

ОБЩЕСТВЕНИ КОМУНИКАЦИИ И ИНФОРМАЦИОННИ НАУКИ
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**EFFECTIVELY DEVELOPMENT OF MIDDLE MANAGEMENT TEAMS:
TEAM DEVELOPMENT AS A STRATEGIC PROCESS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL
VALUE CREATION**

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Abstract: *Management teams are a core component of modern organizations. However, their contribution to value creation does not depend solely on the professional excellence of individual managers, but on how effectively they collaborate - both in terms of achieving their own objectives and aligning with overarching organizational goals. The key question, therefore, is not whether a management team must function as a “team” in the traditional sense, but rather how much teamwork is actually required in this context-and in what form it best contributes to strategy execution. This cannot be resolved through a one-off workshop or offsite event. Instead, it requires an ongoing development process in which goals, roles, and work methods are regularly defined, reviewed, and adjusted. A useful reference framework is the Input-Mediator-Output-Input (IMOI) model (Ilgen et al. 2005), which illustrates how individual and organizational preconditions (inputs) are transformed into measurable outcomes (outputs) via team processes such as communication, role clarity, and shared norms. These outcomes, in turn, feed into subsequent development cycles as new inputs. This underscores a central point, especially for Middle Management Teams: their effectiveness does not emerge from isolated interventions, but from a systematic interplay of needs, interventions, and outcomes over time.*

Keywords: *management team; organizational development; team development; team coaching; IMOI model*

INTRODUCTION

Management teams are a key instrument for implementing corporate strategies. They bring together different perspectives, coordinate business areas, and are responsible for strategic decisions (Bang et al. 2021, pp. 13f; Wageman et al. 2010, p. 477; Lindinger et al. 2013, p. 112). However, their success does not depend solely on the excellence of individual managers, but on whether they succeed in integrating their contributions in such a way that they jointly create added value for the organization (Bang et al. 2017; Wageman et al. 2008, p. 161). The individual success of managers does not necessarily lead to collective effectiveness. This is particularly true for Middle Management Teams, which serve as a critical interface between strategic decision-making and operational execution (Floyd & Wooldridge 1997, pp. 465–485; Castañer & Yu 2017, pp. 13–32; Walter 2016, p. 11). Their ability to align vertically with top leadership and horizontally across functions is essential to organizational effectiveness (Groth 2008, p. 11; Walter 2016, p. 82 f.)

In this context, the question arises as to how Middle Management Teams can structure their collaboration in such a way that they achieve the greatest possible impact with the most efficient use of resources, thereby making a sustainable contribution to strategy implementation.

However, effective collaboration does not come about solely through designation or selective measures, but through consciously designed processes that clarify roles, structures, and working methods (Katzenbach & Smith 2004; Dyer 1995, p. 85). Team development should therefore not be understood as a one-time event, such as a workshop or offsite. Rather, it is a continuous, long-term process that addresses the specific challenges of the team and requires ongoing reflection, review, and adjustment of its working methods (Comelli 2003, pp. 169–189; Salas et al. 2004, p. 48.2-48.3; Bang et al. 2021, pp. 153–158).

This article examines the thesis that the development of Middle Management Teams is more effective when it is understood as a continuous process rather than relying on isolated individual measures.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper presents a systematic literature review of foundational and contemporary studies on team development and organizational effectiveness (Salas et al. 2004; Klein et al. 2009; McEwan et al. 2017; Bang et al. 2021). It also includes key research on Top and Middle Management Teams (Wageman et al. 2008) and organizational development (Hackman 2002; Hawkins 2011; West 2012).

Relevant sources were identified through international academic databases and snowball sampling. The review focused on peer-reviewed articles, established theoretical works, and especially literature from the past two decades.

As no primary data was collected, this article offers a conceptual synthesis, critically examining existing research and applying it to the specific question of management team development.

RESULTS

Team Development as Part of Personnel and Organizational Development

In the literature, team development is predominantly described as part of personnel and organizational development: a targeted, long-term process that strengthens cooperation and effectiveness (Comelli 2003, pp. 169–189; Neuberger 1994, pp. 12–14). Unlike isolated measures, it involves interventions that address structures, processes, and social relationships and focus on the team as a whole (Stumpf & Thomas 2003, pp. XIII–XIV).

More recent work emphasizes that team development is only effective if it is linked to organizational goals and framework conditions (Mathieu et al. 2008; Rico et al. 2011) and understood as a structured learning and change process that is closely linked to the strategic management of the organization (Kozlowski & Ilgen 2006).

Reasons and Goals of Team Development

Team development is typically initiated when new demands arise or difficulties become apparent within the team - for example, in newly formed groups, unclear roles and goals, communication problems, conflicts, or when performance potential is not being fully realized (Dyer 1995, p. 79; Comelli 2003, p. 169–189; Kauffeld 2008, pp. 29–41). Such symptoms often point to underlying causes such as a lack of clear objectives, unclear definition of roles, or insufficient communication structures (Dyer 1995, p. 80; Hackman 2002, p. IX).

The objectives of team development measures are accordingly diverse. They range from establishing binding structures and rules to improving cooperation and relationships to promoting social skills and the team's ability to reflect (Comelli 1994, pp. 61–84; Dyer 1995, pp. 90–93). At its core, team development aims to enable teams to continuously reflect on their working methods, increase their effectiveness, and at the same time support the motivation and personal development of their members (Stumpf et al. 2003, p. XIV; West 2012, p. 61).

The Process of Team Development

Team development should not be understood as a one-time event. Short-term formats such as offsites or outdoor training courses can create cohesion in the short term, but they have little lasting effect in everyday work (Dyer 1995, p. 85; Salas et al. 2004, p. 48.4). Effective collaboration is more likely to emerge from a longer-term process characterized by clear steps and a close connection to the strategic challenges of the organization (Comelli 2003, pp. 169–189; Bang et al. 2021, p. 154).

Typically, this process comprises several phases: clarifying the mandate and expectations, conducting a thorough diagnosis of the initial situation, developing and implementing appropriate measures, and subsequently reflecting on and evaluating the outcomes (Dyer 1995, pp. 90–91; Comelli 2003, pp. 169–189; Kauffeld 2011, p. 151–152). Evaluation and feedback loops are not the end but rather part of a continuous learning cycle in which the team makes ongoing adjustments (Marks et al. 2001; Bang et al. 2021, p. 86).

Diagnosis is of central importance, as it provides the basis for ensuring that interventions truly fit the team and its situation. Development needs - and corresponding goals - may arise at different levels: cultural (values, norms, identity), organizational (vision, strategy, goals), structural/

procedural (processes, interfaces, roles, rules, decision-making processes), or individual (trust, psychological safety) (Comelli 2003, pp. 169–189; Hackman 2002, p. 22; West 2012, p. 61; Kozlowski & Ilgen 2006; Edmondson 1999; Bang et al. 2021; Schein 2010; West 2012; Schiersmann & Thiel 2014). Moreover, such needs rarely occur in isolation. In practice, issues often emerge as a mix across levels, or become visible on one level while originating on another - for example, interpersonal conflicts that stem from unclear structural or organizational conditions (Hackman 2002, p. 22; West 2012, p. 61; Hawkins 2011, p. 18). As Hawkins (2011, p. 18), drawing on Oshry, emphasizes, teams often concentrate too heavily on personal issues, even though many difficulties are manifestations of collective structures and processes.

In practice, however, this phase is often shortened or omitted altogether for cost reasons, even though it is precisely this phase that determines the effectiveness of the entire development process. Research shows that team development is particularly effective when it begins with a careful needs analysis and is continuously adapted (Dyer 1995:86f, 2003:186ff, Salas et al. 2004:48.6). If these steps are skipped, there is a considerable risk that team development will fail to achieve the intended outcomes and will be perceived by participants as ineffective (Kauffeld & Lehmann-Wiltenbrock 2011, p. 217).

Special Characteristics of Management Team Development

Developing management teams presents distinct challenges. Unlike operational teams, which are united by shared tasks and interdependence, management teams consist of highly autonomous executives with diverging departmental priorities. They often hold strong personal convictions and may be resistant to correction - even from the team leader (Wageman et al. 2008, p. 161). In Middle Management Teams, this complexity is further amplified. Members are often positioned between hierarchical expectations from above and operational demands from below. They must not only interpret and translate strategy, but also coordinate across silos – often without formal authority over peers (Groth, 2008, p. 11; Walter, 2016, p. 82 f.)

These dynamics align with Upper Echelons Theory, which posits that organizational outcomes are shaped by the values, experiences, and cognitive frameworks of senior executives (Hambrick et al. 1984). In this view, top managers do not merely implement strategy – they shape it through their own lenses. As such, management teams differ fundamentally from traditional work teams in both structure and behavior. More recent work confirms that top teams operate within complex power structures, and their collective effectiveness depends not just on technical ability, but on how they interact, align, and make sense of strategic contexts (Hambrick et al. 1984).

Given these dynamics, individual development interventions such as coaching may improve personal competencies but rarely translate into improved team performance. What is essential are collective development processes that clarify roles, establish decision-making routines, and foster shared responsibility (Hackman 2002, p. 179; Burke et al. 2006; Salas et al. 2005). Management team development thus requires more than a series of individual measures; it demands a systemic, team-level approach.

The literature reflects a lack of consistency in how terms like team development, team coaching, team training, and teambuilding are used. While some authors treat these terms interchangeably, others draw clear distinctions (Comelli 2003; Shuffler et al. 2011; Hawkins 2011, p. 54–59). For the purposes of this discussion, team development is defined as a structured, long-term process that integrates various interventions and supports sustained collaboration and strategic alignment. While coaching, training, or teambuilding may contribute to this process, they cannot replace its systemic character – particularly in the context of leadership teams.

Research shows that such processes are most effective when closely aligned with an organization's strategic challenges and current issues (Bang et al. 2021, pp. 153–158). Eight core principles emerge from the literature: strategic relevance, leadership engagement, evidence-based learning, individualized contribution, structural support, ongoing feedback, professional coaching, and sufficient time for new routines to take hold. These findings reinforce that management teams do not improve through symbolic events but through the integration of strategy work and learning processes.

Crucially, management teams must first clarify their role and mandate: What issues must they address collectively - complex strategic topics or operational decisions? Only then can the required degree and structure of teamwork be defined (Critchley et al. 1984, p. 163; Bang et al. 2021, p. 161).

Despite these unique dynamics, core elements of effective teamwork still apply: a shared focus, supportive structures, an enabling environment, and targeted development interventions (Hackman 2002, p. 242). High performing management teams do not emerge by chance, but through intentionally designed collaboration (Comelli 1994, pp. 61–84). They grow through collective designed processes that must be consciously facilitated over time (Comelli 2003). Recent research confirms that lasting effectiveness requires alignment between team development and organizational strategy, with management teams making a visible contribution to strategic implementation (Rico et al. 2011; Mathieu et al. 2017).

The Effectiveness of Team Development

The literature remains divided on the effectiveness of team development in improving performance. Critics argue that many interventions emphasize social cohesion, yet produce limited and short-lived effects (Salas et al. 2004, p. 48.4; West 2012, p. 88). However, meta-analyses demonstrate that targeted interventions can yield measurable benefits. Clarifying goals and roles, in particular, is a proven success factor that enhances team performance over time (Klein et al. 2009). Recent reviews confirm that evidence-based training improves both behavior and outcomes, whether in laboratory or organizational settings (Salas et al. 2012; McEwan et al. 2017).

Effectiveness is highest when interventions address multiple levels – individual competence, team processes, and organizational structures (Rico et al. 2011). Multidimensional approaches that combine task, procedural, and social aspects, and engage members in experiential learning, are especially effective (Shuffler et al. 2011). Sustainable impact requires alignment with actual needs, structural integration, and support from top management. Without these, team development risks being perceived as ineffective or irrelevant (Shuffler et al. 2018; Thompson 2018, p. 19).

Critics also point to the ineffectiveness of standardized, “one size fits all” programs – particularly for management teams (Hawkins 2011, pp. 54ff.; Comelli 2003). Popular formats such as off sites or outdoor events may promote short-term cohesion but fall short if they neglect work routines and decision-making processes. Meta-analyses confirm that customized, evidence-based interventions significantly outperform generic formats (Lacerenza et al. 2018).

Most empirical studies focus on operational teams or controlled environments. Their applicability to management teams remains insufficiently explored. In this context, standardized formats are particularly limited, as the challenges often involve role clarity, decision-making, and strategic responsibility rather than daily collaboration (Wageman et al. 2008, p. 161; Bang et al. 2021, p. 161). For management teams, team development is effective only when it is context-sensitive, strategically embedded, and conceived as an ongoing process.

Models and the Measurability of Team Development

Team development cannot be viewed in isolation from organizational goals. A valuable framework is the updated Input–Mediator–Output–Input (IMOI) model by Ilgen et al. (2005), which has also been applied to management teams (Bang et al. 2021, p. 5). It illustrates how team processes are shaped by individual and organizational inputs and how mediators – such as communication, role clarity, and norms - translate these into measurable outcomes. These outputs, in turn, feed back into new development cycles.

For management teams, relevant inputs include strategic mission, departmental agendas, team composition, and available resources. In the context of Middle Management Teams, these inputs also reflect cross-functional mandates, hybrid leadership responsibilities, and varying degrees of autonomy, making tailored team development especially important (Floyd et al. 2000).

Mediators such as communication quality, conflict resolution, trust, and psychological safety influence outputs like decision quality, implementation speed, or employee satisfaction (Kozlowski & Ilgen 2006; Mathieu et al. 2017). These outcomes then shape subsequent development phases.

The IMOI model thus offers not only a theoretical lens but also a practical framework for eval-

uating team development. Assessment can involve both qualitative methods (e.g., reflection, observation) and quantitative instruments (e.g., standardized process or climate scales). Meta-analyses confirm that team development is most effective when evaluation is embedded throughout the process - not just at its conclusion (Klein et al. 2009; Shuffler et al. 2018). This enables development efforts to remain adaptive, evidence-based, and aligned with strategic goals.

In sum, management team development is a multidimensional and ongoing process that spans cultural, organizational, structural, and individual domains. Its effectiveness depends on deliberate design, strategic alignment, and systematic evaluation - setting it apart from one-off trainings or symbolic team-building events. As such, it must be seen as a central element of long-term organizational development.

Building on the foundational IMO model, the present paper proposes an extended framework that tailors its structure to the specific dynamics of management teams (Fig. 1). This adapted model retains the core IMO logic – inputs, mediators, emergent states, and outputs – but incorporates leadership-specific factors such as strategic alignment, team composition, and organizational support as critical inputs.

Team interaction processes-ranging from goal clarity and communication to conflict management and feedback culture-serve as mediators that convert these contextual inputs into measurable outcomes. Emergent states such as team-based trust, shared understanding, commitment, and a functional team culture dynamically evolve and reinforce team functioning. Outputs include not only task performance and implementation strength but also learning integration, strategic contribution, and long-term resilience.

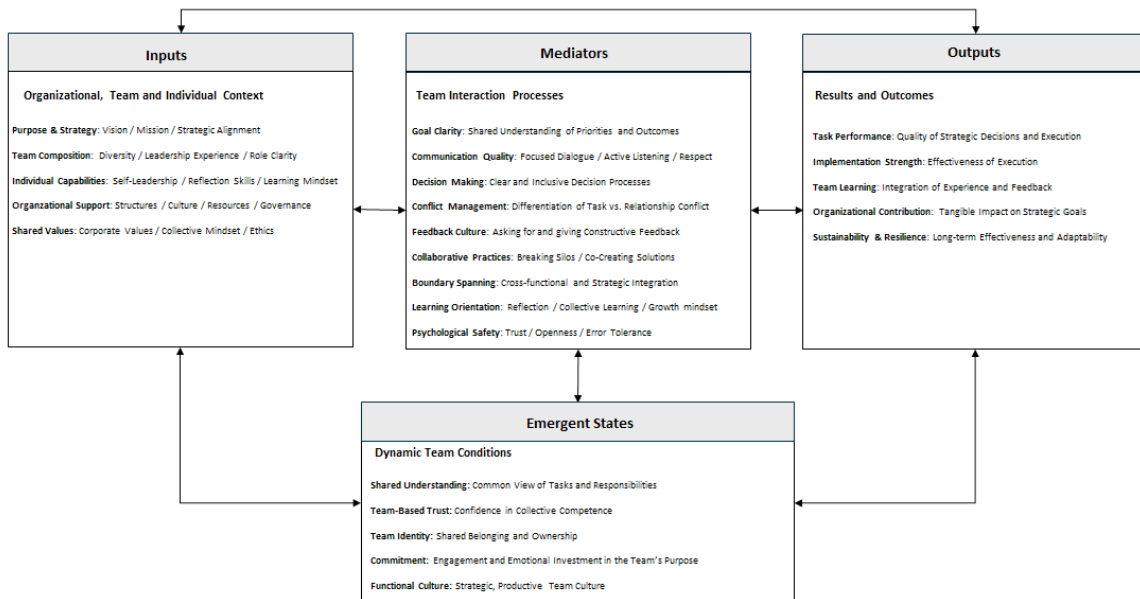


Fig. 1. Extended IMO Framework for Management Teams - based on Ilgen et al. (2005) and Bang & Midelfart (2021), adapted by the author.

This customized version of the IMO model offers a practical lens to design, guide, and evaluate management team development efforts. It emphasizes that collaboration at the executive level requires more than alignment on content – it depends on how interaction patterns, cultural norms, and individual capacities combine to support strategic execution. As such, it reinforces the argument that team development must be systemic, ongoing, and embedded in the broader logic of organizational effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

The literature review confirms that team development is a key element of both personnel and organizational development. It should not be seen as a one-time intervention, but a continuous

process requiring tailored measures and structural integration. This is particularly true for management teams, whose members do not naturally function as a team and must actively shape their collaboration. In Middle Management Teams, the challenge is compounded by their dual role as both strategy implementers and local leaders. They operate in dynamic contexts that require adaptive collaboration and strong horizontal alignment.

Effective development of management teams depends on close alignment with the organization's strategic goals and current challenges. Interventions must be needs-based, structurally supported, endorsed by top management, and embedded into existing decision-making processes.

Beyond fostering psychological safety or cohesion, team development must be guided in clear standards and systematically evaluated. The Input–Mediator–Output–Input (IMOI) model offers a valuable framework for identifying key levers and tracking measurable progress over time.

Looking ahead, a better balance between standardization and customization will be essential. A shared foundation enables comparability and evaluation, while flexibility ensures responsiveness to each team's unique context. Only when both dimensions are combined can team development drive collaboration, strategic alignment, and long-term organizational resilience.

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ЕФЕКТИВНО РАЗВИТИЕ НА МЕНИДЖЪРСКИ ЕКИПИ: РАЗВИТИЕТО НА ЕКИПА КАТО СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКИ ПРОЦЕС ЗА СЪЗДАВАНЕ НА ОРГАНИЗАЦИОННА СТОЙНОСТ

Резюме: *Управленските екипи са съществена част от съвременните организации. Техният принос към компанията обаче не зависи само от професионалната компетентност на отделните*

мениджъри, а и от това как те организират своята съвместна работа – както по отношение на собствените си цели, така и по отношение на интегрирането им в по-висшите цели на компанията. Следователно основният въпрос е не толкова дали един мениджърски екип трябва да бъде „екип“ в класическия смисъл, а по-скоро колко екипна работа е необходима в този контекст и под каква форма тя допринася за реализацията на стратегията. Отговорът на тези въпроси не може да бъде даден в рамките на еднократен уъркшоп или извън офиса. По-скоро той изисква непрекъснат процес на развитие, в който целите, ролите и начините на работа се дефинират, проверяват и адаптират редовно. Полезен референтен модел в това отношение е моделът *Input–Mediator–Output–Input (IMOI)* (Ilgen et al. 2005), който илюстрира как индивидуалните и организационните предпоставки (входни данни) чрез екипни процеси като комуникация, изясняване на ролите или норми водят до измерими резултати (изходни данни), които от своя страна се връщат като входни данни в нови цикли на развитие. Особено за мениджърските екипи става ясно, че тяхната ефективност не се дължи на единични мерки, а на систематичното съчетаване на нужди, интервенции и ефекти във времето.

Ключови думи: мениджърски екип; организационно развитие; развитие на екипа; екипен коучинг; IMOI модел

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