Principles of Highly Effective Outcomes Research Consulting Teams

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KEY POINTS . . .

An understanding of the core principles of highly effective teams can guide statistical consultants working within the field of health economics outcomes research (HEOR) to build better teams.

Teams that are highly effective establish *a priori* communication rules, share an identifiable communication pattern, and operate within a speak-up culture.

Outcomes research (OR) consultants strongly committed to research and publication standards work with determined integrity and efficiency, improve team operations, and raise the trustworthiness of the entire organization.

Health economics and outcomes research (HEOR) within the pharmaceutical industry assesses the value of a drug, often through comparative clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness studies. Health care decision makers use results from HEOR studies to adopt policies and allocate health care resources [1, 2]. While most large health care organizations and pharmaceutical companies include HEOR operations, some bring consultants "in house" for developing the methods and analytics of their outcomes research (OR). These types of consultants are most effective when working in consulting teams rather than individually or in a research group. A research group typically meets periodically and members are assigned individual tasks with an obligation to report back to the group. Typically, the research group makes decisions about studies or processes but delegates the execution to others. In a consulting team, the team meets regularly to work together to plan and execute their own work in support of internal and external clients. Unlike a research group, consultant team members mutually own shared goals. For the rest of the article, when we refer to OR team member or OR team, we are referring to members of or an OR consulting team, respectively.

For teams to be effective, members must work together and integrate knowledge, skills, and experience to guide research design and analytic services [3]. Generally, a highly effective team is defined as a group of people who perform specific roles, have complementary talents and skills, are committed to a common purpose, consistently demonstrate high levels of collaboration and innovation, and who ultimately produce superior results [4]. With this description of a highly effective team as a foundation and through the author's professional expertise and collective experiences within HEOR and the pharmaceutical industry, a highly effective OR consulting team is proposed to be capable of continually evolving to: 1) improve its day-to-day operations; 2) provide valued services to internal and external clients; and 3) develop and disseminate new OR methodology. Aspects of these principles are unique to the specific structure and dynamics of a highly effective OR consulting team, and these principles are grounded in classical and current research on high-performing and highly effective teams [5-8]. In the author's experience, the underlying structure of a highly effective OR team is based on a strong "speak-up" team culture that is supported by five core principles and a supportive organizational environment. Good communication is built around a speak-up culture and is an absolute requirement of an effective team (Fig. 1). The most important rule of a speak-up culture is respect — everyone's speech is respected. In a speak-up culture, employees are empowered to ask questions, express doubts, and voice concerns—while respecting each other's ideas.

In addition, a supportive environment is the underlying framework which provides appropriate resourcing for professional development, supports individual team members and the OR team as a functional unit, enables productive and creative experiences, raises individual and team commitment levels, and allows the team to have a business-relevant niche (Fig. 1). This type of environment helps establish a defined focus, where the OR team's shared vision matches the organization's goals and strategic focus. To achieve this synchronization, an understanding of how the organization sees itself operating in relation to the larger environment must exist [9]. Even though an OR team's potential for success may be high, if the organization's environment does not support the team, the OR consulting team may fail to attain its potential.

Strategies for a Speak-up Culture

Effective communication requires that the team leader is responsible for establishing the speak-up culture by developing and employing strategies to maximize the contributions of each member [5]. The first strategy that encourages a speak-up culture is to ensure that the team understands the value of concise, clear, and professional communication and to make sure these standards are met [5]. The second strategy requires that team members actively listen to what others are saying, help to clarify one another's ideas, and take the time to debate

Figure 1. Highly Effective OR Team Construct.
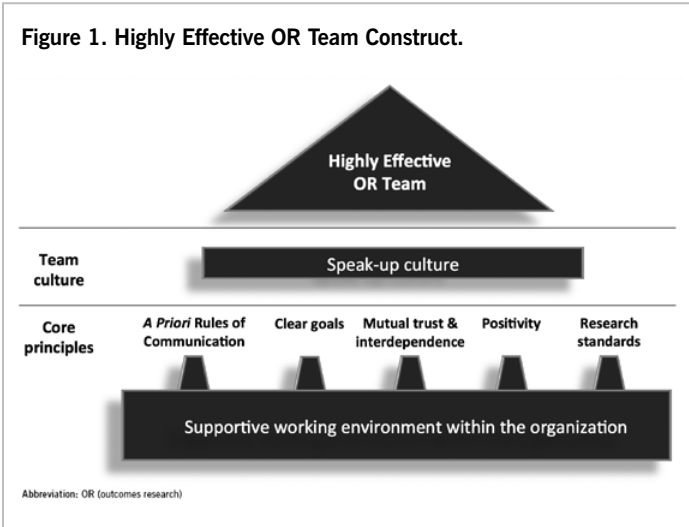
complex concepts. The third strategy is to make certain that all consultants are aware that the team operates within an environment where individuals can openly express their thoughts and ideas, and in turn, that colleagues respect each other's thoughts, ideas, and speech [5]. A speak-up culture is not self-sustaining. The culture can be affected by new members and cultural diversity. To avoid disruption, members need to be trained (and/or retrained) in the team's shared five core principles [3].

Five Core Principles of Highly Effective Teams

To date, no research has focused on building high-performing OR consulting teams in general or, in specific relation to OR consulting teams within the pharmaceutical industry. Although principles identified through research of highly effective teams, in general, give important insight into aspects of OR consulting teams, OR consulting team have unique characteristics with respect to team members (e.g., consulting vs. full-time employee), structure, and function that require separate analysis. While many factors influence OR consulting team capabilities, here we focus on five core principles required for a highly effective OR consulting team.

Core Principle 1: Establish a Priori Rules of Communication
Highly effective and successful teams share several recognizable communication behaviors [5, 9]. In successful OR teams, conversations are face-to-face. Team members talk and listen in equal measures while expressing ideas freely. Contributors keep topics brief and to the point, ensuring that no one member's ideas dominate or override another team member's willingness to share ideas. Side conversations within a highly effective OR team are not discouraged as they help to build collaborative relationships. It is important to be aware of key group dynamics such as eye contact between the speaker and the listener and allowing others to interject during a discussion. Effective communication also utilizes digital technology to facilitate easy and continuous communication [5]. Communication patterns can be taught and learned, but teams need to define the rules of communication that will govern their operations [5, 9].

Core Principle 2: Define a Clear Purpose and Specific, Actionable Performance Objectives
Highly effective teams establish clear performance objectives which together meet the team's shared vision and are in alignment

with the focus and goals of the organization. Objectives may be based on each team member's performance objectives, and must bring value to the team's internal and external clients. A shared vision motivates individual team members to work together toward common goals and increases the team's belief in its ability to be effective, increases team performance, and enhances the ability to surmount difficult situations [10-12]. Importantly, the vision and objectives must be mutually agreed upon, so that team members are accountable to each other.

Core Principle 3: Foster Mutual Trust and Interdependence
OR consultants are, to some degree, dependent on one another to perform tasks and most likely have very different credentials and backgrounds such as statistics, health service research, pharmoacoepidemiology, or economic modeling. This diversity can be successfully leveraged as long as the consultants work collaboratively to achieve team goals, and consequently, the goals of the organization. The success of the collaboration is dependent upon mutual trust among the team members and the team leader, an open-minded team environment, complementary technical and problem-solving skills, and mutual helping [13,14]. In the most successful collaborative work scenarios, OR team members work jointly with each other and support each other's strengths and weaknesses without judgment. Trust in others to perform their roles over time helps maintain the team's performance [14]. A trustworthy leader is one who genuinely cares for the team, is concerned equally about the welfare of all team members, and who is competent, responsible, reliable, and dependable [15].

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The building of trust and a safe OR consulting team environment will also help create opportunities that inspire learning and innovation. When OR team members trust one another and their leader, failure or mistakes become learning opportunities. The OR team works together to determine what went wrong and how to move forward. In a safe environment, team members have the courage to take risks because fear of failure does not exist [16]. To foster innovation, OR team members are encouraged to continuously develop their skills and think of new and creative ways to solve problems. Highly effective OR consulting teams value diversity in approaches to problem solving and are open to several possible answers to complex methodological issues.

Core Principle 4: Cultivate Positivity
Positivity and negativity are integral components of a behavioral feedback system [17]. Positivity raises team spirit and morale, which improves team effectiveness, while, negativity can stifle team performance. One way to continually reinforce positivity is to emphasize daily progress against meaningful work [18]. Another way is to believe in the team's ability to complete tasks   >

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Table 1. Summary of Additional Factors that Impact Success

Other Variables to a Successful Highly-Effective OR Team

Team must operate within an organization that provides:
- Time for internal and external training
- Accessible HR support around performance and talent management
- Efficient adverse event reporting processes
- Efficient legal and ethics and compliance review processes
- A mechanism for objective and rigorous protocol review
- Strong publication support (via internal and external medical writers)
- Solid IT support (infrastructure, software, database access and query tools, and support staff)
- Funding for innovation development in addition to funding for usual research activities

Team must operate within an organization that values:
- Team vision and objectives aligned with larger business-critical objectives following from an externally focused, customer-based culture
- Behaviorally based commitment to high standards of business ethics and compliance
- Ongoing, objective assessment of individual and team performance
- Team and individual accountability for results
- Innovation

Research and Publication Guidelines

- **Guidelines for Observational Research Methods and Analysis**
  - International Society for Pharmacoeconomics and Outcomes Research's (ISPOR's) Good Practices for Outcomes Research Reports [19]
  - The STrengthening the Reporting of OBservational studies in Epidemiology (STROBE) Statement [20],
  - The Good ReseArch for Comparative Effectiveness (GRACE) Principles and Checklist [21]
  - The European Network of Centres for Pharmacoepidemiology and Pharmacovigilance (ENCEPP) Guide and Checklist [22]
  - The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality's (AHRQ's) Effective Health Care Program [23]
  - The Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute's (PCORI's) Patient-Centered Methodology Report [24]
  - The Equator Network [25].

- **Guidelines for Good Publication Practices**
  - International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) 26,
  - Committee for Publication Ethics (COPE) COPE [27].

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successfully; teams that are confident in their abilities to meet set goals perform better [16].

Core Principle 5: Strongly Commit to Research and Publication Standards ("How the Work Gets Done")
A strongly commitment to sound research and publication standards in the pharmaceutical industry must be present and adhered to. How a OR consulting team's research gets completed and published should be steered by both internal and external guidelines (Table 1) [19-27]. Most, if not all, pharmaceutical companies develop internal guidelines for the design and review of OR studies as well as internal publication review standards and authorship criteria. These internal guidelines typically explain how to best accomplish work, identify individual roles, describe the decision-making process, and how to resolve conflict.

How to Find the Right People for Your Team

Great care should be taken when recruiting team members. The principles of highly effective OR consulting teams described herein can be used to guide the recruiting process. Effective team members communicate well; are goal-oriented, respectful, and trustworthy; share the same vision as the team and the organization; work well with others; are optimistic and encouraging; and commit to high research and publication standards. In addition, a successful consultant is able to take on a leadership role when necessary [28].

Conclusion and Future Outlook

In conclusion, a highly effective OR consulting team operates within a speak-up culture, has clear performance and objective goals that are agreed upon by all team members, and the team's shared vision aligns with the vision of the larger organization. Relationships built on mutual trust and positivity increase the team's effectiveness and foster innovation. A highly effective OR consulting team works with a commitment to research and publication standards and with integrity and efficiency to improve the trustworthiness of the entire organization.

Internal OR consulting teams are not consistently found in the pharmaceutical industry at this time. However, as companies focus more on real-world data to meet patients', clinicians', and payers' needs for evidence of product value, one would expect that internal OR consulting teams will increase in number. Furthermore, internal teams may become increasingly desirable compared to external HEOR vendors since internal teams are closer to medical and brand strategy and since they are able to more nimbly navigate company-specific research processes. Internal teams also have an ability to work directly with payer-customers to support outcomes-based research partnerships and contracting efforts, and benefit from simply being physically co-located with the colleagues they support. If, indeed, these consulting OR teams become common within the industry, it will be imperative that they be conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated based on known principles of team effectiveness.

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