Team Training: challenges and emerging solutions

Johan Riemersma
TNO Human Factors
The Netherlands

Abstract

Nowadays, complex tasks can no longer be performed by subdividing them in part-tasks, allocating these to several specialists and integrating the part-task results afterwards into an overall result. Due to technological and organisational changes, much more emphasis has to be placed on the ways teams of experts operate in concert towards a common goal and to the crucial team processes of communication and co-ordination.

This raises of course questions about the most successful ways to train teams. In practice, it is mostly up to a team itself to develop, during actual teamwork, effective ways for communication, co-operation and mutual adaptation. Because this may not always be most efficient, the main challenge is to develop explicit strategies for training team skills. One such form is cross-training, in which team members are trained in the position of other team members. But also in that case, often no explicit focus exists on the development of specific teamwork skills or (prerequisite) team knowledge. The literature on team functioning identifies as (prerequisite) team knowledge: shared mental models of the task structure, the (developing) situation, the tasks of other team members and how they are related to one’s own tasks and a model of communication. It is still a challenge, firstly, to identify required knowledge and skills on the team level by team task analysis, secondly, to identify/develop optimal training strategies and training scenarios geared to explicit learning goals, and thirdly, to use measures of team task outcomes and team processes for providing the most effective feedback for team (self-)correction. Emerging solutions are discussed.

Introduction

Society, but more specifically, the way society organises work processes, is rapidly changing. The influx of computer power is one factor but a more profound change, enabled by this influx, is a cultural one. The new professional is a networking knowledge worker, hopping from team to team. The traditional, top-down controlled organisation will be gradually replaced by more synthetic, shorter lived action networks, sharing temporarily a common goal and fuelled by the contribution of the unique resources of the partners. Nowadays, complex tasks can no longer be performed by subdividing them in part-tasks, allocating these to several specialists and integrating the part-task results afterwards into an overall result as was standard in ‘machine bureaucracies’. Due to these technological and