Adaptation in anaesthesia team coordination in response to a simulated critical event and its relationship to clinical performance

M. J. Burtscher, T. Manser, M. Kolbe, G. Grote, B. Grande, D. R. Spahn and J. Wacker

1 ETH Zurich, Center for Organizational and Occupational Sciences, or Organization, Work, and Technology Group, Kreuzplatz 5, CH-8032 Zurich, Switzerland
2 University Hospital Zurich, Institute of Anaesthesiology, Rämistrasse 100, CH-8091 Zurich, Switzerland
3 Present address: University of Zurich, Department of Psychology, Binzmühlestrasse 14/15, CH-8050 Zurich, Switzerland

* Corresponding author. E-mail: m.burtscher@psychologie.uzh.ch

Background. Recent studies in anaesthesia and intensive care indicate that a team’s ability to adapt its coordination activities to changing situational demands is crucial for effective teamwork and thus, safe patient care. This study addresses the relationship between adaptation of team coordination and markers of clinical performance in response to a critical event, particularly regarding which types of coordination activities are used and which team member engages in those coordination activities.

Methods. Video recordings of 15 two-person anaesthesia teams (anaesthesia trainee plus anaesthesia nurse) performing a simulated induction of general anaesthesia were coded, using a structured observation system for coordination activities. The simulation involved a critical event—asystole during laryngoscopy. Clinical performance was assessed using two separate reaction times related to the critical event.

Results. Analyses of variance revealed a significant effect of the critical event on team coordination: after the occurrence of the asystole, team members adapted their coordination activities by spending more time on information management—a specific type of coordination activity ($F_{1,28}=15.17, P=0.001$). No significant effect was found for task management. The increase in information management was related to faster decisions regarding how to respond to the critical event, but only for trainees and not for nurses.

Conclusions. Our findings support the claim that adaptation of coordination activities is related to improved team performance in healthcare. Moreover, adaptation and its relationship to team performance were found to vary with regard to type of coordination activities and team member.

Keywords: adaptation; clinical performance; coordination; critical event; teamwork

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Increasing complexity in healthcare has led to a growing interdependence of tasks and functions which has, in turn, created a need for increased cooperation and team-based forms of work organization. This is particularly true in dynamic domains of healthcare such as anaesthesia, surgery, and intensive care where effective teamwork has been shown to be important for safe patient care. Research on patient safety in anaesthesia has underlined the significance of team-processes such as communication and coordination. Similarly, studies from other dynamic domains of healthcare—intensive care and surgery—support the claim that teamwork is important for safe patient care. Coordination is a central feature of teamwork. This is particularly true in the operating theatre where effective team coordination is a vital component since one’s actions can immediately require another team member to react appropriately. Within the scope of medical teams, we regard coordination as those activities that aim at organizing the joint patient treatment—in contrast to the patient treatment itself. Additionally, we consider coordination a process comprising specific observable behaviours, which include information exchange (e.g. asking a question) and mutual adjustment of actions (e.g. distributing tasks among team members). The ability of a team to adapt its coordination...
activities to changing situational demands (e.g. raising taskload, occurrence of a critical event) has been identified as a major characteristic of successful teams.\textsuperscript{11, 12} Adaptive coordination is especially relevant in anaesthesia where levels of workload, action density, and standardization vary considerably.\textsuperscript{13–15} Moreover, the inherent dynamics of anaesthetic practice constantly bear the possibility of potentially critical, non-routine events.\textsuperscript{5}

Studies on team coordination in healthcare highlight three performance critical factors. In anaesthesia, for example, higher performing teams were found to increase their task management—a specific type of coordination activity corresponding to the mutual adjustment of actions—in response to the occurrence of non-routine events.\textsuperscript{16} Appropriate timing (e.g. when to share information) is also related to successful patient treatment.\textsuperscript{17, 18} Other studies point to the importance of considering inter-professional differences as team members contribute differently to team coordination depending on their role and professional background.\textsuperscript{19, 20} Although all three factors have been found to affect coordination activities, most studies focus on a single aspect.

The current work represents a first attempt to integrate these factors. This study aims to investigate how anaesthesia teams adapt their coordination activities in response to a simulated critical, non-routine event—asystole during laryngoscopy. After previous research on team coordination in healthcare, we hypothesize that anaesthesia teams will adapt their coordination activities in response to a critical event. Specifically, we expect differences in adaptation activities to include (i) the type of coordination activities and (ii) the team member. Additionally, we expect (iii) the degree of adaptation to be related to clinical performance—that is, higher performing teams being more adaptive to the critical event.

**Methods**

The study was approved by the local ethics committee (KEK-STV-Nr. 09/05) and registered at ClinicalTrials.gov (NCT00706108). We obtained written consent from all participants before the simulation.

Participants were 15 anaesthesia trainees and 15 anaesthesia nurses from a large teaching hospital working in teams of two. As all were volunteers, they represented a convenience sample. Participants were only included if they had at least 3 months clinical experience within the department to assure sufficient familiarity with the anaesthesia equipment and procedures. [Please note that some of the video recordings (i.e. the raw data) were used in a previous study focusing on a different process (leadership) and also using another observation system and other markers of performance.\textsuperscript{30}]

A simulator mannequin for advanced life support (Laerdal\textsuperscript{\textregistered} mannequin allowing mask ventilation, intubation and rhythm simulation using Megacode\textsuperscript{\textregistered} heart rhythm simulator) was used. To increase ecological validity, we conducted the simulation in a genuine operating theatre. The hospital's standard anaesthesia equipment including drugs, needles, stethoscope, and the usual airway devices was provided. Participants were videotaped during the entire scenario. Data were also recorded from the vital signs monitor and the ventilator which were synchronized with the videotapes by a master–slave recording system, to assure simultaneity.

The scenario was a standard anaesthesia induction. The patient represented an ASA I male with a very short clinical record; he was undergoing excision of a pilonidal sinus, in the prone position under general anaesthesia with tracheal intubation. The most common anaesthesia team composition for this type of procedure includes an anaesthesia trainee with sufficient practical experience and an anaesthesia nurse or nurse student. In the scenario, a staff anaesthetist was available if required. When designing the scenario, we aimed at securing a high level of standardization, minimizing the influence of extraneous variables on team coordination (e.g. variance in patient status or team composition).

During laryngoscopy, asystole was simulated as a critical event. Sinus rhythm returned when predefined actions consistent with ACLS guidelines were taken.\textsuperscript{21} The simulation was always conducted by the same two operators (staff anaesthetist and research fellow).

**Measures**

**Coding of team coordination**

Team coordination was operationalized as all team-member activities aimed at organizing the joint task execution (e.g. delegating a task, requesting information). We coded these activities with an established observation system for anaesthesia teams consisting of 33 mutually exclusive codes which are grouped into five main categories: ‘information management’, ‘task management’, ‘coordination via work environment’, ‘meta-coordination’, and ‘other communication’.\textsuperscript{12, 16, 19} In this study, we focused on ‘information management’ and ‘task management’. See Supplementary Appendix for a full description of these categories, including the respective codes and examples of behaviours.

We classified each coordination activity according to its code (e.g. information request), its timing (i.e. beginning, end, and duration), and the team member (e.g. anaesthesia nurse). Coding was performed by a trained organizational psychologist on a standard PC using Interact\textsuperscript{©}—a specialized software for behavioural observation (Mangold International GmbH, Arnstorf, Germany).

**Clinical performance**

An experienced staff anaesthetist blinded to our hypotheses assessed various reaction times related to the successful treatment of the asystole using the synchronized video, monitor, and ventilator data. We calculated two distinct markers of performance based on these measures. ‘Decision latency’ was defined as the period from the point in time when the team recognized the asystole until they decided how to respond to it. ‘Execution latency’ was defined as the period from deciding what to do until counteractions
were successfully taken—that is, until restoration of sinus rhythm. We decided to use these measures because ‘time to detect’ and ‘time to solve a problem’ are common markers of performance in anaesthetic simulations. Moreover, they represent an essential aspect of clinical performance in a resuscitation situation where a timely response is vital. Both markers were measured in seconds; therefore, high values indicate low performance.

Data handling

Since we were mainly interested in team coordination in relation to the critical event, we restricted our analysis to the time from the announcement to intubate the patient until restoration of sinus rhythm. Relevant task characteristics were kept constant, both within and between cases, enabling us to isolate the effect of the critical event. In order to assess effects of timing, we divided this period into two phases with onset of the asystole as the discriminating event. In the following section, we will refer to the first phase which extended from the announcement to intubate to the asystole as routine (Phase I). The second phase, from the asystole until the sinus rhythm was re-established, is the critical event (Phase II).

Our analyses focused on information management (i.e. the coordination of information relevant for task execution) and task management (i.e. coordination of actions or tasks), since previous studies have indicated that these categories represented the two most frequent and performance-relevant types of coordination activities. For each phase (routine and critical event), we calculated separate task management and information management measures for both team members. Individual measures were defined as the time spent on the respective coordination category in relation to phase duration. For example, if an anaesthesia nurse spent 2 min of a 4 min phase on task management, his/her task-management score for this phase was 50%. Since percentages are nominal data, we used arcsine transformation as used in similar studies. To obtain a measure of adaptation—changes in coordination activities in response to the critical event—we calculated the difference between phases I and II. By using differences rather than absolute values, we also controlled for the baseline of coordination activities of each team.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Phase I: routine</th>
<th></th>
<th>Phase II: critical event</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AT</td>
<td>AN</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>AT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task management</td>
<td>10.39</td>
<td>6.87</td>
<td>17.26</td>
<td>10.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information management</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>6.91</td>
<td>8.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remaining categories*</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>6.81</td>
<td>8.41</td>
<td>2.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall coordination activities</td>
<td>15.80</td>
<td>17.78</td>
<td>32.58</td>
<td>21.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Results

Six of the participating anaesthesia trainees were female (40%); eight of the anaesthesia nurses were female (53%). Six of the anaesthesia trainees (40%) reported having <6 months experience, three had between 6 and 18 months (20%), two had between 18 and 36 months, and four reported having more than 36 months experience as an anaesthesia trainee. According to our coding scheme, participants spent an average of 35.22% of their time on coordination activities (Table 1).
Adaptation in coordination activities in relation to the critical event

We hypothesized that the critical event would affect the coordination activities of the anaesthesia teams, particularly regarding team member and type of coordination activities.

Information management

A mixed two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of phase, $F_{1,28}=15.17$, $P=0.001$; anaesthesia teams responded to the asystole by spending more time on information management ($\Delta_{\text{Phase II - Phase I}}=0.063$, 95% CI (0.096, 0.030)). In contrast, neither the main effect of team member ($F_{1,28}=0.72$, $P=0.40$; $\Delta_{\text{Trainee - Nurse}}=-0.016$, 95% CI ($-0.054, 0.022$)), nor the interaction between the phase and team member was significant ($F_{1,28}=0.03$, $P=0.86$), indicating that trainees and nurses adapted their information management in a similar way. Figure 1 illustrates the changes in information management for both team members.

Task management

With task management as the dependent variable, the ANOVA yielded a different result. There was neither a main effect of phase $F_{1,28}=0.54$, $P=0.47$; $\Delta_{\text{Phase II - Phase I}}=0.026$, 95% CI ($-0.035, 0.074$) nor of team member $F_{1,28}=3.93$, $P=0.06$. Results do, however, indicate a trend that anaesthesia trainees spent, on average, more time on task management than nurses ($\Delta_{\text{Trainee - Nurse}}=0.055$, 95% CI ($-0.002, 0.11$)). The interaction between the phase and team member was not significant ($F_{1,28}=0.58$, $P=0.45$).

Adaptation and clinical performance

We used two different markers of clinical performance—decision latency and execution latency. They were uncorrelated, $r=0.018$, $P$ (two-tailed)$=0.95$, 95% CI ($-0.50, 0.52$), indicating that each measure represents a unique aspect of performance.

We were primarily interested in whether the adaptations in coordination activities, in response to the critical event, were related to the performance of the anaesthesia teams. Consequently, we calculated the differences between Phases I and II for both types of coordination activities. We correlated these differences (i.e. indicators of the degree of adaptation) with both performance measures. Since we also interested in whether trainees’ and nurses’ coordination activities would differ with regard to the relationship to performance, we calculated separate correlation coefficients for both team members.

There was a negative correlation $[r=-0.49, P$ (one-tailed)$=0.03$, 95% CI (0.03, −0.80)] between decision latency and the anaesthesia trainees’ change in information management. This indicates that the more the trainee increased his/her information management (e.g. situation assessment, discussing options) after the occurrence of the critical event, the faster the team came to a decision regarding treatment. Neither the anaesthesia nurse’s change in information management activities nor either changes in task management were related to decision latency.

The changes in information management and task management were not related to execution latency; the way anaesthesia trainees and nurses adapted their coordination activities did not affect how long it took them to re-establish sinus rhythm.

Discussion

The current study provides evidence for adaptive coordination in response to a simulated asystole during laryngoscopy and the relationship between adaptation and markers of clinical performance. Our findings are in line with a recent research highlighting the importance of information sharing for clinical performance in medical teams, particularly in terms of time sensitivity. For example, the accuracy of decision-making in intensive care teams has been shown to improve if team members engage in more explicit reasoning (i.e. thinking out loud) and talking to the room (i.e. undirected yet clearly understandable assessments of the situation). Similarly, in surgery, patients’ odds of experiencing complications increased if teams performed less information sharing during operations and subsequent hand-offs.

Regarding time sensitivity, Manser and colleagues recently found that information management—but only within the first 5 min after a simulated malignant hyperthermia—predicted the clinical performance of anaesthesia teams, with higher performing teams exhibiting more information-sharing behaviours. Similarly, in intensive care, the likelihood of error in information transmission increased with the age of the information.

The current study also stresses the importance of which team member engages in information management. In
general, team coordination in healthcare has been found to vary as a function of team member roles. However, no relationship between the behaviour of specific team members or professions and teamwork outcomes has been established. This study shows that only the increase in trainees’ information management was related to the teams’ clinical performance. This indicates that not only the act of coordination itself but also the actor is relevant to clinical performance. Differences in perceived expertise may be the reason for this finding: if information is transmitted by a physician, it may have been considered more significant by the team. Although this result has to be interpreted within the scope of the limitations of our study, we believe it provides initial evidence that successful information management—and team coordination in general—should be investigated with regard to both its timing and team member roles. Moreover, as information management comprises specific behaviours, it could arguably be improved by training.

In terms of task management, we could neither identify differences between the two phases nor relate task management to any of the two performance measures. In the context of previous research, these findings hint at the potentially moderating role of the type of incident. Although the current work failed to establish a statistically significant relationship between task management and performance, a recent study in a similar setting found higher performing anaesthesia teams exhibiting more task management in response to non-routine events. The earlier study featured various types of events; in contrast, the current study focused on a specific critical event. Bradycardia during laryngoscopy is not uncommon and is often rectified without specific treatment. The rare event of severe bradycardia may resemble asystole; it may be difficult to distinguish between the two, and so, an immediate response according to the standardized life support protocols (ACLS) is mandated. In this case, the task is standardized. In anaesthesia, the relationship of other team processes such as leadership with performance has been found to be influenced by the level of standardization; in standardized situations, routine can substitute leadership behaviour. In addition, the importance of situational factors such as occurrence of critical events, standardization, and task-load has been shown repeatedly. Therefore, it is possible that standardization diminished the influence of task management in the current study. In summary, type of event appears to be a likely moderator of the relationship between coordination activities and performance.

With regard to team performance, our study points to the multidimensionality of effective anaesthesia team coordination. Information management correlated with decision latency but not with execution latency. Owing to the protocol for treating an asystole during laryngoscopy, one important critical process was identifying the event as such. As soon as the team decided what to do, the protocol determined the further process which possibly explains why coordination activities, particularly task management, were not related to execution time.

The current study’s weaknesses refer to two main challenges in applied research. First, using teams of professionals as unit of analysis has led to a limited sample size and the associated reduced statistical power. This is particularly problematic since we based part of our conclusion on negative findings (i.e. the absence of a relationship between task management and clinical performance). Furthermore, although we tried to control for this factor by using difference scores for coordination rather than absolute values, we did not explicitly address the issue of common work experience. Team members who had worked together before are likely to coordinate differently from teams cooperating for the first time. However, in view of the complexity of teamwork in applied settings, it is difficult to control for, and isolate, the effects of single factors. This work highlights the significance of certain processes (i.e. adaptive coordination); however, further studies (possibly involving larger sample sizes) on the relationship between patient safety and team coordination are required.

Future studies should scrutinize the type of medical incident as a moderator of the coordination–performance relationship, mainly regarding task management. It would be particularly interesting to compare incidents with a standardized response to incidents for which no standard protocol exists. Furthermore, the role of common work experience for effective coordination in medical teams should be investigated. Finally, although the difference in task management between trainees and nurses was not statistically significant, our findings indicate a trend towards trainees exhibiting more task management, especially during the critical event. Future studies should elaborate on role-specific differences in adaptive coordination.

The importance of effective coordination for maintaining safe patient care has been acknowledged in various healthcare settings. Team coordination is dynamic; the optimal way to coordinate as a team in a given situation depends on a variety of factors. As a result, research in coordination has to control for the ‘who’ (team member), ‘when’ (timing), and ‘what’ (type of coordination). Therefore, recommendations regarding how teams should coordinate their actions are contingent upon the situation. Our findings also suggest that there are more general characteristics of effective team coordination. Successful information management seems to depend on the right timing, that is, there are windows of opportunity for this type of coordination. Furthermore, a team’s ability to adapt its coordination activities is crucial to effective performance. As in previous studies, higher performing teams were better able to shift from routine to critical situations—they adopted more effectively. Hence, adaptability represents one of the most important skills and should be further scrutinized.

Supplementary material
Supplementary material is available at British Journal of Anaesthesia online.
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Conflict of interest
None declared.

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