

# Teams Matter

**In today's dynamic knowledge economy, teams are replacing hierarchies, and shared leadership is emerging as the key driver in many teams' success**

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Understanding how teams can work efficiently is the focus of assistant professor Michael Kukenberger's research. Consulting and collecting data in the area of team dynamics, he has worked with several Fortune 500 and Global 1000 companies, the U.S. armed services and the Centers for Disease Control.

“My goal has been to understand the true complexity of teams by considering them as emergent and dynamic phenomena made up of different individuals with different and complementary traits,” Kukenberger says.

In terms of these traits, working with U.S. Army transition teams (10–15 soldier teams that train forces in Iraq and Afghanistan) uncovered five different roles that team members tend to gravitate towards. These include roles focused on getting task work accomplished (i.e., organizer and doer), emotional types of roles (i.e., team builders and connectors) and change-oriented team roles (i.e., innovator and challenger).

Kukenberger’s recent work has also examined functional and gender diversity as it relates to leadership structure. In lieu of considering leadership from an external, formal standpoint, Kukenberger says this work considers leadership as an *informal*, *emergent* and *shared* perspective among team members.

“Our work has provided evidence that when teams are functionally diverse they tend to share more leadership,” he says. “However, these findings depend on teams having a highly cooperative environment in order to realize the benefits of different perspectives.”

Gender diversity tends to have a negative impact on shared leadership, but only when teams have a low cooperative environment; what’s more, these negative effects tend to dissipate as teams gain more experience and discover that these identity differences are less meaningful, while the functional differences are more salient over time.

Kukenberger’s past work suggests that understanding the drivers of shared leadership is critical. For example, in a comprehensive study he and his co-authors have uncovered evidence that the more teams share leadership the better they perform. While he suggests that the viability of different leadership structures likely depends on context, he notes that “leadership theories that move us away from top-down, bureaucratic, formal archetypes designed for institutionalized hierarchies to more social, emergent, informal, and often shared paradigms will help organizations be more competitive in our fast-moving, knowledge-oriented economy.”

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