Coordination in Task-Performing Groups

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Groups are often called upon to perform tasks in organizations. Hiring decisions are made by selection committees, product ideas are generated by teams, products are assembled by a collective of individuals, and problems regarding how to cut labor and time costs are solved by task forces. Often, these groups are composed of members with different expertise, skills, and roles, who work on a task that requires them to combine their efforts in a way that facilitates successful task completion. For example, the selection committee may try to pool all members’ unique information about the job candidates in order to reach a well-informed decision, team members who generate product ideas may wish to avoid duplication of ideas in order to maximize the quantity of ideas produced, and members assembling a product may build the part that is assigned to them by occupational roles or standard operating procedures. The way in which group members synchronize their actions in order to complete successfully the group task is referred to as group coordination. In other words, group coordination involves who among the members does what, as well as when, where, and how they complete their designated tasks. This chapter explores different ways that members can coordinate their actions, the factors that moderate such coordination attempts, and implications for group performance effectiveness.

Coordination is an essential component of successful group performance. As Steiner (1972) suggested, groups whose actual productivity does not equal their potential productivity may have incurred such “process losses” because of either reduced motivation or poor coordination. We will focus on the latter cause of process losses, namely, performance deficits due to group actions that are poorly orchestrated. Coordination losses can stem from inappropriate allocation of resources (e.g., unnec-
necessary duplication of efforts, leaving some subtasks undone) or failure to time efforts wisely. The lack of temporal coordination is demonstrated when work group members experience scheduling problems in their use of organizational resources or in finding a mutually satisfying meeting time (McGrath & Rotchford, 1983). Coordination losses can also occur when members do not weigh others’ contributions in an optimal way or make incorrect assumptions about what subtasks others will perform. In recognition of the role that group coordination plays in impacting group performance, this chapter will review the existing literature related to group coordination and offer a theoretical integration.

Group coordination can vary on at least two dimensions: time and explicitness. Member attempts to coordinate may occur before group work begins or during the process of working together. Coordination may be tacit, based on unspoken expectations and intentions, or it may be explicit, based on verbal agreements or formally adopted plans that fully and clearly designate who is to do what and when they are to do it. Although the dimensions of time and explicitness theoretically represent continuums instead of dichotomies, for ease of presentation, we will discuss four modes of coordination located at the extreme of the continuums: (1) preplans, (2) in-process planning, (3) tacit precoordination, and (4) in-process tacit coordination. These coordination modes are depicted in Figure 5.

Before interaction begins, preplans explicitly indicate ways for members to coordinate their efforts. Preplans include job descriptions, organizational rules, poli-

Figure 5. Model of Coordination mode in task-performing groups.