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What is This?
Channeled Autonomy: The Joint Effects of Autonomy and Feedback on Team Performance Through Organizational Goal Clarity

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Past research suggests that autonomy has highly variable effects on team performance, and that one explanation for this pattern of findings is that autonomous teams fall into a state of disorder where they lack clarity regarding the goals of the broader organization. Following this perspective, the authors develop a model proposing that performance feedback coupled with high autonomy enables teams to have greater clarity of the organization’s goals, which in turn increases team performance. This model was tested on 110 teams in a defense industry manufacturing firm in South Korea using mediated-moderation techniques. Results indicate that highly autonomous teams that receive a high degree of performance feedback outperform other teams because of their heightened level of organizational goal clarity. In contrast, highly

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autonomous teams that receive low levels of feedback perform at the lowest levels compared to other teams because of a lack of organizational goal clarity. The authors discuss the implications of these findings for theory, research, and practice.

**Keywords:** team design; autonomy; feedback; team performance

In response to an increasingly dynamic and uncertain business environment, many organizations structure their workforces around so-called “self-managed” teams, or teams characterized by high levels of decision-making autonomy (Hollenbeck, Beersma, & Schouten, 2012). Such teams have the freedom and flexibility to make independent decisions on a range of critical issues (Manz & Sims, 1987), which theoretically should enable autonomous teams to achieve higher levels of performance (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Seibert, Wang, & Courtright, 2011). However, the research evidence to date on the relationship between autonomy and team performance is mixed. For example, despite meta-analytic results suggesting a moderate, positive relationship between team autonomy and team performance, Stewart (2006) also found a remarkably large degree of variance in this relationship that was not attributable to sampling error. Similarly, in a qualitative review of the self-leadership literature, Stewart, Courtright, and Manz (2011) found that whereas high autonomy enhanced team performance in some studies, other studies found that autonomy had no relationship, and sometimes even a negative relationship, with team performance. These mixed results beg the question: Under what conditions is autonomy beneficial for teams?

In responding to that question, theory and research suggest that one risk associated with team-level autonomy is that of autonomous teams falling into a state of disorder where they independently pursue actions that are inconsistent with organizational prerogatives. For example, organizational design theorists have long contended that autonomous teams may become isolated from the broader organizational environment without a mechanism to make the organization’s goals clear (Galbraith, 1973; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). Moreover, Wallace, Johnson, Mathe, and Paul (2011) found that having a climate of empowerment only benefited unit-level performance when employees felt a shared sense of accountability that directed their efforts—that is, when they believed their actions could be subject to evaluation by a salient audience. In essence, these perspectives suggest that autonomy is unlikely to benefit team performance unless other mechanisms are present to help bring direction and order to autonomous teams’ efforts. However, what specific mechanisms bring order and direction to autonomous teams, and why do they ultimately help autonomy to be positively associated with team performance? Answering these questions is the primary objective of our study.

In the present study, we focus on the role that performance feedback plays in bringing order and direction to autonomous teams in the form of greater organizational goal clarity. In particular, we argue that with lower performance feedback, a potential risk of autonomy in teams is a lack of clarity as to the broader organization’s goals, which may cause teams to overlook decision alternatives and strategies that are beneficial for the organization at large (Haas, 2010). However, with relatively higher levels of feedback, autonomy is linked to greater clarity regarding the goals of the broader organization (Sawyer, 1992).
short, performance feedback channels the direction of autonomous teams’ work toward the attainment of organizationally desirable goals and provides a safeguard from falling into a state of disorder (Katz & Kahn, 1966), creating what may be referred to as a channeled autonomy effect—an interaction between autonomy and feedback that relates to heightened organizational goal clarity and higher levels of team performance. This proposed pattern of relationships is shown in Figure 1.

This study contributes to the literature in two key ways. First, our study answers a call in the literature for research on moderators of the autonomy–team performance relationship. As noted above, although a great deal of research has investigated the relationship of autonomy with team performance, there are mixed findings regarding this relationship (Stewart, 2006; Stewart et al., 2011), with very little research examining contingencies of team autonomy. The current study aims to provide an answer to the question of when autonomy is beneficial for teams—namely, when they receive high levels of performance feedback. Thus, we extend recent research that has explored contingencies of autonomy and empowerment (e.g., Wallace et al., 2011) and contribute to the nascent literature on interactions between team design characteristics (e.g., Janz, Colquitt, & Noe, 1997; Langfred, 2005; Stewart & Barrick, 2000). Second, we investigate the role of a theoretically relevant mediator of the interaction between team autonomy and performance feedback: organizational goal clarity. In doing so, we also answer the question of why teams high on autonomy and performance feedback achieve higher levels of performance—namely, because such teams are clear as to their parent organization’s goals. In concert, these efforts serve to provide insights on optimal mixes of structural features for teams and uncover why such mixes are associated with team performance (Sundstrom, de Meuse, & Futrell, 1990).

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Benefits and Risks of Autonomy

Autonomy has drawn the attention of scholars seeking to design work that motivates individuals and teams to achieve high levels of performance (Hackman & Oldham, 1976;
Stewart, 2006). In this study, we focus on team-level decision-making autonomy, defined as the degree of freedom, independence, and discretion that teams are given to make decisions themselves as opposed to having decisions made for them by supervisors (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; Stewart, 2006). Dynamic and rapid change in the immediate environment necessitates allowing teams to exercise decision-making autonomy (versus following a rigid plan of action enforced by an external leader) because it better enables teams to adapt to these environmental demands (Campion, Medsker, & Higgs, 1993; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). Autonomy is also a mechanism that provides individuals with the discretion to not only communicate within their team to determine which goals to pursue, but to be more proactive in exercising voice and seeking feedback from outside sources (Fuller, Marler, & Hester, 2006; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoeke, & Rosenthal, 1964). This logic is consistent with the role-episode model of role clarity (Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Kahn et al., 1964), which postulates that employees independently interact with others to gain the knowledge necessary to carry out their work tasks.

Despite the supposed beneficial effects of autonomy, a question generally taken for granted by groups and teams scholars is how autonomous teams know and understand the goals that are valued by the broader organization in which they are embedded, and by extension, which goals they should pursue. To that end, some scholars have suggested that a risk of autonomy is falling into a state of disorder wherein autonomous teams or units generate and pursue goals that are incongruous with those of the broader organization (Carnall, 1982; Galbraith, 1973; Haas, 2010; Wallace et al., 2011). Operationally, this state of disorder is characterized by a lack of organizational goal clarity, an emergent state of shared belief in which team members are collectively aware of and understand the goals and objectives of the organization in which it is embedded (Locke, 1991). There is a key difference between organizational and team goal clarity. Namely, teams may be clear on which goals they are pursuing (e.g., high team goal clarity), yet those goals could be incongruous with those that the organization wants them to pursue (e.g., low organizational goal clarity). Because the focus of our model is the notion that autonomous teams may become unaware of or misunderstand the goals of the organization where they are embedded, we focus on organizational goal clarity rather than team goal clarity. Organizational design perspectives suggest that a lack of organizational goal clarity could cause teams to overlook decision alternatives and courses of action that incorporate a broader perspective of the organization’s needs (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Sundstrom et al., 1990).

**Moderating Role of Performance Feedback**

In order to help autonomous teams gain greater clarity of the organization’s goals, some scholars have suggested that organizations must engage with teams in a process of information exchange (Daft & Lengel, 1986). A specific and critically important aspect of this information exchange is performance feedback (Katz & Kahn, 1966). Performance feedback is defined as “information about the actual performance or actions of a system used to control the future actions of a system” (Nadler, 1979, p. 310). According to goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2013), as individuals make progress towards accomplishing their goals, feedback serves to direct individuals’ attention towards the aspects of the task for which they have received feedback, thereby acting as a guide to their future goal setting and, ultimately, their behavior (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Similarly, control theory proposes that
feedback ensures the attainment of valued goals or outcomes by identifying discrepancies between current performance and established standards (Klein, 1991), which motivates the assessment and readjustment of goals to meet established standards. Along these lines, DeShon, Kozlowski, Schmidt, and Milner (2004) found that team-level feedback promotes team effectiveness primarily because it allows team members to understand and effectively calibrate the goals they should pursue. Without feedback, teams may “set completely unrealistic team-level goals” (p. 1052).

Based on the preceding theoretical background, we argue that although high autonomy provides teams with the ability to determine what goals the organization deems necessary to maintain effective performance, there is no guarantee that autonomous, self-regulating teams will always be cognizant of the organization’s goals and objectives because they may pursue courses of action that, although clear to them, are not desired by the parent organization. Hence, to prevent disorder in autonomous teams, there is a need to ensure that autonomous teams remain aware of the organization’s goals so they can in turn make decisions and take courses of action beneficial to the organization. We argue that this need is at least partially fulfilled by performance feedback because feedback provides a mechanism for organizations to provide teams with information relevant to goals desired by the organization (DeShon et al., 2004) while also directing the team’s attention towards their goal progress (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2013). Despite scholars’ assertions that autonomous teams lacking in feedback will suffer from a lack of organizational goal clarity, to our knowledge this study is the first to directly test this idea.

A practical example of how autonomy and feedback complement one another occurred at Texas Instruments when the company began designing autonomous work teams. Management began this intervention by encouraging self-direction and independent action, with the message being, “You’re empowered; now go do what you want to do” (Thompson, 1999, p. 1). However, the intervention initially failed because teams had little idea about which objectives were important to the organization and thus critical to pursue. However, once the organization began providing feedback on the teams’ goal processes, the organization began seeing the benefits of high team autonomy largely because teams had a clearer idea of the organization’s goals (Wellsins, Byham, & Dixon, 1994). Throughout the implementation, teams maintained significant authority over tasks, processes, and decision-making; however, receiving performance feedback allowed teams to independently make better-informed decisions that accounted for the broader organizational context’s needs. Thus, as this example demonstrates, autonomy without feedback can cause teams to be “like an island … isolated from the rest of the world” (Jassawalla & Sashittal, 2000, p. 39) while providing performance feedback channels the efforts of autonomous teams by bringing increased clarity regarding the goals desired by the organization.

Based on this logic and the preceding example, we predict that highly autonomous teams experience increased organizational clarity as they receive relatively higher degrees of performance feedback. In contrast, teams with high autonomy but relatively little feedback will have reduced organizational goal clarity. In other words, these teams will know that they have to do something, but without sufficient feedback, they will not know what that something is.

Hypothesis 1: Team autonomy and performance feedback have an interactive relationship with organizational goal clarity such that the relationship between autonomy and organizational goal
clarity will be positive for teams with higher levels of performance feedback, and negative for teams with lower levels of performance feedback.

**Organizational Goal Clarity and Team Performance**

In addition to hypothesizing that autonomy and performance feedback will interact to associate with organizational goal clarity, we also propose that organizational goal clarity will, in turn, be positively related to team performance. This prediction is consistent with input-mediator-output models of team performance, which posit that team emergent states mediate and are more proximal to performance than team design characteristics such as autonomy and performance feedback (Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005). As alluded to previously, we extend previous studies that have examined contingencies of autonomy and empowerment (Wallace et al., 2011) by investigating the relationship of a theoretically derived outcome of those interactions (i.e., organizational goal clarity) on performance. Furthermore, despite its role as a critical antecedent of team performance, surprisingly few studies have examined the link between organizational goal clarity and team performance.

We propose that organizational goal clarity is positively related to team performance for two reasons. First, clear understanding of a goal enhances performance by channeling effort toward the attainment of that goal (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2013). Moreover, team-level motivation includes the direction, intensity, and persistence of goal-directed efforts (Chen & Kanfer, 2006). With regards to teams embedded within a larger organizational context, organizational goal clarity represents the directional aspect of team motivation, such that without knowing the organization’s goals, a team cannot direct intensity or persistence towards accomplishing them. Indeed, given that the parent organization is the team’s primary stakeholder and ultimately evaluates team performance, accomplishing the goals outlined by the organization is critical to team performance. Second, organizational goal clarity leads teams to collectively develop a clear vision of how their behaviors contribute to the organization’s performance and providing the knowledge of which goals are valued by the organization (Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Spreitzer, 1995). This leads, in turn, to higher levels of performance (Hu & Liden, 2011).

**Hypothesis 2**: Organizational goal clarity will be positively related to team performance.

**Integrated Mediated-Moderation Model**

Taken together, Hypotheses 1 and 2 point to a mediated-moderation model where organizational goal clarity mediates the interactive relationship of team autonomy and performance feedback with team performance. Specifically, because Hypothesis 1 points to a moderating effect for performance feedback on the relationship between autonomy and organizational goal clarity, and Hypothesis 2 proposes a direct relationship of organizational goal clarity on team performance, our hypotheses collectively reflect a first-stage mediated-moderation model wherein autonomy and performance feedback have an interactive relationship with team performance through the mediating relationship of organizational goal clarity.

**Hypothesis 3**: The relationship between autonomy and team performance is moderated by performance feedback through the mediating effects of organizational goal clarity, such that autonomy
will have a positive indirect relationship with team performance (via high organization goal clarity) when feedback is higher, and a negative indirect relationship with team performance (via low organizational goal clarity) when feedback is lower.

**Method**

**Sample and Procedures**

Data were collected from team members and leaders over 2 months in 2010 from teams with some degree of decision-making autonomy in a large, private sector manufacturing firm operating in the defense industry in South Korea. Team members individually completed questionnaires that contained items related to the team autonomy, performance feedback, and organizational goal clarity constructs. The directions for this questionnaire explicitly instructed team members to respond with reference to their team (i.e., “Please answer the following questions about the work you do on your team”). Team leaders, who were not members of the team, were asked to provide performance ratings of their team. The questionnaires were written in English and translated to Korean according to established translation procedures (Brislin, 1980). Surveys were distributed to 1,500 team members, of which 1,267 responded to the survey (84.5%). In total, members of 111 work teams participated, as well as 110 external team leaders. One team with missing performance data was removed from our analyses, as mediated-moderation analyses are not robust to missing data (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). Within-team response rates were all over 60%. This resulted in a final sample of 110 teams with 1,263 individuals. The mean age of respondents was 34 years ($SD = 3.39$) and 89% were male.

**Measures**

All items (see Appendix A) were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = very inaccurate and 7 = very accurate). In line with Chen, Mathieu, and Bliese (2004), alpha was computed by taking the team mean of each item and then computing coefficient alpha.

**Autonomy.** Team members rated the autonomy of their work groups with four items adapted from Oldham and Cummings (1996) and Patterson et al. (2005). A coefficient alpha of .62 was obtained for the scale ratings.

**Feedback.** Team members rated the degree of performance feedback received by their team via three items adapted from Patterson et al. (2005). A coefficient alpha of .82 was obtained for the scale ratings.

**Organizational goal clarity.** Team members rated organizational goal clarity with four items from Patterson et al. (2005). A coefficient alpha of .97 was obtained for the scale ratings.

**Team performance.** External team leaders rated team performance with a four-item scale reflecting team goal achievement and effectiveness adapted from Zellmer-Bruhn and Gibson (2006). A coefficient alpha of .85 was obtained for the scale ratings.
**Control variables.** We controlled for team size, average team tenure (i.e., the average length of time team members had been together), and team task type (production, service, or research and development teams) in our analyses. First, a larger team may receive more feedback than a smaller team because the organization may assume that the larger team has more difficulty in coordinating their efforts (e.g., Amason & Sapienza, 1997). Second, teams that have worked together for longer periods of time may be trusted with more autonomy and have greater organizational goal clarity than teams that have recently formed (e.g., Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1990). Finally, teams that engage in more complex tasks may also be granted more autonomy or feedback, which might then make those teams outperform others in the organization (Haas, 2010). Team task type was coded using two dummy variables representing production teams and R&D teams, with service teams as the referent. Of the 110 teams in our sample, 54.5% were R&D teams, 24.5% were production teams, and the remaining 21% were service teams.

**Measurement Model**

We performed confirmatory factor analyses to examine the factor structure of our autonomy, performance feedback, and organizational goal clarity scales. LISREL 8.80 was used to evaluate the fit of the measurement model. We compared the expected three-factor model with two plausible alternative nested models. First, we tested a single-factor model to determine whether respondents viewed all three constructs as the same, and results showed this was a poor fit to the data, $\chi^2(44) = 190.8$, CFI = .89, SRMR = .11. Because of the conceptual link between organizational goal clarity and feedback noted in our theorizing, we also tested a two-factor model with feedback and organizational goal clarity loading on a single latent factor, $\chi^2(42) = 121.8$, CFI = .94, SRMR = .09. Results revealed that the three-factor model had the best fit to the data, $\chi^2(41) = 96$, CFI = .96, SRMR = .08, and was a significantly better fit than the two-factor model, $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 25.8$, $p < .01$, confirming the expected underlying factor structure.

**Aggregation of Individual Responses to the Group Level of Analysis**

Because team member respondents were nested within groups, we computed mean $r_{wg}$ (based on a uniform distribution) as an index of within-group agreement for relevant measures (LeBreton, James, & Lindell, 2005), ICC(1) as an index of within-group variability compared to between-group variability, and ICC(2) as an index of the reliability of group means (Bliese, 2000). The aggregation statistics are as follows: autonomy [$r_{wg} = .85$; ICC(1) = .08; ICC(2) = .50], performance feedback [$r_{wg} = .75$; ICC(1) = .06; ICC(2) = .42], and organizational goal clarity [$r_{wg} = .80$; ICC(1) = .14; ICC(2) = .65]. The mean $r_{wg}$ values were all above the recommended cutoff value of .70, indicating acceptable within-group agreement. In addition, ICC(1)s were all in the acceptable ICC(1) range of .05 to .20 suggested by Bliese (2000), while the ICC(2) values indicated that differences among groups can be reliably measured (LeBreton & Senter, 2008). Therefore, we deemed that there was sufficient within-group agreement and between-group variance to aggregate the team-level variables.
Results

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of our control and study variables.

Analytic Technique

We tested our hypotheses using Edwards and Lambert’s (2007) mediated-moderated regression path analysis approach. We began by mean-centering all of our study variables and covariates. Then, as shown in Equation 1 of Table 2, we regressed organizational goal clarity on the control variables, autonomy, performance feedback, and the product term to model the “first-stage” of our model, which represents a test of Hypothesis 1. In Equation 2, we regressed team performance on the control variables, autonomy and organizational goal clarity. This is used in conjunction with Equation 1 to estimate the second stage, direct, and indirect effects. The second stage effect (e.g., organizational goal clarity → performance) represents a test of Hypothesis 2, while the difference between the indirect effects at high and low levels of feedback as well as the significance of each simple slope represents a test of Hypothesis 3.

Following these regression analyses, we used the SPSS macro provided by Edwards and Lambert (2007) to bootstrap the coefficients with 1,000 samples. This allowed us to generate standard errors that account for the nonnormal distribution of the indirect effects and subsequently calculate bias-corrected, bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals for all the paths in our model. In order to appropriately determine the nature of the mediated-moderated relationship between autonomy and performance, we calculated first-stage (autonomy → organizational goal clarity), indirect (autonomy → organizational goal clarity → team performance), and total effect (first-stage + indirect) path estimates at relatively high and low levels of feedback as well as the significance of each simple slope represents a test of Hypothesis 3.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<td>.05</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Task Type Dummy 2</td>
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<td>.50</td>
<td>-.26*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Team Size</td>
<td>11.50</td>
<td>7.90</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Team Tenure</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>.35*</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.36*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Autonomy</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Feedback</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Goal Clarity</td>
<td>5.29</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>.72*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Performance</td>
<td>6.22</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>.21*</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>.23*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n = 110 teams. Task Type Dummy 1 = production teams; Task Type Dummy 2 = R&D teams. *p < .05.
Tests of Hypotheses

Results of our analyses revealed that although autonomy had a weak, negative relationship with organizational goal clarity when feedback was low ($p = -0.02$, 95% CI: $-0.34$, $0.21$), autonomy exhibited a strong, positive relationship with organizational goal clarity when feedback was high ($p = 0.40$, 95% CI: $0.11$, $0.89$). The difference between these relationships (at higher vs. lower levels of feedback) was significant ($d = 0.42$, 95% CI: $0.11$, $0.89$). These results, which are shown in the first column of data in Table 3, provided support for Hypothesis 1. Table 3 likewise shows that there was a significant second-stage relationship between organizational goal clarity and team performance ($p = 0.27$, 95% CI: $0.05$, $0.49$), thus providing support for Hypothesis 2.
In terms of testing our hypothesized conditional indirect effects model (Hypothesis 3), we found, as shown in the fourth column of Table 3, that at lower levels of feedback the indirect relationship between autonomy and performance via organizational goal clarity was negative, though weak ($p = -.01$, 95% CI: $-.12, .06$). Conversely, at higher levels of feedback, the indirect effect was positive and significant ($p = .11$, 95% CI: $.02, .29$). Furthermore, the difference between the indirect effects across higher and lower levels of feedback was significant ($d = .12$, 95% CI: $.02, .38$). Figure 2 provides a graphical depiction of these contingent indirect effects (scaled to our 7-point performance scale) and confirms Hypothesis 3 in that the indirect relationship between autonomy and performance was strong and positive for teams high in feedback through the mediating effects of organizational goal clarity. Although this indirect relationship was nonsignificant (though negative, as hypothesized) for teams low in feedback, the difference in the magnitude of the relationships between autonomy and performance through organizational goal clarity at higher versus lower feedback levels was significant.

**Discussion**

Large variability in the autonomy–team performance relationship, coupled with a lack of theoretical guidance regarding moderators of this relationship, have left scholars and practitioners with few clues on how to leverage the potential benefits of team autonomy. To address these issues, we hypothesized an interaction between autonomy and feedback such that teams benefit most when they receive high levels of autonomy while also receiving higher levels of performance feedback. We found support for this interaction being associated with higher team performance because it allows teams to gain a clearer sense of the organization’s goals.
Implications for Theory and Research

Our study extends theory and research on team autonomy and team design in several ways. First, we extend recent research (e.g., Wallace et al., 2011) that has identified contingencies of team autonomy. In particular, we found support for the moderating effect of performance feedback on the relationship between team autonomy and organizational goal clarity, and ultimately team performance. This result contributes to the team design literature, as most theoretical frameworks consider only the additive effects of autonomy and feedback (e.g., Campion et al., 1993). Moreover, Stewart et al. (2011) noted the need for identifying moderators of the autonomy-performance relationship because autonomy “does not appear to be … universally beneficial at the team level. Researchers should thus continue to focus on contextual factors that link performance with team-level self-leadership [autonomy]” (p. 213). Other scholars (e.g., Sundstrom et al., 1990) have also called for studying team design features through a contingency lens (Donaldson, 2001). Our study answers these calls by identifying performance feedback as a moderator of team autonomy.

Second, we found support for the notion that the interaction between autonomy and feedback is mediated by organizational goal clarity. To our knowledge, few studies have examined the relationship of organizational goal clarity with team performance, let alone considered its role as a mediator of team design characteristics. This is surprising, given that one of the basic assertions of goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2013) is that clear, specific, challenging goals are more effective than unclear goals. Our findings showed that providing both autonomy and feedback is related to high levels of organizational goal clarity, while withholding feedback from autonomous teams may cause them to enter a state of disorder. By identifying organizational goal clarity as a key mediator of the autonomy-feedback interaction, our study builds on recent research that has explored similar interactions (Wallace et al., 2011) by demonstrating the mechanism by which autonomy and mechanisms meant to bring order to autonomous teams influence team performance.

Third, we contribute to team-level feedback research by showing how feedback is critical for teams to understand the goals of the organization and for channeling team efforts towards high team performance. Feedback is most often studied as an individual-level work design characteristic rather than a team-level design characteristic (DeShon et al., 2004; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Our study highlights the value of future studies on the subject of team feedback.

Practical Implications

We suggest that coupling high autonomy with ample performance feedback has benefits for both team members and organizations. First, autonomy allows teams to retain control over the “how” of work and thus experience the motivational benefits related to high autonomy. At the same time, providing feedback allows teams to avoid ambiguity by understanding where they should direct their team’s efforts. Second, designing teams with high autonomy and feedback allows organizations to take advantage of the increased flexibility of autonomous teams while being enabled to direct those teams toward goals congruent with the organization’s needs. Our results also suggest performance feedback does not rob teams of autonomy or undermine its effectiveness; rather, feedback leverages the benefits of autonomy by clarifying organizational goals and thus giving teams a context in which to plan and direct their performance.
Limitations and Future Directions

As with any study, our study has several limitations. First, our performance feedback measure does not measure the source or valence of the feedback received. While this is common in team feedback research (e.g., Campion et al., 1993; DeShon et al., 2004), future research could delineate how teams react to different forms and sources of feedback. For example, is negative feedback just as likely to clarify organizational goals as positive feedback? Does feedback affect organizational goal clarity and performance differently when it comes from supervisors, customers, or objective indicators? Second, our sample was teams from South Korea. Thus, cultural differences are a potential boundary condition of our model because some research shows that cultural conditioning affects reactions to the valence of feedback (Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Investigating potential cultural differences in reactions to feedback type thus represents an avenue of future research on channeled autonomy. Third, an implicit aspect of our theorizing is that organizational goal clarity should align team goals with organizational goals. We did not, however, measure information regarding the actual content or congruence of team or organization goals. Future research should address this limitation by determining what relationship feedback and autonomy have with team-organization goal congruence. Fourth, our coefficient alpha for autonomy was below the recommended conventional cutoff value of .70. Although scholars have argued that slightly less reliable scales can still be acceptable (Schmitt, 1996), the low reliability may have attenuated relationships between autonomy and other variables. Fifth, our independent variable, moderator, and mediator were all measured at one point in time and were perceptual measures of team structure. We thus encourage the use of longitudinal designs and measurement of objective team structural characteristics to investigate the relationships examined in our study. Finally, the variance on our independent variables was rather low, which could attenuate relationships between variables (Schmidt, Shaffer, & Oh, 2008). On a related note, the mean level of feedback all teams reported receiving was relatively high, meaning that the levels of high and low can only be interpreted relative to the organizational context. Future research could address this limitation by employing experimental designs that maximize variance on feedback.

Appendix A

Scale Items Used

Decision-Making Autonomy (adapted from Patterson et al., 2005)

1. My supervisor leaves it up to our team to decide how to go about our job.
2. Management trusts our team to make work-related decisions without getting permission first.
3. In our team, it’s important to check things first with the team leader before making a decision (R).
4. Our team leaders keep too tight a reign on the way things are done in the team (R).

Performance Feedback (adapted from Patterson et al., 2005)

1. The way our team does our job is rarely assessed (R).
2. Our team usually receives feedback on the quality of work we have done.
3. Our team members don’t have any idea how well we are doing our job (R).
Organizational Goal Clarity (adapted from Patterson et al., 2005)

1. Our team members have a good understanding of what our organization is trying to do.
2. The future direction of the organization is clearly communicated to our team members.
3. Our team members are well aware of the long-term plans and direction of the organization.
4. There is a strong sense of where the organization is going among the team members.

Team Performance (adapted from Kearney & Gebert, 2009 and Zellmer-Bruhn & Gibson, 2006)

1. This team achieves its goals.
2. This team achieves high performance.
3. This team makes a great contribution to the company.
4. This team is very successful in terms of overall achievement.

Note

1. Feedback is distinct from related constructs such as accountability and directiveness. Accountability is the expectation that one’s behavior will be evaluated by an actor with the possibility to receive either rewards or sanctions as a result of the evaluation (Hall et al., 2003; Wallace et al., 2011). In other words, accountability represents the expectation of being evaluated, while performance feedback represents the actual receipt of an evaluation. Similarly, directiveness is a leadership style that provides team members with a framework for decision making and action in alignment with the leader’s vision, such as setting rules for individuals to follow (Somech, 2006). Although directiveness includes the provision of feedback, the constructs differ because feedback is an evaluation of a team’s outcomes as opposed to a leader’s specification of subordinates’ work processes.

References


