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Review

Team-on-team negotiation: How internal structure shapes what teams can do at the table

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Team negotiation research presents a paradox: teams sometimes achieve more integrative outcomes than solo negotiators, yet in other cases they escalate competitiveness and harm relational outcomes. Existing theory has not resolved this inconsistency, in part because it treats negotiating teams as if they could change positions as easily as individual negotiators. We argue this assumption overlooks a central constraint of team-on-team negotiation: before any adaptive external exchange can occur, teams must internally authorize revisions to their positions as new information emerges. Drawing on evidence from research on team negotiation, multiparty negotiation, and team design, we identify this internal capacity as a recurring but underspecified theme in prior work. We refer to it as *mandate revisability*: the ease with which a team can reopen, revise, and reauthorize its internal position during ongoing negotiation. We then show how five structural features – decision rules, authority concentration, communication patterns, agenda design, and role differentiation – shape this capacity and, in turn, link intra-team structure to inter-team behavior. This perspective helps explain why behaviors often interpreted as competitive rigidity may instead reflect internal authorization constraints. It also shows how seemingly inconsistent team negotiation outcomes can become more systematically predictable. We discuss implications for future research and practice.

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The puzzle: mixed findings in team negotiation

Negotiations are dynamic environments in which exchanges between parties can reveal new information about counterparts' priorities and constraints, creating opportunities to identify integrative solutions. Whether teams can convert these insights into action is a central question, and the findings in the literature remain mixed.

On the positive side, teams can improve outcomes. When at least one team is present, joint gains increase [1,2], and teams are more likely than solo negotiators to avoid making bad agreements when no zone of agreement exists [3]. However, these gains do not necessarily reflect true group-level synergy because heightened performance often results from one member asking better questions rather than improved team coordination [4].

The costs are equally well-documented. Teams tend to behave more competitively toward opposing groups than individual negotiators, driving value-claiming at the expense of joint gain [5–7]. They also produce worse relational outcomes than individuals [4]. Trust judgments within teams anchor on the least trustworthy member rather than the average, increasing the likelihood of impasse [8]. Further, hierarchical structures can suppress information elaboration, reinforce fixed-pie assumptions, and shift behavior toward competitive value-claiming [27]. These effects are particularly likely when authority is concentrated or when cultural norms emphasize harmony over dissent [9].

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We argue that these mixed findings reflect a structural factor largely overlooked in prior work: before any insight revealed at the table can become an offer, the team must internally authorize it. Whether that authorization is fast or slow, cheap or costly, determines whether informational advantages translate into adaptive behavior, and whether teams capitalize on their potential.

Intra-team dynamics during inter-team negotiations

A common feature of prior research is that team members are assigned identical payoff schedules, effectively treating the team as a scaled-up dyad. In doing so, prior work on team negotiations has largely examined teams as unitary decision-makers whose externally expressed position can be updated without considering the internal process required to revise it. One limitation of this approach is well known: in real teams, members may not have the same goals or information, and internal misalignment can impede their negotiation effectiveness [10—12]. But even when team members do agree, the team may still have difficulty changing course. For an individual negotiator, revising a position can be a matter of updating one's private judgment. For a team, revising a position may require a process: members may need to reopen discussion, justify the change, secure agreement, or obtain approval from those who authorized the original mandate. This means that team flexibility depends not only on what members prefer, but also on whether the team's decision process allows those preferences to be translated into a revised mandate.

Experimental evidence confirms the cost of that internal complexity. Intra-team conflict undermines internal consensus and limits the team's ability to capitalize on trade-offs [13]. These constraints intensify under accountability to a profit-oriented supervisor, benefiting teams of strangers but impairing teams of friends, whose concern for the relationship raises the perceived cost of challenging settled positions [14,15].

Negotiations between teams are thus layered on top of internal team processes. Mandates may originate externally, delegated by a supervisor or constituency, or internally through pre-negotiation deliberation. But in either case, teams must determine whether and how their positions can be revised once negotiation begins. This internal approval process is largely overlooked in the extant team literature.

Mandate revisability

Prior research has examined whether teams outperform solo negotiators. We integrate insights from this literature around a common question: why do team-on-team outcomes vary so widely? We locate the answer not in the mere presence of a team at the table, but in how the team is structured to revise its position once negotiation is underway.

Across research on team and multiparty negotiation, a recurring insight is that teams do not simply update positions; they must authorize revisions. Team members may need to reopen discussion, challenge a settled position [10,11], manage internal coalitions [13], or secure approval before they can move at the table [16]. Teams also differ in their capacity to reflect on and adapt their strategies [17]. To represent these dynamics, we use the term *mandate revisability* as a single organizing lens: the ease with which a team can reopen, revise, and reauthorize its internal position during an ongoing negotiation.

Mandate revisability has two core components. The first is the political cost to challenge a settled position (e.g., disrupting internal coalitions or triggering dissent). The second is the speed with which internal approval for a revision can be obtained. These components can combine in consequential ways. A collegial but bureaucratic team faces low political cost but slow approval, whereas a hierarchical team with an aligned leader can approve changes quickly but may suppress the internal elaboration needed to recognize when revision is warranted. In both cases, new information may emerge at the table without translating into revised offers.

Mandate revisability is distinct from initial mandate delegation. Broad starting authority does not guarantee high revisability, nor does a narrow mandate preclude it. Consequently, two teams with identical formal hierarchies may differ substantially in their revisability during negotiation.

Mandate revisability is also different from team reflexivity. Reflexivity refers to the tendency of teams to reflect on their objectives, strategies, and processes and adapt them to circumstances [17]. Although reflexivity generally improves team performance [17], recognizing that adaptation is needed is not sufficient in negotiations: teams must also have the structural capacity to authorize changes to their positions. Even highly reflexive teams will produce deadlock when revisability is low, an outcome that from the outside appears as stubbornness.

Structural features shaping mandate revisability

Each structural feature shapes how influence over the decisions at the table is distributed among members and addresses the same underlying question: who holds the authority to initiate, contest, or approve changes to a team's position [16] (see Table 1).

Table 1

Internal team features and their effects on mandate revisability.

Internal team feature	Effect on mandate revisability	External behavioral signature
Decision rules: Majority (vs. Unanimity)	Higher – fewer veto constraints on revision	Faster position updates; risk of minority resentment
Agenda design: Simultaneous (vs. Sequential)	Higher – cross-issue trade-offs remain available	Greater integrative reciprocation across the table
Communication patterns: Open (vs. Closed)	Higher – dissent surfaces, alignment assessed before acting	More adaptive, exploratory offers to counterpart
Authority concentration: Centralized (vs. Decentralized)	Higher on speed; lower on elaboration quality	Rapid pivoting; potential for post-agreement backlash
Role differentiation: Defined (vs. Undefined)	Higher – expertise has a pathway to trigger revision	More integrative capacity; structured value claiming

Note. These effects are most consequential when team members hold different information or priorities (conditions under which revision would improve outcomes) and when the negotiation generates new information that challenges the team's prior position.

Decision rules

Whether teams require unanimity or a simple majority to act determines veto dispersion. Under unanimity, any member can block a proposed revision, giving those in the minority leverage to slow or prevent position changes. Under majority rule, revision is faster, but outvoted members may resist implementing the decision. Evidence from three-person group negotiations suggests that the same logic extends to team-on-team negotiations: unanimity trades integration risk for implementation risk, whereas majority rule does the opposite [18–20].

Agenda design

Teams that consider issues simultaneously retain the ability to make cross-issue trade-offs. However, teams that commit to issues sequentially create lock-in effects that raise the cost of revisiting early positions [20–22]. Lock-in effects become especially pronounced when teams negotiate sequentially under unanimity rules, since sequencing limits reconsideration and unanimity empowers any member to block reopening issues already settled. Sequential commitment can thus increase political costs while also closing off options before priorities are fully understood.

Communication patterns

Open communication surfaces dissent and allows teams to gauge support for revision before any external offer is made. Side conversations that exclude members in multiparty settings [23,24] or cultural harmony norms that suppress disagreement [9,25] conceal the true distribution of preferences and raise the political cost of revision. Communication patterns therefore do more than transmit information; they determine whether teams can assess internal alignment in time to revise their positions.

Authority concentration

Hierarchical teams can authorize position changes rapidly when the leader is aligned. However, the same hierarchical structure that accelerates revision can also suppress the internal information elaboration needed to recognize when revision is warranted, reinforcing fixed-pie assumptions [26] and driving value-claiming behavior [27,28]. More powerful team members face a further risk: they may overestimate the strength of their internal alliances, such that unilateral position changes that are assumed to be supported can trigger unexpected coalition backlash [29].

Role differentiation

Clearly defined complementary roles with explicit influence rights can give expertise a pathway to trigger reconsideration. The good cop/bad cop strategy illustrates this dynamic: effective role coordination must be established before negotiation begins [30], and teams with complementary role differentiation can create more joint value and claim a greater share of it compared with undifferentiated teams [31]. Team-level political skill may also facilitate reconsideration [32]. Without role differentiation, expertise has no reliable pathway to trigger revision.

When two teams with different profiles on these features meet at the table, the resulting asymmetry produces dynamics that cannot be explained by treating either team as a unitary actor.

Mandate revisability in team-on-team negotiation

Team-on-team negotiation involves two teams interacting simultaneously, each processing information through its own authorization structure. Offers and concessions are not simply strategic signals but also implicit tests of what the opposing team can internally authorize. What looks like stubbornness may thus reflect an internal bottleneck rather than indifference to pursuing value-creation. From across the table, a team that recognizes integrative potential but cannot act on it is indistinguishable from one that never did.

External outcomes also reshape internal coalition dynamics. For example, external resource pressure can trigger power struggles within hierarchical teams [33,34], showing that the dynamics between teams can

increase the political costs within teams. Mandate revisability is therefore dynamic rather than fixed.

Viewed this way, the seemingly contradictory findings in team-on-team negotiation research reflect different constraints on revision. When revisability is low, teams may possess useful information but fail to translate it into movement at the table. The source of the constraint differs across studies. Hierarchical structures can authorize changes quickly, but may suppress the information elaboration needed to recognize that change is warranted, reinforcing fixed-pie beliefs and value claiming [27,28]. Harmony norms in collectivist team contexts raise the political cost of voicing dissent, making it harder to reopen settled positions [9,25]. Low trust can prevent the internal consensus needed to authorize concessions, pushing teams toward impasse [8]. Accountability to a profit-oriented supervisor can make reversal especially costly for teams of friends, as challenging a settled position may also threaten the relationship [14,15]. Heightened intergroup competitiveness can harden a team's opening position, making later softening appear internally as capitulation rather than adaptation [5,35]. In each case, what appears across the table as competitive rigidity reflects a constraint inside the team.

However, when revisability is high, teams are better positioned to act on what they learn. The diverse perspectives and information exchange documented in early team-negotiation research [1] become useful when teams can act on them. Clear, complementary roles give expertise a pathway to trigger reconsideration [30,31]. Simultaneous agendas keep cross-issue trade-offs available [20–22]. Open communication allows teams to gauge internal support before committing at the table [23,24]. Pre-negotiation superordinate-goal dialogs reinforce this pattern, but only when they follow each team's internal preparation, leaving room to revise rather than locking positions in advance [36].

When the negotiation does not require repeated mandate revision (e.g., when the presence of a single competent member is sufficient to ask the value-creating questions), revisability provides no additional benefit, and team effects reduce to individual-level processes [4].

Implications and future directions

For practitioners, the central implication is that mandate revisability can be designed before negotiation begins. The structural features we listed are deliberate choices. Teams that adopt majority rather than unanimity decision rules, avoid over-centralizing authority, establish open internal communication, sequence issues simultaneously, and assign complementary roles with defined influence rights enter negotiations structurally positioned to act on what they learn.

For scholars, this perspective opens three directions. First, manipulating these features would establish which most strongly enhances mandate revisability. Second, the framework connects to emerging work on collective intelligence and reconceptualizes group performance as dynamic interactional processes involving information sharing, inclusive decision-making, and team learning, rather than as a stable cognitive capacity [37,38]. Whether collective intelligence produces consistent performance across negotiations remains untested; examining it as a predictor of mandate revisability would help connect two literature that have thus far remained separate.

Third, recent methodological advances make mandate revisability increasingly tractable to observe. Large language models can reliably code negotiation transcripts for process-level behaviors at scale [39,40], making it feasible to extract revision lags as a direct behavioral indicator. Generative AI may further support collective reasoning, collective memory, and collective attention within teams [41,42], though real-time feedback can cause overcorrection on targeted dimensions while disrupting others [43]. This underscores the need for system-level calibration rather than isolated interventions. AI-supported deliberation may also reduce the political cost of revision when authorization is contested [44,45].

Conclusion

Team negotiation research has documented cognitive advantages, relational risks, and accountability costs, but overlooked the internal architecture that determines whether these resources translate into adaptive behavior at the table. Mandate revisability, a team's capacity to reauthorize its position during negotiation, connects internal team structure to external exchange. Apparent rigidity, integrative failure, and preventable impasse often reflect internal authorization constraints rather than competitive intent. Understanding how internal structures shape what teams can do with what they learn is therefore a central challenge in the study of team negotiation. Mandate revisability provides an organizing lens for addressing this challenge, one that not only helps to explain a broad range of team effects but also points toward designing teams capable of realizing their potential.

Credit author statement

Leyi (Holly) Shi: Conceptualization, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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All authors reviewed and approved the final author contribution statement.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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* of special interest
** of outstanding interest

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Further information on references of particular interest

17. * This meta-analysis of 171 independent studies shows that team reflexivity positively predicts performance and is fostered by participation-supportive leadership, suggesting that revisiting mandates can improve outcomes but carries political costs because it requires team leaders to legitimize adaptation and manage internal team alignment.

25. * Across a meta-analysis and four studies, this paper shows that in East Asian negotiations, harmony concern rather than trust drives information exchange, which in turn affects joint gains. The findings suggest that cultural norms shape the constraints negotiating teams face when sharing discrepant information across cultural contexts.

27. ** Across four team-on-team negotiation experiments, this paper shows that compared to egalitarian teams, hierarchical teams elaborate less on available information, reinforce fixed-pie assumptions, and claim more value at the expense of joint gain. An intervention that encourages greater information elaboration within teams is also tested and found to mitigate these effects.

31. * Across four team-on-team experiments, explicit role differentiation increased joint value creation and allowed differentiated teams to claim a larger share of that value, making role structure a direct and current lever of mandate revisability.

32. * This paper shows that politically skilled team members are seen as more cooperative by their opponents and that team-level political skill may predict better deals and higher ratification rates, identifying team skill composition as an important driver of negotiation team success.

39. * This paper demonstrates that large language models can reliably code negotiation transcripts for behavioral markers at scale, opening a practical route to measuring revision lags and other process indicators central to mandate revisability.

41. ** Woolley frames generative AI as a coordination technology enhancing collective intelligence through collective reasoning, collective memory, and collective attention, with implications for reducing coordination costs in human teams working on complex tasks like team negotiations.

43. ** This study shows that real-time feedback on specific collaborative processes can prompt teams to overcorrect on targeted behaviors while inadvertently disrupting others, suggesting that improving mandate revisability for negotiating team performance requires system-level, not piecemeal, interventions.

44. ** This study shows that AI-facilitated deliberation can help diverse teams identify shared positions, suggesting that computational support may reduce the political cost of revision when human negotiators struggle to move from recognition to authorization.