

Leader Ambidexterity in Goal Orientation and Team Adaptive Performance

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Leader Ambidexterity in Goal Orientation and Team Adaptive Performance**Abstract**

Team goal orientation—that is, team members’ desire for learning or performance (or both) in achievement settings—has been treated as a stable team characteristic with benefits and costs that are contingent on the teams’ circumstances. From this view, team effectiveness is thought to be a function of a team possessing the “right” goal orientation in the “right” situation. However, because no single goal orientation is conducive to effective team functioning across the range of complex and changing circumstances that teams may face, a more fluid view of goal orientation may be helpful in understanding how goal orientation in teams may foster team adaptive performance. Specifically, we propose that teams whose work involves complexity and change may adapt more effectively as a result of leader-initiated shifts in goal orientation as circumstances evolve. To examine this possibility, we develop and examine the concept of *leader ambidexterity in goal orientation*—defined as a leader’s capability to switch across different goal orientations in response to various situational demands. Using a scale measure we developed and validated for this research, we explore the role of leader ambidexterity in goal orientation as a predictor of team adaptive performance using field data from 79 teams at a premier U.S. military academy. We found that team adaptive performance was higher in teams whose leaders scored higher on ambidexterity in goal orientation. This effect was robust even when accounting for stable leader and team-level goal orientation variables. We discuss theoretical and practical implications of this work.

Keywords: goal orientation, leadership, teams, leader ambidexterity, adaptive performance

Researchers have long been interested in *team goal orientation*, which refers to team members' desires for learning or performance (or both) in achievement settings (Porter, 2008). Team goal orientation has been treated as a stable team input that endures across various circumstances, with accumulated evidence suggesting that the benefits and costs of a team's learning or performance goal orientation depend on its specific situation. For instance, a *team learning orientation*—where members focus on building mastery and competence—may be beneficial when teams have diverse members (Li et al., 2022; Pieterse et al., 2013), yet it can impede the efficiency of teams when they are performing well (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2003). Similarly, a *team performance orientation*—where members focus on demonstrating competence—can be helpful when team members strongly identify with their team (Dietz et al., 2015), yet this same orientation may be problematic after a workload increase for teams with slack resources (Porter et al., 2010). The implication of this research is that team effectiveness is determined by a team possessing the “right” goal orientation in the “right” situation.

However, because no single goal orientation is conducive to effective team functioning across the full range of complex and changing circumstances facing some teams, a more fluid view of goal orientation may be useful. In contexts where team effectiveness hinges on *team adaptive performance*, or the degree to which team members appropriately adjust their behaviors and routines in response to complexity and change (Maynard et al., 2015; Rousseau & Aubé, 2020), teams may be advantaged by shifting their goal orientation to best meet new emerging situational demands as circumstances evolve, and team leaders may be uniquely suited to initiate such shifts (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2003; Dragoni, 2005). In line with this possibility, Alexander and van Knippenberg (2014) suggested that *leader ambidexterity in goal orientation*—defined as a leader's capability to switch across different goal orientations in response to various situational

demands—benefits teams engaged in innovation. Research that develops a better understanding of this leadership capability and its impact could provide a more complete theoretical account of goal orientation in teams whose work involves complexity and change, and in turn, could suggest interventions for enhancing the adaptability of hierarchical teams. To this end, our purpose is to describe leader ambidexterity in goal orientation beyond Alexander and van Knippenberg's (2014) brief account and empirically assess whether it uniquely predicts team adaptive performance beyond the effects of stable forms of leader and team goal orientations. Our primary study features a sample of 79 military teams engaged in a four-week field training exercise using a measure of our core construct that we developed and validated to support this effort.

Our research contributes to the literature in two ways. First, we contribute to goal orientation theory by offering a novel view of how team leaders can manage complex and changing circumstances via goal orientation to promote team adaptive performance. In contrast to previous work that paints leader and team goal orientations as enduring (e.g., Hendricks & Payne, 2007; LePine, 2005), we cast team leaders as potential orchestrators of *switches* in goal orientations to align their teams to the one best suited to the immediate situational demands (Alexander & van Knippenberg, 2014). We achieve a deeper conceptual understanding of our core construct's breadth, function, and relation to stable forms of leader and team goal orientations. The result is a means to integrate previous findings regarding team goal orientations and a path for leveraging the advantages of different goal orientations via goal orientation switching. For those wishing to investigate this novel form of goal orientation, we provide the essential tools: a developed construct, a validated measure, and theorizing generalizable to hierarchical teams whose work involves complexity and change.

Second, our research extends theory on team adaptation by highlighting leader

ambidexterity in goal orientation as a unique facilitator of team adaptive performance. Prior work has identified numerous strategies to prepare teams to adapt (e.g., crew resource management, Salas et al., 2006; overlearning, Driskell et al., 1992; leader briefings, Marks et al., 2000; commander's intent, Anderson, 1998). Others have recognized the need for hands-on leader support during moments of change and team adaptation (e.g., Waller & Kaplan, 2024). Here, we propose a form of *in-the-moment leader support* that entails the leader aligning their teams' goal orientations with immediate situational demands to enhance team adaptation. Our emphasis is on how leaders optimize team motivation, which differs from other supportive leader actions, such as sensegiving (Edmondson et al., 2001; Morgeson, 2005; Randall et al., 2011), leadership style flexes (Thommes et al., 2024), and dynamic task delegation (Klein et al., 2006).

Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

Team Goal Orientation

Inspired by research on individual goal orientation (e.g., Dweck, 1986), scholars have explored how goal preferences in achievement settings also operate at the team level, focusing primarily on learning and performance orientations (LePine, 2005; Porter, 2008). Whereas teams with a learning orientation pursue achievement through mastery or building competence, teams with a performance orientation seek to demonstrate competence by meeting or exceeding performance standards (Porter, 2008). Team goal orientation, shaped by team members' enduring preferences or by interactions that produce a shared state goal orientation (DeShon et al., 2004; Porter, 2008), is typically cast as a stable team input that impacts team functioning and effectiveness. Team scholars rarely consider the leader's goal orientation, and those who have also treat it as stable across circumstances (Hendrick & Payne, 2007; Porter et al., 2016).

Research on team goal orientation has yielded impressive, yet inconsistent findings. Team

learning orientation can improve team performance, decision-making, and creativity (DeShon et al., 2004; Gong et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2024; Park & DeShon, 2010), but these benefits depend on contextual factors—such as goal difficulty (LePine, 2005), team diversity (Li et al., 2022; Pieterse et al., 2013), prior team performance (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2003), and the presence of slack resources, time, and team performance orientation (Porter et al., 2010). Further, when learning is overemphasized or resources are limited, team effectiveness can suffer (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2003; Porter et al., 2010). Team *performance* orientation has received less attention, yet a similarly complex array of findings exists. Some research suggests that team performance orientation facilitates team creativity and performance (Gong et al., 2013; Pieterse et al., 2013), while other studies suggest it detracts from team effectiveness (Lee et al., 2024) or that its effects are contingent on factors such as team identification (Dietz et al., 2015), goal difficulty (LePine, 2005), and tight resources and time (Porter et al., 2010).

Importantly, scholars rarely examine team goal orientations beyond learning and performance (see Dietz et al., 2015, Gong et al., 2013 for exceptions). This contrasts with individual-level research, which points to three or four goal orientation dimensions and often includes an avoid motive (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; VandeWalle, 1997). For instance, VandeWalle (1997) argued that individuals seek to demonstrate competence by either (1) *proving* their abilities to others or (2) *avoiding* the appearance of incompetence. Team scholars, however, have focused primarily on the prove aspect in team performance orientation, presumably because the avoid dimension undermines team flourishing (Gong et al., 2013). Yet, there are times when some form of a team avoidance goal is likely critical to team effectiveness. In manufacturing contexts, for example, teams must prevent accidents while meeting production demands (Hofmann et al., 2017). Similarly, teams in high-reliability contexts need to be obsessive about

eliminating failure which can be calamitous and highly visible (Weick et al., 1999; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006, 2007). Thus, incorporating risk management—defined as the avoidance of debilitating failure by striving to minimize team capability and resources losses (Jaspersen & Peter, 2017; Zaccaro et al., 2022)—along with learning and performance, could provide a more complete theoretical account of the productive goals that teams pursue.

In sum, goal orientation in teams has been viewed as a stable team input. Research has focused on team learning and performance orientations and has identified benefits and costs that surface under specific circumstances. Although helpful for teams with stable demands, an alternative approach may be needed for teams that face complex and changing circumstances where risk management may also be relevant. Given that fluid, state goal orientations can emerge in response to the right stimuli (Alexander & van Knippenberg, 2014; Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2003), the possibility that teams can align and realign their goal orientation to new emerging situational demands as circumstances evolve offers promise for addressing this concern.

Team Adaptation and Adaptive Performance

Surgical teams (Vashdi et al., 2013), trauma resuscitation unit teams (Klein et al., 2006), and military teams (Hirschfeld & Bernerth, 2008) exemplify the myriad types of teams that conduct complex work in dynamic environments (Sundstrom, 1999). Such teams must adapt to changes (Cooper et al., 2001) arising from their external environment (e.g., a weather event impacting a ship's navigation devices; Hutchins, 1991), from within the team (e.g., team member injury; Christian et al., 2017) or from the complex nature of the work itself (e.g., multi-goal missions, Smith, 2014; multi-phase work, Alexander & van Knippenberg, 2014; Mathieu et al., 2017). Such changes and complexity introduce new situational demands that may make a team's normal course infeasible (Burke et al., 2006a; Maynard et al., 2015), requiring the team to adjust

its routine to align with the new demand (LePine, 2005). Teams that adapt well in these cases experience favorable outcomes, such as mission effectiveness, superior performance, and decision-making accuracy (Diedrich et al., 2005; Hollenbeck et al., 2011; LePine, 2003).

The nature of team adaptation is messy, iterative, and non-linear. To adapt to complexity and change, teams cycle through and revisit different activities—sensemaking, situational assessment, executing an adaptive response, and reflective learning (Burke et al., 2006a; Pearsall et al., 2025). Each of these activities requires a different team goal orientation to properly focus and coordinate the team's activity. For example, during sensemaking or reflective learning, the team needs to seek out new information to understand emerging performance requirements, develop new capabilities, or reflect on its activities to build team competence (Kozlowski et al., 1996; Thommes et al., 2024). Research shows that teams are effective in these activities when they are learning oriented, presumably because they focus on gaining new information and improving (Edmondson et al., 2001; Koeslag-Kreunen et al., 2018; LePine, 2005).

Maintaining a team learning orientation, however, will not serve the team well as it faces other team adaptation activities. Teams are created to achieve goals (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2003; Mayo et al., 2025), and thus need to efficiently execute, even when performance routines are new (Burke et al., 2006a; Pearsall et al., 2025; Thommes et al., 2024). When teams hold a performance orientation, they tirelessly pursue success, work to become efficient, and use external benchmarks (e.g., outperforming other teams, Dietz et al., 2015) to gauge what else might be needed for success. Thus, a team performance orientation regulates the team's efforts to efficiently achieve noteworthy performance amongst their peers.

Yet, a team learning or performance orientation is unlikely to aid teams as they consider the risks associated with a dynamic or complex circumstance (e.g., psychological distress, injury,

financial ruin). Situational assessments of the urgency, severity, and endurance of an emerging challenge to the team's normal routines are critical (Pearsall et al., 2025). Such assessments require teams to evaluate imperfect information, determine the likelihood of losing critical resources, and take steps to preserve team capabilities and resources (Zaccaro et al., 2022). Thus, a team focus on risk management is critical when teams make such situational assessments because it invokes a vigilant mindset (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006, 2007).

In sum, to adapt to and thrive within complex and changing circumstances, teams must shift across goal orientations; otherwise, they risk misalignment between their current goal orientation and the demands of a specific circumstance. However, teams are unlikely to adapt their characteristic approach to work if left unguided (Hackman, 2002; Woolley, 2009), creating the need for a formal leader with the unique vantage and influence to intervene (Burke et al., 2006b; Morgeson et al., 2010; Waller & Kaplan, 2024). Thus, leaders who can detect the need to change and orchestrate a switch in the team's goal orientation to align it with the immediate situational demand may serve as an important catalyst of team adaptive performance.

Leader Ambidexterity in Goal Orientation

In their theoretical paper on project teams seeking radical innovation, Alexander and van Knippenberg (2014) described ambidextrous team leaders as those who prompt their teams to adaptively shift between learning and performance orientations. Building on their findings, we define leader ambidexterity in goal orientation as a leader's capability to switch across different goal orientations (i.e., learning, performance, risk management) in response to various situational demands. Leader ambidexterity in goal orientation is a specific form of ambidexterity that captures how well leaders toggle between opening (i.e., the exploration of emerging opportunities – learning) and closing behaviors (i.e., the exploitation of existing organizational

capabilities – performance, risk management; Alexander & van Knippenberg, 2014; Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008; Rosing et al., 2011), and is conceptually distinct from other related leader adaptability concepts. For example, leader switching behavior captures the leader's ability to change their management focus across team members, sub-groups within the team, and the team as a whole (Harris, 2012)—a shift across *different audiences* within the team rather than across team goal orientations. As another example, behavioral flexibility refers to the ability to switch across learned behaviors in response to familiar demands (Zaccaro et al., 1991), pointing to switching between familiar *leader behaviors* rather than team goal orientations. Finally, while leader adaptability (Baard et al., 2014) captures a leader's *comfort and effectiveness in novel situations*, this concept is silent about the activities enacted to meet new demands.

Linking Leader Ambidexterity in Goal Orientation to Team Adaptive Performance

Leaders who are ambidextrous in goal orientation are less biased in their sensemaking of the task environment and more responsive to cues that signal the team's need to adapt (Alexander & van Knippenberg, 2014). They are comfortable with different goal orientations, which may be critical as the team adapts its missions and strategies to complex and changing circumstances (Fleishman et al., 1991; Morgeson et al., 2010; Zaccaro et al., 2001). These leaders possess flexibility in their motivational response and shift across different goal orientations to pursue the one that makes the most sense to meet a new situational demand (Alexander & van Knippenberg, 2014). As such, ambidextrous leaders are accurate in their interpretations, fluid in their motivational responses, and situationally attuned. These attributes likely help boost their teams' adaptive performance.

Team leaders communicate their preferred goal orientation to induce the corresponding state goal orientation among their team members through their own behavior, interactions with

their team, and explicit direction (Dragoni, 2005). A shared state goal orientation emerges because members encounter cues signaling the desired goals and behaviors, which are further reinforced through team interactions (Ames & Archer, 1988; Dragoni, 2005). Evidence for the transmission of leaders' goal orientation to the team is compelling: teams adopt the same goal orientation as their leaders, even overriding their own natural goal orientation tendencies (Dragoni & Kuenzi, 2012). Team leaders orchestrate movement across goal orientations through their conversational emphasis, time permitting (Alexander & van Knippenberg, 2014). During team discussions, leaders may encourage the team to reflect or sense make (learning), inspire competent or competitive action (performance), or contemplate the risks involved in different courses of action (risk management).

When urgent demands face the team, leaders convey a shift in goal orientation through an abrupt change in behavior to illustrate to team members the novel focus and accompanying actions required of team members in the moment (Bandura, 1986; Dragoni, 2005). Leaders may also use abbreviated commands to convey such shifts (e.g., “hold up” to transition to risk management or “let’s go” to switch to performance), and this type of punctuated, as-needed communication is effective within teams (Stachowski et al., 2009; Waller et al., 2020 as cited in Waller & Kaplan, 2024). Moreover, as team members see their leader switch across these different goal orientations, they become attuned to rely on the leader’s just-in-time direction, hindering one entrenched team goal emphasis from developing (Zohar & Luria, 2004).

Unlike leader ambidexterity in goal orientation, characteristic leader goal orientations provide the same enduring cues to the team regarding the preferred goal orientation regardless of circumstance (Dragoni, 2005), which at times is ill-suited to different team adaptation activities. At the same time, we know of no evidence that teams flex their goal orientations on their own,

making it likely that frequent mismatches occur between team goal orientations and the demands required for team adaptation. For these reasons, we predict:

Hypothesis. Leader ambidexterity in goal orientation has a positive unique effect on team adaptive performance beyond the effects of stable leader and team goal orientations.

Overview of Studies

To examine our hypothesis, we first conducted a series of studies to create and validate a scale measure of leader ambidexterity in goal orientation (details may be found in [additional online material](#)).¹ As these studies indicate, our focal scale measure had strong content validity (see Study 1, [Online Supplement 1](#)) as well as convergent and discriminant validity relative to six orbiting constructs—leader self-monitoring, leader adaptability, leader competence, leader switching behavior, paradoxical leader behavior, and leadership self-efficacy (see Studies 2–4, [Online Supplement 1](#)). With qualitative data, we verified that leaders rated high in ambidexterity in goal orientation effectively switched across different goal orientations as circumstances changed, whereas those rated as low did so less effectively (see Study 5, [Online Supplement 2](#)). Study 6 (main study) tests our hypothesis, with supplementary analyses confirming that our measure of leader ambidexterity in goal orientation reflects more than just learning, performance, and avoid orientations and patterns thereof (VandeWalle, 1997; see [Online Supplement 3](#)).

Transparency and Openness

We adhered to all elements of the *Journal of Applied Psychology* methodological checklist. We describe our sampling plan, measures, data exclusions, and data analytic approach. Data were analyzed using the `lm` function in R v.4.2.2 (R Core Team, 2022). This study's design and its analyses were not preregistered. The dataset is not available due to an agreement with our

¹ These online materials can be found at OSF: https://osf.io/5dsza/overview?view_only=871981846b3548a498d542149e02e6e1

data partner, although the analytic code is available upon request. All studies received Institutional Review Board approval (Studies 1-4: Arizona State University (STUDY00021269; Title: Ambidextrous Leadership in Goal Orientation; Studies 5-6: the United States Military Academy at West Point (IRB-16-137; Title: Cadet Field Training Leadership Study).

Main Study Methods and Results

Sample and Procedure

We sampled military teams and their team leaders at a premier U.S. military service academy engaged in a four-week, high-fidelity field training exercise. This offered an ideal setting and population for examining leader ambidexterity in goal orientation. These teams must adjust to complex and rapidly changing circumstances to ensure “mission success and troop safety” (Maneuver Center of Excellence Public Affairs, 2024), and military squad leaders (hereafter “team leaders”) are expected to help their squads (hereafter “teams”) do so. We collected matched multi-source team data at three points in time during the training. Cadets (hereafter “team members”) were assigned to a team, consisting of 8-10 members, for the duration of the training exercise. Team leaders were assigned to lead one team and reported to a platoon leader and platoon sergeant (hereafter “second-line leaders”). Teams were nested in platoons, which formed companies, thus mirroring military hierarchy.

Data were missing at random for 28 teams, resulting in complete data for 79 teams. Team members were 19.47 years old on average ($SD = 1.16$) and 84.24% were men. Team leaders were mostly men (83.54%) and about one year older ($M = 20.56$; $SD = 1.13$). Second-line leaders were mostly men (% male platoon leaders = 89.87; % male platoon sergeants = 82.35). Platoon leaders tended to be a little older than the platoon sergeants (platoon leader $M = 21.42$ years; SD

= 1.39; platoon sergeant $M = 20.13$ years; $SD = .88$). Race, ethnicity and other demographic data were not collected to preserve respondent anonymity and at the request of our data partner.

Figure 1 overviews the training exercise and highlights instances that required teams to adapt and the timing of our measurements—collected through the completion of pencil-and-paper questionnaires by team members, team leaders, and second-line leaders. At the beginning of the field training (Time 1), we collected demographics and team leaders' and members' self-reported goal orientations (team member useable $N = 652$; response rate 76.38%; team leader useable $N = 88$; response rate 85.05%). Roughly two weeks later (Time 2), after team members had sufficient opportunity to observe their team leader, we collected team members' ratings of their leaders' ambidexterity in goal orientation (usable team member $N = 803$; response rate 87.34%). The exercise concluded with a multi-day cumulative performance event, during which teams faced complex missions, changing objectives, and unforeseen crises, such as lost equipment, team member injuries, and mission failures. Figure 2 illustrates possible disruptions and goal orientation switches needed within a sample military operations task. Finally, we collected the team adaptive performance measure at the end of this culminating event (Time 3) from 48 second-line leaders to ensure that they had time to observe teams within their command (response rate 87.50%). Our final data file consists of complete records matched across three time periods from different sources (matched team member $N = 514$; matched team $N = 79$).

Measures

Unless indicated otherwise, participants provided their ratings on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*).

Team adaptive performance. Following guidance from Baard et al. (2014) to contextualize adaptation, and consistent with previous efforts (e.g., Charbonnier-Voirin et al.,

2010; Han & Williams, 2008), we asked our research partner to identify the most relevant item within each of the 8 dimensions of individual-level adaptive performance from Pulakos et al. (2000). We adapted these 8 items to the team-level using a referent-shift approach (Chan, 1998), and thus our items referred to the team as the focal level of analysis (see Lee et al., 2024 for a similar approach). A sample item is “How often did this squad easily change gears in response to unexpected events and circumstances?” All items loaded onto one factor (eigenvalue = 4.75). A confirmatory factor analysis indicated good fit to the data ($\chi^2(20) = 61.89$, CFI = .93, SRMR = .05), and factor loadings ranged from .62 to .80. At Time 3, second-line leaders used these items to rate their teams’ adaptive performance (1 = *Never* to 5 = *Always*). Platoon leaders and platoon sergeants observed their teams extensively. Whereas platoon leaders witnessed more externally focused team activities, platoon sergeants were more hands-on with the internal functioning of the team. Because the two second line leaders had unique perspectives on team performance, we averaged their ratings. Despite their different vantage points, we found agreement in their ratings (median $r_{wg,j} = .97$), and that a substantial and statistically significant amount of variance in the ratings was attributable to the team ($ICC1 = .29$, $F(78, 62) = 1.75$, $p = .012$; Bliese, 2000).

Leader ambidexterity in goal orientation. We used the five-item scale measure we developed and validated for this study to measure leader ambidexterity in goal orientation (see Appendix A). Team members agreed on their ratings of their leader (median $r_{wg,j} = .92$) and their ratings indicated a meaningful construct at the team level ($ICC1 = .36$; $ICC2 = .80$, $F(78, 501) = 5.045$, $p < .001$). Therefore, we averaged member ratings within each team to form this measure.

Leader and team goal orientation. At Time 1, leaders and team members self-reported their goal orientations with VandeWalle’s (1997) commonly used 13-item scale. Sample items include “I am willing to select a challenging work assignment that I can learn a lot from” (5

items; learning); “I prefer to work on projects where I can prove my ability to others ” (4 items; performance); “I avoid taking on new tasks if there is a chance I might appear incompetent to others” (4 items; avoid). A printing error resulted in many participants missing one performance orientation item; this item was removed from analysis. To create team learning, performance, and avoid orientation scores, we averaged the team member ratings of each of their goal orientations (learning, performance, avoid, respectively) and aggregated these responses to the team level.² Leader goal orientation scores were derived by averaging the self-reported responses on the appropriate items for each dimension.

Control variables. We controlled for team members’ *technical ability*, as it may boost team adaptive performance (Christian et al., 2017). Using archival data, we calculated the percentage of team members within each team who were rated by military experts as being competent on essential military tasks. In addition, because gender influences team dynamics (LePine et al., 2002; Woolley et al., 2010) and our research site was male-dominated, we controlled for the *percentage of female members in the team* (0 = male and 1 = female).

Results

Table 1 presents variable descriptives, correlations, and reliabilities. We note that none of the singular leader goal orientations related to leader ambidexterity in goal orientation (learning $r = -.19$, *ns*; performance $r = -.18$, *ns*; avoid $r = -.09$, *ns*). Thus, the ability to switch between goal orientations was not related to having a general preference for any specific goal orientation.

To test our main hypothesis, we accounted for the hierarchical structure of our data: team members and leaders are nested within teams (i.e., Level 1) which form platoons (i.e., Level 2)

² We treat these aggregate constructs as additive in conceptualization and operationalization (Chan, 1998). These team-level constructs are comprised of the goal orientations of the individual team members and agreement among members is not central to the construct definition.

which then form companies (i.e., Level 3). Although our interest is in understanding the team, team variation may be influenced by platoon or company membership, creating non-independent team observations. To produce more precise estimates and not violate the OLS assumption of independent observations, we controlled for platoon and company membership using dummy variables (Bliese et al., 2020). This approach is equivalent to multi-level approaches and accomplishes the same goal of appropriately handling non-independent data (Bliese et al., 2020). Further, it is well-suited here because there are few platoons within companies, thus constraining the variance and making it difficult for multi-level models to converge without error.

The results of our regression models are presented in Table 2. In support of our hypothesis, leader ambidexterity in goal orientation was positively related to team adaptive performance beyond the effects of team members' technical ability and the percentage of female members on the team ($b = .30, SE = .11, p = .009$; see Model 1a), stable leader goal orientations ($b = .27, SE = .10, p = .011$; see Model 2a), and stable team goal orientations ($b = .33, SE = .11, p = .004$, Model 3a). The magnitude of this effect was surprisingly consistent across all models, explaining, on average, 7.5% incremental variance in team adaptive performance.³ In contrast, only one out of six of the singular leader and team goal orientation controls appears related to team adaptive performance (leader avoid $b = -.21, SE = .07, p = .007$, Model 4).

To examine the robustness of our findings, we calculated the cumulative probability of finding a significant effect for leader ambidexterity in goal orientation on team adaptive

³ The significant relationship between leader ambidexterity in goal orientation and team adaptive performance was robust to the exclusion of control variables (i.e., team technical ability, percentage of female team members) and platoon and company dummy variables. For the sake of comprehensiveness, we ran additional analyses to explore the possibility that leader (or team) goal orientations interact to facilitate team adaptive performance (Porter et al., 2010). We found that none of these interaction terms were statistically significant; yet, a statistically significant incremental effect of leader ambidexterity in goal orientation on team adaptive performance remained of roughly the same magnitude as in our main analyses in all these models (see [Online Supplement 3](#) for the results of the leader goal orientation models). Results of the other additional analyses are available upon request.

performance using bootstrapping with 10,000 iterations (Bliese & Wang, 2020). We found a 93% cumulative probability of finding this relationship to be significant. In contrast, the cumulative probabilities of finding a significant effect for other leader goal orientation conceptualizations were low or hovered around 50% (leader learn: 6%; prove: 43%; avoid: 56%). Given this evidence, we interpret the negative relationship between leader avoid orientation and team adaptive performance revealed in Models 2 and 4 as being tenuous. These results suggest that singular stable goal orientations are not reliably related to team adaptive performance. Instead, and in support of our theorizing, it appears that the leader's ability to switch across goal orientations is key for facilitating team adaptation.

General Discussion

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Our work contributes to the goal orientation and team adaptation literatures in several ways. First, by validating the effectiveness of a more fluid conception of goal orientation, we provide a novel approach to the study of goal orientation relevant for hierarchical teams whose work involves complexity and change. We observed that in complex and changing circumstances, stable leader and team goal orientations are not conducive to adaptation; instead, leaders' orchestration of goal orientation switches appears valuable for boosting team adaptive performance. This effect was strong and consistent across various models even when simultaneously considering the effects of stable leader and team goal orientations, which were not found to be robust. Our improved understanding of the nature and functioning of leader ambidexterity in goal orientation, along with the development and validation of a survey measure of this construct, equips researchers to further study this more fluid conception of goal orientation in hierarchical teams that face complex and changing circumstances.

Second, by illuminating the possibility that teams can leverage the advantages of different goal orientations across various situational demands, our work provides a means of integrating the complex array of empirical results found in previous studies regarding stable depictions of team learning and performance orientation (e.g., DeShon et al., 2004; LePine, 2005; Porter et al., 2010). For example, the previously identified benefits of a team learning (or performance) orientation likely emerged when teams achieved the kinds of matches described in this article between their stable goal orientation and the specific team activity studied (e.g., sensemaking, execution, situational assessment). Similarly, the failure to detect predicted impacts of team learning (or performance orientation) or the uncovering of detrimental effects may have occurred when the teams' goal orientation was mismatched to the focal task under study. From this view, the usefulness of stable team goal orientations as an antecedent to team effectiveness necessitates identification of all the various contingencies relevant to creating these matches and mismatches. In contrast, the usefulness of our fluid view of goal orientation may simply be dependent on whether situational demands shift in ways that require different goal orientations.

As such, by considering the full range of activities needed for team adaptation (Pearsall et al., 2025), our work points to the need to include a productive expression of the avoid orientation in our focal construct and provides the basis for clarifying its meaning and nature. Our theorizing and main study results suggest that a leader's focus on risk management to avoid failure at opportune moments is productive for teams whose work involves complexity and change. This insight is bolstered by supplemental qualitative findings (see [Online Supplement 2](#)) which indicate that leaders' avoid orientation manifested less effective leader behaviors than leaders' emphasis on managing risks. Indeed, our main study results suggest that a negative relationship may exist between a leader's avoid orientation and team adaptive performance, which is

directionally consistent with meta-analytic evidence (Payne et al., 2007; Van Yperen et al., 2014). This is likely because avoid-oriented individuals withdraw from the task, become anxious, and perform poorly (VandeWalle et al., 2019). We invite researchers to further refine this current and emerging understanding of the functional and dysfunctional expressions of a goal orientation centered on avoiding failure in team contexts.

Third, by considering leaders' stable goal orientations, we gain insight into the unique nature of leader ambidexterity in goal orientation. Indeed, we found that our focal construct is unrelated to each leader goal orientation and combinations thereof (see Table 1; Table 3.1; [Online Supplement 3](#)), thus, leaders do not appear to translate their own stable goal orientation into an ambidextrous form. Moreover, given that leader goal orientations were interrelated in ways that are consistent with prior research in magnitude and direction (Hendricks & Payne, 2007; Marquardt et al., 2021; Porter et al., 2016), it is not likely that their relationships with leader ambidexterity in goal orientation are due to an oddity in our sample. Rather, our results suggest that some leaders adeptly suspend their own stable goal orientation tendencies when the situation calls for it. Perhaps what differentiates ambidextrous leaders from those who endure in their goal orientation is their situational attunement and motivational flexibility—two capacities implied in our theorizing and that potentially can be learned (Smith et al., 2012).

Finally, by validating the utility of a unique, motivationally-based predictor of team adaptive performance, we advance theory regarding team adaptation. Our results show that teams led by someone who switches goal orientations to meet complex and changing circumstances adapt better than teams who do not have this form of leadership. This insight reveals how an achievement-related motivational state—specifically goal orientation—can be optimized in teams as they adapt by continually matching the appropriate goal orientation to the team's

immediate adaptation activity. This view is unique from other perspectives in this literature that have focused on strategies to prepare the team (e.g., leader briefings, Marks et al., 2000) or forms of leader support that are cognitive or behavioral in nature (e.g., sensegiving, Morgeson, 2005; dynamic delegation, Klein et al., 2006; leadership style switches, Thommes et al., 2024). We also note that although we advance a view that teams follow their leaders' motivational cues, this may not always be true. Indeed, leaders may encounter difficulties in orchestrating goal orientation switches if the team rejects the leader's authority due to their own pre-existing beliefs regarding "effective" leadership or because of blurred authority structures (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

Our research also has several practical implications. First, it appears that team effectiveness may hinge on the degree to which appropriate switching occurs among three goal orientations. Assessing leaders on how frequently they adopt each of these orientations would raise their self-awareness about whether they prioritize one orientation over others even when the situation demands otherwise. Second, it is possible that training leaders to become more ambidextrous in their goal orientation could improve team adaptability. Ideally, leader training would involve practice in recognizing the need to change course, adopting the goal orientation best suited to new demand and communicating adaptive shifts to the team. Third, our work suggests that when teams need to adapt frequently, selecting leaders with high levels of ambidexterity in goal orientation could promote team adaptive performance.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

Like any study, our findings need to be considered in the light of a few limitations. First, although we theorized that leader ambidexterity in goal orientation facilitates team adaptive performance through aligning and realigning the team's focus across different situational demands, we neither examined this mechanism directly nor are we able to definitively rule out

the possibility that this relationship could be explained by an unmeasured cause. However, two features of our research should help alleviate these concerns. First, our qualitative study (see [Online Supplement 2](#)) provides evidence that leader ambidexterity in goal orientation influences alignment of team member activities in ways that facilitate team adaptive performance; thus, we offer indirect support for the presumed theoretical mechanism. Indeed, our interviews revealed many accounts of how leaders who are high in ambidexterity in goal orientation cue their teams to behaviors suited to emerging conditions, equipping them to execute under complex and changing circumstances. Conversely, teams with leaders who were low in ambidexterity failed to align team goals with novel situational demands, as evidenced by team members expressing confusion, questioning, frustration, and a lack of team coordination. Second, because the foci of our independent and dependent variables differ (i.e., goal orientation of the leader versus behavior of the team) and were rated by different sources at different times (team members and two weeks later, second line leaders), many alternative third variable explanations for their association are mitigated or become more tenuous. Nevertheless, in the interest of testing the mechanism responsible for the association between leader ambidexterity in goal orientation and team adaptive performance more directly, we encourage researchers to incorporate longitudinal designs, perhaps using observational data, as well as laboratory and field experiments.

Second, we acknowledge that our conceptualization of leader ambidexterity in goal orientation incorporates risk management, which appears to capture a different type of striving than what VandeWalle (1997) intended in defining an avoid orientation. As such, we were careful not to equate the two concepts. Instead, we drew from VandeWalle's (1997) cast of stable goal orientations, which included the notion of avoidance, to illuminate a new way of thinking about the array of productive goal orientations among teams that face complexity and change. At the

same time, we note that the substitution of avoidance with risk management departs from convention, and thus, the issue could be explored in future research.

Third, because our study took place in the context of a military exercise, the extent to which our findings generalize to more ordinary work settings is unknown. Indeed, the specific demands that align with different goal orientations in this context may be quite different as compared to other types of work settings. However, there are many types of hierarchical teams that perform in dynamic contexts (e.g., management teams, project teams, action teams) which would likely benefit from leaders who are able to initiate shifts between team goals related to learning, performance, and risk management in response to changes in circumstances. Indeed, Alexander and van Knippenberg (2014) introduced the idea of leader ambidexterity in goal orientation when theorizing about how new product development teams navigate the varied challenges they face when trying to innovate. Nevertheless, researchers should examine how the impacts of leader ambidexterity in goal orientation apply to other types of teams and settings. It may also be useful to identify broad categories of demands that require different goal orientations to develop general principles regarding when leaders should shift goal orientations.

Conclusion

As an alternative to stable treatments of goal orientation in teams, we develop and validate the concept of *leader ambidexterity in goal orientation* and describe how and why it is particularly valuable for teams that operate in complex and changing circumstances. Our findings suggest that this construct can be reliably and validly measured and has a distinct positive influence on team adaptive performance apart from stable conceptualizations of leader and team goal orientation. We extend theory on goal orientation and team adaptation in exciting, novel ways and raise provocative theoretical questions for future research.

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Table 1*Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Reliabilities*

	<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>
1.	Team Adaptive Performance	3.95	0.53	(.90)									
2.	Leader Ambidexterity in Goal Orientation	4.14	0.55	.45**	(.95)								
3.	Leader Learning Orientation	4.09	0.66	-.01	-.19	(.89)							
4.	Leader Performance Orientation	3.32	0.87	-.20	-.18	.27*	(.71)						
5.	Leader Avoid Orientation	2.90	0.95	-.24*	-.09	-.35**	.27*	(.85)					
6.	Team Learning Orientation	4.03	0.27	.01	-.04	.02	.02	-.06	-				
7.	Team Performance Orientation	3.32	0.41	.09	.02	-.03	-.04	-.06	.16	-			
8.	Team Avoid Orientation	2.67	0.40	.05	.04	.15	.03	-.04	-.34**	.34**	-		
9.	Percentage of Female Team Members	0.14	0.06	-.21	-.33**	.13	.05	-.02	-.18	.00	.04	-	
10.	Team Technical Ability	0.26	0.14	.23*	.07	-.18	-.11	.15	.14	.00	-.10	-.14	-

Notes. $N = 79$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed). Coefficient alphas are shown on the diagonal.

Table 2

Model Results for Predicting Team Adaptive Performance

Variables	Model 1 Est. (SE)	Model 1a Est. (SE)	Model 2 Est. (SE)	Model 2a Est. (SE)
Intercept	4.75 (.30) **	3.32 (.60) **	5.38 (.51) **	3.82 (.76) **
Predictors				
Leader ambidexterity in goal orientation		.30 (.11) **		.27 (.10) *
Team Goal Orientation Controls				
Team learning orientation				
Team performance orientation				
Team avoid orientation				
Leader Goal Orientation Controls				
Leader learning orientation			.00 (.10)	.05 (.09)
Leader performance orientation			.02 (.07)	.02 (.06)
Leader avoid orientation			-.22 (.07) **	-.19 (.07) **
Other Controls				
Percentage of female team members	-3.46 (.95) **	-2.33 (.99) *	-3.85 (.90) **	-2.86 (.92) **
Team technical ability	.39 (.41)	.32 (.39)	.72 (.41)	.68 (.39)
Adjusted R ²	.38 **	.45 **	.48 **	.54 **
Δ Adjusted R ²	-	.07	-	.06

Notes. N = 79. The numbers in parentheses are standard errors. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$. Analyses control for non-independence via dummy codes for company and platoon. For brevity, the effects of the dummy codes are not presented and are available upon request. Change in Adjusted R² refers to the variance explained by leader ambidexterity in goal orientation.

Table 2 (continued)*Model Results for Predicting Team Adaptive Performance*

Variables	Model 3 Est. (SE)	Model 3a Est. (SE)	Model 4 Est. (SE)	Model 4a Est. (SE)
Intercept	2.88 (1.25)*	.76 (1.35)	4.39 (1.30)**	2.17 (1.43)
<i>Predictors</i>				
Leader ambidexterity in goal orientation		.33 (.11) **		.30 (.11) **
<i>Team Goal Orientation Controls</i>				
Team learning orientation	.37 (.28)	.50 (.26)	.28 (.26)	.40 (.25)
Team performance orientation	-.01 (.18)	-.04 (.16)	-.12 (.17)	-.13 (.16)
Team avoid orientation	.17 (.18)	.21 (.17)	.12 (.17)	.16 (.16)
<i>Leader Goal Orientation Controls</i>				
Leader learning orientation			-.00 (.10)	.05 (.09)
Leader performance orientation			.01 (.07)	.00 (.07)
Leader avoid orientation			-.21 (.07)**	-.17 (.07)*
<i>Other Controls</i>				
Percentage of female team members	-3.18 (.98) **	-1.83 (1.01)	-3.66 (.95) **	-2.47 (.97) *
Team technical ability	.25 (.43)	.13 (.40)	.59 (.44)	.49 (.41)
Adjusted R ²	.38**	.47 **	.46 **	.54 **
Δ Adjusted R ²	-	.09	-	.08

Notes. $N = 79$. The numbers in parentheses are standard errors. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$. Analyses control for non-independence via dummy codes for company and platoon. For brevity, the effects of the dummy codes are not presented and are available upon request. Change in Adjusted R² refers to the variance explained by leader ambidexterity in goal orientation.

Figure 1

Training Overview and Study Measurement Timing

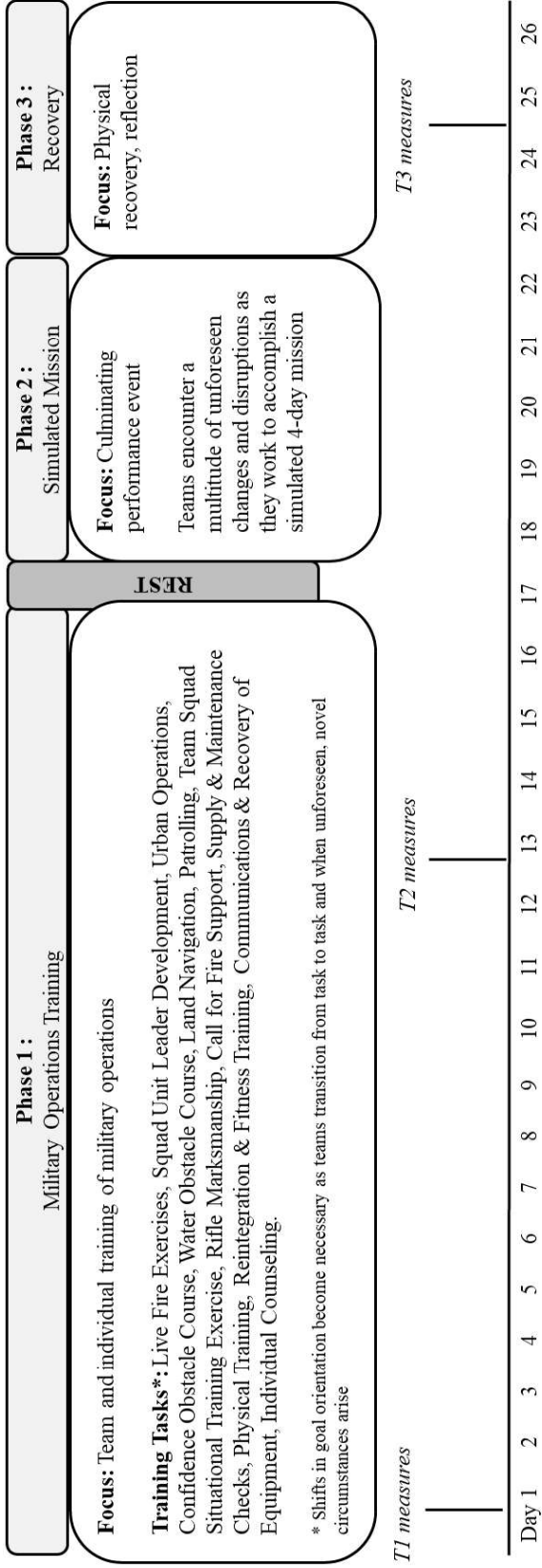
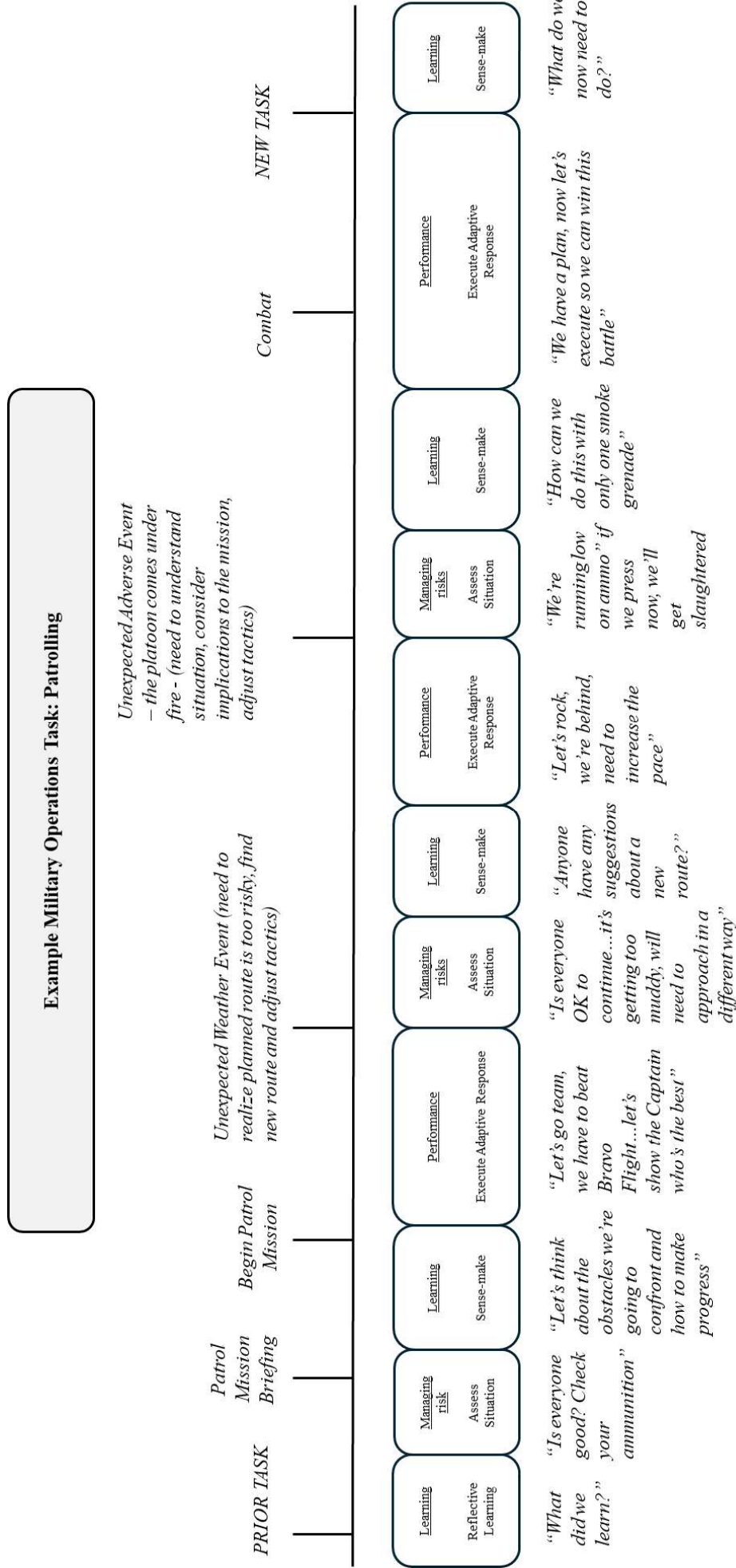


Figure 2

An Illustration of Goal Orientation Switches



Appendix A

Leader Ambidexterity in Goal Orientation Scale Measure

1. My squad leader is able to move effortlessly between a focus on learning, outperforming other squads, and the management of risk across different situations.
2. My squad leader effectively switches his/her focus between learning, outperforming other squads, and the management of risk.
3. My squad leader is effective at motivating our squad to learn, outperform other squads, or manage risk depending upon what the situation demands.
4. My squad leader can seamlessly alternate his/her focus on learning, outperforming other squads, or managing risk appropriately.
5. My squad leader is able to simultaneously balance an appropriate focus on learning, outperforming other squads, and risk management.