

(SP) TEAM PERFORMANCE BETWEEN CHANGE AND STABILITY: THE CASE OF ITALIAN “SERIE A”

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Introduction

Change and stability in team membership are popular and important topics in the team and organizational behavior literature. Many studies have been conducted on this issue and the findings are highly contextual: That is, team stability has shown to be beneficial to team performance for certain aspects, while it seems to be detrimental for others (for a review, see Akgün and Lynn, 2002).

More specifically, team stability has a positive effect on team performance because it facilitates the creation of routines, shared norms, common languages and trust within the group (e.g. Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1990). In fact, team members interacting over a long period of time will be able to develop standard work patterns that are familiar and comfortable, patterns in which routine and precedent play a relatively large part. In this way, teams establish certain stable structures of interlocked behaviors and relationships, which lead to synchronicity and a better execution of the required tasks (Berman et al., 2002; Weick and Roberts, 1993). Such stable patterns allow individuals to come to a shared understanding of why certain actions are appropriate for the organization, increasing their ability to coordinate and adapt. In other words, team stability seems to favor the emergence of a collective mind, i.e. “a distinct higher-order pattern of interrelated activities” grounded in and emerging from “individual actions” (Weick and Roberts, 1993: 374). After an initial learning period, in which shared cognitive schemata are formed, individuals become able to “construct their actions (contribute) while envisaging a social system of joint actions (represent), and interrelate that constructed action with the system that is envisaged (subordinate)” (Weick and Roberts, 1993: 363). In this way, individual team members come to a shared understanding of why and when certain actions are appropriate, increasing their ability to coordinate and adapt, which, in turn, leads to better perform their tasks (Berman et al., 2002; Weick and Roberts, 1993).

However, once a collective mind has coalesced around a set of interdependent individual schemata, it may be progressively more difficult to alter them. This is particularly problematic in case team process and schemata become routinized around a taken-for-granted way of interacting (Berman et al., 2002). In other words, team members, who have been performing their jobs together for an extended time, come to rely more and more on their customary ways of doing things to complete their task requirements. Thus, with increasing team stability, team members could gradually become more isolated from outside sources of relevant information and new ideas, and less receptive toward communications that threaten to disrupt significantly their comfortable and predictable work practices and patterns of behavior (Katz, 1982). In this way, individuals within the team may be unwilling or unable to adopt new modes of behavior, and, thus, team stability may be detrimental to team performance by limiting the team’s ability to break with the past patterns, if need arises (Berman et al., 2002; Delmestri, Montanari and Usai, 2005; Hansen, 1999).

This paper’s main aim is to contribute to extant literature on team stability analyzing the relationship between team stability and performance in the case of sport teams. Each season sport teams aim at improving their previous performance (or at least maintaining it if the previous year they have been successful). In so doing, they have basically to choose between keeping the team stable or changing it by selecting new players, and if so, how

much. In other words, is it better to bet on team stability, because the shared experience accumulated over time can construct patterns or schemata which are needed to operate in a synchronous fashion, or to change team composition by selecting new players who can improve team performance? This is the main question we want to address in our paper.

Methods

In order to test our hypotheses, we focused our analysis on the Italian “Serie A” Soccer League. In particular, we collected data from the 1994-95 season through the 2003-04 season. We obtained a final dataset of 180 team-year observations. We adopted a standard multiple regression model, in which our dependent variable was team performance (points obtained by a team at the end of the season), and our independent variables were represented by a team’s players turnover and relational intensity. We used this latter variable in order to take into account the strength of ties among a team roster’s members with regard not only of the team considered, but also all the previous teams players have played. We computed this measure counting, for each team, how many times the two members of a dyad player-player have played together in the past and, then, we calculated for each team the average value of all its dyads’ indexes. We also introduced in our model some control variables: Coach turnover (dummy variable 0/1), average age (of each team’s roster players), number of roster players, and previous season team performance.

Results

Results of our regression model are presented in Table 1. Model 1 presents results considering control variables only. Model 2 tests our regression adding team players turnover, Model 3 introduces relational intensity, and models 4 test jointly the effects of players turnover and relational intensity on team performance. Adjusted R² is constantly increasing, rising from .209 to .345. All models show the same statistical significance ($p < 0.01$).

Table 1 Results of regression^a analysis.

| Variables | Model1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
|----------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Previous season team performance | .340*** | .246*** | .233*** | .340*** |
| Average age | .203** | .191* | .126* | .153* |
| Coach turnover | -.189** | -.189* | -.136 | -.189 |
| Number of players | -.131* | -.126* | -.120* | -.114* |
| players turnover | | -.216** | | -.119* |
| relational intensity | | | .434*** | .423** |
| Adj. R ² | .209 | .253 | .301 | .345 |

^a Standardized regression coefficients are shown; * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

Discussion

Results support our hypotheses about the relevance of team stability in team performance. The presence of close and long-lasting ties among team members (represented by low players turnover and high relational intensity), in fact, can facilitate the creation of routines, and common languages, increasing the likelihood of co-operative behaviors with positive effects on team performance. In other words, findings show how team performance could be affected by the structure of relationships existing among them. In particular, results support the idea proposed by social capital theory that close and long-lasting ties within team

members can positively affect performance (Coleman, 1988, 1990). Keeping a team stable, in fact, could lead to repeated practice and expertise, and everything else equal, is reflected in a better execution of the set of routines on part of the people who have stayed together for a longer time. In this way, teams establish certain stable structures of interlocked behaviors and relationships, which lead to synchronicity and a better execution of the required tasks.

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