

Leadership Function Framework to Foster Team Flow in R&D Project Teams



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Kiran Govind V
Sumati Sidharth

Defence Institute of Advanced Technology, Pune
(kirangovindv@gmail.com)
(sumatisidharth@gmail.com)

Research and development (R&D) in futuristic technologies, executed by R&D project teams, steers global economy and human progress. Team flow, an emerging topic in team science, is reported to improve team effectiveness and enhance team performance. Nurturing team flow in project teams is the responsibility of project team leader. In this first-of-its-kind study involving R&D project leaders of DRDO, based on a novel 5R framework of team flow, qualitative methodologies were used to explore leadership functions which can foster team flow in R&D teams. The study concludes by proposing a framework of twelve leadership functions for R&D project team leaders.

Keywords: Team flow, Leadership, R&D project teams, 5R framework, Leader Behaviors

1. Introduction

"Creativity and innovation in the workplace involve developing and implementing new methods to improve procedures, practices, or products. The creativity stage focuses on idea generation, while innovation is about putting those ideas into action, leading to identifiable benefits (Anderson et al., 2014). These elements are vital for research and development (R&D) projects, driving organizational growth and maintaining competitive advantage (Zhou and Shalley, 2003). In the past two decades, companies have prioritized fostering creativity and innovation in project teams, crucial for survival and growth, as well as the development of new products and services (Madjar et al., 2002; Im and Workman, 2004).

Research and development (R&D) project teams aim to provide a competitive advantage to the organizations but often face complex challenges. The early stages of these projects typically have low clarity, and they follow unconventional technical processes, increasing the likelihood of failure (Farokhad et al., 2019). Other key challenges include rapid external changes, tight schedules, limited resources, and the need for innovative solutions. To overcome these, teams must function cohesively, fostering trust, communication, and commitment. The key factor that supports this process is team leadership. Leaders impact the R&D team's performance through daily involvement, including planning, monitoring, and effectively utilizing the team's potential. This has led to the development of new frameworks for leading R&D teams, as traditional models have become less effective (Thamhain, 2008).

2. Team flow in R&D project teams

In recent decades, extensive research has focused on improving the effectiveness of teams within organizations, particularly regarding various team processes. One key concept that has emerged is "team flow," which refers to a shared experience of flow—a highly focused and effortless state an individual experiences while engaging in an activity. Team flow occurs during the execution of interdependent tasks for the benefit of the team and is characterized by an optimized team dynamic, consisting of seven prerequisites and four key characteristics (van den Hout et al., 2018). Studies have shown that team flow enhances both team performance (Gaggioli et al., 2017) and creativity (van Oortmerssen et al., 2015). R&D teams face distinct challenges, such as rapid advancements in science and technology, diverse team member expertise, and a lack of clear metrics for evaluating progress (Clarke, 2002). In a competitive global landscape, these teams must adapt by forming alliances, focusing on development over fundamental research, outsourcing certain activities, and ensuring projects are completed on time and within budget (Farris and Cordero, 2002). Successful project execution involves interdependent processes that transform inputs into outcomes through collaborative cognitive, verbal, and behavioral actions aimed at achieving shared goals (Marks et al., 2001).

Govind and Sidharth (2024a) proposed the 5R Team Flow Model for R&D project teams, which includes five essential processes: Resonant, Reflection, Response, Resultant, and Reinforcing. These processes are vital for fostering team flow and enhancing effectiveness and performance. In a separate study, Govind and Sidharth (2024b) identified key factors influencing team flow from the R&D perspective, relating them to each process in the model. The 5R Team Flow Model is illustrated in Figure. 1.

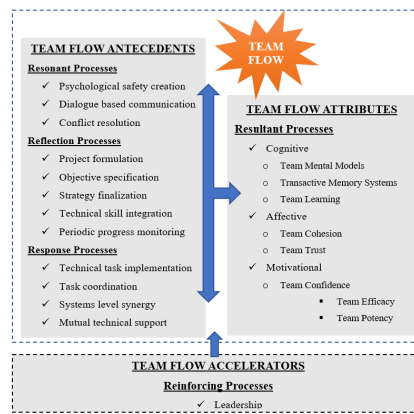


Figure 1 5R Model for Nurturing Team Flow in R&D Project Teams (Govind and Sidharth, 2023a)

3. Objectives of the Present Study

The 5R model shows that leadership plays a crucial role in enhancing Team flow in R&D teams. The R&D team leader fosters key elements—resonant, reflective, responsive, and resultant processes—that promote team flow. Leadership roles in these processes are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Role of the R&D Project Leader In Facilitating 5R Team Processes

Processes Influencing Team Flow	Role of R&D project team leader in facilitating the process
Resonant processes	Creating a psychologically safe team culture, instilling dialogue-based communication techniques, amicable resolution of conflicts, coaching and mentoring
Reflection processes	Initiating innovative ideas, planning and strategizing, project review and monitoring, creative problem-solving
Response processes	Organising task activities, co-ordinating, gatekeeping, system-level monitoring,
Resultant Processes	Facilitating the emergence of resultant cognitive, affective, and motivational states by ensuring effective inter-dynamics of resonant, reflection and response processes.

Thamhain (2003) identified that the key factors boosting the innovative performance of R&D teams relate to addressing team members' personal and professional needs. Gupta and Singh (2013) suggested that focusing on relationship-oriented, task-oriented, and emergent processes can transform R&D teams from individual experts into cohesive workgroups. The R&D project leader is essential in creating a supportive environment for effective teamwork, allowing the team to utilize organizational competencies and achieve its goals. Leadership requirements in research and development (R&D) environments differ from those in traditional businesses, necessitating the replacement of conventional models with specially designed alternatives (Arnold et al., 2000; Khatri, 2005). For example, the leadership behaviors needed to foster team flow—a developing area of research in team effectiveness—have not yet been fully established, particularly within R&D teams. This paper addresses that gap by proposing a new leadership framework specifically for nurturing team flow in R&D settings. This study aims to conduct interviews and analyses literature to identify crucial leadership behaviors influencing these processes and propose a preliminary inventory of these behaviors.

4. Methodology

In-depth interviews and a literature search were used to develop an inventory of leader behaviors. This approach follows Churchill and Iacobucci (2006), who recommend in-depth interviews for exploratory research, and Eisenhardt (1989), who also supports this method for studying lesser-known topics. The literature search complemented the preliminary findings, as noted by Strauss and Corbin (2008). Information was gathered from R&D professionals and aligned with existing studies to create a framework of leader behaviors that enhance team flow in R&D teams.

4.1 Respondents

Twelve R&D professionals were selected through purposive sampling as participants in the study. Each participant held a leadership position in R&D project teams within a defense R&D establishment, leading teams of knowledge workers. They were identified by top management and are recognized experts in their technical areas. With 18 to 34 years of experience in R&D, their leadership expertise in project teams ranges from 8 to 19 years, providing valuable insights into leadership processes essential for this study.

4.2 Data Collection

Face-to-face interviews were conducted by the first author with each participant in two parts. Initially, participants discussed their experiences in R&D teams, perspectives on leadership, and specific leadership styles. This open conversation allowed for exploration of their attitudes, behaviors, and challenges as leaders. In the second part, respondents were introduced to the

concepts of flow, team flow, and the 5R processes. They were informed that the interview aimed to investigate how leader behaviors can foster team flow in R&D teams, followed by direct questions about facilitating the 5R processes. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes, and comprehensive notes were compiled into a report for the participants' review, with some clarifications obtained through follow-up calls

4.3 Data Analysis

Each interview report was analyzed to identify common patterns related to the study's purpose. Initially, both authors independently reviewed and categorized the reports, resolving differences through discussions to achieve a unified classification. An extensive literature review identified relevant leadership behaviors for R&D teams. Yukl and Falbe (1990) proposed a taxonomy of fourteen leader behaviors, which Gupta and Singh (2012) adapted into a framework specifically for the Indian R&D context based on research with scientists from five government-funded laboratories. They categorized leader behaviors into five groups: 1. Relation-oriented: inspiring, supporting, developing, recognizing, informing 2. Task-oriented: clarifying, problem-solving, monitoring, buffering 3. Empowering: consulting, empowering 4. Team-building 5. Leading by example, Gupta et al. (2013) validated this model quantitatively using data from 11 laboratories. Morgeson et al. (2010) also described 15 team leadership functions organized into transition and action phases of team performance. These taxonomies, alongside insights from interviews and literature, informed the development of new leadership behavior categories.

An inventory of twelve leader behaviors influencing team flow in R&D teams was developed through interviews and theoretical studies. Three of Gupta et al.'s (2012) leadership functions—inspiring, problem-solving, and monitoring—were retained. Six constructs were combined into new constructs: supporting and consulting became Empathizing; developing and recognizing formed Coaching; and consulting and empowering became Aligning. Redundant constructs were eliminated or redefined, such as combining 'informing' and 'clarifying' into 'monitoring' and redefining 'buffering' as 'managing team boundaries.' Seven of Morgeson et al.'s (2010) leadership functions were also included, covering all Reflection process enabling functions and two Response process enabling functions. Additionally, 'creating consensus' and 'systems thinking' emerged from interviews, supported by recent research. The results are discussed in the next section.

5. Results

Based on data analysis and combining an extensive literature review with the author's two decades of diverse experience in R&D project management, a range of leadership behaviors has been identified as key elements that can cultivate a seamless flow within R&D teams. These leadership practices are designed to enhance three critical processes: Resonant, Reflection, and Response. By nurturing these processes, leaders can facilitate the emergence of Resultant Processes that arise from dynamic team interactions. Together, these interconnected processes create an environment where team members can experience a state of flow, characterized by heightened focus, creativity, and collaboration. Table 2 provides a comprehensive inventory of the leadership behaviors that emerged from this study. Each behavior is accompanied by a succinct definition, offering clarity on the characteristics and attributes that define effective leadership in this context.

Table 2 Twelve Leader Behaviors Likely to Nurture Team Flow in R&D Teams

Leader behaviours nurturing team flow in R&D teams	Definition	Comparison with leader behaviours proposed by similar models	
		Gupta et al., (2013)	Morgeson et al., (2010)
Resonant process enabling functions			
Empathising	Being an attentive listener, empathizing with team members' feelings, and fostering open dialogue within the team	Supporting	Not available
Inspiring	Inspiring team members to envision a shared future and encouraging them to work together as a cohesive unit.	Inspiring	Not available
Creating consensus	Establishing a collective understanding of the team's shared purpose and ensuring that task-based conflicts do not escalate into relationship-based conflicts.	Not available	Not available
Coaching	Encouraging team learning by developing members' skills and strengths, providing constructive feedback, and ensuring timely recognition.	Developing, Recognising	Training and developing the team
Reflection process enabling functions.			
Visioning	Defining the team's overall purpose and ensuring that all team members have a shared understanding of it.	Not available	Defining mission
Goal setting	Establishing team goals and clearly defining performance expectations for each team member.	Not available	Establishing expectations and goals,
Strategizing	Clarifying the roles, strategies, and timelines necessary for achieving the team's goals.	Not available	Structuring and planning,
Monitoring	Periodically reviewing team activities, assessing progress, and giving feedback for necessary adjustments.	Monitoring	Monitoring the team
Response process enabling functions			
Coordination	Making sure that team members carry out interdependent activities in a coordinated and timely manner.	Not available	Not available
Problem-solving	Identifying potential problems early, keeping the team informed, and developing satisficing solutions.	Problem-solving,	Solving problems
Boundary spanning	Engaging with the external environment, moderating outside influences, forming networks, accessing resources, and protecting the team's interests.	Buffering	Managing team boundaries
Systems thinking	Considering the team and its activities as a whole, recognizing interrelationships and emerging features, and capitalizing on uncertainties.	Not available	Not available

6. Discussions

6.1 Conclusions and Implications

Research and development (R&D) project teams play a crucial role in addressing complex challenges and creating innovative, cost-effective solutions. To achieve this, it is essential to harness the diverse skills and expertise of all team members. Research indicates that fostering an environment that encourages team flow—the state where individuals work together seamlessly—can significantly enhance both the effectiveness and overall performance of these teams. One pivotal framework in understanding this phenomenon is the 5R model of team flow, which emphasizes the transformative impact of leadership on facilitating team flow experiences. This paper seeks to enrich the existing literature on the subject by presenting a detailed inventory of leadership behaviors that influence team dynamics. In particular, it focuses on three essential processes identified in the 5R model: Resonance, Reflection, and Response. Through careful analysis, the study identifies four distinct behaviors exhibited by leaders that can effectively facilitate each of these critical processes. By focusing on these behaviors, leaders can cultivate an environment where team members thrive, collaborate more effectively, and ultimately produce groundbreaking solutions to their challenges.

Through an extensive literature review and in-depth interviews, twelve leader behavior constructs have been identified that are proposed to influence team flow within R&D project teams. These behaviors vary widely; some are general and applicable to any leadership role, while others are specifically tailored to the R&D environment, designed to foster creativity and innovation.

Each process in the 5R framework has four influencing leader behaviors. The resonant processes, including psychological safety, dialogue-based communication, and conflict resolution, which are intended to bring the team members into a state of resonance, are influenced by leader behaviors like empathising, inspiring, creating consensus and coaching. The reflection processes, including R&D project formulation, objective specification, strategy finalization, technical skill integration and periodic progress monitoring, during which the R&D team reflects on the project's activities, are influenced by leader behaviors like visioning, establishing goals, strategising, and monitoring. The response processes include technical task implementation, task coordination, systems-level synergy, mutual technical support and course corrections, which involve the execution of the R&D task activities and are found to be influenced by leader behaviors like coordination, problem-solving, boundary spanning and systems thinking.

Among the 12 leadership behaviors identified, some—such as ‘creating consensus’ and ‘systems thinking’—are particularly critical in the context of R&D projects. For instance, R&D team leaders who utilize systems thinking can view the project holistically, allowing them to anticipate potential problems and implement solutions proactively. Additionally, these leaders can present a broader perspective to team members who are specialists in their respective fields. This ability helps persuade team members to step beyond their comfort areas and collaborate effectively toward synergistic solutions.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

The present study acknowledges several limitations that can inform future research endeavors. Given that it relies exclusively on qualitative methods, conducting a follow-up survey on a larger scale is essential. This broader survey would help ascertain which of the identified leadership behaviors genuinely influence team flow processes meaningfully. Throughout this study, a diverse range of leadership behaviors has been proposed, stemming from a limited set of interviews and an extensive review of relevant literature. These suggestions are also rooted in the authors’ two decades of professional experience in critical roles within the field. However, despite this comprehensive foundation, the proposed behaviors have not yet been ranked or prioritised based on their impact and significance. Further quantitative research is necessary to enhance the depth of understanding. This approach could help streamline the extensive list of proposed behaviors to focus on a more manageable number of core dimensions. For example, the concepts of ‘monitoring’ and ‘coordination’ might be integrated to form a broader construct, as both share overlapping characteristics that could be better understood when considered together.

Another notable limitation of this study is its narrow focus on the R&D project domain, which restricts its findings to a specific context. The interviews were exclusively conducted with R&D project leaders overseeing intricate defence R&D projects at a single defence research laboratory. This exclusive approach overlooks the rich experiences and insights that could be gathered from similar teams operating in other research environments, such as space exploration and related scientific fields. For instance, considering the realm of defence R&D, the landscape is further complicated by diverse stakeholders, including the armed forces, who serve as the primary customers for defence-related innovations. Additionally, public and private sector industries and academic institutions play vital roles in this ecosystem. By studying how leaders in these varied sectors navigate the complexities of their projects, valuable strategies and insights that might enhance project management practices across different domains can be uncovered. Exploring these dynamics could yield a deeper understanding of the collaborative efforts required for success in complex, multidisciplinary R&D project endeavours.

This study concentrated on interviewing R&D team leaders to gain insights into the behaviors that drive effective leadership within research and development contexts. While these leaders’ perspectives are valuable, it is equally important to incorporate team members’ views about leadership. Their insights can enrich our understanding and potentially uncover crucial elements that are missing from the proposed framework of leadership behaviors. Moreover, it is essential to consider the various contingency factors that can impact the dynamics of an R&D project scenario. Future research should delve deeper into how leaders can actively shape the organizational environment. By doing so, they can foster conditions that promote a sense of team flow among R&D project teams, ultimately enhancing creativity, collaboration, and productivity.

7. References

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