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# Team leadership across contexts: a qualitative study

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Team  
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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to compare leadership functions from different team contexts considering context characteristics that contribute to team effectiveness.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A qualitative study was conducted. Seven leaders of multidisciplinary child protection teams (MDTs) and nine managers of an information technology (IT) company took part in semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using content analysis with ATLAS.ti.

**Findings** – Results showed that the two types of teams used different performance criteria, with teams from non-profit contexts lacking defined performance criteria. The results also showed that transition leadership functions are more frequently mentioned by IT than by MDT leaders. Moreover, interpersonal leadership functions emerged as independent functions that may occur in both the transition and action phases.

**Research limitations/implications** – Context is paramount for performance criteria definition and for the relevance of certain team leadership functions over others. It also presents some suggestions for improvement to the model of Morgeson *et al.* (2010a).

**Practical implications** – The results support the idea that there are differences in the leadership functions that are most valued by leaders, depending on the specific team's context. Results also showed that some non-profit and less task-structured teams lack the specific performance criteria that could help them make more successful interventions.

**Originality/value** – This paper reviews context literature, it shows that the emphasis on team leadership functions can vary across contexts and to the knowledge it is the first that compares the model of Morgeson *et al.* (2010a) in different contexts.

**Keywords** Context, Qualitative, Performance criteria, Team leadership functions

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

In the field of organizational behavior, team leadership as a research area has evolved. Literature on team leadership has benefited from scientific developments both with regard to team effectiveness and to the study of leadership in general. However, there are fewer studies of leadership at the team level compared to those at the individual and interpersonal levels of leadership (Zaccaro *et al.*, 2001; for a recent review see Graça and Passos, 2012).

Most research on team leadership is based on the functional perspective, which considers that the leader's main task is to assure all functions that are critical to

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accomplishing the team's task, and for group maintenance (e.g. McGrath, 1962; Hackman and Walton, 1986; Zaccaro *et al.*, 2001; Morgeson *et al.*, 2010a). Based on input-process-output (I-P-O) models, empirical research usually indicates that team leadership has an important impact on team performance and team effectiveness by itself and/or through interaction processes that can occur within teams (Kozlowski *et al.*, 1996; Mathieu *et al.*, 2008; Zaccaro *et al.*, 2001). Some models based on the functional perspective have tried to enumerate which of the team leaders' functions are the important drivers in promoting team effectiveness (Burke *et al.*, 2006; Fleishman *et al.*, 1991; Zaccaro *et al.*, 2001).

Recently, Morgeson *et al.* (2010a) proposed a model of functional team leadership integrating those leadership functions with the dynamic aspects of the literature on teams (Marks *et al.*, 2001). They suggested that leaders perform specific functions to meet their teams' needs. However, these needs differ according to whether a team's performance cycle is either in a transition or an action phase (Marks *et al.*, 2001). To our knowledge, this model has never been studied in different contexts.

Although models of team leadership have been proposed or studied across different teams, they are context free since there has been little or no concern with the context in the formulation of those models (e.g. Fleishman *et al.*, 1991; Gupta *et al.*, 2010; Sivasubramaniam *et al.*, 2002). In fact, in most of the published papers on team leadership, the sample studied is sometimes mentioned as a constraint to the generalization of results. In other cases, authors integrate contextual variables in their models that can work as moderators (e.g. team structure, human resources systems, organizational culture) referring to the different effects that one variable can have on another according to certain conditions (Gladstein, 1984; Kozlowski *et al.*, 1996; Burke *et al.*, 2006; Morgeson *et al.*, 2010b; Vroom and Jago, 1988). However, Hackman (2012) argues that the increasing number of identified and empirically assessed potentially moderating variables can make work become complex for leaders in real organizations. Thus the author proposes that instead of focussing on causal relationships in regard to group behavior, researchers should analyze how much of a difference the conditions that foster team effectiveness actually make. We suggest that, in the formulation of the model itself, researchers should consider whether the models are suitable for teams that operate or work in different contexts such as profit and non-profit organizations.

The aim of this paper is to explore whether the team leadership functions from the Morgeson *et al.* (2010a) model emerge in a different way according to distinct contexts. With regard to exploratory theory development, we ask whether there are functions that can be generally appropriate across contexts, or whether there are functions that emerge as more critical in one context than another. And which functions seem more critical – transition-phase functions or action-phase functions?

To answer these questions, we used a qualitative approach. This is a powerful alternative to quantitative designs due to its advantages regarding sensitivity to context, and its contribution toward elucidating the complex nature involved in team leadership. In fact, our aim was not to test the influence of specific contextual factors on the nature of team leadership, or the validity of the factorial structure of the model, but instead analyze what emerged from the participants' answers. In fact, there are emergent and dynamic properties that are not well captured by standard causal models (Hackman, 2012).

In the next sections we will review the literature on organizational context and how it has been studied with regard to teams and leadership. And, to conclude, this study will review team leadership literature and, in particular, will explore the team leadership functions from a dynamic innovative perspective (Morgeson *et al.*, 2010a).

### Context and team leadership

No organizational phenomena exist in a vacuum. An important element for any theory building is the boundary conditions, i.e. the context in which a theory is expected to hold up (Holton and Lowe, 2007). Johns (2006) defines context as “situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behavior as well as a functional relationship between variables” (p. 386). This concern is present in the literature on teams and leadership.

The dynamic perspectives on groups consider that groups are inherently dynamic and embedded within contexts, and develop activities that unfold over time. This assumption makes researchers look at groups as developing as systems over time, but also that they change as a function of certain contextual conditions (McGrath *et al.*, 2000). Recently, Hackman (2012) has revived the systemic perspective in the study of groups, which was very popular in the 1950s, and posits that researchers should “become more inventive in developing conceptual models and research strategies that respect the fact that groups are social systems” (p. 428). Regarding the area of leadership research, context has been acknowledged as salient to leadership with theories such as situational leadership and contingent leadership (Fiedler, 1967; Hersey and Blanchard, 1969) that propose that leadership effectiveness depends on the fit between leaders’ characteristics and context features.

Despite this theoretical acknowledgement that context is salient to teams and leadership, only in recent years has empirical research given widespread attention to context (Hackman, 1999; Kozlowski and Bell, 2003; Liden and Antonakis, 2009; Pinnington, 2011). In fact, there is little concern about the differences inherent to the contexts in which teams operate, and there are practically no comparisons between them in empirical studies. For example, Porter and McLaughlin (2006) reviewed the literature from 1990 to 2005 in order to gain a better understanding of the contextual influences on leadership, and concluded that 65 percent of all reviewed articles had no emphasis at all on organizational context related to leadership, with only 16 percent that strongly emphasized it.

So why is it so important to take into account the differences between contexts in teams and leadership in formulating the theoretical models and empirical studies? First, it provides an opportunity to examine the way context influences the variability that may emerge in constructs under study (Liden and Antonakis, 2009), since context is likely to be responsible for one of the most disturbing problems in organizational behavior: study-to-study variation in research findings (Johns, 2006). Also, theoretical models of leadership need to be grounded by the characteristics of the contexts (Kozlowski *et al.*, 1996), such as the structural features of social systems, that would help leaders take them into account in the most appropriate way as they carry out their leadership role (Hackman, 2010).

Another important question is: what are these contexts that can influence and shape teams and leadership? In the literature on teams, several proposals incorporate contextual variables that can enable or constrain team-member interaction and processes (e.g. Gladstein, 1984; Hackman, 1987). Examples of these labeled contextual variables are: team structure, composition and design (e.g. Gladstein, 1984; Hackman, 1987; Morgeson *et al.*, 2010b), human resources systems (e.g. Hackman, 1987), and environmental factors such as organizational culture (e.g. Gibson, 1999). Other authors have suggested team typologies in order to classify different team types (Cohen and Bailey, 1997; Sundstrom, 1999). These typologies typically consider contextual dimensions such as fundamental work cycle and skill differentiation (e.g. Devine, 2002; Hollenbeck *et al.*, 2012) or highlight specific contextual features of teams (e.g. Hackman and Katz, 2010) such as collective values.

Regarding leadership, among the few studies that do consider context with regard to leadership is the analysis of Porter and McLaughlin (2006) mentioned earlier, some contextual variables were unanimously appointed as having impact on leadership. Those were: culture/climate; goals/purposes; people/composition; processes; state/condition; structure; and time. As can be seen, team processes are rarely analyzed in the relationship between leadership and organizational context. The few studies that report teams as the context of leadership focus only on team composition/heterogeneity. Beyond culture, Liden and Antonakis (2009) add team context and social networks to the study of leadership. There are also other studies, that would indicate leadership is affected by the team (e.g. Cogliser and Schiesheim, 2000; Henderson *et al.*, 2009; Morgeson and DeRue, 2006). However, most of these studies are based more on the interpersonal level and less at the team level.

In the previous paragraphs, we reviewed the high number of contextual variables/dimensions applied to teams and leadership. According to Hackman (2012), in order to make these dimensions useful for leaders and managers, complex “contingency tables” would have to be created that identify the actions indicated for several circumstances. This would pose challenges due to limited human information processing, making it difficult to apply the research findings of these models to leaders’ actions in real time. Thus the authors propose enabling conditions – instead of causes – that need to be present to foster group effectiveness (Hackman, 2012) that may deserve more attention from researchers.

To sum up, from our review of the literature we found that most of the studies that mention context focus on individual approaches to leadership, or on the interpersonal level. They do not consider the specific tasks that teams have to perform, nor, indeed, do they consider the role leadership plays in the variability between teams.

### **The model under study**

As previously stated, the majority of team leadership models are based on the I-P-O model. Due to some limitations of traditional I-P-O models (Ilgen *et al.*, 2005; Kozlowski *et al.*, 1996; Zaccaro *et al.*, 2001), more dynamic approaches to team leadership have emerged. These have tried to address the task dynamics of teams, and among them is the model of Morgeson *et al.* (2010a) already mentioned. Morgeson *et al.* (2010a) propose a framework of leadership functions based on a comprehensive literature review from published articles and book chapters. These functions are integrated in two different phases – transition and action phases (Marks *et al.*, 2001) – which correspond to different task cycles of teams. In the transition phase, the focus of the team is not on direct task work *per se*, but rather on the activities that establish and structure the task and its subsequent performance. Thus leadership functions are related to establishing team goals, structure and planning, and providing feedback, among others. In contrast, in the action phase, the team focusses on activities that directly contribute to accomplishing its goals. Two examples of leadership functions in this phase are monitoring the team and solving problems.

Since the majority of models do not distinguish the role of the leader in the different task cycles, the model of Morgeson *et al.* (2010a) is a relevant exception that deserves to be studied and explored. This should be done, not only paying attention to the temporal aspects, but also taking into account the context in which teams operate given that

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groups are dynamic, complex and adapt to different contexts and develop over time (McGrath *et al.*, 2000). The team leadership functions corresponding to these phases are presented as follows (adapted from Morgeson *et al.*, 2010a):

- (1) Transition phase:
  - compose team;
  - define mission;
  - establish expectations and goals;
  - structure and plan;
  - train and develop team;
  - sense making; and
  - provide feedback.
- (2) Action phase:
  - monitor team;
  - manage team boundaries;
  - challenge team;
  - perform team task;
  - solve problems;
  - provide resources;
  - encourage team self-management; and
  - support social climate.

Morgeson *et al.* (2010a) recognize that some of the identified team leadership functions might be appropriate regardless of the team or the context in which the team is operating. However, they also expect that the effectiveness of those functions would vary based on contextual factors and recommend that scholars carry out research that explores the range of team, organizational and environmental contingencies that might help to explain how these team leadership functions influence team processes and effectiveness. To our knowledge, this model has never been studied in different contexts.

### **The present study**

Studies that compare team leadership functions in different team contexts are scarce. Considering this limitation, we investigate the model of Morgeson *et al.* (2010a) in two different team contexts. Since this study has an exploratory character, we will not formulate hypotheses. Rather, we propose the following exploratory questions:

- (1) Are there functions that can be generally appropriate across contexts?
- (2) Or are there functions that emerge as more critical in one context than another?
- (3) If so, are there transition-phase functions or action-phase functions that seem more critical?

It should be made clear that on the one hand, it is not our purpose here to test the effect of specific contextual factors on the nature of team leadership. On the other hand, neither is it our aim to evaluate the equivalence measurement of the factorial structure (Byrne and Campbell, 1999) of the team leadership functions' model. Examining how the model fits in both contexts is done in some studies on cross-cultural leadership (e.g. Casimir *et al.*, 2006), or those who compare team effectiveness across different teams (e.g. Gibson *et al.*, 2003). Although empirical evidence already exists that shows context is relevant for the relationships between leadership and team processes (e.g. Graça and Passos, 2012; Zheng *et al.*, 2010), there is no comparison of leaders from different types of teams.

Therefore based on the different components of I-P-O models, concerning inputs, team processes and team outcomes, our focus was on analyzing what emerges from the participants' answers regarding these concepts. Based on the idea that groups are social systems, it is our contention that far from there being merely a set of several cause – effect relationships or a linear combination of factors that drive performance, they in fact exhibit emergent and dynamic properties that are not well captured by standard causal models (Hackman, 2012).

In order to carry out this analysis, it is very appropriate to use a qualitative study. For Johns (2006), well-conducted qualitative research has great potential to elucidate context effects since qualitative researchers can be sensitive not only to the full range of contextual variables that might affect behavior in a studied setting, but also to the behaviors and attitudes that context might affect. Moreover, according to Bachiochi and Weiner (2002), qualitative research should be used in certain circumstances. First, it is appropriate when the context is central to the investigation, as it is in this study. Second, when the participant's interpretation is central to the research question. In our case, what we intend to explore, among other things, is the discourse that different leaders have, and what they value in their teams. Third, when the depth of data is essential it is also very appropriate to use this methodology because we can only understand the dynamics inherent to these specific team and leadership processes when we put them in context. And lastly, qualitative research is appropriate when the research is exploratory, which is the case here since there are no published studies that have empirically tested this issue.

There have been some qualitative studies in team leadership, in the areas of coaching (e.g. Wageman, 2001), boundary management (e.g. Druskat and Wheeler, 2003) and dynamic delegation (e.g. Klein *et al.*, 2006). However, these studies did not compare different team contexts. (An exception being the study of Zheng *et al.*, 2010, which studied leadership and innovation in different teams but did not study leadership functions or the conceptualizations of transition and action phases in a dynamic perspective of team leadership.) There has also been some research on leadership in different organizations, namely, between for-profit and non-profit organizations (de Hoogh *et al.*, 2005; Egri and Frost, 1994; Pinnington, 2011; Sarros *et al.*, 2011). However, most of these studies were focussed on leadership at the individual level (e.g. evaluating if there were differences in leadership management characteristics depending on the specific context).

To sum up, using a qualitative approach, we want to understand more deeply whether team leadership functions differ according to team contexts, and whether there are new leadership functions that could also be interesting to use in future studies.

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## Method

### *Sample*

Our participants consisted of 16 team leaders: seven leaders from multidisciplinary child protection teams (MDTs) – a non-profit organization sector – and nine top managers from an international information technology (IT) company.

In order to cope with their turbulent operating environment, public sector organizations have been “seduced by the concept of teamworking” (McHugh and Bennett, 1999). A MDT is defined as “a group of professionals who work together in a coordinated and collaborative manner to ensure an effective response to the reports of child abuse and neglect” (Ells, 2000, p. 5). According to Graça and Passos (2012), the success of MDTs is highly dependent on main factors such as a team’s ability to work as a unit to reflect and critically analyze the resources available for a specific case of child abuse or neglect, and the leader’s capacity to obtain and manage the resources needed to assure team effectiveness. All MDT leaders were female. Their tenure was on average 2.2 years in leadership functions and they had experience in the area of child intervention, or at least, in social intervention.

The IT company studied provides web and custom enterprise software solutions for several organizations. The IT sector is characterized by a constantly changing environment, and one where teams are subject to high levels of pressure in order to meet project deadlines and client satisfaction needs. We interviewed team leaders from three different levels in the organization in order to obtain a broader range of answers. They had been in a leadership role on average for 3.8 years. Five were male and four were female.

### *Procedure and instrument*

Participants from MDTs were contacted by e-mail, complemented with an authorization form provided by the national agency responsible for the monitoring of local MDTs. We contacted not only MDT teams with a great number of cases but also MDT teams with few cases in order to obtain a consistent, but also heterogeneous, sample. IT participants were contacted by e-mail and meetings were held with the top business directors and human resources managers in which the relevance of the study and methodology proposed was presented. A formal authorization form between the research team and the company was signed. We contacted leaders at different hierarchical levels in order to cover different perspectives. Thus in both samples participants were selected considering their characteristics and availability. The participation of individuals was voluntary and their confidentiality was assured; permission to record the interviews was requested and received. In the first phase, MDT interviews were conducted; IT interviews were conducted in the second phase. For each group, we interviewed participants until the data from the interviews became redundant (no theoretical novelty). The interviews were recorded and transcribed in full by the researchers. Interview duration was on average 29 minutes. Transcription resulted in a corpus consisting of 59,123 words on 138 pages.

The interview protocol was structured according to three main areas: first, introduction questions, such as tenure in the function, career path of the participant; second, team functioning, such as team performance criteria; and third, leader’s role (meaning of the leadership and critical functions within these specific teams; key functions; coordination). The questions of the interview protocol are listed in the Appendix. We chose to ask broad, open-ended questions, to more deeply understand which concepts emerged from the participants, and to avoid directing them to specific



performance criteria and leadership functions (Spradley, 1979; Klein *et al.*, 2006). The interviews were semi-structured allowing new questions to be introduced throughout the interview as a result of interviewee responses (Ghiglione and Matalon, 2005).

## Results

### *Data analysis*

Data were analyzed through content analysis, using ATLAS.ti software. There are some important features in content analysis that distinguish it from other methodologies: it recognizes the importance of language; it is replicable and applicable, it is analytically flexible and, when properly conducted, it is a methodology that can be checked for its accuracy, reliability and validity (Duriáu *et al.*, 2007; Krippendorff, 1980/2004).

In our analysis, we used words, sentences or paragraphs as segments to code, and we used a mixed approach (Ghiglione and Matalon, 2005). Specifically, we created a category dictionary for the leadership-related questions comprising 15 a priori categories that correspond to the leadership transition and action functions from the model of Morgeson *et al.* (2010a). For example, structure and plan – determining or assisting in determining how work will be accomplished (e.g. method), who will do which aspects of the work (e.g. role clarification) and when the work will done (e.g. timing, scheduling, work flow). From the process of data analysis, other categories emerged a posteriori. Of these a posteriori categories, four were related to other leadership functions not specified in the model of Morgeson *et al.* (2010a) (e.g. structure and plan – specific task episode; conflict management) and eight leadership characteristics were very specific to the context studied (e.g. manage team diversity; task experience as essential). From the performance criteria analysis, 23 categories emerged corresponding to different performance criteria. We will only show the main results, and we identify which categories emerged a posteriori.

We also analyzed the associations between categories, that is, the categories that appeared in the same quotation or in the same paragraphs. This density within codes shows the leadership functions that leaders consider to be more related to each other.

To enhance the reliability of the analysis, two people separately evaluated the categories and their corresponding quotations. Meyrick (2006) proposes two main quality criteria in qualitative research: transparency and systematicity. Our research meets these two criteria: transparency is obtained by explaining in detail all the procedures of the research process, of the construction of the interview protocol, and of the elaboration of categories; systematicity is met, since all interviews were analyzed in the same way and we used the same procedures when the names of categories needed to be changed, or when existing categories needed to be incorporated into new categories.

### *Results*

We will compare the performance criteria of both contexts, and then we will show the leadership functions that appeared as relevant for both contexts.

The tables present the absolute frequencies that were mentioned independently of the participant and the number of participants who mentioned a certain category. We have privileged the former option for the analysis, coding one occurrence per person, even if it appeared more than one time. This decision was made to allow for a clearer and unbiased perception of the data, avoiding the bias of the absolute

frequencies of a certain category, might reflect, for example, that one participant mentioned one category several times while others never mentioned it.

*Performance criteria – MDT teams.* All the categories for performance criteria emerged a posteriori, since these teams do not have explicit standardized performance criteria that we could anticipate. Therefore we can see in Table I that when participants were asked “what criteria do you use to know that your team is performing well,” the majority of MDT leaders’ answers were related to the absence of defined criteria and to the need for criteria definition and supervision. Due to the subjectivity of working with children and youth at risk, as well as with their families, and also due to the number of circumstances that relate to a “successful-outcome case,” the MDT leaders acknowledged, that it would be important to work on the definition of some performance criteria.

Although the criteria are not explicit, participants also mentioned some issues that may be seen as indicators of team effectiveness for these specific teams. For example, the functioning of agencies’ network, number of applied measures labeled deliberations in the legislation, and the workload and case distribution for each team member.

*Performance criteria – IT teams.* Even though IT teams have performance evaluation and some performance indicators, the categories displayed emerged

| Categories <sup>a</sup>                                 | Absolute frequencies (n = 46) | Frequencies (one per participant n = 7) | Evidence  |
|---|-------------------------------|---|---|
| Absence of defined criteria                             | 7                             | 5                                       | “Now I can not say because we do not set those goals, ok? We do not have exactly these standardized objectives saying we have to get here or there” (MDT5)  |
| Supervision and criteria definition as needed/ relevant | 17                            | 3                                       | “Now I would like that someone spent a little more time to this area of evaluation of our work, which is difficult, I know it’s hard [...] But for the evaluation of certain points [...] We need to learn and need to show to others what is right, what is wrong, what we can improve [...]” (MDT4) |
| Functioning of agencies’ network                        | 5                             | 2                                       | “You know we tried, we often call upon to what is the base of the pyramid. That is, the formal agencies [...]. And after gathering this information, then that is when we have to move” (MDT5)  |
| Number of applied measures/deliberations                | 3                             | 2                                       | “One indicator can be the huge number of deliberations that are done now. Thus, the cases do not pass so far from legal aspects as passed before” (MDT4)  |
| Workload for each team member                           | 3                             | 2                                       | “Number of cases’ distribution by case manager and then compare that number with the number of decisions that that case manager has” (MDT2)   |

**Notes:** MDT, MDT leader. <sup>a</sup>Categories that emerged a posteriori. The number following the letter indicates the specific individual respondent; for example, MDT1 is one leader, MDT2 is a second leader and so on

**Table I.**  
Main results for performance criteria in MDT

a posteriori in order to explore the participant’s perspective. In Table II, we can see that IT teams report more explicit criteria than MDT. The quality of the product these teams deliver was mentioned by all but two IT leaders. They believe that if the product is working well for the client and if it corresponds to client expectations, it shows that the team performed its tasks in an effective way. This quality is also related to the progress in the task and deadline fulfillment, mentioned by three IT leaders. These teams have specific time phases of the project, during which they must develop certain planned tasks. If they deliver in line with these steps, then it would also indicate that the team had performed well. Specifically, IT leaders point to their key performance indicators (KPIs), which are measurable. This shows a great difference between these teams and MDT teams. These KPIs can include customer satisfaction and project margin.

*Leadership functions.* In Table III, we show the results of the team leadership functions in the two contexts studied. As mentioned before, some of the categories for leadership functions were created a priori from the model of Morgeson *et al.* (2010a). These included structure and plan (transition functions) and monitor team (action functions). Also, some categories emerged a posteriori from the data analysis. The reflection on the emergent categories concerning leadership functions is most relevant to our discussion.

First, concerning transition functions, some leaders specified a task performance episode in which the function structure and plan was important. We added the category specific task episodes – structure and plan.

Second, in the original model of Marks *et al.* (2001), they suggest that team processes are divided into transition, action and interpersonal processes. In the model of

| Categories <sup>a</sup>                        | Absolute frequencies<br>(n = 34) | Frequencies<br>n = 9 | Evidence  |
|--|----------------------------------|----------------------|---|
| Quality of the product                         | 8                                | 7                    | “There are indicators that relate to the quality of what is delivered: number of defects found in the customer acceptance phase. Generally, a way to measure the team has to do with the quality of what is delivered” (IT9)                          |
| Progress of the task and deadlines fulfillment | 5                                | 3                    | “And I always ask their feedback in relation to the activities they are doing, if they are concluding the tasks in the expected time” (IT8)   |
| Key performance indicators                     | 4                                | 3                    | “We have the KPIs, which is a numeric part, objective and measurable [...] There are KPIs that are shared among all, i.e. if the group perform well, everyone wins. The group that has poor performance is penalized in some way. And I am too” (IT2) |
| Individual performance                         | 3                                | 3                    | “From the individual point of view, we have the performance appraisal for people. We usually do a yearly formal thing (although we do the follow-up of people over the year), formally there is an appraisal point by the end of the year” (IT2)      |

**Table II.**  
Main results for performance criteria in IT

**Notes:** IT, IT leader. <sup>a</sup>Categories that emerged a posteriori. The number following the letter indicates the specific individual respondent; for example, IT1 is one leader, IT2 is a second leader and so on

| Categories <sup>a</sup>                     | Absolute frequencies MDT leaders (n = 113) | Frequencies MDT leaders (one per participant n = 7) | Absolute frequencies IT leaders (n = 118) | Frequencies IT leaders (one per participant n = 9) | Evidence   |
|---|--|---|---|--|--|
| <i>Transition functions</i>                 |  |   |   |  |  |
| Compose team                                | 0  | 0   | 3   | 2  | "And that means what? It means to try, when we have to form a project team, try to get the most suitable resources" [...] (T1)   |
| Establish expectations and goals            | 0  | 0   | 7   | 5  | "I always need to think what is expected from this unit, we have to define which are the targets of everything we have, what are our goals as a group [...] What are the roles of the people who are working with me? And what is expected of these people in terms of the company, what skills that person has [...]" (T8)  |
| Structure and plan                          | 5  | 3   | 8   | 3  | "What I do is, may be in a situation where I get here, and there are a number of things here rocking, I trying to focus, do this, do that [...] which was something that I had great difficulty, but it needed to be so." (MDT1)   |
| Specific task episodes – Structure and plan | 0  | 0   | 15  | 9  | "Project management in terms of IT; it is a person who has the responsibility in the project of drawing the system, and then will coordinate the team in order to make that draw real and implement the requirements" (T6)<br>"And the project is developed in sprints, sprints are 2 to 3 weeks, and in every sprint, it's almost a mini-project within that major project, where we have analysis, survey, deepen the requirements with the client [...]" (T1) |
| <i>Action functions</i>                     |  |   |   |  |  |
| Encourage team self-management              | 7  | 5   | 2   | 2  | "But I always try to give freedom to the managers and if they are making home visits, follow-ups, if they are doing this whole process or procedure. My acting is very, very punctual and very sporadic. Because I think we have to give   |

(continued)

**Table III.**  
Main results for leadership functions for both contexts

Table III.

| Categories <sup>a</sup> | Absolute frequencies MDT leaders (n = 113) | Frequencies MDT leaders (one per participant n = 7) | Absolute frequencies IT leaders (n = 118) | Frequencies IT leaders (one per participant n = 9) | Evidence  |
|-------------------------|--|---|---|--|---|
| Manage team boundaries  | 31   | 6   | 12  | 6  | management and even complete freedom to the technician" (MDT5)<br>"Obviously, when I have senior elements, I can divide those tasks to them, therefore I do not need to take care of everything" (IT6)<br>"A president [...] is also a manager and a manager fundamentally of sensitivities, of internal sensitivities between the different technicians, sensitivities between technicians and external users/patients and between users and the relationship with the community" (MDT2)<br>"We have relationships at 3 levels, the development team, the team from the client, and the top management team in the company. Those 3 worlds are hard to coordinate [...]. Therefore, the responsibility goes all for us. We are responsible for the project, for the delivery to the client and get the message to the top management team. Manage that as a whole is crucial and it takes some common sense. When that communication fails, everything goes down [...]" (IT7)<br>"It is to be inside of everything, give them support in everything, in all deliberations. Wherever case is, I can answer, I can place myself in the situation. Therefore, the leader is to coordinate the team in general [...]" (MDT7)<br>"We do regular assessments of the situation, to get a sense. Of what each one is doing in that day, what each one did last day, and if he is with any problem that I can help him ahead of time" (IT3) |
| Monitor team            | 8  | 4   | 19  | 8  |   |

*(continued)*

| Categories <sup>a</sup>             | Absolute frequencies MDT leaders (n = 113) | Frequencies MDT leaders (one per participant n = 7) | Absolute frequencies IT leaders (n = 118) | Frequencies IT leaders (one per participant n = 9) | Evidence  |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|---|--|---|
| <i>Interpersonal functions</i>      |  |   |   |  |   |
| Conflict management                 | 3  | 2   | 2   | 2  | "I try to talk with people sometimes try to mediate, go there, talk a bit. I should do it more than I do, I feel it too, because it also has to do with issues that are delicate for me and I have trouble, but the more you postpone the problem worse" (MDT1).<br>"Have some patience to listen, have some patience to handle more complicated situations, to manage conflicts [...] and manage the relationships of people in the group." (IT2)<br>"It is to create a dynamic inside and out, where into people feel supported and feel that when someone is more down or when one is more upset or worried, there is someone who has this vision, this perception and this care [...]. Therefore, I also feel that I have to care for people who work here" (MDT3)<br>"I think that a coordinator is a person who should know to listen, and several times, for those people who are not front, understand how they deal with the work. If they feel frustrated, if they feel motivated, I think that is an essential aspect" (IT8) |
| Support social climate <sup>a</sup> | 8  | 4   | 13  | 7  | "It is a conflict manager: we live in permanent conflict, it is not rare that you get someone here that tells you 'I give you a shot.' We need to say but listen, what is it to shoot, come on see, let's try to understand." (MDT2)<br>"When it's time for the demonstration to the customer, there are always points of stress. And so, is there any pressure to complete tasks with the date of the sprint and to test and validate with the client. And therefore, there is a cycle of well-defined points of stress, which has to do with incremental deliveries we do" (IT6)  |
| Stress management                   | 6  | 4   | 5   | 3  |   |

*(continued)*

Table III.

| Categories <sup>a</sup>            | Absolute frequencies MDT leaders (n = 113) | Frequencies MDT leaders (one per participant n = 7) | Absolute frequencies IT leaders (n = 118) | Frequencies IT leaders (one per participant n = 9) | Evidence  |
|------------------------------------|--|---|---|--|---|
| <i>Other functions</i>             |  |   |   |  |   |
| Manage team diversity <sup>a</sup> | 10   | 5   | 12  | 0  | "And this is where I feel the greatest difficulty in managing all these people. They are all different from each other, have different sensitivities, have also to meet its objectives, and also have to deal with many people, and it is not easy, this part is not easy" (MDT4) |
| Resign from explicit coordination  | 3  | 3   | 0   | 0  | "I think all the decisions of a commission should go through the group and I do not decide anything [...]" (MDT3)   |
| Task experience as essential       | 0  | 0   | 7   | 4  | "The coordinator is a person here who has accumulated a lot of experience from past projects, has gone where others are now known and therefore, knows the various stages and what needs to be done at any time" (IT6)  |

**Notes:** MDT, MDT leader; IT, IT leader. <sup>a</sup>Categories that emerged a posteriori. The number following the letter indicates the specific individual respondent: for example, MDT1 is one leader, MDT2 is a second leader and so on. The number following the letter indicates the specific individual respondent; for example, IT1 is one leader, IT2 is a second leader and so on.

Morgeson *et al.* (2010a), the authors propose that the function of support social climate corresponds to the action phase. However, we believe that, as in team processes (Marks *et al.*, 2001), leaders engage in specific interpersonal behaviors. Indeed, throughout the interviews, participants expressed that supporting social climate could occur both at transition (e.g. “We need to listen to them, we need to know how to manage people well, fitting them in from the beginning of the project”) and action phases (e.g. “In terms of work, it means trying to get a feeling about the people to better understand how they fit in the team”). Therefore, we added a third group of leadership functions that we categorized as interpersonal functions. Following the work of Marks *et al.* (2001) and based on data analysis, interpersonal functions were divided into two subcategories: stress management and conflict management.

Third, a fourth group of functions emerged from our analysis of leaders’ answers. They were not explicitly related to the models of Morgeson *et al.* (2010a) and Marks *et al.* (2001), but they were specific to the contexts studied, such as manage team diversity and task experience as essential for leadership roles.

Table III also gives information that there are differences between MDT and IT teams in terms of which leadership functions they value. The major difference relates to the transition functions. In fact, IT leaders reported many more leader behaviors related to establish expectations and goals, structure and plan a specific episode and compose team, than MDT leaders did. The function structure and plan was equally mentioned in both contexts.

Action functions did not reveal as many differences as transition functions. Monitor team was highlighted in both contexts, although leaders of IT teams mentioned it twice as much as MDT leaders. We also observed that MDT leaders reported more behaviors related to encouraging team self-management than IT leaders did. manage team boundaries was equally distributed between both team contexts.

Although MDT leaders’ work experience is much more related to human services, IT leaders reported more support social climate behaviors than did the MDT leaders. Stress management was mentioned more than conflict management, and the results of these two subcategories were equivalent among teams.

Finally, regarding the other emergent functions, only MDT leaders mentioned manage team diversity and resign from explicit coordination. IT leaders, when asked what are the important competencies of a team coordinator, gave importance to task experience.

We also performed analysis to show the association between variables as mentioned in the data analysis section. Figure 1 shows that in MDT there were no relevant associations between transition functions and the other functions. There are, however, associations between action functions and interpersonal functions.

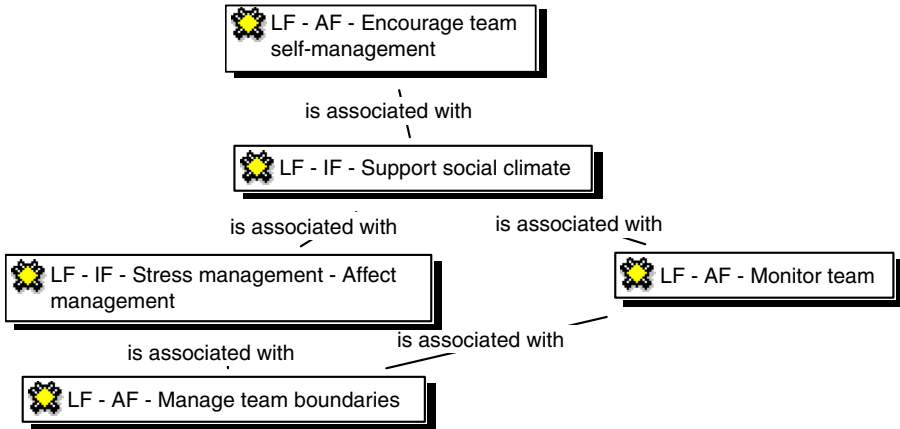
Concerning IT teams, Figure 2 demonstrates that transition functions are associated with action and also interpersonal functions. Monitor team leadership behaviors was the most mentioned function in relation to transition functions, such as establish expectations and goals, and action functions, like manage team boundaries and the interpersonal function support social climate.

## Discussion

The goal of our study was to explore team effectiveness conceptualizations and leadership functions in different team contexts. Using a qualitative content analysis, we wanted to achieve a better understanding of whether team leadership functions

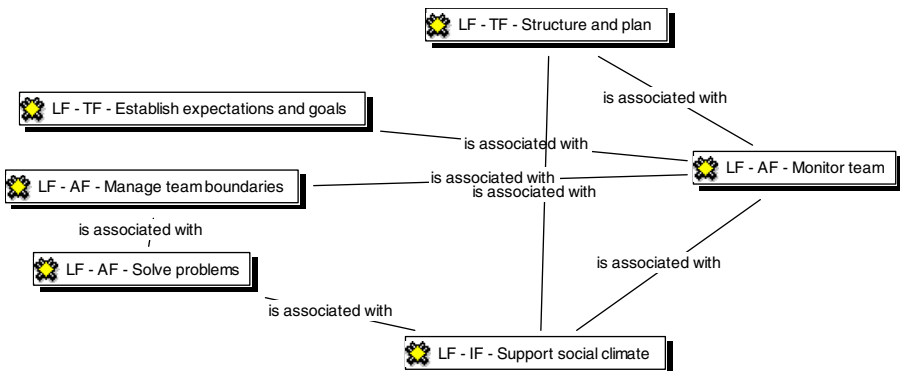


**Figure 1.**  
Association between leadership functions categories in MDT teams



**Notes:** LF, Leadership function; AF, action function; IF, interpersonal function

**Figure 2.**  
Associations between leadership functions in IT teams



**Notes:** LF, Leadership function; AF, action function; IF, interpersonal function; TF, transition function

differ according to the team context, and whether there were new leadership functions that could also be interesting to include in future studies. By different contexts we mean different organizational structures and strategies, and human resources systems such as performance criteria definition that can explain the results that we found.

With regard to performance criteria, our results clearly showed the differences between the two team contexts. Due to the subjectivity inherent in defining a successful intervention, as in the case of multidisciplinary child and youth protection teams, there are few or no explicit performance criteria. These results are in line with the ones that, using a quantitative forced scale, found some dimensions of team effectiveness in this context, such as team performance management and boundary spanning (Graça and Passos, 2012). However, in this present study, MDT leaders mention the need for defined criteria and put forward some, such as the number of deliberations applied, for instance. In contrast, in the case of IT teams, team leaders report more standardized performance criteria. Baruch and Ramalho (2006) analyzed the way academic scholarly works measure organizational outcomes, and different criteria emerged depending

on whether it was for business or for non-profit organizations, concluding that the number of criteria for business organizations was greater than for non-profit organizations. The present study draws attention to the lack of defined criteria for teams in non-profit organizations, and to the fact that this affects their task structuring, and team leadership, and in turn has an impact on their performance.

With regard to team leadership functions, this study raises several questions about the model of Morgeson *et al.* (2010a), as well as about other models of team leadership. Thus far, theoretical models and empirical studies on the impact of leadership on teamwork effectiveness have generally been applied to profit-making organizations. Although private and public organizations are similar in that the environment is relevant to their activity and they both require leadership skills and competences, leaders of non-profit organizations experience specific situations: they are often required to operate with fewer resources yet maintain an acceptable level of productivity (Ahearn *et al.*, 2004).

Transition leadership functions were prominent in IT teams, but they were not in MDT. This is the most relevant finding of this study. The compose team function, for example, is not performed by MDT leaders, yet it is performed by top managers of IT teams. We might also suppose that the fact MDT leaders do not refer to the function establish expectations and goals is due to the fact that the absence of performance criteria makes it difficult to set goals for the MDT. With regard to IT teams, the function structure and plan was specified (specific task episode) in the domain of a dynamic perspective of performance with different task episodes over time (Marks *et al.*, 2001), showing how important it is that leaders address the planning needs of these specific teams. These results showed that although structuring and planning is mentioned in both contexts, transition team leadership functions are more likely to occur in organizations with clear planning phases that have a more structured task design, and more control over the task itself.

Manage team boundaries and monitor team emerged as very important action leadership functions, and were highlighted by leaders of both team types. The monitor team leadership function was two times more prevalent among IT leaders than among MDT leaders. Manage team boundaries, on the other hand, is very important for MDT, since they have to find the resources within the community and there are other MDT that also have responsibilities in situations where children and youths are at risk. So, the MDT members need to know which institutions they can call upon to help them find solutions and resolve their cases (Graça and Passos, 2012). Hackman and Katz (2010) draw attention to the fact that other groups are among the most pervasive and salient features of a group's context. Few groups can accomplish their purposes without coordinating with external groups and authorities, obtaining information from them, receiving their feedback, or relying on them for assistance of some kind (Ancona and Caldwell, 1992; Haas, 2006).

The formal skills required by MDT leaders are not very explicit, despite the fact they are the agents who represent the other team members, hence they frequently mentioned encourage team self-management behaviors, and also mentioned several resign from explicit coordination behaviors. This revealed some of these teams' functioning aspects such as different sources of leadership and self-leadership behaviors that some members other than the formal leader exhibit.

Another important implication of this study is that we have added the component of interpersonal leadership functions. We believe that social support climate behaviors are

relevant at both the transition and action phases, and not just in the action phase as conceptualized by Morgeson *et al.* (2010a). The social domain (as distinct from the task domain) has always been identified in leadership theories and even in team leadership theories (Burke *et al.*, 2006). We also added two functions based on the Marks *et al.* (2001) model: stress management (adapted from the process affect management) and conflict management, since both frequently came up in the participants' answers. In fact, the emotional component of MDT tasks (Murphy, 2004) and pressure from the IT sector regarding technologies leads to very stressful situations for technicians.

There were other functions not included in Morgeson *et al.*'s (2010a) model that emerged from our analysis, such as manage team diversity (due to the multidisciplinary specificity of MDT) and resigning from explicit coordination in the case of MDT leaders. The last function can be linked to encourage team self-management and that was mentioned more often by MDT leaders than by leaders of IT. Task experience was also mentioned by IT leaders. As the career paths of most IT leaders have progressed in a very similar way (first, as software developers and then managers, etc.), they mentioned the importance of a project coordinator having experience in the task. These other categories emerged from the analysis and it could be interesting to use them also in future studies. Qualitative research provides this interesting kind of analysis, and shows aspects that are intimately related to the specific characteristics of team contexts.

#### *Limitations and suggestions for future studies*

This study has some limitations that must be discussed. First, the distinction between the transition and action phases of Morgeson *et al.*'s (2010a) model may not be clear for team leaders in today's organizations. More specifically, there may be certain contexts in which the way that leadership can satisfy team needs (team leadership functions) is not clearly at the transition phase or the action phase in an ongoing team's performance. In fact, leaders may assume that planning activities are already part of the actions that contribute directly to goal accomplishment and the task itself, and/or are activities that although contributing directly to goal accomplishment are transitory and not the main task.

Second, although this was an exploratory study and the results from the interviews were consistent within each team context, further research could go deeper by having a larger sample with more participants. But based on our results, we believe that we achieved redundancy or theoretical saturation of the data (Law *et al.*, 1998).

Third, our sample consisted only of team leaders because our goal was related to leadership behaviors and to analyzing those behaviors in their daily work. However, it would be interesting to interview other team members too, to get a broader view of how team leaders' behaviors are manifested in interaction with the team. Moreover, teams in the technology and non-profit sectors did, indeed, show differences. Yet, in future studies, it could be appropriate to study more kinds of organizational contexts to include more diversity of team types in current organizations.

Finally, since some MDT leaders mentioned resign from explicit coordination, future studies should also deal with different leadership sources (Morgeson *et al.*, 2010a) for a more consistent analysis. In IT teams, we studied three hierarchical management levels. It could be interesting in future studies to analyze the differences between the answers at the three levels of management.

### *Practical implications*

In short, the results support the idea that there are differences in the leadership functions that are more valued by leaders, depending on the specific team's context. The model of Morgeson *et al.* (2010a) is suitable for studying various contexts, but the relevance of each function is different depending on the specific type of team and organization studied. If the goal is to impact management practice in addition to contributing to the literature, then we must include context in study design and in interpreting the findings. This study highlights the functions that are most important to leaders within a certain setting. Recruiters must take that into consideration when selecting personnel for their organizations. This is also true for training programs. In fact, trainers cannot suppose that a specific model and set of exercises will be suitable for every kind of trainee and organization, rather they must consider the context in which they will intervene.

Results also showed that some non-profit and less task-structured teams lack the specific performance criteria that could help them make more successful interventions. It is crucial that applied research helps these teams define team performance criteria not only according to rigorous scientific standards but based also on the answers that emerge in exploratory studies such as this one.

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#### Appendix. Interview protocol

1. Introduction
  - 1.1 For how long have you been in your current position?
  - 1.2 Prior to this position, what was your role in this organization?
  - 1.3 What has been your career path until this position?
2. Team functioning
  - 2.1 Which criteria do you use to know if your team is being successful/having a good or bad performance?
3. Leader's role
  - 3.1 In your opinion, what are the critical aspects of your work as a leader of this organization?
  - 3.2 What are the key functions of your work as a leader?
  - 3.3 How do you coordinate the activities between the different team members?

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**About the authors**

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