# Literature Review: Using Experiential Learning to Build Effective Teams

Robert Forto

School of Business, Liberty University

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Dr. Laurie Barnes

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## Authors Note

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**Abstract**

Teamwork is prevalent in organizations, yet it has pitfalls, such as groupthink, over-dependence on a dominant leader, overcommitment to goals, and diffusion of responsibility. Such negative factors can be overcome, and team effectiveness can be improved when teams intentionally focus on learning. Using the Kolb model and based on nearly four decades of research and theory on experiential learning theory in teams, the literature should emphasize identifying learning as a critical component of team effectiveness. The purpose of this literature review is to highlight the importance of experiential learning in building effective teams and review the characteristics, skills, and influence necessary to create change in an organization. The importance of experiential learning dates to 1938 when John Dewey proposed that learning cannot occur without experience. This research will support the suggestion that experiential learning can build highly effective and functioning teams in an organization and allow for a systematic review of the literature to examine this model in further detail. Research suggests passive learning models like presentations drive only five percent retention, whereas experiential learning more effectively engages participants in "practicing by doing," driving at least 75% retention. Team building activities can improve team performance by improving team cohesion. For this review, this author examined the biblical and scholarly literature of forty sources to examine common themes and patterns in the research and determine what gaps or limitations exist on using experiential learning in creating effective teams.

*Keywords:* Kolb model, experiential learning, team building, teamwork, team effectiveness, experiential learning theory, ELT, experiential learning in teams, team development, team functions, virtual teams, business simulations.

**Using Experiential Learning to Build Effective Teams**

The purpose of this literature review is to highlight the importance of experiential learning in building effective teams and review the characteristics, skills, and influence necessary to create change in an organization. The importance of experiential learning dates to 1938 when John Dewey proposed that learning cannot occur without experience. A great example is to imagine trying to learn to tie shoelaces without having the practical experience of hands-on laces (Morris, 2020). Experiential learning takes a fundamentally different view of the knowledge process and places life experience as a central and necessary part of the learning process. Kolb (2014) proposed that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Emphasis will be placed on finding the connections between experiential learning theory and team-building models found in the literature. A literature search shows that experiential learning can be effective in building high-functioning teams. Seow et al. (2019) found that hands-on learning mirrors real-life problems and interdisciplinary work opportunities. Organizations can use the tools offered through experiential learning to provide members with the opportunities to learn necessary skills to meet the current and future demands of the teams. According to Werner and DeSimone (2006; as cited in Potnuru et al., 2019), experiential learning opportunities, which are strategically oriented to the organizational process for managing and developing teams, will allow for contributions to the overall success of the organization.

This research will support the suggestion that experiential learning can build highly effective and functioning teams in an organization and allow for a systematic review of the literature to examine this model in further detail. Many organizations are turning to games and role-playing scenarios. A well-crafted game can help teams grasp the consequences of their actions, reducing the risks of poor choices being repeated. Identifying the individual role in the

team and later implementing the change can allow team members to feel less intimated and overwhelmed and more likely to embrace the rules, resulting in better performance.

**Rationale**

Research suggests passive learning models like presentations drive only five percent retention, whereas experiential learning more effectively engages participants in "practicing by doing," driving at least 75% retention. Team building activities can improve team performance by improving team cohesion (Carron, 1992; Carron, Widmeyer & Brawley, 1985; as cited in Keith et al., 2018). Ideally, team building activities will produce this cohesion, which refers to the bond that forms when team members have positive feelings toward each other, when they can manage conflict and solve problems in a supportive way in a trusting environment and when the stakeholders are satisfied with how the team works together (Carron 7 Brawley, 2012; as cited in Keith et al., 2018). The research shows that team-based experiential learning can be effective and is becoming widely accepted as a model for team management. Organizations are bringing international business dynamics, vibrancies, and complexities into the business using simulations, role-plays, and experiences (Mockaitis, Zander & De Cieri, 2015; as cited in Cathro, 2020). From a biblical perspective, Hebrews 10:24-25 (*New International Version*, 1978) examines the importance of encouragement in an organization and the need for teams to feel a part of something greater than themselves. Gerdes (2019) suggests that organizations must see their teams as whole persons rather than formal roles and functions. They argue that relationships can develop through team-building exercises (e.g., role-playing and games) will lead to better organizational results.

Experiential learning fast tracks the development of new and reinforcing behaviors that teams can use to become agile, decisive businesses and help managers develop the skills to lead

effectively. This process enables teams to meet, get to know each other and work out a common purpose together. Organizations deal with universal day-to-day challenges with their teams. Research shows that to equip teams to deal with transformational challenges, people learn most effectively by doing. Furthermore, it is proven that experiential learning bridges the gap between learning and practice in a safe, risk-free environment. Using the model set forth by Dewey and later Kolb, organizations can use this method to develop highly effective and engaged teams and set their teams up for long-term success. As a result, they are willing to stay involved and reach goals and expectations through a common purpose and mission.

**The Kolb Model**

Kolb's experiential learning cycle is perhaps the most scholarly influential and cited model regarding experiential learning theory (Morris, 2020). However, this model lacks clarity regarding what constitutes concrete experience and how these experiences will be explored later in this literature review. Therefore, it is imperative to understand how the Kolb model can be used to involve active participants, how knowledge is situated in place and time; how learners are exposed to novel experiences, which requires risk; learning demands involving real-world problems; and critical reflection as a mediator to meaningful learning (Morris, 2020).

In experiential learning, learners are involved and actively engaged in the process. This learning by doing is a founding concept of the team-building process and the subject of Munge et al.'s (2018) work. They found that a hands-on, task-oriented process, as outlined by Blair (2016) and Dorfsman and Horenczk (2018) and later by Seaman et al. (2018), necessitates those learners are active in the process. When learners are placed physically, often in collaboration with others, in rich contextual learning environments that represent the present moment, uncontrived experiences can develop (Karoff et al., 2017). This process allows learners to assume full or

collaborative responsibility for this learning process, which is the crux of Wheelan's (2021) text and Hou and Pereira's (2017) research.

Coker et al. (2017) highlights this experiential learning process and found that a significant amount of time and effort is required by an organization in developing training programs for team development. Smith and Segbers (2018) postulate that interactions within a team or group are critical drivers to their success, and Pipitone (2018) conceptualizes engagement within a place, either virtually as will later be discussed in the research of Magnier-Watanabe et al. (2017) or onsite in the workplace which will allow participants to think more clearly, deeply, and critically about the societal and group norms as they relate to the power structures that surround them (Deringer, 2017).

Further, Fifolt et al. (2018) builds on the Kolb (2014) model and discusses the role of experiential learning in bringing a community together. This is particularly evident in what they propose as service-learning, where learning must respond to accept challenges in the workplace and with their clients. Lastly, by providing these real-world experiences, teams and groups can develop a collaborative process that balances the group's efforts with the organization's goals and objectives and allow for practical problem solving and communication skills necessary in team development (Isaak et al., 2018).

**Experiential Learning Cycle**

With an understanding of the Kolb (2014) model, it is essential to survey the literature regarding its use in interprofessional education. Kolb's experiential learning theory (ELT) was used to study health care provider students to meet programming standards for working together in a group. Kolb's ELT includes the four-part learning cycle: concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. This study was chosen as a guide for the students who

did not wish to learn in a static environment where information is transmitted to them passively. This is a central concept in experiential learning, as the name means, learning by experience. The students wanted to be active partners in their learning process. An important note is that although ELT has traditionally focused on the individual learner (Bleakley, 2006), it can also be applied to team learning, thus the importance to this literature review (Stocker et al., 2014). The researchers focused on concrete experiences that allowed the learners to participate in a group activity such as simulations, which will be discussed in greater detail later in this review and perform a role in a team (Fewster-Thuente et al., 2018). The participant's performance provided a context for a debriefing on which the learner reflects on their experience, draws conclusions, and makes decisions about their behavior. Therefore, experiential learning works well in the team-building process. With this four-step model, a leader can apply principles of real-world experiences and have the results relate to the issue at hand, whether that be communication barriers, conflict resolution, team building, or other performance-related endeavors. The study supported this relationship between cognitive changes demonstrated by the students and ELT. The research also found that learning is a process in keeping with Kolb (2014) and must be completed in stages. The use of the ELT model allows students to learn at each stage (Poore et al., 2014). Students had the opportunity to gain concrete experience during the simulation, reflect and explain their thinking and lastly experiment with the knowledge they accumulated (Fewster-Thuente et al., 2018).

**Experiential Learning with Teams in the Virtual Space**

A literature review on experiential learning and its use in building effective teams would not be complete without searching for recent studies regarding the use of virtual space in today's organizations. This author wanted to include this section of the synthesis first because the topic is

timely. Building on the work of Kolb (2014) and Seow et al. (2019), the impact of today's challenges with a global pandemic has transformed the workplace, and more organizations are relying on virtual meetings to bring employees together to work on client solutions and to reduce a strain on resources. For example, a study of graduate programs in France and Japan were given relevant materials, individual and joint team assignments on virtual teamwork, and were asked to evaluate their work using previously identified global virtual team key success factors (Magnier-Watanabe et al., 2017). The virtual team space can be challenging to navigate when trying to incorporate experiential learning, as Kolb (2014) proposes, but it is not impossible. For example, Duarte and Synder (2006; as cited in Magnier-Watanabe et al., 2017) identified seven critical success factors that were found to be directly related to virtual team performance: human resource policies, on the job education and activities and development (i.e., experiential learning activities), standardization of organizational and team processes, use of collaborative and communication technologies, organizational culture, leadership support and competencies of the team leader and members.

A vital component of any team is trust. Several studies define trust as one of the most important critical success factors in virtual teams. By building a culture of trust, people will be able to understand and rely on each other. Being task-oriented is one of the critical characteristics of high-trusting teams throughout the team's life (Germain, 2006; as cited in Magnier-Watanabe et al., 2017). Experiential learning activities are an excellent conduit for building trust. Games such as ice breaker questions, social media, video calls, chat tools like Slack, or even virtual "coffee dates" are great, easy to get to know each other and build trust in the virtual space.

Furthermore, Magnier-Watanabe et al. (2017) concluded that even though virtual teams have been around for the last couple of decades, the immediate shift to a virtual model during the

pandemic required many organizations to make a quick and abrupt shift to meeting with their teams. Their study found, even with experiential learning activities and other tools to assist in team development, the participants in the research found it very challenging, especially in a non-work setting such as a virtual meeting from home.

**Team Building**

Klein et al. (2012; as cited in Potnuru et al., 2019) define team building as the formal and informal team-level practices that focus on improving social relations and clarifying roles and solving tasks and interpersonal problems that affect team functions. A cursory search of the internet shows myriad companies that employ experiential activities in this team-building process. For example, one California-based company uses business simulations to align employees in team building, conflict management listening, negotiating, peer relationships, and process management. Their novel programs include a Mount Everest climbing simulation where participants are placed in a challenging and inspiring experience of climbing a mountain to win a prize offered by an "eccentric millionaire." Together, they must decide how to work together, what equipment to use, how to use their strengths, and what risks to run. Simulations like these can be done in the virtual space as outlined by Magnier-Watanabe et al. (2017) or onsite.

A key area of effective team building is empowerment. Imagine how empowered a group can become if they (virtually) climb the world's highest mountain together? The basic objective of empowerment is the redistribution of power between management and employees—most commonly in the form of increasing employee authority, responsibility, and influence commitment (Potnuru et al., 2019). Employing experiential learning and other activities such as business simulations can accomplish this task.

The findings of the Potnuru et al. (2019) study have serval critical theoretical contributions. First, the study provides a deeper understanding of how employee learning influences the enhancement of employee competencies and how a positive learning culture can strengthen teams. Just as Bates and Khasawneh (2005; as cited in Potnuru et al., 2019) argue, there is a considerable consensus today that a critical competitive advantage for organizations lies in the ability to learn and be receptive to challenges from both internal and external environments. Whether it be a changing organizational landscape that is heavily reliant on using virtual technology or the use of novel experiential learning activities, a company that can provide unique opportunities in challenging times can perform better by increasing the competency level of its employees.

Sapienza et al. (2018) posit that complex real-world challenges are often solved through team work and of particular interest are ad-hoc teams assembled to compete for some tasks, and researchers are finding that video games adopt this team formation strategy and provide a natural environment to study teams. Keith (2018) took this novel approach to team-building and what Potnuru et al. (2019) describes as an informal level of experiential learning at the team level and used video games in their research as well. The Sapienza (2018), Keith (2018), and the Potnuru (2019) studies all showed the same thing; that there are possible directions for individualized incentives aimed at steering a video game player's behavior and improving team performance, an important finding as so many of today's younger generations who make up a wide swath of the workforce play these games.

Warmelink et al. (2017) took this a step further and combined the elements of formal and informal experiential activities and used mixed reality escape room games to evaluate team-building potential. In the study, they used a multi-level team challenge based on the concept of

an escape room staged in a space colony emergency. Ten teams of three played the game and filled out pre-and post-game questionnaires with validated measurements of team cohesiveness and mediating factors relating to team composition, game experience, and team dynamics (Warmelink et al., 2017). This is different than the Mount Everest simulation written about herein as this was a hands-on approach and onsite at a location. The study's findings showed a positive and significant increase in team cohesiveness. They validated that games and other experiential learning activities can improve and understand and guide the team-building process (Warmelink et al., 2017).

**Organizational Learning Culture**

Potnuru et al. (2019) outlined the importance of an organizational learning culture that provides an avenue for teams and leadership with a system that institutes knowledge sharing as part of the team-building process. Nugroho (2018) took this a step further and examined the effects of collaborative cultures and knowledge sharing on organizational learning. The research found that the success of a business organization is commonly assessed based on its success in generating profits. Still, today's organizations are much different than a top-down authoritarian company that expects their teams to perform without any input. Today more and more companies rely on a servant leadership approach that allows for knowledge sharing and collaboration. Organizational performance is not just the "numbers" in todays fast-paced organizations. Instead, interactions amongst employees and leadership can be well facilitated if the internal and external environment of the organization supports or encourages the interactions to occur (Nugroho, 2018). The more interactions occur, the greater the likelihood of knowledge sharing to happen, and the facilitation of learning can continue.

Experiential learning can create a sharing mechanism that will allow knowledge transfer from one section or level of the organization to another section or level. Such interaction makes it possible to develop new organizational knowledge, which is a product of the organizational learning arising from such knowledge sharing (Nugroho, 2018). This is not a new or novel idea. Davenport and Prusack (2000) explain that organizational culture explicitly facilitates knowledge sharing, which can create a collaborative culture. Also, Spinello (2000) highlights this relationship further by arguing that the relationship between organizational learning and knowledge sharing has a very close relationship and, in turn, builds on the previous research of De Long and Fahey (2000) that reveals that a culture of trust and collaborative cultures increases the effectiveness of an organization. This finding implies that a good culture will promote knowledge sharing and improve the performance of an organization's teams, as indicated by effectiveness (Nugroho, 2018).

**Strategic Management**

Several studies in the literature show that experiential learning is effective in the strategic management process of team development. Helms and Whitesell (2017) analyzed viable future alternatives based on information provided in cases or computer simulations regarding team building from a strategic stance. Building on the research of Chickering's (1977) research on active learning, Helms, and Whitesell (2017) suggests that students learn more effectively when participating in the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The authors highlight that experiential learning is motivational and student-centered and leads to increased retention of content and engagement of students with their outcomes (Helms and Whitesell, 2017). Because their goal was to analyze strategic management, the participants were given active business teaching and learning techniques, including case studies, research projects, group projects, and classroom

discussions. Their findings showed that the students' understanding of the subject matter improved with active learning processes. More importantly, the students' understanding of strategic management increased (Helms and Whitesell, 2017).

Van Hanh (2020) also looked at a strategic perspective using experiential learning projects through contests that engineering students participated in together. The researchers hypothesized that motivation was lacking in team-oriented projects and wanted to see if competition amongst the students could improve motivation. A theoretical model of creating value in an experiential learning project through a contest was developed and applied at Hung Yen University of Technology and Education in China. Their findings were surprising: (1) the prize money of the contest was not a significant factor for motivating the students; (2) the attractiveness of a contest theme, more than one way of solving the problem, and using technology were significant factors in motivating the students to learn; (3) the experiential learning project through a contest had the most significant impact on the development of skills, experiences, and abilities and the power of teamwork to make decisions (Van Hanh, 2020).

Furthermore, Zhang et al. (2019) integrated an experiential learning-based framework to facilitate project planning in civil engineering and construction firms from a strategic management perspective. Their study was used to examine how construction and engineering students can better facilitate the skills needed for capstone course activities for project planning and implementation using the Kolb model. Like most of the studies used in this literature review, their framework includes concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Like many other disciplines in this literature review, experiential learning theory (ELT) is widely used in engineering education (Manolis et al., 2014). For instructors, ELT can naturally reflect the characteristics of teachers' development

of self-learning strategies (Zhang et al. 2019). Following Kolb's ELT, teachers can obtain clear operational procedures in curriculum design and develop group-oriented projects for their students, like the contest Van Hanh (2020) used. The study results showed the potential of Kolb's ELT in project planning, teaching, and learning tasks. They helped students in their capstone course improve their experience learning style to develop communication procedures, technology, and quality control. All viable reasons to use experiential learning opportunities, no matter the setting.

**Biblical Integration**

From a biblical perspective, Hebrews 10:24-25 (*New International Version*, 1978) examines the importance of encouragement in an organization and the need for teams to feel a part of something greater than themselves. Gerdes (2019) suggests that organizations must see their teams as whole persons rather than formal roles and functions. They argue that relationships can develop through team-building exercises (e.g., role-playing and games) will lead to better organizational results. Gerdes's (2019) research is based on Schein and Schien's (2013) research on organizations. Their work is based on developing a half-dozen practical exercises, done individually or in a group (experiential learning), and they proved to be useful for immediate engagement. The authors argue that trust builds relationships and that there are four levels for the workplace to achieve to lead to the best results. Firstly, in line with Elijah in 1 and 2 Kings and Jesus Christ in the book Matthew, a leader's disposition toward his followers invites reciprocation. This reciprocity leads to relationship, trust, and dignity. Gerdes (2019) argues that the formal roles of leader and followers have not changed at this level, but the relationship dynamic has. It is interesting that in levels two and three, that the authors do not argue for intimate relationships, as those are reserved for family and close personal relationships. This

form of humble leadership, based on scripture, and this approach to workplace relationships helps leaders become more effective and enables teams to operate at peak performance. While Gerdes's research is more heavily influenced by scripture than the work of Schein et al., (2013), their well-researched findings are compatible with a Christian perspective. Notably, biblically, people are made in the image of God (*New International Version*, 1978, Genesis 1:27; Hebrews 2:7). They are not objects to be manipulated, and they should not be reduced to their professional functions (Gerdes, 2019).

**Identifying Limitations and Further Research**

Academic discourse on experiential learning is not without assumptions about the experience and its relation to learning (Kuk & Holst, 2018). Without the detail of the prevailing experiential learning models, there is a possibility that some assumptions may be reinforced. Michelson (2015; as cited in Kuk & Holst, 2018) is notable in that she critiques the central assumptions embodied in the experiential learning framework. Especially in the model by Kolb. This allows for fresh insights into how the experience has been or could be associated with learning. One limitation is how everyday lives make it difficult to make various nuanced, practical approaches to experiential learning (Kuk & Holst, 2018).

Simply put, everyone does not live with rich experiences gained from ordinary activities, whether through gameplay, virtual meetings, contests, or other prompts. Moreover, some people are inept at proper reflection techniques that experiential learning theory hinges on. While it is difficult, if not impossible, for one to experience every kind of context directly, it is possible to gain an understanding of a wider variety of contexts by taking note of other standpoints (Kuk & Holst, 2018). On the contrary, however, experiential learning is approached from embodied learning, and reflection loses its distinct position as the starting point of learning if it is not

experienced (Kuk & Holst, 2018). From this literature review, it is difficult to understand the analysis of the differing contexts about how people communicate with people who do not share the same experience. For example, if an organization uses a business simulation like the Mount Everest or escape room examples used herein, how is that simulation and experience communicated with the team, group, or other stakeholders that did not participate?

Regarding using Kolb's experiential learning theory on building effective teams, Carson et al. (2018) argues that the sample sizes for cohesive research studies are too small. As with any empirical study, it may leave out contextual sensitivities. While many research projects on Kolb's model focus on meanings and experiences, many of them should be generalized with caution (Pappas et al., 2018). Furthermore, many of the studies use prototypes of platforms to test Kolb's theory, which leads to usability problems. Lin et al. (2017) found that collaborative research should be conducted among institutions and other non-related entities. One of the most important limitations goes back to Kuk's (2018) assertation that there is a need for attending to the role of context in skill development (Collins-Nelsen et al., 2021). With the increased demand for transferable skills, it is crucial to explore the relationship between them and the context used in the experiential learning environment (Collins-Nelsen et al., 2021). Furthermore, it would benefit from pre/post research wherein participants are interviewed and given more opportunities to speak directly to their experiential education process and transferable skills (Collins-Nelsen et al., 2021). Lastly, it would be interesting to consider where organizations use experiential learning opportunities and how these experiences fit within experiential education frameworks on building effective teams.

**Summary and Conclusion**

Teamwork is prevalent in organizations, yet it has pitfalls such as groupthink, over-dependence on a dominant leader, overcommitment to goals, and diffusion of responsibility (Kayes et al., 2005). However, such negative factors can be overcome, and team effectiveness can be improved when teams intentionally focus on learning. Using the Kolb (2014) model and based on nearly four decades of research and theory on experiential learning theory in teams, the literature showed that identifying learning is a key component of team effectiveness. While the Kolb model is far from perfect and has viable limitations to its use, the literature shows a prevailing synthesis that groups participate in experiences together, and cohesion occurs.

The literature shows a common theme of six aspects of team development and how those can be parlayed with experiential learning. Those six aspects are purpose, membership, role leadership, context, process, and action. The experiential learning model builds on these aspects and incorporates; includes concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. As shown, they are closely related. In short, a team's goal should be to learn from their experience as a group and thereby create the group they want to be. The Kolb model works well by allowing teams to share their experiences and reflect on the meaning of those experiences. This model enables the team to use observations and reflections to create a collective understanding of the group and use it as a guide in acting to create the kind of group experience that they desire (Kayes et al., 2005; Kolb 2014). While this literature review is by no means an exhaustive examination, it does highlight how experiential learning can be paired with teams to reach high potential and effective development opportunities. Of course, there is much to be gleaned from this review, it is only the beginning for the development of a cohesive project to explore later in this doctorate program.

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