

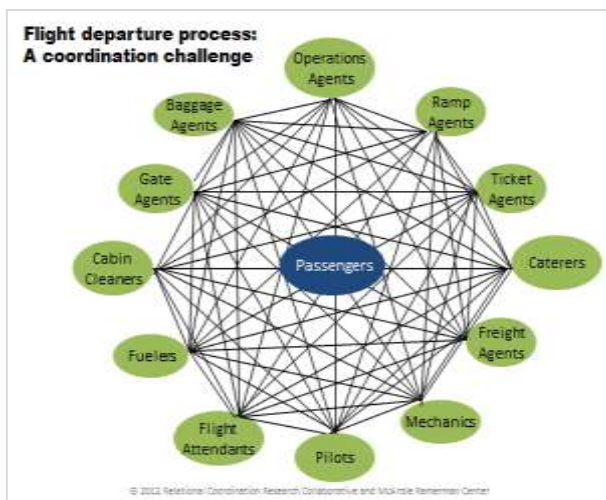
## RELATIONAL COORDINATION: MANAGING INTERDEPENDENCE FOR HIGH PERFORMANCE

### Executive summary

*Relational Coordination is a powerful new framework, grounded in extensive research, that describes how groups of individuals, workgroups or organizations manage their interdependent tasks to work together effectively under conditions of uncertainty, rapidly changing circumstances and time pressure. Interventions based on relational coordination can improve a group's capacity to perform complex, highly interdependent work.*

### Overview

To reach the highest level of performance on a work team or across an entire organization it's not enough for people to be good at their own jobs. They need to effectively align and coordinate their work. They need to share and integrate information that comes in from many unique vantage points. They have to understand and manage their interdependence.



To learn how teams do this, Brandeis University researcher Jody Hoffer Gittell observed airline flight departure operations in which 12 different workgroups must carry out specialized interdependent tasks to get a plane off the gate on time. Each workgroup can spot emerging problems that no other group can see and that have important implications for everyone else's work.

Not surprisingly, Jody observed that communication between workgroups is essential and that it needs to be timely, accurate, appropriately frequent and, when a problem arises, focused on solving the problem rather than assigning or avoiding blame.

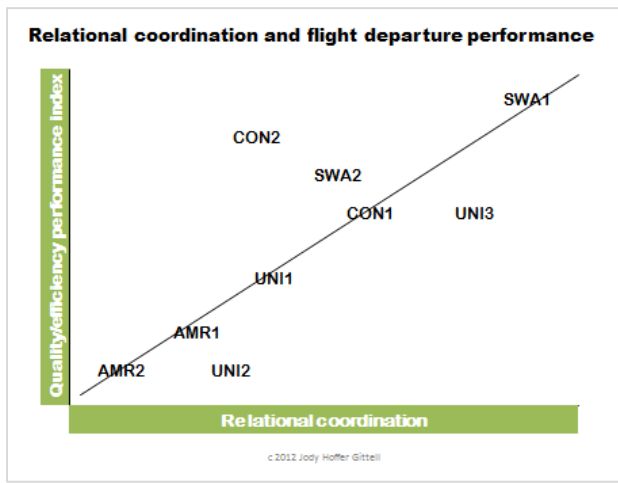
Jody further observed that the ability of workgroups to carry out this self-coordinating communication depends upon the quality of their relationships. They need a sense of common purpose that unifies and aligns their specialized tasks. For example, the fuelers need to understand that their job is to help get the plane off the gate on time, not just to fill the fuel tanks. The members of each workgroup also need to understand what the other groups do, how the way they do their own work affects the work of the others, what the other groups need to know and when. And finally, each workgroup needs to feel valued and respected by the others.



Jody consolidated these observations into a seven-dimension framework that she called "Relational Coordination." It describes the core elements of communication and relationship that are necessary for coordinated collective action.<sup>1</sup> These seven elements are mutually reinforcing: good relationships promote good communication, which fosters good relationships and so on in a virtuous cycle. However,

the reverse is also true: poor relationships hinder communication, which create tensions that further impair relationships and so on in a vicious cycle.

The next step in Jody's research was to study the effect of relational coordination on team performance. She developed a survey in which members of each workgroup rate each of the other workgroups on the seven dimensions of relational coordination. She administered the survey at nine different airline hubs



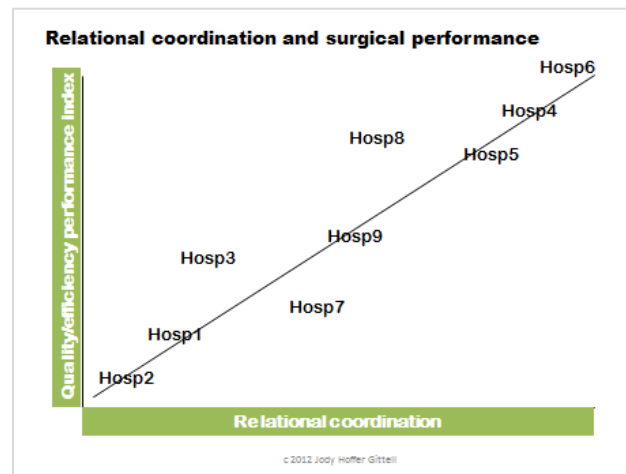
and then looked at the association between relational coordination scores and various measures of team performance. The results were stunning.

Relational coordination was strongly associated with various measures of cost and quality: how long each flight remained at the gate, the staff time per passenger mile, and the rates of lost luggage, passenger complaints and late arrivals.

Jody then combined all these measures into an overall performance score and plotted each hub's performance score against its Relational Coordination score. The resulting graph revealed that the higher the RC score, the better the

performance. This research was the basis for Jody's first business bestseller, *The Southwest Airlines Way*.<sup>2</sup>

Jody subsequently performed a similar study in a second industry, healthcare, looking at the relational coordination in orthopedic surgery teams that performed hip and knee replacements. Comparing RC scores with performance at nine different hospitals, the results were similar: relational coordination was strongly associated with how long patients remained in the hospital, quality of care, patient satisfaction, and even how well patients could walk and how much pain they had six weeks after surgery. When she combined all these measures into an overall performance score, relational correlation once again was strongly associated with performance. These findings were the basis for her next book, *High Performance Healthcare*.<sup>3</sup>



A large and growing body of research in a number of industries has shown a strong association between RC and a wide variety performance dimensions in the domains of quality, safety, cost, customer/patient satisfaction and workforce well-being and resilience.

But the story doesn't stop there. Eight years ago, we started working with Jody to develop field applications of Relational Coordination, and many others from around the world have joined the effort since then. RC has proven to be a powerful and effective framework for improving the process of collaboration – for making interdependence visible, discussable, measurable and manageable. And it can be applied across levels of scale: from teams of individuals (including management teams) to interacting work groups or departments to multiple organizations collaborating on a shared project.

The Relational Coordination Survey can be used as a diagnostic, a feedback tool and an outcome measure for team development work.<sup>4</sup> RC-based interventions can be used in work process improvement, team-building and culture change initiatives to improve the way people are working together. Jody's most

recent book, *Transforming Relationships for High Performance*,<sup>5</sup> describes relational, structural and work-process interventions that address the 7 dimensions of RC and improve performance.

To learn more about Relational Coordination we invite you to visit the Relational Coordination website at Brandeis University ([www.rcrc.brandeis.edu](http://www.rcrc.brandeis.edu)), participate in the webinars and conferences of Brandeis' Relational Coordination Research Collaborative, come to one of our [workshops on RC interventions](#) or contact us.

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<sup>1</sup> Gittel JH. "What is relational coordination?" Available at <http://rcrc.brandeis.edu/about-rc/what%20is%20RC.html>

<sup>2</sup> Gittel JH. *The Southwest Airlines Way*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Gittel JH. *High Performance Healthcare*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Available through Relational Coordination Analytics [www.rcanalytic.com](http://www.rcanalytic.com)

<sup>5</sup> Gittel JH. *Transforming Relationships for High Performance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016.