Exploring the Role of Interpersonal Trust in Facilitating Knowledge Exchange and Collaboration in Cross-Functional Teams

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how interpersonal trust facilitates knowledge exchange and collaboration among members of cross-functional teams in organizational settings. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 29 professionals from diverse industries in Tehran who had direct experience working in cross-functional teams. Participants were selected via purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the study objectives. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Each session lasted between 45 to 75 minutes and was transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach. Trustworthiness was enhanced through strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail. Three major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Foundations of Interpersonal Trust, including subthemes such as communication openness, psychological safety, and role clarity; (2) Enablers of Knowledge Exchange, including informal interactions, competence-based trust, leadership support, and feedback acceptance; and (3) Collaboration Outcomes and Challenges, highlighting trust's role in enhancing synergy, innovation, and conflict resolution, as well as the detrimental effects of mistrust and knowledge hoarding. Participants consistently emphasized that trust enabled deeper collaboration, reduced information silos, and fostered a learning-oriented environment. Interpersonal trust is a critical enabler of effective collaboration and knowledge sharing in cross-functional teams. It facilitates both the relational and cognitive dimensions of teamwork by fostering psychological safety, mutual respect, and open communication. Organizations seeking to improve cross-functional performance should actively cultivate trust through leadership practices, structural supports, and team-building initiatives. This study contributes to a nuanced understanding of trust as a dynamic and context-sensitive phenomenon in collaborative work settings.

Keywords: Interpersonal trust; cross-functional teams; knowledge exchange; collaboration; qualitative research; psychological safety; organizational behavior.

Introduction

In today's increasingly complex and dynamic business environments, cross-functional teams have become vital to organizational success. These teams, composed of individuals from diverse departments, bring together a range of skills, knowledge bases, and perspectives to address multifaceted challenges, foster innovation, and enhance responsiveness to market demands (Mathieu et al., 2019). However, the collaborative potential of cross-functional teams is not automatically realized. Instead, it hinges significantly on the quality of interpersonal relationships,
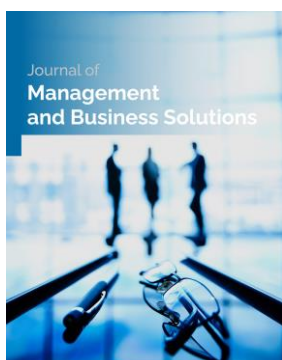
particularly the presence of trust among team members. Interpersonal trust has emerged as a critical enabler of effective communication, knowledge sharing, and mutual collaboration—core elements for high-functioning cross-functional teams (Mayer et al., 1995; Costa et al., 2022).

Trust is widely recognized as the foundation of effective teamwork. In organizational contexts, interpersonal trust refers to the willingness of individuals to be vulnerable to others based on expectations of benevolence, integrity, and competence (Colquitt et al., 2007). In cross-functional teams, where team members often lack prior working relationships and operate from different functional mindsets, establishing trust can be particularly challenging (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Unlike homogeneous teams, cross-functional teams frequently encounter conflicting priorities, communication barriers, and interdepartmental rivalry—all of which can hinder collaborative processes if trust is not actively cultivated (Joshi et al., 2009). Consequently, understanding the mechanisms through which interpersonal trust facilitates collaboration and knowledge exchange in such teams is not only theoretically relevant but also practically urgent.

A growing body of literature underscores the pivotal role of trust in promoting knowledge exchange behaviors. Knowledge, particularly tacit knowledge, is often embedded in individual experiences and difficult to codify (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Sharing such knowledge requires a relational context characterized by psychological safety and mutual respect—conditions that are fostered by trust (Chow & Chan, 2008). In the absence of trust, employees may hoard information due to fears of misuse, exploitation, or damage to professional credibility (Holste & Fields, 2010). Conversely, trust reduces relational risk and enhances openness, allowing team members to engage in deeper, more meaningful knowledge interactions (Abrams et al., 2003). This dynamic is particularly salient in cross-functional teams, where task interdependence is high, and knowledge is distributed across specialized domains.

Moreover, trust has been shown to contribute positively to team learning, a process in which team members collaboratively reflect, experiment, and integrate new insights to improve performance (Edmondson, 1999). In cross-functional settings, such learning often depends on the ability of team members to question assumptions, challenge ideas, and negotiate meaning across disciplinary boundaries. Trust acts as a lubricant that facilitates this critical dialogue and reduces the interpersonal friction that might otherwise derail collaborative processes (Zand, 1972). Edmondson and Lei (2014) emphasize that psychological safety—a trust-based construct—enables individuals to speak up, admit errors, and request help, all of which are essential for team adaptability and resilience.

Despite the well-established link between trust and collaboration, several studies have noted that trust is not a static trait but rather a dynamic and context-sensitive phenomenon (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). In project-based and time-bound cross-functional teams, trust must be developed rapidly and often without the benefit of long-standing interpersonal familiarity. This has led scholars to distinguish between cognition-based trust (trust grounded in perceived competence and reliability) and affect-based trust (trust rooted in emotional bonds and shared values) (McAllister, 1995). Both types are relevant in cross-functional collaboration, but their relative importance may vary depending on team maturity, task complexity, and organizational culture (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). As such, understanding how trust develops and functions in specific team contexts is a critical gap in the literature that this study seeks to address.

Organizational support and leadership behaviors have also been identified as critical antecedents of trust in teams. Research indicates that leaders who model openness, fairness, and consistency are more likely to foster trusting relationships among team members (Burke et al., 2007). In cross-functional environments, where team members report to different departmental heads, the absence of clear leadership structures can complicate trust-

building efforts. Studies suggest that designated team leaders who promote a shared vision, facilitate communication, and manage conflict constructively play a key role in cultivating a trust-based climate (Palanski et al., 2011). Similarly, structural elements such as role clarity, reward systems, and organizational norms can either support or undermine the development of trust (Schoorman et al., 2007).

From a practical standpoint, fostering trust in cross-functional teams has significant implications for organizational performance. High-trust teams have been found to exhibit greater creativity, faster decision-making, and enhanced adaptability to change (Dirks, 1999; Bijlsma-Frankema & Costa, 2005). These attributes are particularly crucial in volatile and uncertain business contexts, where agility and innovation are key competitive advantages. However, building trust is not without challenges. It requires intentional design and continuous investment, particularly in environments marked by departmental silos, geographic dispersion, or cultural diversity (Cummings & Bromiley, 1996). Organizations must therefore consider not only individual behaviors but also systemic enablers of trust, including leadership development, communication training, and team-building interventions.

Although existing research offers valuable insights into the general role of trust in organizations, there remains a paucity of qualitative studies that explore how trust is experienced and enacted in real cross-functional team settings. Much of the current literature relies on quantitative surveys that capture trust as a static variable rather than a dynamic process shaped by context and interaction (Ferrin et al., 2006). Qualitative inquiry, with its focus on meaning-making and lived experience, offers a richer understanding of the nuanced ways in which trust facilitates or impedes collaboration. This study contributes to this growing area by exploring the perceptions of professionals working in cross-functional teams in Tehran, a context that also adds cultural specificity to the largely Western-centric literature.

In particular, this research aims to uncover the processes through which interpersonal trust influences knowledge sharing, team synergy, and conflict management. It also seeks to identify the enablers and barriers to trust development in cross-functional settings. Through semi-structured interviews with 29 participants from diverse industries, the study provides grounded insights into the lived realities of collaboration across functional boundaries. Thematic analysis using NVivo software allows for a systematic examination of patterns and themes, thereby generating a conceptual framework grounded in empirical data. In doing so, the study not only extends theoretical understanding but also offers practical recommendations for managers and organizations seeking to improve cross-functional collaboration through trust-building strategies.

In sum, interpersonal trust plays a foundational role in enabling effective collaboration and knowledge exchange within cross-functional teams. By exploring the lived experiences of professionals engaged in such teams, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the social and organizational dynamics that support or hinder trust in complex collaborative environments. The findings are expected to inform both theory and practice, contributing to the design of more cohesive, innovative, and high-performing teams in the contemporary workplace.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how interpersonal trust influences knowledge exchange and collaboration within cross-functional teams. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain in-depth

insights into participants' lived experiences and perceptions regarding interpersonal dynamics and team-based knowledge processes. The participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research focus. Inclusion criteria required participants to have experience working in cross-functional teams in organizational settings based in Tehran. A total of 29 professionals from diverse industries, including finance, healthcare, technology, and education, participated in the study. Participants included team members, team leaders, and middle managers with varying years of professional and collaborative experience.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, allowing for flexibility in probing specific themes while maintaining consistency across participants. The interviews were guided by a protocol that included open-ended questions about trust-building experiences, knowledge-sharing practices, perceived enablers and barriers, and the impact of interpersonal dynamics on collaborative outcomes. Interviews were conducted in person and via secure online platforms, each lasting between 45 to 75 minutes. The interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached—that is, when no new significant themes or insights emerged from the data. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis with the support of NVivo qualitative data analysis software. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Initial open coding was conducted to identify recurrent concepts and patterns. These codes were then grouped into subthemes and broader thematic categories reflecting the participants' collective experiences. To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, the study employed strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining a detailed audit trail of the coding and interpretation process.

Findings and Results

Theme 1: Foundations of Interpersonal Trust

Shared Goals and Vision

Participants emphasized that trust often stemmed from having a clearly articulated, shared purpose within the team. When objectives were aligned across functions, collaboration improved. One participant remarked, "When we're all working toward the same outcome, it's easier to trust that everyone's doing their part." Shared goals created a unified direction that minimized suspicion and individualistic behavior.

Communication Openness

Open and transparent communication was repeatedly cited as central to building trust. Teams where members freely exchanged information and voiced concerns without fear of judgment were more cohesive. A senior project coordinator stated, "We had regular syncs where we could speak openly—even challenge ideas. That honesty built our trust." Active listening and reducing ambiguity reinforced the sense of mutual respect.

Reliability and Consistency

Trust grew stronger when team members consistently met deadlines, delivered quality work, and maintained regular communication. Participants noted that predictability in performance and behavior made collaboration easier. "If someone is always on time and follows through, I trust them more," shared a marketing specialist.

Integrity and Ethical Behavior

Ethical behavior, such as honesty and fairness, emerged as another foundational component of interpersonal trust. Trust deteriorated when team members perceived bias or dishonesty. As one participant explained, "I don't need someone to agree with me all the time, but I need to know they won't cut corners or lie."

Psychological Safety

Feeling emotionally safe to express oneself without fear of ridicule or reprisal was integral to trust-building. Teams that cultivated an inclusive and non-judgmental atmosphere saw greater collaboration. A design lead noted, "In our team, no one laughs at your ideas. That makes you want to contribute more."

Past Collaborative Experiences

Trust was often grounded in prior positive work interactions. Familiarity with team members' work styles and past successes made new collaborations smoother. "I had worked with him before. That made me more willing to share what I was working on," noted an HR manager.

Role Clarity and Accountability

Participants emphasized that when responsibilities were clearly defined and accountability was maintained, misunderstandings decreased, and trust flourished. "Knowing exactly what everyone is supposed to do avoids unnecessary conflict," said a logistics coordinator. Clear boundaries helped reduce redundancy and fostered confidence in the team structure.

Theme 2: Enablers of Knowledge Exchange

Informal Interactions and Social Bonds

Trust deepened through casual, non-task interactions. Informal conversations—whether during lunch breaks or through casual messaging—created bonds that later supported knowledge-sharing. A participant noted, "It's during coffee chats that I often learned what other teams were doing, and that helped our projects a lot."

Trust in Competence

Respecting each other's skills and professional judgment encouraged individuals to share knowledge confidently. One IT team member mentioned, "I trust her advice because I know she's been in this industry longer than I have. That kind of trust is technical, not just personal."

Reciprocity and Mutual Benefit

Participants reported being more inclined to share knowledge when they perceived a culture of reciprocity. A team leader explained, "If I help you now, I trust you'll help me later. That give-and-take makes us more efficient." Mutual trust created a cycle of ongoing collaboration.

Leadership Support

Trust was also influenced by leadership behavior. Leaders who modeled transparency, facilitated cross-functional interactions, and addressed conflicts constructively contributed to a trust-based environment. "Our manager encouraged us to speak our minds—even if we disagreed. That really fostered openness," shared a finance analyst.

Cross-Functional Learning Orientation

A learning-oriented mindset supported knowledge flow across departments. Participants noted that curiosity and openness to different perspectives enabled deeper exchanges. "I didn't understand the tech side, but I asked questions and they didn't judge. That openness helped me learn and contribute more," said a business strategist.

Feedback Acceptance

Teams that welcomed critical feedback and treated it as a learning opportunity experienced more robust collaboration. "We had this unwritten rule: it's okay to critique, but do it respectfully. That helped us trust each other's input," a software engineer noted.

Theme 3: Collaboration Outcomes and Challenges

Enhanced Team Synergy

When interpersonal trust was strong, workflow was smoother, and synergy emerged. Participants described fewer bottlenecks and improved efficiency. "It felt like everyone was on the same wavelength," one participant recalled. Synergy translated to more effective division of labor and faster problem resolution.

Innovation and Creative Problem Solving

Trust fostered creativity by making individuals comfortable expressing unconventional ideas. "I suggested something wild in a meeting, and instead of laughing, they built on it. That trust made us more innovative," recounted a product developer. Participants emphasized that trust nurtured risk-taking behavior, essential for innovation.

Conflict Mitigation

Trust allowed team members to handle disagreements constructively. Conflicts were addressed early and with mutual respect. "We had disagreements, sure. But no one took it personally. That's what trust does—it softens the rough edges," said an operations manager.

Resistance and Mistrust

Conversely, teams lacking trust often encountered resistance, suspicion, and disengagement. A participant admitted, "Sometimes I felt like they were hiding information. That made me hold back too." Trust deficits led to communication breakdowns and stifled progress.

Knowledge Hoarding

A notable challenge was the tendency to hoard information when trust was absent. Several participants shared experiences of individuals withholding key knowledge due to competitive or defensive motives. "I didn't share everything because I wasn't sure how it'd be used—or misused," said one senior analyst.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study explored how interpersonal trust facilitates knowledge exchange and collaboration in cross-functional teams. The findings revealed three overarching themes: *Foundations of Interpersonal Trust*, *Enablers of Knowledge Exchange*, and *Collaboration Outcomes and Challenges*. Each theme comprised nuanced subthemes that collectively illuminated the pivotal role of trust in navigating the complexity of team collaboration across functional boundaries. This section interprets these findings in light of existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

The first theme, *Foundations of Interpersonal Trust*, emphasizes the antecedents that contribute to the formation and maintenance of trust within cross-functional teams. Participants highlighted the importance of shared goals, open communication, reliability, integrity, psychological safety, role clarity, and prior collaborative experiences. These findings align with Mayer et al.'s (1995) integrative model of organizational trust, which identifies ability, benevolence, and integrity as key drivers of trustworthiness. Similarly, McAllister's (1995) distinction between

cognition-based and affect-based trust is reflected in participants' emphasis on both technical competence and emotional rapport. For instance, participants described how clarity in role expectations and dependable behavior created cognitive trust, while respectful dialogue and emotional support nurtured affective trust. These dual aspects were essential for building a trustworthy team environment, echoing the observations of Costa et al. (2022) on trust's multidimensional nature in team dynamics.

Moreover, the subtheme of psychological safety—participants' sense of being able to express themselves without fear of negative consequences—mirrors Edmondson's (1999) conceptualization of team learning climates. The presence of psychological safety allowed participants to admit errors, question ideas, and offer feedback, thereby reinforcing trust. This finding reinforces earlier research suggesting that psychological safety is both a precursor and a product of trust (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). The fact that past positive collaborative experiences enhanced trust further supports the temporal dimension of trust formation proposed by Lewicki and Bunker (1996), who argued that trust develops in stages through repeated interactions.

The second theme, *Enablers of Knowledge Exchange*, details how trust translates into actionable collaboration behaviors, such as sharing information, co-creating knowledge, and learning across functions. Participants cited informal social interactions, trust in competence, reciprocal exchanges, leadership support, learning orientation, and feedback acceptance as core facilitators. These findings are consistent with Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) theory of knowledge creation, which underscores the social dimension of tacit knowledge exchange. Informal interactions, described by participants as "coffee chats" or "hallway conversations," served as informal channels for transferring experiential knowledge, a pattern also identified by Cross and Parker (2004) in organizational network studies.

Participants' emphasis on competence-based trust supports Holste and Fields' (2010) conclusion that employees are more likely to share critical tacit knowledge when they perceive colleagues as knowledgeable and professionally credible. Moreover, the value placed on reciprocity echoes Blau's (1964) social exchange theory, which posits that trust-based relationships flourish when individuals perceive mutual benefits. As some participants indicated, "I help you now, you help me later" dynamics reinforced a cycle of exchange and strengthened collaboration over time. Leadership emerged as a vital structural enabler, validating the findings of Burke et al. (2007), who highlighted that leader transparency, supportiveness, and fairness are essential for cultivating intra-team trust and knowledge-sharing behaviors.

Additionally, participants recognized that feedback acceptance was integral to maintaining trust and avoiding interpersonal defensiveness. This finding aligns with research by Ashkanasy et al. (2017), which highlights emotional intelligence as a mediating factor in trustful feedback cultures. In cross-functional teams where disciplinary expertise varies, openness to feedback reflects not only humility but also trust in others' perspectives, further fostering collaborative efficacy.

The third theme, *Collaboration Outcomes and Challenges*, examined the tangible impacts of trust (or its absence) on team processes and results. Participants described trust as a key driver of team synergy, innovation, and conflict resolution. Teams with high trust levels experienced fewer miscommunications and executed tasks more efficiently—a phenomenon supported by Dirks (1999), who found that trust enhances group performance by reducing interpersonal monitoring and enabling cooperation. Trust also fostered creativity, with participants feeling empowered to propose unconventional ideas, confirming findings by Bijlsma-Frankema and Costa (2005) who posited that trust reduces the perceived risk of idea rejection and promotes innovation.

54

Conversely, participants also reported that the absence of trust led to resistance, knowledge hoarding, and disengagement. These negative behaviors align with Cummings and Bromiley's (1996) insights that low-trust environments inhibit communication and reinforce siloed thinking. Knowledge hoarding, in particular, was viewed as a protective behavior stemming from fear of exploitation or competitive disadvantage—concerns that have been observed in previous studies (Connelly et al., 2012). This underscores the importance of relational security in enabling knowledge transparency across team boundaries.

In sum, the findings affirm that interpersonal trust serves as both a precondition and a catalyst for knowledge exchange and collaboration in cross-functional teams. It is not merely a soft, interpersonal variable, but a strategic resource that can significantly shape organizational learning, innovation, and performance.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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