We grow up under a regimen that measures (academic grades), rewards (allowances), and punishes (trips to the principal's office) individual—not collective—performance.

Whenever we want to “get something done,” our first thought is that of holding an individual responsible (Katzenbach & Smith, 2006, p. 23).

This translates into how companies traditionally hold employees accountable on functional teams through rewards and punishments. A manager provides an overall performance rating as part of the annual performance review process (measures), which connects to the employee's merit increase and/or bonus allocation (rewards) or receiving a verbal/written warning for low performance, along with the withholding of a merit increase and bonus (punishment).

The traditional approach, rooted in fear, is typically applied to directed employees who are dependent on manager guidance because they lack fully developed problem-solving and decision-making skills. Fear-based management creates an environment

where the individual is constantly trying to figure out what the authority figure wants (Thompson, 2018). While the continuation of this approach may be effective for teaching directed employees how to be successful, this management style fails when applied to self-directed employees who should be more autonomous and require less managerial guidance because it “stifle[s] creativity, decision making and the use of intuition” (Thompson, 2018, p.18), which can suppress the inner dialogue pushing for personal accountability. “Without a foundation of [personal] accountability, engagement fluctuates” (Wakeman, 2013, p. 80). For individuals to want to hold themselves personally accountable, managers must create an environment where the self-directed employee is given the freedom to make decisions out of respect, not obligation, as long as they align with the values and purpose of the organization (Thompson, 2018).

Mutual Accountability

Mutual accountability is a construct that exists within a team in which individuals hold one another responsible for their actions or results against the work agreements established at the beginning of their working relationship as a team. Mutual accountability means that everyone will serve both as the individual who is accountable and the external party who holds one another accountable, or “reciprocal expectations—each party has performance expectations of those who have performance expectations of him or her” (Whitaker, Altman-Sauer, & Henderson, 2004, p. 3).

Evans (2017) stressed that the key to mutual accountability is tied to a team’s willingness to communicate openly and candidly, seek real time feedback, and encourage and challenge one another to complete tasks at peak levels. The willingness to do so is often elusive because expectations are frequently unstated or unclear (Lencioni, 2002).

Whitaker et al. (2004) believed that setting expectations for who is responsible for what action and what result, and to whom an individual is responsible within a team without a single formal authority, does not follow the traditional model applied to manager and employee because of internal “imbalances in resources or formal authority and our cultural propensity to think in terms of hierarchy; however, our notions of accountability often focus attention on a one-way, adversarial principal-agent relationship” (p.118). Teams can also experience an internal imbalance in relation to the equal distribution of tasks if expectations and responsibilities are not well defined, as high-performing members of a team (with high personal accountability) may feel compelled to compensate for low-performing members’ inadequate or slow work (Barclay et al., 2016), which can cause resentment. Consciously developing mutual accountability requires that individuals acknowledge these imbalances and the natural propensity for an authority figure in establishing expectations to support the development of a clear objective for the team, multiple sub-objectives for each individual team member, and reciprocal expectations about responsibility (Whitaker et al., 2004).

There are two typical solutions to this in the literature, which often rely on one another but can be executed independently. The first and simplest is to have the team’s collective actions be evaluated by an external party with the ability to dole out group consequences (Kou & Stewart, 2018). “As such, [team] accountability is rooted in group members’ expectations that they will be held accountable as a unit and can be described as a state in which group members collectively feel accountable for team behaviors and performance” (Kou & Stuart, 2018, p. 35). The other response is to have team members participate in “full and frank discussion in which [they] advocate for their interests and

perceptions but remain open to hearing and understanding the interests and views of others and to a public testing of assumptions” (Whitaker et al., 2004, p. 118). Neither solution comes without its own unique challenges. Having an external unit hold the team accountable can have negative implications for the team, including feelings that excessive monitoring is intrusive, declines in intrinsic motivation, and counterproductive behaviors (Kou & Stuart, 2018). Team members are often reluctant to have ‘full and frank’ discussions with one another about expectations, and possibly not meeting expectations that “can spawn a variety of unhealthy and unnecessary stresses which diminish an employee’s affective connection” (Ryan, 2004, p. 518) to the team, which ironically only causes resentment for not meeting expectations and allowing the team to fail (Lencioni, 2002).

Functional versus Cross-Functional Teams

Functional teams are comprised of employees with different responsibilities within vertical levels of the organizational hierarchy who work to achieve results for the same organizational function, like an information technology, operations, or customer service department (Study.com, 2019, Functional Work Teams, para. 1). There is comfort within the functional team in that “authority, relationships, decision making, leadership, and boundary management are simple and clear” (Parker, 2003, p. 2). The primary advantage of these teams is the increased efficiency at which the results can be delivered within a similar scope of work. Employees often prefer staying in their functional teams because they find it comforting to be accountable only for their individual actions and results (Katzenbach & Smith, 2001).

When working on an organizational task, like developing a product, with

functional teams, the process is like a relay race as completed work is passed from one department to the next, which results in unnecessary or missing components and delayed delivery (Parker, 2003). Issues arise with partnerships between cross-functional teams when the collective leadership teams that manage them fail to clearly articulate the interdependencies necessary to succeed, which can create psychological barriers between departments, because employees observe colleagues moving in different directions, making it difficult for employees of cross-functional teams to trust and support one another (Lencioni, 2006).

Cross-functional teams combine diverse individuals of relevant functional expertise at horizontal levels of organizational hierarchy in order to solve problems, because linking an organization's functional departments at the development level allows for more flexible decision making and rapid integration (Lamb & Munsing, 2011). "The cross-functional makeup provides the advantages of multiple sources of communication, information, and perspectives; contacts outside a particular project group; inclusion of downstream concerns in upstream design; a clearer line of sight to the customer; and speed to market, which is critical for success" (Keller, 2001, p. 547). Bringing people with different expertise together can lead to reduced time to results, improvement in an organization's ability to solve complex problems, greater focus on the customer, increased creativity, and heightened organizational learning capabilities (Parker, 2003), which can assist a company in meeting strategic imperatives and increase customer satisfaction at the same time.

Research Gap

The issues regarding the weakness of cross-functional teams with respect to the

inconsistency of establishing mutual accountability suggest a practical problem in need of further research. Indeed, little research has explicitly looked at the issue of mutual accountability in cross-functional teams, with existing conclusions being extrapolations from prior studies in other areas, rather than the result of direct studies of this topic. Given that the literature reviewed in the previous sections has framed the importance of personal accountability, mutual accountability in teams, and the role of cross-functional teams in this ever-changing world, there is a clear line of inquiry outlining a research gap with respect to cross-functional teams and mutual accountability. The current study will serve to fill this gap by examining issues involved in establishing and maintaining mutual accountability and its effects on cross-functional organizational teams.

In addition, the research gap is informed by several more direct calls for research. In their review of the literature regarding team mutual accountability over the past several decades, Kou and Stewart (2018) indicated that the current literature is perhaps incomplete on account of its rigidity. Their results suggested that team accountability is a dynamic, interpersonal process that is not adequately captured by traditional rigid theories of accountability. Therefore, a flexible, exploratory, qualitative approach should serve to examine it more fluidly. Moreover, research by Martin (2016), who studied teams and the factors affecting their performance, indicated that there is a need to examine issues such as cultural norms and how they impact establishing mutual accountability in teams. Since cross-functional teams draw upon different departments; they represent distinct vantage points of an organization's culture, making the study of mutual accountability in cross-functional teams a prime way of studying this. Secondly, Schaubroeck and Yu (2017), who studied virtual teams, found that further research is

needed into the geographical distance between members, which also creates cultural norms. Such that there is at least an organizational implication with cross-functional teams being formed between various departments, because of the increasing demand for talent it is also likely that there are geographically dispersed team members on cross-functional teams, which means the current study fills this call for research as well.

Summary

The purpose of this study is to explore mutual accountability, how it is established, and its impact on cross-functional teams. Chapter 2 explored the research that contextualizes the current study. First, it established the concept of accountability. Accountability is a longstanding societal principle that has been adapted into the workplace. Second, it explored the transition from general accountability to personal accountability, before moving on to how the team context complicates the ability to hold one's self and others accountable due to blurred lines of authority and our cultural propensity to seek out a single authoritative figure. To remedy this, teams can establish an external central authority or deliberately establish mutual accountability through explicit dialogue. Cross-functional teams are teams that draw members from multiple organizational divisions. Unless they adopt a project management approach, cross-functional teams typically lack central authority and struggle with accountability because of different departmental norms and expectations. However, little to no research has yet explored this phenomenon directly, and more is needed in accountability studies on cross-functional organizational teams. As Chapter 2 reviewed the background literature, Chapter 3 details the research methodology for the current study.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore mutual accountability, how it is established, and its impact on cross-functional teams. To focus this research, the following questions will guide the current study:

1. What is an individual's experience with mutual accountability as a member of a cross-functional team?
2. How is mutual accountability established in cross-functional teams?
3. What are the barriers to establishing and maintaining mutual accountability in cross-functional teams?
4. What is the impact of mutual accountability, or lack thereof, on the overall effectiveness of a cross-functional team?

To answer these research questions, a qualitative research approach will be utilized. This chapter explores the research methodology, the study population, the data sources, and the data collection and analysis procedures used in this study.

Methodology

The research method for the current study is qualitative research, which utilizes open-ended questions and seeks to descriptively assess the experiences of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This makes qualitative inquiry ideal for exploring participants' subjective experiences, opinions, and perceptions. Further, because qualitative methods are used to understand experiences and perspectives at the individual level (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2016), this method will prove valuable in exploring how people experience mutual accountability being established and how they

experience its impact on cross-functional teams.

Rather than relying on large sample sizes and short-form data, qualitative research adopts small sample sizes, asks open-ended questions, and collects a large amount of subjective and descriptive data that allows a study to fully explore the issues under examination, usually within their native context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Moreover, the qualitative approach is ideal for examining subjective issues because it allows the researcher to seek views on a focused topic (Hammarberg et al., 2016), such as how the experience of mutual accountability in cross-functional teams may affect other subjective outcomes, such as effectiveness. For this research, the qualitative approach is superior to the quantitative approach, which tends to be more numerically based and overly structured, which can limit the depth of the responses.

Research Design

The qualitative research model seeks to characterize the nature of mutual accountability on cross-functional teams in order to determine the baseline conditions within which mutual accountability is developed and nurtured in cross-functional teams. From this baseline, I will then more deeply explore the issues surrounding and related to the existence and nature of mutual accountability in cross-functional teams.

Qualitative data were collected by conducting interviews. Interviews are, in general, the most common source of qualitative data because they allow a researcher to elicit participants' experiences in a descriptive form (Kallio et al., 2016). Qualitative interviews naturally draw on open-ended questions. Semi-structured interviews represent a balanced approach to interviewing that is widely adopted by qualitative researchers (Kallio et al., 2016). Semi-structured interviews are facilitated with an interview guide,

which is prepared in advance by the researcher (Kallio et al., 2016).

Interview guides contain a list of preliminary questions and research topics that the interview should cover, while offering structure for comparability. However, they are only semi-structured in the sense that the researcher is free to go beyond the interview guide, probing participants' experiences with follow-up questions to elicit more information. In this regard, as long as the topics necessary to answer the research questions are being discussed, there is no harm in giving participants more flexibility to answer questions in greater depth to elicit further relevant data.

The interview guide utilized in this study was developed by me (Appendix A) and consists of six open-ended questions to explore mutual accountability between team members to determine how this relationship is established and how it impacts the effectiveness of cross-functional teams. At the end of the interview, the participants were given the opportunity to add any additional information about their experiences with cross-functional teams that they thought would be relevant.

Population

Qualitative research does not require large sample sizes, and it does not draw upon the types of power analysis used in quantitative research (Mason, 2010). Instead, qualitative studies deeply analyze the perceptions of a small number of participants through interviews and other long-form, open-ended sources of data. Qualitative researchers seek to reach the point of saturation, or the point at which new data no longer contributes new ideas to the study. Accordingly, it is only possible to propose an initial sample size, which should be modified as necessary to achieve saturation. Therefore, a small, purposive sampling of six participants, at a minimum, is appropriate.

The participants were recruited individually through LinkedIn using personal network connections. I sent participant recruitment messages (Appendix B) to 15 LinkedIn connections to recruit a purposive sample of participants with directly relevant experience as members of various cross-functional organizational teams. Participation recruitment messages asked if individuals would be interested in completing an interview on the topic of cross-functional teams.

The population under study consisted of nine individuals working in various roles from six different industries. Cross-functional teams are operationally defined as teams that draw members from one or more departments of the same organization. Consequently, participants were required to have been a member of a cross-functional team within the past five years. No other demographic characteristics were used for inclusion or exclusion.

Data Collection

The qualitative data were collected through telephone interviews. Once participants were identified through the recruitment process, interviews were scheduled and allowed participants to select the best time that fit their schedules.

Prior to the scheduled interviews, participants were sent an informed consent form (Appendix C) for their review. The document described the study, its purpose, the participation requirements and expectations, and the measures that will be taken to protect the identity and confidentiality of all participants. Informed consent for participation in the study was obtained verbally prior to the start of the interviews. Participants were also sent the questions from the interview guide to allow time for them to process their thoughts.

The interviews with each participant lasted 25–30 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded, transcribed, and coded with transcription software. I also took notes during the conversation to ask follow-up questions based on answers provided, in order to elicit more information from the participant. All additional notes were masked using false names and entered on my password-protected, personal laptop to maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

Data Analysis

I leveraged the definition of qualitative evaluation by Berkowitz (1997) to drive the analysis:

Data collection and data analysis are not temporally discrete stages: as soon as the first pieces of data are collected, the evaluator begins the process of making sense of the information. Moreover, the different processes involved in qualitative analysis also overlap in time. Part of what distinguishes qualitative analysis is a loop-like pattern of multiple rounds of revisiting the data as additional questions emerge, new connections are unearthed, and more complex formulations develop along with a deepening understanding of the material (p. 4-2).

Initial connections were made during the interview phase with typed notes. I gained a deeper understanding of the data by repeatedly reading through the transcribed interviews with the research question in mind, expanding initial impressions and highlighting verbatim quotes of the participants and taking additional notes to identify themes and patterns (Bennett, Barrett, & Helmich, 2018).

Once key themes and patterns were identified, preliminary assumptions and meaning was given to the notes taken and patterns observed. After gaining a deeper

understanding, I did open coding by applying a paraphrase or label (a code) to anything that might be interpreted as relevant to the research topic in the transcripts (Gale, Heath, Cameron, Rashid, & Redwood, 2013). Differences were also indicated to reflect the alternate approaches and experiences that represented outliers in the data. Final conclusions occurred when I expanded on the initial assumptions, considering what the analyzed data meant in relation to and assess their implications for the proposed research questions (Berkowitz, 1997).

Summary

The purpose of this study is to explore mutual accountability, how it is established, and its impact on cross-functional teams. To serve this purpose, the research method for the proposed study is qualitative in design. The study population consisted of a qualitative sample of nine cross-functional team members who have worked on such teams in the past. Recruitment took place through LinkedIn and participants were interviewed via telephone. To collect the data, interviews were audio recorded with transcription software. The resulting qualitative data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. I ensured that informed consent and ethical practice were adhered to at all stages of the research. This chapter has addressed the specifics of the research methodology; Chapter 4 will present the results of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore mutual accountability, how it is established, and its impact on cross-functional teams. This chapter summarizes the key themes of the qualitative data collected from the perspectives of nine interviewees who have participated in cross-functional teams in the past five years. 10 general themes were noted across one or more of the interviews conducted (Table 1). The discussion will focus on the top four key themes that emerged from the data analysis related to mutual accountability and team effectiveness are as follows: clarity of expectations, management support, cultural norms, and the presence of a team driver.

Table 1
General Themes

	N	%
Clarity of Expectations	57	29%
Management Support	36	18%
Cultural Norms	27	14%
Team Driver	25	13%
Gain Buy-in	20	10%
Managing Conflict	12	6%
Human Behavior	7	4%
Documentation	5	3%
Reputation	4	2%
New Hires	3	2%
	196	100%

N = number of discrete mentions of the theme in all the interviews

The first theme, clarity of expectations, discusses the importance of team members clearly understanding their roles and responsibilities at the beginning of the project/task. The second theme examines how support from management, either the direct manager of a team member or senior leadership, can affect a team member's level

of interest and commitment to completing team tasks. The third theme explores how cultural norms that exist at multiple levels (i.e., department, division, and organization) can dominate the way a cross-functional team operates regardless of its stated intention. Finally, the fourth theme identifies a team driver because it is believed that an effective cross-functional team must have someone driving and tracking progress toward the end goal.

Clarity of Expectations

The first question participants were asked was related to the way that mutual accountability was established in cross-functional teams in which they had participated. The overarching theme revealed throughout all nine interviews was the importance of gaining clarity of expectations among team members at the beginning of the project. Participants shared the importance of each person being clear on the team's objective, individual roles and responsibilities, task requirements, and deadlines for team milestones and individual tasks. Participant Seven (P7) stated:

I think one thing that's been helpful in these cross-functional teams is spending the first couple of meetings really laying out the vision for that particular project, and then helping everyone kind of understand the different elements of it—trying to get everyone on the same page and the same starting point. And then from there, the team can go into specific tasks or project cadences, or buckets of kinds of phases for the work. And then, really line by line, the team can talk through what that work is, or potentially would look like, and who would be the best person on the team to take on some of those tasks.

P7 said that if the team does not take the time to clearly define the elements of the project, including the tasks and who will complete each one, the lack of planning will have a negative impact on the project's legacy or on the team's ability to transition the ownership of what has been built for ongoing management. While the team "may be excited and proud of the work that they've done, they're glad the project is over, and

[that] they don't have to work on that team anymore.”

Participant Eight (P8) also conveyed the importance of articulating expectations clearly at the beginning of the process by saying, “setting up-front what are our goals, what are we accountable for, and just having that understanding from the onset” is necessary to establishing accountability for the team that can then be successfully upheld throughout the project. Without clear goals up front, P8 said that the group would be inefficient and may be unable to achieve the team objective.

Participant Four (P4) expressed the importance that clear expectations play in establishing accountability as follows:

Typically, as part of a kickoff for any activity or any sort of group that is working across functions, we want to outline roles and responsibilities first. Certainly, we want to document those things and have people agree to them, and then make sure that we are having regular cadence, to make sure that those things are being completed.

The lack of a documented plan clearly outlining roles and responsibilities often leads to “missing milestones and deliverables and impacting a project delivery.”

Participant Nine (P9) shared that the first thing to do is discuss and document “setting the expectations of accountability upfront,” thus ensuring that team norms are established around accountability. This individual went on to say:

We speak openly about who will own what, what ownership means, and what accountability means. Sometimes we use a tool to help with that, like a RACI matrix¹. Sometimes we do not. Sometimes we fill out project one-pagers and take more of a program management approach. [Then] the other thing is, reiteration. We mention it over and over again. We put it in meeting notes. They get sent around after meetings. We have talked about it at the top of meetings when it's in meeting agendas, clarifying who is responsible for different items.

Without clarity of expectations, team members interpret information (e.g., task

¹ The RACI matrix is used to document the four roles that stakeholders might play in any project – Responsible, Accountable, Consulted or Informed.

ownership, the meaning of accountability, deadlines) differently, leading to confusion about who is responsible for a particular task, how the task is to be completed, and when the task is due.

Having clear expectations leads to a positive experience and positive results. P9 shared that when expectations are clear, teams “gel, or harmonize, or start to norm and perform” and can often complete the project early, on time, and/or go beyond expectations. P7 stated that the “success of [the] project feels like a success for the team.”

Management Support

After clarity of expectations, all nine participants (two of whom have also served in a managerial capacity) mentioned how direct manager support of cross-functional team members is important to upholding established accountabilities. They discussed the manager’s impact from two perspectives: 1) managers may volunteer team members with a different set of expectations that may not align with those of the cross-functional team, and 2) even if roles and responsibilities are clear, without management support, it is a challenge to seek assistance if team members are not completing their assigned tasks because their manager has a different agenda. P8 discussed expectations for team members being set by their manager prior to joining the team:

In a perfect world, [expectations for participation are established] before we get to the team. But managers all communicate differently. Some members show up and do not know why they are even part of the group, thinking, ‘I don’t know why I’m here but whatever you need from me.’ In a perfect world, it is established [by management] before we get there, and then reconfirmed as we go into the first meetings. And then for those who do not even know why they were selected to be part of the team, we discuss that and establish that, and make sure that we are all on the same page.

P8 went on to say that the biggest challenge was team members “not coming to the table with those clear expectations from their managers or whoever elected them to be part of

the team,” effectively questioning why they were asked to join the team. Often, when they ran into issues, they had to go back to the manager in question because they did not “have the bandwidth to be involved right now,” or because the team member in question “may not have the right knowledge or skills” to complete the task. Depending on where the manager stood on the spectrum of support, the team was able to see a change in behavior or even the person, if the manager was actively engaged and invested in the success of the project and their employee’s participation. If they were on the other end of the spectrum, the team just had to deal with the person’s shortcomings because the manager was indifferent to the project and their employee’s participation.

Participant Two (P2) said that “different leadership styles” impact how each team member approaches the work that needs to be done. When “the managers [of team members] on [the] cross-functional team [are] on the same page” when they approach a task, it makes getting work done “a lot easier.” This participant reiterated that the manager is “also a source of accountability.” P2 went on to say:

If [the direct manager is] not equally invested, [the team member is] getting different levels of accountability. For example, if I’m involved in a cross-functional team, I’m also meeting with my own manager regularly. I would imagine that my manager would ask me about that project like, ‘How’s it going? What’s going on with the team? How can I support you?’ But if somebody else’s manager isn’t doing that or having those conversations, [that team member is] going to show up differently to that project team.

Participant Six (P6) said that the process “would first start off by engaging [the prospective team] member’s managers” to gain buy-in about the scope of the project, the type of work that needs to be done, and the amount of time estimated to complete the work. This individual said it was about “just being as clear as possible on what is needed” so that individuals identified were “intentionally selected” to “establish some

accountability” upfront. This usually translated to an engaged team member who was more likely to do the work. P6 did admit that working with management to identify participants did not come without challenges. Occasionally, management “may not have [offered up] the person with the right capabilities” to join the team, because they didn’t want to give up their most capable person, which means “you kind of get the bottom of the barrel. I know that sounds terrible, but that happens.” The team is then left “trying to hold [this team member] accountable to something; it may be that they just don’t know how to do [it],” which is different from them not wanting to do it. The team has to go back to the manager to re-negotiate resources.

P2 summed up this theme best by stating that the direct managers of team members need “to be invested in the team on behalf of their subordinates and provide the same level of support” for the project as they provide for their own team’s activities because, if needed, “the manager may be able to shift some resources for the [cross-functional team member] if they’re struggling to carry their weight on the team project”. Without that support, team members may not be actively engaged in the project. This sentiment of direct manager buy-in and how their support can help keep a project moving was universally acknowledged as important by all participants.

Cultural Norms

Throughout the interviews, seven participants described the ways in which cultural norms at the department, division, or organizational level interfered with the cross-functional team’s ability to be effective. The most explicitly positive description of culture came when Participant Five (P5) described how challenges with accountability were rarely experienced because the leader of their organization raised the bar on team

participation. P5 said, “It’s kind of known that you need to bring everything that you say you’re going to bring to the table,” and because of that, “I don’t really see people slacking on their end because then you just won’t [get to] be a part of [future projects]” if they don’t complete their assignments. I believe that this example of the positive influence of culture was rare; the belief was then confirmed when no other participant conveyed anything close to this experience.

The other study participants discussed how workplace culture negatively impacted their experience working on cross-functional teams. P9 discussed how corporate-level status and “being nice can get in the way.” This participant said, “if everyone’s kind of equivalent, it might end up where everyone’s being so nice, [that] they don’t want to call it” if no one is assigned to a task or someone is not doing their part. The team “end[s] up dancing around it and there’s a lack of commitment to [the] project, because people are trying to play the nice card to please everyone, or not call someone out for not taking accountability in certain areas.” The most glaring cultural norm P9 mentioned was that:

Despite accountabilities, there’s some level of acceptance of saying, ‘I’m too busy.’ I have so many projects that slipped and that’s okay, because it happens to everyone at [the] organization, or ‘I can’t get to it because I’m so busy with other projects, you need to find someone else.’ So even though they are accountable for it, it’s like, well, okay, we’ve got it. Everyone’s busy so [inaudible] slip, you’re forgiven. The problem is, we do that repeatedly, day in and day out: we forgive people, so it’s hard to hold them accountable.

P9 went on to say that this pattern continues because people are not “punished or reprimanded for it because everyone knows it and does it themselves. So, they’re not going to get on your case because they don’t want you to get on their case when they do it.”

P6 discussed how “being nice” can be a potential problem on cross-functional teams. The participant talked about how regional differences drive cultural differences, specifically how some parts of the organization are “receptive to accountability” and that if other parts of the organization have “a passive culture, they may view any kind of holding [team members] accountable or specificity as being aggressive.” This aversion to holding team members accountable can impact a team’s ability to meet objectives, because delayed tasks then go unaddressed or fall to the responsibility of team driver (which will be discussed in the fourth theme).

Participant Three (P3) discussed how having “no true accountability, [when] there’s no reprimand or drawback to just not being an active team member,” coupled with “the lack of reward or growth or promotion,” impacts the effectiveness of cross-functional teams. P3 believed that those elements combined do not support the notion that “we’re all one team [and] that we’re all part of this together; you doing your part, helps everybody do their part, which helps the whole group succeed.” This participant went on to say that when people see other team members fail to pull their weight and demonstrate “the lack of teamwork,” it can lead to low participation overall. P3 said people may think “[I am] getting the same salary and the same everything and [the non-contributor] doesn’t do anything. Why am I working so hard?”

P3 also discussed the complexity of new hires who come from a different organization, thus bringing outside cultural norms to the new company. They described it as the way a new employee may feel working on a cross-functional team with “people who have been at an organization a long time.” New team members may worry about establishing themselves and feel reluctant to speak up for fear of “rubbing [other team

members] the wrong way” if they do. The veteran team member, in turn, may worry about “how they’re perceived or what their role is [as a member of the team], or what their expectations are [for how the team will operate].” During the acclimation period, new employees may struggle as they try to figure out how they should perform, resulting in difficulties meeting expectations.

Participant One (P1) discussed how department cultures can interfere with cross-functional team effectiveness. P1 talked about how some departments may be comfortable if they miss a deadline or go over budget, which may not be in alignment with the expectations of the cross-functional team. Acknowledging that it was a “terrible way to operate,” the participant said that employees are “just resigned to the fact [that some teams have different approaches] and they don’t try to fix it” or align things with the needs of the team. The goal was simply to manage it so that “putting out fires is not a part of [the participants] everyday job responsibility.” As a leader, sending your employee to work on a cross-functional team, P1 would “train” them to deal with these situations because you can’t always get them to bend to your will and you have to figure out how to not let it spread to your team.”

In general, all participants accepted their respective workplace cultures and discussed ways that they moved through these cultural impediments, rather than making any efforts to change them. P1 effectively captured this survivalist spirit, commenting that when you cannot get rid of the problem person or department, “you’re going to have strengths and weaknesses and you’re going to be the most productive when you know how to work around them.” P6 was more optimistic, acknowledging that while changing culture doesn’t happen overnight, the best way to have an “optimal outcome” is by

“finding where there are similarities” to figure out “what’s going to help us [better understand] what’s going to help them to receive my communication and vice versa.”

This participant went on to say that “it’s about finding commonalities and emphasizing those to try to mobilize the work.”

Team Driver

In the fourth theme, seven of nine participants mentioned the importance of having someone drive the team and track toward the end goal. Typically, this is the project owner, who is responsible if the project fails. Occasionally, this team driver can be different from the project owner in that the driver is not held responsible if the project fails. Rather, this separate person, regardless of being identified formally or informally, is either the project owner or a driver only, and in the case of the participants’ experiences was critical to the team’s ability to establish responsibilities and keep the group and individual team members on track, ultimately helping the team in question achieve its overarching goal.

P7 said that when they had the opportunity to be the driver, because they were the project owner, they were able to bring “full passion and full engagement” to the project. P7 noticed that the team liking the driver also played a factor because team members may be more inclined to complete tasks and assignments because they want to see that person be successful. By contrast, when the driver is just the driver and not the project owner, the process was “muddied” because there was a lot of time spent “figuring out what the project was about, what the team was doing, and why.” If the team driver takes the time to figure out all those things, they can gain support from team members and be seen in an “authority role for the project.” Without this informed team driver, “the project team kind

of just lets those that aren't pulling their weight sit on the sidelines." P7 believed that an effective team driver would be "checking in with that underperforming team member's manager" to discuss the situation, re-confirm capacity, provide training, or pull a troubled employee off the project.

P6 stated that the team driver's ideal role (in this case someone who is not the project owner) is "facilitate[ing] the process for how [team members] hold each other accountable, meaning, it's not that [they are] going to hold [each team member] accountable, but [they] can help [the team] get to how [they] hold each other accountable." The participant went on to say that the team driver is like a "conductor" who ensures that every team member works in harmony as part of the "band." P6 stressed that facilitating the accountability discussion is so important, if a team member does not take on this role, they will either ask someone to take on that role or work with the project owner to have that role assigned.

P3 said that team drivers are a "pretty fascinating concept" because they can be "formal [intentionally selected for their expertise related to the project] or informal [random volunteer]". Either way, someone is "figuring out who should be doing what." At the same time, P3 did say that while they hadn't experienced it often, determining roles and responsibilities effectively without a team driver takes "collaboration and groupthink decision making that leads to wide-open conversations about who should do what." Typically, what P3's experience has been "kind of like *Lord of the Flies*² and no one really wants that;" i.e., because there is no clear leadership, team members are constantly asking, "do you want to be the lead on this," and no one is moving the project

² *Lord of the Flies*, a novel written by William Golding, is often used to describe something that is free from rules and structure.

along. As it relates to a “formal or informal” team driver, P3 said the issue with an “informal” team driver is that “you're kind of left up to people's personalities, which usually [goes] to people who are the most type A or the people who are most project oriented” who may not have the relevant expertise or may not be in tune with the project’s goal and “put a different spin on it.” Ultimately, that random volunteer or informal team driver “may not even be the right person to lead that group, or they may have too much on their plate already,” yet they took on the role because they saw a void in leadership.

Ultimately, team drivers, when present, played a critical role in participants’ cross-functional team experiences in that they helped to drive the group toward their end goal. P9 captured this spirit most successfully when they said that the team driver is “like [a] safeguard for accountability,” i.e., that they work to hold team members accountable based on established roles and responsibilities. Without that driver, the team was often in disarray trying to figure out who did what, trying to hold people accountable if a deadline was missed, and to understand how delays would impact the overall project.

Summary

This chapter outlined the findings and summarized the key themes extrapolated from the nine individual interviews with people who participated in cross-functional teams. The following four dominant themes were identified and described through the data analysis related to mutual accountability and team effectiveness: clarity of expectations, management support, cultural norms, and a team driver. Chapter 5 will discuss conclusions, study limitations, implications, and recommendations to improve cross-functional teams, as well as offer suggestions for further research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore mutual accountability, how it is established, and its impact on cross-functional teams. To serve this purpose, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who previously participated in cross-functional teams. This study explored their lived experiences related to mutual accountability: how it is established, barriers to establishing and maintaining it, and the impact of its presence or lack thereof on the overall effectiveness of cross-functional teams.

This chapter discusses the relationships between the interview data gathered and the previous data revealed in the literature review through exploring how the results of the study answered the four guiding research questions:

1. What is an individual's experience with mutual accountability as a member of cross-functional teams?
2. How is mutual accountability established in cross-functional teams?
3. What are the barriers to establishing and maintaining mutual accountability in cross-functional teams?
4. What is the impact of mutual accountability, or lack thereof, on the overall effectiveness of a cross-functional team?

The chapter continues with the implications of the results on organizations and teams. Next the chapter acknowledges the limitations of the study and the impact they may have on the results, followed by recommendations for possible future research opportunities. The chapter concludes with a summary of the results.

Conclusions

While much of the results of the study were in harmony with the reviewed literature, there were some areas in which they varied slightly. The results showed that creating, maintaining, and upholding mutual accountability among team members is challenging because it relies on multiple elements that are often interdependent of one another. These results seem to be supported by the previous research, which found that there is no single recommended approach to creating and maintaining strong mutual accountability and that the approaches are intertwined.

Guiding Research Question #1

What is an individual's experience with mutual accountability as a member of a cross-functional team? Through the analysis of the interviews, it seems that being a member of a cross-functional team can be challenging because it is sometimes difficult to partner with colleagues outside their normal functional teams. Team members either had a different set of expectations that did not align with those of the newly formed cross-functional teams or were not completing assigned tasks on time. These experiences mirrored the literature review that also identified the issue of individuals bringing different expectations based on their original team's specific accountabilities from various departments (Katzenbach & Smith, 2006) and how this made cross-functional teams challenging, in large part because team members often focused on achieving personal or departmental goals at the cost of the cross-functional team's goal, which created conflict.

Having a disconnect between goal alignment also caused what many described as a lack of engagement or commitment to completing assigned tasks by team members,

which caused deadlines to be missed. This, in turn, gave rise to challenging situations because people were reluctant to address delayed assignments, thus putting projects in jeopardy. The results highlighted how some individuals had difficulty holding team members accountable in these uncomfortable situations because they did not want to be seen as aggressive. This finding is in alignment with Lencioni's (2002) assertions that teams struggled if they were unable to hold each other accountable for poor performance or behaviors that interfered with the team's ability to achieve their goal.

Guiding Research Question #2

How is mutual accountability established in cross-functional teams? To build mutual accountability, the literature identified the need for clear roles and responsibilities. Barclay (2016) and Lencioni (2002) both argue that if expectations and responsibilities are clearly stated and understood, team members are more likely to hold one another accountable. This was underscored by the results related to having clear expectations at the beginning of the project. Clear expectations were defined as being sure each person on the team was clear on the team's objectives, individual roles and responsibilities, task requirements and deadlines for milestones. Gaining upfront clarity of what is expected between team members provides the necessary data point for them to refer back to when misunderstandings or missteps occur.

In another segment of the literature research, Martin (2016) identified cultural norms as a possible driver in establishing mutual accountability in teams, primarily because cross-functional teams draw upon different departments that represent distinct vantagepoints of an organization's culture, thus bringing different approaches establishing mutual accountability. This perspective is supported by the results of the

study in that differences in approach spawned differences in the ways team members interacted with one another or defined success, which then fueled the challenging situations that arose, making establishing mutual accountability increasingly difficult. To address these differences, the participants reverted to the concept of setting clear expectations.

Guiding Research Question #3

What are the barriers to establishing and maintaining mutual accountability in cross-functional teams? Several barriers arose from the results, including unsupportive cultures, inability to confront laggards, and lack of management support. While organizational culture can support establishing and maintaining mutual accountability, it can also be an impediment. The literature review highlighted the need for a proper cultural environment to support the concept of accountability for team members to follow through on any commitment set by the cross-functional team (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011; Williams & Taylor, 2012). The results reflected a similar belief that without a supportive culture, individuals would be reluctant and/or resistant to completing assignments. Team members felt empowered by the lack of consequence to “slack off” on assignments, and since the culture supported them, other team members did not feel that they had just cause to push the issue. Passive cultures created both the “slackers” and the team members who were reluctant to speak up.

The results and the literature both contend that management support can be a barrier to establishing and maintaining mutual accountability. The results, in agreement with Katzenbach and Smith (2006), acknowledge that each team member brought their own specific accountabilities related to their original teams and personal goals to the

project, causing tension. The belief is that when the collective leadership teams who manage individual team members fail to understand and actively support their efforts, it creates distrust and weakens the partnership. Lencioni (2006) believed that it created psychological barriers because team members observed their peers moving in different directions, making it difficult for them to trust and support one another.

The theme of management support was tied back to cultural norms because the misunderstanding and lack of support came from each manager having their own approach to establishing mutual accountability as well as their own priorities related to their respective teams, influencing which team members they agreed could contribute to the cross-functional team. The results showed that the best way to overcome this is to set clear expectations with the collective leaders about their team members' roles and their own roles in supporting their team members as a part of the cross-functional team.

Guiding Research Question #4

What is the impact of mutual accountability, or lack thereof, on the overall effectiveness of a cross-functional team? With the results leaning toward more challenging than stimulating experiences with cross-functional teams, the list of impacts due to the lack of mutual accountability was plenty in number, consistent between the participants' experiences, and still quite simple. It seems that without mutual accountability, teams experienced confusion related to task definition, responsibility, and deadlines. As a result, groups were inefficient, which often led to missing deadlines and targets, ultimately impacting the overall success of the project. Once the project was complete, the lack of mutual accountability tainted the team members' reputations, the project's legacy, and the team's ability to transition the project into business as usual. In

the end, the team members themselves were simply happy that the project was over, leaving a bad impression on their experience with cross-functional teams, a feeling that is very evident in their shared experiences.

This is not to say that glimpses of the impact of strong mutual accountability were not mentioned. The results showed that when mutual accountability was present, it created a positive experience for the team members, yielding positive results for the project. The results indicate that when clear expectations are set, it creates an environment where team members want to complete assigned tasks and if that should not occur have the foundation to successfully hold one another accountable. Teams harmonized, often completing projects early, on time, or going beyond the stated objectives of the project. This is in alignment with the aspiration of cross-functional teams: swift, seamless coordination of efforts (Keller, 2001), reduced time to results, and improved problem solving (Parker, 2003), all of which ultimately assist an organization in meeting strategic imperatives.

Limitations

This study had four principal limitations. First, the study could have benefited from a sample size larger than nine. While a saturation point was reached, it is possible that additional data points could have been uncovered if a larger sample size was used. Second, I was acquainted with all of the participants, some to a greater degree than others, which could have influenced their responses. Third, the results could have been subjective based on my interpretation of the interview data. Fourth, while a qualitative approach allowed for deeper exploration of the subject, the interview data could ideally have been offset by quantitative data gathered through a survey.

Implications for Practice

While organizations are different, there are certain takeaways from the study that could help enhance the overall effectiveness of cross-functional teams. If done collectively, these practices could yield better team member experiences and greater results. This section provides some actions organizations can take to create effective cross-functional teams.

First, both the organization and the project will be served if managers are consulted prior to the formation of cross-functional teams. Their role in the success or failure of a cross-functional team is evident. Managers would be able to provide insight into which team members have the capacity and the capabilities to be engaged and productive, which could then yield greater efficiency and results. By working with managers to form the cross-functional team, the sponsor could also ensure that the collective managers are also clear on the expectations and commitment required, thus being able to provide the appropriate level of support throughout the project.

Second, organizations should examine their respective cultures to understand what could become an impediment to the success of a project. Ultimately, the goal of gaining this insight is to change cultural norms that interfere with the organization's ability to live its values and meet its strategic objectives. Changing a culture takes time, often years. While this will not create the ideal situation today, it will create one to strive for while Human Resources works to help the organization adapt and change. The goal of understanding is not to immediately change the cultural norms, but to create a level of awareness that will allow the employees to recognize and adjust accordingly in the interim.

Lastly, managers should provide clear expectations at all levels related to the objective of the cross-functional team, from the executive sponsors to the collective leadership of the team members, all the way to the team members themselves. Clarity provides clear direction for all parties involved, making it easier for individuals to hold one another accountable and thus increasing the chances of team success. Expectations should be communicated in writing, reviewed, and discussed to ensure that all parties are in agreement. This will reduce the possibility of misunderstandings, missed deadlines, inaccurate work, and delayed or incomplete projects.

Recommendations

While Schaubroeck and Yu (2017), who studied virtual teams, found that further research was needed into the cultural norms that could arise out of geographical distance between members, the results showed no evidence that would suggest being on a virtual team had any impact on establishing, maintaining, or any type of impact on mutual accountability in cross-functional teams. Participants did not mention team members interacting with team members in different locations as a factor when establishing a team or holding someone accountable. This suggests that a more explicit exploration of the possible impacts that virtual teams may have on cross-functional teams is needed.

Based on the results, organizational norms play an outsized role in cross-functional teams. It would be fascinating to examine how societal norms impact team members' ability to be effective in cross-functional teams. This could explore topics like passivity vs. aggression or being risk averse vs. risk seeking. It would also be interesting to explore the impact that diversity has on a cross-functional team's effectiveness. Diversity could focus on the impact of gender, race/ethnicity, education level, position

level (role in company), tenure, or some combination thereof.

Summary

This chapter presented the correlation between the gathered interview data and the previous data revealed in the literature review through exploring how the results of the interviews answered the four guiding research questions. The results showed that creating, maintaining, and upholding mutual accountability among team members is challenging because of unclear expectations, lack of management support and unsupportive cultures which resulted in confusion related to task definition, responsibility, and deadlines. As a result, groups were unlikely to achieve the objectives of the project. The remaining parts of the chapter describe the implications of the results on cross-functional teams if organizations were to address the identified challenges, limitations of the study which mainly focus on the sample size and types of data gathered, and recommendations for possible future research opportunities like virtual teams, societal norms and diversity.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

1. How have you established accountability among team members in cross-functional teams?
2. What challenges have you found in establishing accountability among team members in cross-functional teams?
3. What challenges have you found in upholding accountability among team members in cross-functional teams?
4. What do you think the impact of having a strong sense of accountability has on a cross-functional team's overall effectiveness?
5. What do you think the impact of not having accountability has on a cross-functional team's overall effectiveness?
6. What do you think can be done to build a strong sense of accountability in cross-functional teams?

Appendix B: Recruitment Message



October 13, 2020

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Lori Simms and I am a Master Student in the Graziadio Business School at Pepperdine University. I am conducting a research study examining how mutual accountability is established and maintained in cross-functional teams. I would like to invite you to participate in the study. If you agree, you will participate in an interview. The interview is anticipated to take no more than 30–45 minutes and will be recorded to understand accountability in cross-functional teams.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your identity as a participant will remain anonymous and confidential during and after the study. Each interview will be stored on a password-protected device. Participants will be assigned a unique code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write-up of findings.

If you have questions or would like to participate, please contact me at lori.simms@pepperdine.edu or 310-699-9610.

Thank you for your participation.

Lori Simms
Pepperdine University
Graziadio Business School
Master's Student

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form



SOCIAL-BEHAVIORAL ADULT PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

IRB #: 19-09-1144

Formal Study Title: Mutual accountability and its impacts on cross-functional teams

Authorized Study Personnel

Principal Investigator: Lori Simms, MA (310) 699-9510

Secondary Investigator: Ann Feyerherm, Ph.D. (949) 223-2534

Invitation

You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?

You are invited to participate in this study because you have participated in a cross-functional team at some point during your career.

What is the reason for doing this research study?

Functional teams are comprised of employees with different responsibilities and similar functional expertise who report up to the same manager. Cross-functional teams combine diverse individuals of relevant functional expertise who report to different managers. In functional teams, the manager sets and holds each team member accountable. The difficulty with cross-functional teams is in establishing and holding mutual accountability because individuals come with their specific accountabilities from their original groups and the methods for which those accountabilities were established. This research is designed to explore the experience of individuals who have worked in cross-functional teams to understand how mutual accountability is established and upheld to complete assignments.

What will be done during this research study?

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will take part in a 30–45-minute interview, via telephone, about your experience as a team member of a cross-functional team.

How will my [data/samples/images] be used?

A qualitative content analysis of the transcripts, looking for major themes or significant events, will be conducted to gain greater insight into how cross-functional team members build and maintain mutual accountability.

What are the possible risks of being in this research study?

There are no known risks to you from being in this research study.

What are the possible benefits to you?

You may gain potential insight into how you participate in a team that can help you be more productive in the future. You also have the potential to learn how to set up and work in effective cross-functional teams. However, you may not get any benefit from being in this research study.

What are the possible benefits to other people?

It is also important to note that while you may not gain a direct benefit for them specifically, the team members that they interact with on future cross-functional teams may have the potential to benefit from the possible insights gained or lessons learned.

What will being in this research study cost you?

There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

Will you be compensated for being in this research study?

No compensation will be provided for your participation in this study.

What should you do if you have a problem during this research study?

Your welfare is the major concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

How will information about you be protected?

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. Out of respect for each participant's time and to ensure responses are accurately documented, the interviews will be recorded. Each subject's personal data (including participant name, email address, company, manager, co-worker, or project name) will be masked by the assignment of a pseudonym prior to data analysis to protect confidentiality. Then, all identifying information in the interview will be redacted from the transcripts immediately to ensure that participants' identifying information is protected. The audio files for the interviews will be stored on the PI's password-protected computer for three years and immediately deleted from the devices used to record them.

The data will be stored electronically through a secure server and will only be seen by the research team during the study and for three years after the study is complete. The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings, but the data will be reported as group or summarized data and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

What are your rights as a research subject?

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. For study-related questions, please contact the investigator(s) listed at the beginning of this form.

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research, contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

Phone: 1(310)568-2305

Email: gpsirb@pepperdine.edu

What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study (“withdraw”) at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with Pepperdine University (list others as applicable).

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.