

Applying a Strengths-Based Approach in Multidisciplinary Teams: The Role of Line Managers in Enhancing Team Performance

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Abstract

This thesis explores how a strengths-based approach is applied in multidisciplinary teams to enhance team performance. Multidisciplinary teams are composed of professionals from diverse functional backgrounds, and those teams are vital for innovation. However, they often face challenges such as communication issues, unclear role division, and conflicting priorities. A strengths-based approach can help overcome these challenges, because this approach focuses on identifying and utilizing the unique strengths of employees. Managers who implement the strengths-based approach, they recognize these strengths through informal observation and personal conversations, and assign tasks accordingly. This approach leads to increased motivation, greater ownership, improved collaboration, and ultimately, stronger team performance. The central research question is: *How do line managers apply a strengths-based approach in multidisciplinary teams to enhance team performance?*

A qualitative research design was used in this investigation, involving five semi-structured interviews with line managers of multidisciplinary teams. Participants were selected based on their experience in managing those teams. The interviews were thematically analyzed using a combination of inductive and deductive coding in Atlas.ti. From the data, three main themes emerged, namely: *recognizing strengths*, *utilizing strengths*, and *the effects on team performance*. Managers identified the strengths of their employees mainly through informal observations and having one-on-one conversations with them. Hereby, managers tailored tasks based on the strengths of the employees, created greater autonomy, and built mutual trust. These practices led to increased motivation, greater ownership, improved collaboration, and ultimately, stronger team performance.

The conclusion is that a strengths-based approach positively impacts team performance, particularly in multidisciplinary teams. Managers can reduce friction and enhance collaboration in multidisciplinary teams, when they leverage the strengths of the individuals in their team. Previous researches show that the strengths-based approach individual well-being and engagement supports, while this study highlights how it helps line managers in multidisciplinary teams.

These findings are relevant for organizations and HR professionals, because those findings show that focusing on strengths is beneficial for the employee well-being and is also a strategic tool for improving performance. One limitation of this study is that the data only reflects the perspective of line managers. Including team members in future research could offer a more complete understanding of how strengths-based practices are seen and felt within multidisciplinary teams. Additionally, most managers were unfamiliar with the term "strengths-based approach" itself, which may have limited the theoretical depth of the findings.

Graduation Committee Members

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Keywords

Multidisciplinary teams, strengths-based approach, team performance, performance

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT, a language model developed by OpenAI, solely for the purpose of language optimization. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the work.

1. Introduction

The need for collaboration across multiple disciplines continues to grow. Based on the insights of Sierchio (2003), organizations more often rely on multidisciplinary teams. These teams consist of groups of professionals from different disciplines who collaborate by combining their expertise areas and knowledge (Fay et al., 2006; Sierchio, 2003; Liberati et al., 2015).

On the one hand, multidisciplinary teams have several important benefits. First, they are known to foster innovation. The integration of different perspectives and knowledge often leads to more creative and unique solutions (Edmondson & Harvey, 2018). Secondly, research has shown that such teams can enhance the overall performance of the team, because of the combination of different expertise areas (Fay et al., 2006). Finally, individuals tend to engage with colleagues from diverse functional backgrounds, when they work in a multidisciplinary team. This broadens their own perspective, and it tends to enhance creativity within the team as a whole, and other important team processes such as knowledge-sharing and team learning (Van Der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005).

On the other hand, based on previous studies, managing such diverse teams presents some significant challenges for managers. According to insights from the study of Penson et al. (2006), communication appears to be a key challenge in multidisciplinary teams, as it is considered to be one of the most rewarding aspects of collaboration but does not always proceed flawlessly. Effective communication and collaboration among professionals from different disciplines are essential to maximize the performance potential of multidisciplinary teams (Dillenburger et al., 2014). Penson et al. (2006) further explain that it is therefore the responsibility of the manager to guide the team members in developing not just their communication, but their overall collaboration skills in order to support effective teamwork in a multidisciplinary setting.

Furthermore, one's priorities in the team may differ from another one's priorities, which challenges the manager to guide the group to focus on the most important area (Sierchio, 2003). Another challenge that comes with multidisciplinary teams is role ambiguity. When team members are unsure about their own responsibilities or those of others, tasks may be duplicated, overlooked, or executed inefficiently (Xyrichis & Lowton, 2008). According to their study, the absence of clearly defined roles can hinder collaboration, reduce accountability, and ultimately compromise the team's performance. Moreover, the findings from Wallace (2017) suggest that status hierarchies within multidisciplinary teams can hinder effective collaboration. According to her study, certain disciplines which are seen as more authoritative or dominant than others can create an imbalance in decision-making.

Although multidisciplinary teams offer considerable advantages in terms of innovation, performance, and

creativity (Edmondson & Harvey, 2018; Fay et al., 2006), these benefits are not guaranteed. Having a well-performing multidisciplinary team depends on how well they are managed and how effectively the challenges are addressed (Penson et al., 2006; Xyrichis & Lowton, 2008). According to Randel and Jaussi (2003), managers play an important role in addressing these challenges to make sure that the full potential of the performance of the multidisciplinary team will be realized.

To understand how managers can improve team performance in multidisciplinary teams, it is important to first define what 'team performance' means. Following the perspective of Tannenbaum et al. (1992), team performance is a multidimensional construct that includes task performance (the successful execution of work) and contextual performance (the interpersonal and collaborative processes that support the work). Besides, team performance represents the results of business operation in a certain period of time and can be divided into behavior, results and capabilities (Cai, 2018). Cai states that team performance is a comprehensive indicator that evaluates the ability of the company to develop and operate profitability. In the context of multidisciplinary teams, this implies that performance is not only measured by results, but also by how well team members interact, coordinate, and make use of their individual strengths (Meyers et al., 2023; Van Woerkom et al., 2020).

One promising approach to improving performance in multidisciplinary teams is the strengths-based approach. Based on the studies by Wang et al. (2023) and Bakker and Van Woerkom (2018), the strengths-based approach focuses on the belief that individuals achieve the greatest success when they identify and utilize their strengths, abilities and assets. Managers who make use of the strengths-based approach have an important role in supporting their employees. They help them by recognizing, developing and applying their strengths, which improves their ability to handle challenges and increases productivity (Ding & Yu, 2022; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As a result, the overall performance of the team benefits. The strengths-based approach is based on the idea that every individual has a unique set of strengths that helps them perform at their best (Wood et al. 2011). By focusing on these strengths instead of their weaknesses, managers can address the challenges that often arise in multidisciplinary teams (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Xie, 2013). While managers focus on the strengths of the individuals, leveraging these strengths can have a significant impact on the overall team performance. Research shows that team members become more engaged and productive, when they know their strengths and can use them. This also leads to better collaboration, more mutual respect, and a clearer division of tasks within the team (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Louis, 2009; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2018; Meyers et al., 2023). In multidisciplinary teams, this approach could be particularly valuable. It allows managers to leverage the variety of skills, strengths, and perspectives that naturally exist within such diverse teams, which ultimately should improve team performance (Belbin, 2010; Salas et al., 2008).

Gaining an understanding of the challenges involved in managing multidisciplinary teams shows the need for effective strategies to address complex issues and ultimately improve team performance. This is supported by Lamb et al. (2014), who noted that effectively tackling such challenges can lead to substantial performance improvements.

Although previous research has shown that a strengths-based approach positively influences individual engagement, well-being, and productivity (Bakker & Van Woerkom, 2018; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Wood et al., 2011), its application in the specific context of multidisciplinary teams remains underexplored. Most studies focus either on general workplace outcomes or on strengths-based practices within uniform teams. There is limited evidence on how managers recognize and utilize individual strengths in multidisciplinary teams. This study addresses that gap by investigating how strengths-based principles are applied in the daily management of multidisciplinary teams.

Therefore, the research question is: *How do line managers apply a strengths-based approach in multidisciplinary teams to enhance team performance?* This research aims to provide insights into how a strengths-based approach can support managers in enhancing team performance when working with employees from diverse functional backgrounds. To investigate this, a qualitative research design will be employed, by taking semi-structured interviews with managers of multidisciplinary teams.

By combining empirical data from interviews along with theoretical insights, the study seeks to contribute to the understanding of how strengths-based principles can enhance performance in multidisciplinary teams. It offers practical recommendations for line managers who aim to improve their management of a multidisciplinary team through a strengths-based approach. The study further adds to the theoretical understanding of how strengths-based management operates in multidisciplinary environments, where diverse professional perspectives, priorities, and communication styles coexist.

2. Literature Review

Multidisciplinary teams are being used more frequently to address complex problems. However, their effective management is still a significant challenge (Penson et al., 2006; Sierchio, 2003). A strategy that is promising to enhance team performance is the strengths-based approach. This approach emphasizes the identification of and utilization of each team member's unique strengths (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This literature review aims to bring together existing insights on multidisciplinary teams and the strengths-based approach. It first discusses the definition and characteristics of multidisciplinary teams, followed by a discussion of definition of the strengths-based approach and the applicability to other fields.

2.1 Multidisciplinary Teams

2.1.1 The Need for Multidisciplinary Teams

Based on the research of Sierchio et al. (2003), multidisciplinary teams play an important role in ensuring positive outcomes (in the healthcare industry), because those teams contribute to meeting the various needs in complex problems. Besides, Van der Vegt and Bunderson (2005) conducted research in the oil and gas industry and argued that multidisciplinary teams are effective when individuals bring diverse knowledge and skills to address complex issues. Taking these findings together, the conclusion can be made that the effectiveness of multidisciplinary teams is not limited to a specific industry. Rather, they show that the value of those teams can be generalized across different contexts. Furthermore, organizations rely more frequently on multidisciplinary teams, according to Fay et al. (2006). They argue that in many areas of work today, tasks have reached a complexity which requires a wide range of knowledge and expertise. Lastly, the research by LaFrance et al. (2019) emphasizes that multidisciplinary collaboration is essential for addressing complex care needs, such as those associated with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Based on these studies, it is clear that multidisciplinary teams are increasingly needed in organizations which face complex situations. As their use grows, it is important to consider both their benefits and the challenges they bring.

2.1.2 Benefits

There are multiple benefits related to the implementation of multidisciplinary teams. First, by conducting research in top management teams in 199 banks, the study by Edmondson and Harvey (2018) shows that multidisciplinary teams foster innovation. They substantiate this by referring to the study by Bantel and Jackson (1989). Bantel and Jackson found that diversity in functional backgrounds was associated with more administrative innovations in a sample of bank management teams. Besides, based on insights of their study, they imply that higher knowledge diversity leads to higher innovation. Secondly, multidisciplinary teams provide for improvements in performance, according to multiple studies. While Mannix and Neale (2005) found that the benefits of knowledge diversity emerge when teams have discussions which are aligned to the tasks, Van Knippenberg and Schippers (2007) came to a similar conclusion. They emphasized the mediating role of team discussions and integration of task-relevant information, in converting knowledge diversity into performance benefits. Besides, according to the research by Fay et al. (2006), the utilization of multidisciplinary teams is a strategy to increase team performance. The higher the number of different disciplines represented on a team, the broader the range of KSAs (knowledge, skills and abilities) available on a team should be. The research implies that having a great variety of task relevant KSAs means that there are more different perspectives, which lead to an increase of team performance (in terms of quality of decision-making, innovation or problem-solving). Combining insights of these studies, the conclusion can be made that knowledge diversity itself does not produce performance benefits, in

fact, knowledge diversity enhances team interaction (through which diverse knowledge can be useful) which contributes to team performance. Lastly, multidisciplinary teams allow individuals for exposure to and interaction with other individuals of diverse functional backgrounds, which tends to increase creativity among each in the multidisciplinary team (Van Der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005). They substantiate this by referring to the study of Ancona and Caldwell (1992), who found that teams whose members are from different functional backgrounds communicate more outside of their teams, which leads to more creative solutions. Besides, research has shown that teams produce more creative solutions when they are composed of individuals with diverse set of backgrounds and experiences (Jackson, 1996; Milliken & Martins, 1996).

These benefits of multidisciplinary teams, such as improved decision-making, innovation, and creativity, are strongly related to the overall team performance (Fay et al., 2006; Van Der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005). As Tannenbaum et al. (1992) explained, team performance includes both how well tasks are carried out and how well people work together. These results show that multidisciplinary teams can achieve a high level of performance in both areas.

2.1.3 Challenges

Despite providing numerous benefits, multidisciplinary teams also present significant challenges in the collaboration with individuals from different functional backgrounds (Rathore et al., 2024). Ndoro (2014) argues that in multidisciplinary settings, conflicts between individuals and the team are common. Similarly, Sierchio (2003) and Rathore et al. (2024) highlight that team members often have different priorities, which can create problems. Sierchio's study shows that managers should help the group agree on which areas are most important to focus on. They can use ideas like the 80/20 rule or the Pareto Principle to do this. This way, the team works more effectively and saves time.

Communication is another challenge in multidisciplinary teams. Penson et al. (2006) note that while communication is one of the most rewarding aspects of team collaboration, it does not always proceed flawlessly. Shaw et al. (2007) found that conflicts within multidisciplinary teams often result in inadequate communication. To ensure the effectiveness of services provided by these teams, professionals must communicate and collaborate well (Dillenburger et al., 2014).

Another significant challenge is role ambiguity. According to Xyrichis and Lowton (2008), tasks can be duplicated, overlooked, or executed inefficiently, when team members are unclear about their own responsibilities or those of others. Their study also shows that when roles are not clearly defined, it can hinder collaboration, reduce accountability and weaken the team's performance. Additionally, Wallace (2017) found that status hierarchies within multidisciplinary teams can also hinder effective collaboration. Her research shows that when some

disciplines are seen as more important or powerful, it can lead to unfair decision-making.

Lastly, Rathore et al. (2024) identified challenges such as training and development, incomplete teams, and time constraints. Team members may need ongoing support on how to work effectively in a multidisciplinary team. Besides, the fact that team members may be unavailable can also be a challenge, as an incomplete team cannot work as effectively as a complete one. Moreover, busy schedules and different demands make collaboration even harder. Organizations should implement strategies aimed at improving team collaboration, to address these challenges. Rathore et al. (2024) suggest holding regular team meetings, keeping communication clear, and creating shared policies and guidelines to help teams work together better.

These challenges, such as communication issues, role ambiguity, and conflicting priorities, can directly hinder both the task and contextual components of team performance (Xyrichis & Lowton, 2008). Therefore, managers need an approach that addresses these challenges and helps team members use their strengths, so they clearly understand their roles and responsibilities. One approach that may help address these challenges and thus enhances the performance is the strengths-based approach (Bakker & Van Woerkom, 2018).

2.2 Strengths-Based Approach

2.2.1 Definition and benefits

Based on multiple studies, the strengths-based approach focuses on the belief that the greatest success can be achieved by individuals when they identify and utilize their strengths, abilities and assets (Wang et al., 2023; Bakker & Van Woerkom, 2018; Van Woerkom & Kroon, 2020). Wood et al. (2011) point out that each employee has unique strengths that enable them to perform at their best. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) argue that employees are more productive when they are supported in ways that align with their strengths. To add on this, Pulla (2017) explains that it can lead to personal growth and development, when strengths are recognized and put into practice. Furthermore, Ding and Yu (2022) also found that the strengths-based approach helps employees adapt better to challenging situations. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) further add that people are more productive when managers focus on their strengths, instead of just trying to fix their weaknesses.

The conclusion can be made, that based on these studies, the strengths-based approach can be defined as the belief that individuals achieve the greatest success when they recognize and use their unique strengths, abilities and assets, which will support them in personal growth, adapting to challenges, and making them working more productively. To show how this approach works in practice, several studies have looked at the positive effects it has in the workplace.

Caiels et al. (2023) conducted interviews with managers and workers who are involved in the implementation of the

strengths-based approach. Participants reported multiple positive outcomes, such as improved well-being, increased empathy, and a greater sense of self-awareness. Employees also developed new perspectives on their life, and they also developed the ability to manage their needs. In line with this, Cloninger (2005) suggests that employees who get to use their strengths are more likely to act in a genuine way, which improves their overall well-being. Bakker and Van Woerkom (2018) show that employees who make use of their strengths are less likely to experience depression or work-related stress. This highlights the positive impact of the strengths-based approach on employee well-being. Heslin and Klehe (2006) add to this that the approach boosts the performance of the employees individually, because they make use of their strengths.

It gives them more control and motivates them to try harder when facing challenges, according to Breevaart and Van Woerkom (2024). Breevaart and Van Woerkom also show that the strengths-based approach helps employees to feel more connected to their work and creates an environment where they feel intrinsically motivated. In short, the strengths-based approach boosts employees' well-being, mental health, performance, and engagement. This makes it a sustainable strategy for both people and organizations.

Beyond that, the strengths-based approach has been used successfully in various fields, showing how flexible and effective it is. The strengths-based approach is applied in education, healthcare, and social work. In education, it begins with teachers identifying their own strengths and using them to help students recognize and use theirs (Lopez & Louis, 2009). This method is widely implemented across universities in the U.S. and Canada (Lopez & Louis, 2009).

In healthcare, strengths-based nursing focuses on what patients can do, rather than their limitations. Nurses work with patients to identify and use their strengths to support recovery and improve health (Gottlieb, 2014; Xie, 2013). This approach promotes health, reduces suffering, and gives patients and families more control over the healing process (Swartz, 2016).

In social work, the approach emphasizes collaboration and shared decision-making between professionals and clients. It helps clients feel valued, builds trust, and enhances their sense of control and confidence (Itzhaky & Bustin, 2002; Caiels et al., 2021).

In summary, the strengths-based approach fosters self-awareness, independence, and empowerment, making it a valuable tool across various professional contexts.

2.2.2 Strengths-Based Approach in the Management of Multidisciplinary Teams

Performance in multidisciplinary teams depends on both technical results and how well people work together across different fields (Tannenbaum et al., 1992; Edmondson & Harvey, 2018). It is therefore important to look at how management approaches can influence these outcomes. The strengths-based approach has been shown to improve

individual engagement and how teams work together (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Meyers et al., 2023). Because of this, the approach can be particularly relevant for improving team performance in multidisciplinary teams.

Although the strengths-based approach works well in various contexts, it is especially relevant when managing multidisciplinary teams. Multidisciplinary teams offer numerous benefits, but they also face challenges (Xyrichis & Lowton, 2008; Rathore et al., 2024). The strengths-based approach can help tackle these challenges by guiding managers to focus on what each team member does best and match tasks to their strengths, which can make work more effective and improve overall team performance (Bakker & Van Woerkom, 2018; Breevaart & Van Woerkom, 2024). This means that managers are responsible for coordinating tasks and recognizing and using the unique strengths of their members to improve collaboration and performance. Meyers et al. (2023) found that making use of each other's strengths within teams enhances coordination, mutual understanding, and overall team performance. When the focus of the managers is on the unique strengths of the individuals, they feel valued and respected (Meyers et al., 2023). According to this study, this contributes to inclusiveness, and it encourages open collaboration across different disciplines.

Moreover, when strengths are clearly recognized and used in practice, team members can better understand each other's roles. This can reduce confusion, and it improves collaboration (Xyrichis & Lowton, 2008). According to the study of Van Knippenberg and Schippers (2007), having a variety in knowledge contributes to higher performance, especially when it is shared via positive team discussions and interactions. In this way, the strengths-based approach serves as a bridge that helps connect the differences within the team and makes the diversity work in a positive way.

By helping team members link their strengths to shared goals, the strengths-based approach supports better teamwork. It also encourages understanding between people from different backgrounds, which can improve overall team performance.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design (Fossey et al., 2002). Semi-structured interviews with line managers of multidisciplinary teams serve as the main way to collect data. I chose this type of design because it allows me to gain deep insights about the experiences and perceptions of line managers managing multidisciplinary teams, and how they implement the strengths-based approach. The line managers were asked about their experiences with managing multidisciplinary teams, how they apply the strengths-based approach in this context, and how they believe this influences team performance. By approaching in this way, it allows for a thorough exploration of how line managers use the strengths-based approach to manage employees with diverse functional backgrounds and how

this contributes to improving team performance of multidisciplinary teams.

3.2 Sample

In this research, a purposive sampling method is used to select participants. Purposive sampling means that participants were selected based on specific criteria related to the research question (Rai & Thapa, 2015). Those criteria were the following:

They were line managers of multidisciplinary teams

They had at least two years of experience in managing multidisciplinary teams

They were open to having their interview data used for qualitative research purposes

The sample consists of five participants, who are line managers of multidisciplinary teams. The aim was not to include a large number of participants, but rather to select individuals with direct experience in this area. This provides valuable and relevant insights, according to Rai and Thapa (2015). The participants have at least two years of experience as a manager of a multidisciplinary team, which ensures that they are familiar with the practices that are being discussed (Palinkas et al. 2013). To allow for variation in context and perspective, the participants were selected from different sectors.

The participants were approached through different channels. I used LinkedIn to find suitable profiles, and also reached out via friends, family, and contacts from university. This helped me to connect with line managers who matched the selection criteria and were open to participating in the research.

An overview of the interview participants is included in Appendix A.

3.3 Data Collection and Procedure

The data was collected through conducting semi-structured interviews. This approach allows for flexibility while maintaining a clear structure and guideline across all interviews, according to Adams (2015). Interviews were conducted together with other students who investigate this field (Jet Jansen, thesis under development). Those were either in person or via video call, depending on what worked best for each participant. Based on Bjørvik et al. (2023), the physical location of the interview can significantly impact the research process. They suggest that factors such as privacy and comfort can affect the extent to which someone wants to share information. Because of this, we gave the participant the opportunity to choose the place where they would like to take the interview, so that they felt comfortable and would speak openly. One of the five participants wanted to take the interview in person, in her office, while the others opted for a video call. This was primarily due to scheduling constraints.

Each interview lasted about 45 to 60 minutes, which gave enough time to discuss the main topics. Before the

interview started, participants were informed about the purpose of the research. The participants gave consent for their participation and for the recording of the conversation. The interviews are recorded to make sure that no detail was missed during the transcription and later analysis. Based on the availability of the participants, the interviews were scheduled over a period of one month.

Participants were assured that their answers would stay anonymous, so no names or personal details were stored with the data. After each interview, I saved the recordings safely, transcribed them, and analyzed them in Atlas.ti.

3.4 Instruments

For this research, I created an interview guide with open-ended questions that served as a guideline during the interviews. The goal was to gain a deeper understanding of how the strengths-based approach is used in multidisciplinary teams and how these teams are managed to improve performance.

Although the strengths-based approach is well-established in academic literature (e.g., Wang et al., 2023; Bakker & Van Woerkom, 2018; Van Woerkom & Kroon, 2020), managers are not always aware of this specific term. Many of them may not explicitly refer to their methods as 'strengths-based,' but they might still apply the core principles of the approach. These may include focusing on employees' talents, encouraging personal development, or assigning tasks based on individual strengths. Therefore, the concept was introduced in simple terms to the line managers who were not familiar with the term. During the interviews, the focus was on the core principles of the strengths-based approach rather than on the theoretical label. This way, participants could think about how they use strengths-based practices in managing their teams, even if they were not familiar with the term before.

The interview framework is based on existing literature, but the questions were kept simple and not too theoretical. This was done to avoid steering the conversation too much. Instead, the questions were broad so participants could share their own views and experiences. There was also room for follow-up questions to explore unexpected topics in more detail.

3.5 Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). In this study, I used a combination of inductive and deductive coding. This means that some themes emerged directly from the data (inductive), while others were informed by concepts from existing literature (deductive), especially related to the strengths-based approach.

First, in the open coding step, I read through the transcripts and added short codes to parts that stood out. These codes described what people said, did, or felt.

The next step is axial coding, where I grouped similar codes together into categories. This helped to see how different ideas and behaviors were connected.

In the last step, selective coding, I brought the most important categories together into main themes. These themes directly relate to the research question. They include:

Collaboration in Multidisciplinary Teams

Recognizing Strengths

Utilizing Strengths

Effects on Team Performance

During the whole process, I used constant comparison, which means I kept checking and comparing what people said in different interviews. This helped to make sure the patterns I found really reflected their experiences.

To show clearly how the themes were built, the full coding overview, with examples of codes and categories, is shown in Appendix B.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

I followed ethical standards during the whole research process. All participants gave their informed consent before taking part. To protect their privacy, I removed names and the names of their organizations from the data.

Everything was stored safely on a password-protected device and will be deleted after the study is finished.

4. Results

This chapter presents the findings from five semi-structured interviews with managers of multidisciplinary teams. The results are organized using the four main themes that were developed during the coding process:

Collaboration in Multidisciplinary Teams

Recognizing Strengths

Utilizing Strengths

Effects of the Strengths-Based Approach on Team Performance

Each theme forms a separate section in this chapter and includes examples and quotes from the interviews to support the analysis. Together, these findings illustrate how strengths-based principles are applied in practice, and how they relate to the performance of multidisciplinary teams. Figure 1 is a conceptual model based on insights from the literature. It shows how key elements of the strengths-based approach are connected to team performance in multidisciplinary teams.

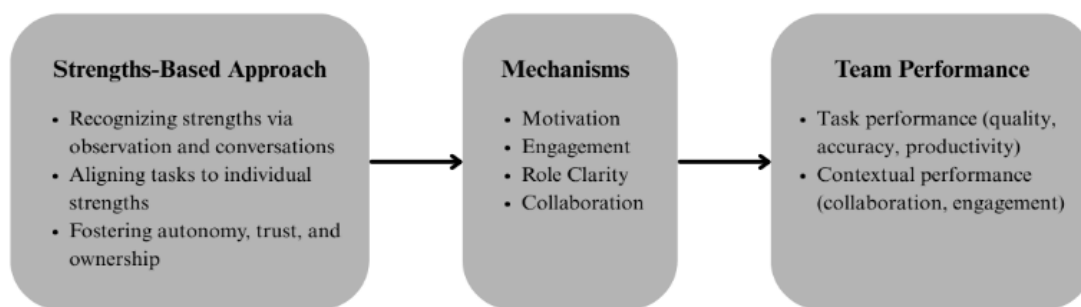


Figure 1. The model illustrates how recognizing and utilizing strengths enhance team performance through underlying mechanisms.

4.1 Collaboration in Multidisciplinary Teams

A theme that recurred across the interviews was the complexity of collaboration in multidisciplinary teams. Managers consistently described that working together across disciplines does not happen automatically. Between the disciplines, there are differences in terminology, working pace, and underlying goals, which often lead to misunderstandings. It also led to delays in the decision-making process, especially in situations where team members needed to solve problems together as a team.

These challenges involved practical issues, and also the fact that each discipline has its own way of looking at work

and their priorities. For example, while developers focus on building systems, marketers are more concerned with testing ideas quickly, and UX designers aim to understand user needs before acting, as Participant 5 explained. This shows that each discipline operates from its own logic, which makes working collectively hard unless someone actively helps them coordinate.

Underlying tensions often came from competing priorities.

“Misalignment in goals is where it always starts. The finance guy wants cheap, ops wants reliable, and tech wants perfection.” (Participant 4)

Not talking about those differences can lead to frictions. Several managers pointed out that noticing these dynamics is the first step to managing them well.

To bridge these differences, participants described various strategies. A common approach was to create structured moments for reflection and team alignment. These included regular check-ins, joint task ownership, and opportunities for informal connection.

“We put people from different profiles together on purpose. It’s not always smooth, but it gets results.” (Participant 2)

According to multiple interviewees, these mixed teams were seen as challenging, but they are beneficial for innovation and shared learning. That is because they share different perspectives with each other.

Another important point was that the manager helps team members understand each other better. Managers said they encouraged people to share their perspectives, visualize workflows, and talk openly about problems. For example, Participant 1 explained that they used visual tools to map out work processes with the team so that any friction points became clear and could be discussed.

“I want to visualize the processes with the team so we can directly identify and talk about the friction points.” (Participant 1)

Other managers emphasized that it is important to create psychological safety and openness. They did that by encouraging open communication and setting clear expectations across the various roles in the team.

Overall, the conclusion can be made that it takes active support to get smooth collaboration between disciplines. Managers should take time and attention and should guide the team members in understanding each other in the team. When this is done well, this investment will improve communication, trust, shared ownership, and overall team performance.

4.2 Recognizing Strengths

The interviews showed that each manager has their own way of recognizing team members’ strengths. Which strategy they used depended on different factors, like how close they were to their team, the type of work, and their leadership style. Three common approaches came forward: informal observation, personal conversations, and using structured tools. To get a full picture of team members’ strengths, these methods can be combined together, rather than using them separately.

Being physically present and available on the work floor is something many managers think is important to get to know someone’s strengths. Casually observing behavior in the workplace made them able to spot signs of engagement, frustration, or (still) unknown talents. Participant 1 described this as a daily routine.

“I walk around every morning, just to see what’s going on. If I sit in my office all day, I’d miss the signals.” (Participant 1)

These observations showed that someone’s job didn’t always match what people actually like doing. For example, Participant 1 talked about a secretary who had trouble with desk work. However, she did very well in active roles where she worked directly with patients. Hereby, Participant 1 changed her task, so that she can work where her strengths and heart lie. This shows that observation was not just about judging how people performed. It was also about understanding what they need, and what they can and want to do.

Besides observation, one-on-one conversations were often seen as an important factor in recognizing strengths. These talks were about more than just performance and also covered energy and motivation.

“I always ask: where do you get your energy from? That often reveals strengths that are not in the job description.” (Participant 5)

These talks helped reveal unknown talents, like a developer who was very good at storytelling. According to Participant 5, this skill was later used to improve communication between departments.

Skill matrices, personality models (such as color profiles), or talent profiles are tools that managers use in more complex or larger teams, to gain a better understanding of the strengths of the team members. These tools helped identify who was good at what. Besides, they made it easier to match people with the right tasks. Participant 4, for example, explained how she intentionally built teams with a mix of “blue” (structured, detail-focused) and “orange” (goal-driven, energetic) personalities.

“I’m not very structured myself, so I make sure to surround myself with people who are.” (Participant 4)

This shows that such tools are used to map out strengths and to help balance the team by bringing together different qualities.

Still, these tools didn’t replace personal knowledge of the team. Instead, they complemented it when managers couldn’t directly observe everyone. Some managers had daily, face-to-face contact with their team members, so they relied more on informal methods. Managers of remote or client-facing teams depended more on structured feedback and performance results. For example, strengths were often judged based on project outcomes and team feedback, in consultancy teams. This is because direct supervision was not always possible.

What also played a role was the role of autonomy. Participant 1 said that she adjusted her approach depending on the employee’s role. For example, a secretary might need more help to shape tasks around their strengths, while a nurse practitioner could take full ownership of new projects. This shows that recognizing strengths also means knowing how much freedom someone is ready to handle.

In short, recognizing strengths is an ongoing process which requires a flexible approach. Managers often rely on their own experience and regular contact with the team to recognize someone’s strengths. It helps to talk with

employees and observe how they work in practice. Also, by noticing what motivates someone and how they fit into the group, managers can decide which role matches them best.

4.3 Utilizing Strengths

Managers need to figure out how to apply individual strengths effectively after identifying them. The process of utilization of the strengths was handled differently across contexts. However, three main strategies emerged from the interviews: assigning tasks based on known strengths, trusting intuition when delegating, and adjusting roles when new talents became visible. In all cases, this needed flexibility and an open mind to rethink fixed roles.

Some managers took a structured approach. Participant 2 used team profiles to create a balanced mix of personalities and working styles.

“We use team profiles to make sure we don’t have too many of the same type.” (Participant 2)

If a team has too many people with the same style, like everyone being dominant or very focused on details, it can cause imbalance and tension. By mixing different strengths, managers hoped to improve collaboration and avoid groupthink. In high-pressure projects, this mix of perspectives and ways of working helped teams respond more flexibly and effectively.

Others made decisions based on experience and trust. Participant 3 often gave high-pressure tasks to one specific engineer. This was not because of personal preference but because this person had shown to be reliable in the past.

“That’s not favoritism, that’s strategic use of strengths.” (Participant 3)

This shows a more practical, performance-focused way of working. Instead of rotating tasks equally or strictly following job descriptions, Participant 3 looked at who had proven skills and could be trusted. It also shows how knowing people well and seeing patterns can help keep performance steady, especially when time is tight.

Participant 5 shared how a hidden strength became clear through experimentation. A marketer showed unexpected skill in data analysis, which became apparent after she was invited to collaborate more closely with analysts.

“That shift boosted not only her motivation, but the quality of the project.” (Participant 5)

This example shows that being flexible with roles can help discover hidden talents, especially when managers let team members try things outside their usual job. It also shows that people feel more motivated when they can do work that matches their natural strengths and interests.

Three factors helped managers apply strengths successfully: being present and observant, fostering trust and psychological safety, and having the confidence to challenge traditional role expectations. Managers who

often checked in with their teams could more easily see where people could add the most value.

Using strengths was not only good for morale but also had practical advantages. Tasks were a better fit, motivation increased, and teams became more stable. Participant 1 saw how restructuring roles based on people’s interests reduced confusion and improved workflow. Participant 4 noted that assigning process tasks to a results-driven team member sped up delivery.

Approaches differed. Some managers used personality frameworks like color profiles, while others relied on informal observations. Some prioritized team balance, others focused on individual reliability. This shows that there isn’t one fixed way to use strengths. It depends on the manager’s style, how the team works together, and the type of work.

In all cases, matching tasks to people’s strengths was essential for good team performance. Managers saw it as a practical way to get better results, avoid friction, and let people do what they are best at.

4.4 Effect of the Strengths-Based Approach on Team Performance

Managers often said that using a strengths-based approach had a positive effect on both individual and team performance. When employees worked from their strengths, they felt more motivated, confident, and engaged. This resulted in better work, fewer mistakes, and smoother teamwork. In all five interviews, this connection was made.

“When people do what they’re good at, productivity goes up, mistakes go down, and the vibe improves. We see it in our KPIs and in customer feedback.” (Participant 5)

This quote shows that aligning tasks with strengths improves work quality and results in measurable improvements in team performance.

Participant 4 highlighted how confidence and engagement are boosted because of the strengths-based approach.

“People are more committed when they’re confident. Engagement drives performance.” (Participant 4)

This shows that there is a clear relation between self-assurance and output. When people feel capable, they are more likely to stay engaged and take initiatives. In these cases, performance comes less from pressure or supervision and more from personal drive. This change also reduces the need for managers to constantly watch over people, because they start taking initiative themselves.

Participant 1 observed a shift in motivation.

“People started coming with suggestions themselves. That’s when you know they’re in their element.” (Participant 1)

Instead of waiting for instructions, employees took responsibility and acted more on their own. This showed that they felt seen and trusted. It also shows that team members didn't rely only on formal leadership to get good results. When they feel more committed to their work, outcomes improve naturally. They begin to make improvements on their own and often spot opportunities before problems even appear.

These examples show that working from strengths supports long-term team development and directly

improves team performance. Confidence, ownership, and intrinsic motivation became more common across teams, and these qualities translated into better collaboration and more consistent results. What participants described in the interviews is not just about individual growth, it clearly influenced how well the entire team performed. Figure 2 shows how the four main themes relate to each other and contribute to team performance, based on the thematic analysis of the interviews.

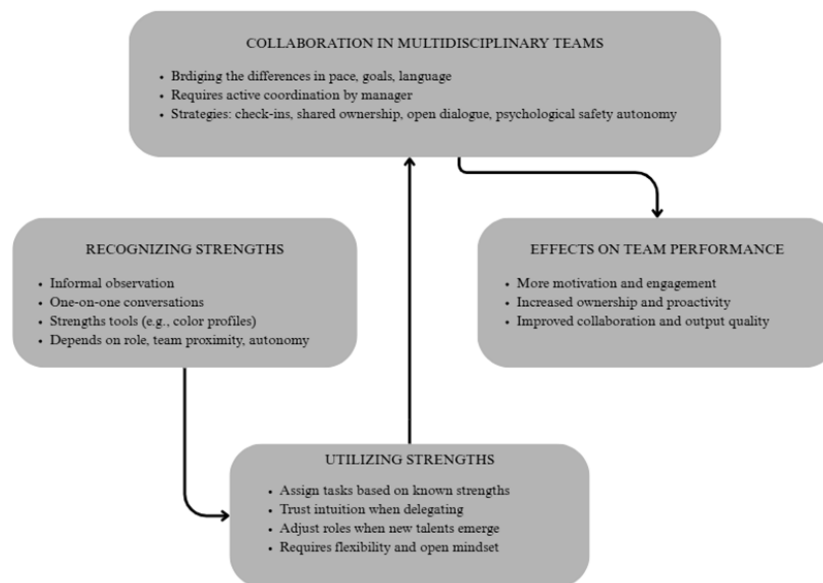


Figure 2. This model was developed based on the qualitative data from the five interviews. It illustrates how the four main themes are interconnected according to the experiences of line managers in multidisciplinary teams.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the existing literature on the strengths-based approach and multidisciplinary team performance in three main ways.

First, this study shows how strengths-based practices are applied in daily work situations, while earlier studies focus on the benefits of the approach for engagement and productivity (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Bakker & Van Woerkom, 2018). In particular, managers often use informal observations, regular one-on-one talks, and their own experience to spot employees' strengths. They mostly prefer this over formal tools like standard assessments or fixed feedback systems. This suggests that formal assessment tools may not be practical in multidisciplinary environments. Informal recognition of the strengths gives managers more room to respond to what the team needs at that moment. It is a more flexible approach, which is supported by managers. This finding

shows that strengths-based management does not always have to include fixed tools (Wood et al., 2011). It supports the idea of Van Woerkom and Meyers (2018) that informal ways of recognizing strengths can work just as well in dynamic environments.

Second, the findings show that managers used many core ideas of the strengths-based approach, like matching tasks to strengths, giving employees more responsibility, and boosting motivation, even if they were not aware of the theory. This shows that managers don't need theoretical knowledge to use strengths-based practices. They often figure it out through experience, especially in multidisciplinary teams where flexibility and adaptability are important. This matches the view of Wang et al. (2023), who say that strengths-based leadership does not require managers to know the theory, as long as they keep supporting and using their employees' strengths in practice. This finding shows that managers often apply strengths-based practices naturally, without using formal models. It suggests that theory should better reflect how these practices develop in real work situations.

Third, this study shows that using team members' strengths can help reduce friction in multidisciplinary teams. It helps overcome miscommunications and conflicting priorities between disciplines, managers noted, and it leads to improved coordination. This finding supports earlier claims that using strengths improves collaboration and respect within diverse teams (Meyers et al., 2023; Clifton & Harter, 2003). It also connects to Van Knippenberg and Schippers (2007), who said that diverse knowledge leads to better performance when teams interact and work together well. This study shows that dividing tasks based on people's strengths can be an effective way to improve coordination and cooperation between disciplines in a team. It shows the potential of the strengths-based approach for improving coordination in multidisciplinary teams.

5.2 Practical Implications

The results of this research offer clear recommendations for line managers and the HR professionals who directly support them in enhancing performance in multidisciplinary teams.

Line managers can benefit from focusing on effective practices which are also simple to execute, like walking around the workplace to observe behavior. They can also engage in regular conversations that focus on output, energy and motivation of the employees. These practices align closely with the suggestions by Van Woerkom et al. (2020), who say that recognizing strengths should be part of ongoing conversations about development instead of being limited to a single evaluation moment. In particular, some managers described that asking questions to employees like "what gives you energy?" helped reveal hidden talents.

Another practical point is to be flexible when giving out responsibilities. Participants said that assigning tasks based on people's strengths, instead of only following job descriptions, made employees take more ownership, be more reliable, and act more proactively. This reflects on earlier research by Breevaart and Van Woerkom (2024), who found that assigning tasks based on strengths improves commitment and resilience, especially in high-pressure or complex environments.

For HR departments, the study suggests that strengths-based thinking can be turned into policy by including talent profiles or strengths questionnaires in onboarding and development programs. Clifton and Harter (2003) found that organizations that actively invest in employees' strengths have higher productivity and lower turnover. Setting up team sessions or peer feedback that focus on strengths can also help create a culture where development and recognition are shared values.

In the short term, managers should be encouraged to explore and use their team members' strengths through ongoing talks and observation. While most managers preferred informal methods, one participant mentioned using tools like personality profiles to get a better understanding of the team's composition. For example, Participant 4 used a color model to look at the balance of

traits in the team. This was more of a tool for reflection than for making strict decisions. Such tools can help show which skills fit together and make teamwork as effective as possible.

As a long-term strategy, strengths-based principles should be included in formal management training and performance management systems. Bakker and Van Woerkom (2018) suggested that such integration of the strengths-based principles supports a more sustainable work environment. That includes fostering autonomy, self-confidence, and consistent performance improvements across teams.

Overall, the study shows that strengths-based management is both a people-focused ideal and a practical approach to improving collaboration, efficiency, and innovation, which leads to better performance in teams with diverse backgrounds and goals.

5.3 Limitations

While the study provides useful insights, there are some limitations to mention. First, the data came only from managers. This means the views of team members were not included, so it is unclear whether employees experience strengths-based practices in the same way. As Meyers et al. (2023) point out, how employees feel about autonomy and support is very important for understanding the full impact on engagement and performance. To get a complete picture, future research should also include the perspectives of the team members.

Secondly, most participants did not know the term "strengths-based approach." Even though they used its principles in their work, their understanding came from their own management style instead of formal theory. Pulla (2017) points out that strengths-based leadership works best when managers have both theoretical knowledge and apply it consciously. Because of this, the study mainly looked at practical behavior rather than theory, which may have limited how deeply some concepts were explored.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how a strengths-based approach is used in multidisciplinary teams to improve team performance. The findings show that when managers can recognize and utilize employees' individual strengths, it leads to more motivation to work, sense of ownership, and more collaboration between team members. These factors directly help to improve team performance. Many managers naturally applied the core principles of the strengths-based approach in their daily work, although they were not familiar with the theory itself. This suggests that a strengths-based approach is both effective and highly practical for improving team performance in multidisciplinary teams.

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Appendix A – Overview of Interview Participants

Interview	Date	Function	Organization	Duration	Medium	Interviewer(s)
1	4 th of June 2025	Department Manager Outpatient Clinic	Regional hospital	approx. 50 min	In person	Mathay Katalanc
2	6 th of June 2025	Director	Engineering firm	approx. 60 min	Teams	Mathay Katalanc & Jet Jansen
3	7 th of June 2025	Head of Acquisition, Large Projects	Contracting Company	approx. 60 min	Teams	Jet Jansen
4	10 th of June 2025	Senior Project Manager / Engineering Lead	Wood Modification Company	approx. 60 min	Teams	Jet Jansen
5	19 th of June 2025	Team Lead Digital Innovation	Telecom provider	approx. 45 min	Teams	Mathay Katalanc

Appendix B – Coding Scheme for Thematic Analysis

Theme	Category	Code
Collaboration in Multidisciplinary Teams	Communication Problems	Different terminology
		Not understanding each other's work
		Talking past each other
	Conflicting Priorities	Own goals per discipline
		Focus difference between departments
	Role Ambiguity	Unclear roles
Missed or duplicated tasks		
Recognizing Strengths	Informal Observation	Spotting talent on the work floor
		Recognizing energy or frustration
	One-on-One Conversations	Asking what gives someone energy
		Talking about what people enjoy doing
	Tools and Profiles	Using color profiles or skill matrices
		Mapping team strengths
Utilizing Strengths	Task Matching	Assigning tasks that match strengths
		Using people where they're most effective
	Role Flexibility	Letting people grow beyond job description
		Changing responsibilities based on talent
	Team Composition	Balancing personality types in the team
		Avoid dominance
Effects on Team Performance	Motivation and Engagement	More motivation
		More enthusiastic
	Ownership and Proactivity	More initiative
		Solving problems independently
	Performance Improvement	Output improves, fewer mistakes
		Collaboration becomes smoother