

**RELATIONAL COORDINATION:  
MANAGING INTERDEPENDENCE FOR HIGH PERFORMANCE**

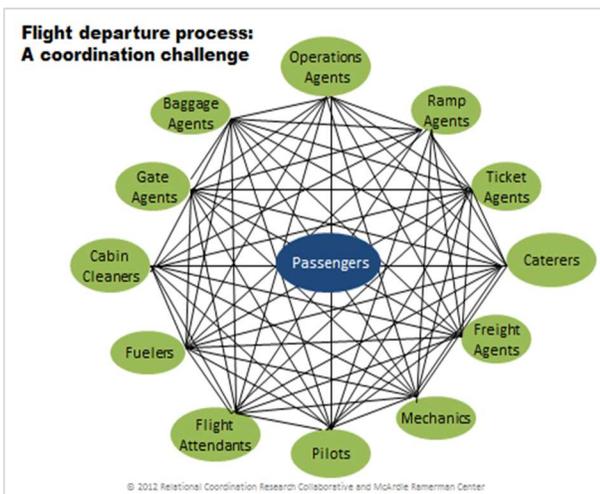
**Anthony L. Suchman, MD, MA**

**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 Gittel 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.

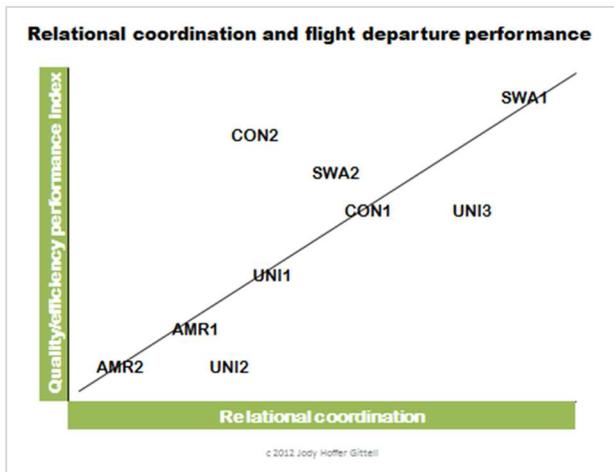
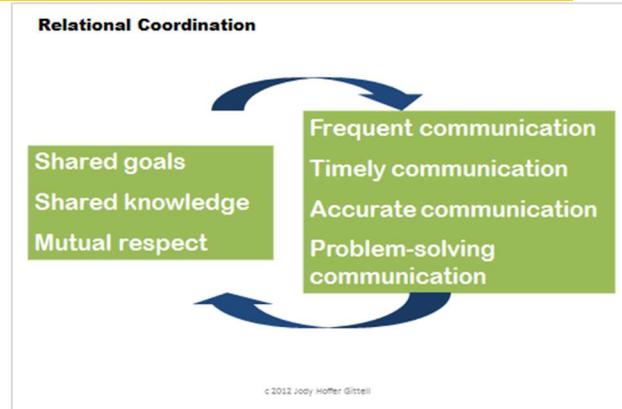
Not surprisingly, Jody observed that communication between workgroups is essential and that it needs to be timely, accurate, appropriately frequent and, when a problem arises, focused on solving the problem rather than assigning or avoiding

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.

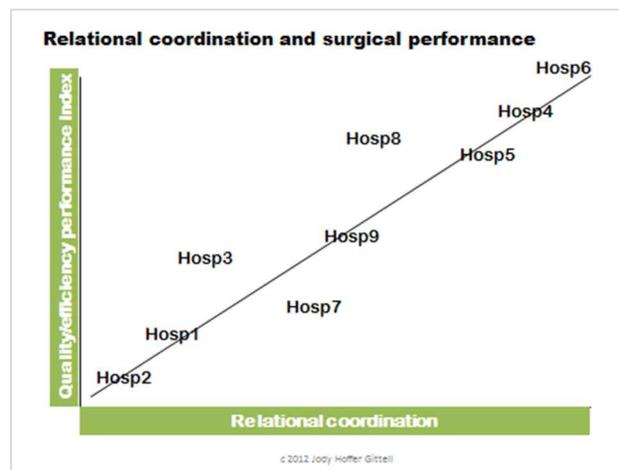
The next step in Jody’s research was to study the effect of relational coordination on team performance. She developed a survey in which members of each workgroup rate each of the other workgroups on the seven dimensions of relational coordination. She administered the survey at nine different airline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



As a result of Jody’s research, it’s now possible to measure the capacity for interdependent functioning of individuals, work teams, larger production units, management teams, whole organizations or even groups of organizations — groups of any size that are working together on a shared work process. The Relational Coordination Survey makes visible a crucial characteristic of teams that has previously been invisible and

---

that makes a big difference in their performance, particularly under conditions of uncertainty, rapidly changing circumstances and time pressure.

But, the story doesn't stop here. Measuring relational coordination is not enough; the next step is to improve it. Working closely with Jody over the past seven years, we've developed interventional applications of Relational Coordination in work process improvement, team-building and culture change that have resulted in substantial, measurable improvement in the way people work together. It's now possible to use the Relational Coordination Survey as a diagnostic, a feedback tool or an outcome measure for team development work. The survey has proven to be one of the most effective ways we've found for helping teams start to talk about how they are working together – to make interdependence visible, discussable and manageable. We've also been compiling and designing specific relational, structural and work process interventions to address the seven dimensions of Relational Coordination.

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 or contact us.

Anthony L. Suchman, MD, MA is Founder and Senior Consultant at Relationship Centered Health Care. He is a general internist, health services researcher, and Clinical Professor of Medicine at the University of Rochester. Tony's work focuses on organizational culture and change; he works with clinicians, administrators, patient advocates and board members in health care organizations. He can be reached at [asuchman@rchcweb.com](mailto:asuchman@rchcweb.com) or by phone at 585.721.9187

---

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