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Relational coordination at work

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Introduction

We live in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world characterised by trends in technology such as AI and ChatGPT, hybrid working, data overload, careers disruption, robotics, contingent work, and automation. Work has become more complicated, specialised, and interdependent, necessitating collaboration across roles, disciplines, businesses, and sectors to accomplish desired results. This chapter aims to: (1) briefly review trends in organisational design highlighting the rise of relational approaches; (2) evaluate the current state of the literature on relational coordination; (3) consider structural intervention as modes of implementation; and (4) propose directions for future research. According to research, relational coordination is connecting with a wide range of beneficial performance outcomes and the actions of businesses either encourage or undermine it through the design of their work systems.

The VUCA world is exerting significant pressure on organisations, threatening the fabric of their existence in some cases. Instead of the traditional image of organisations as machines, we have been moving towards the reality of flatter organisations that operate as organisms in an ecosystem, which includes a much wider range of stakeholders including customers, employees, suppliers, and venture capitalists amongst others. The shift from the bureaucratic form with its top-down hierarchy to a more organic form has been underway for quite some time as organisations respond to the dysfunctions of bureaucratic form. The limitations of bureaucratic organisation include restricted communication, internal focus, rigid rules, and a lack of cross-unit collaboration (Heckscher, 2015). Firms and organisations have developed new designs and processes to overcome these problems.

These new organisational forms seek to marshal and disperse resources in a flexible manner, reporting lines subordinate to action with undiluted

autonomy, leadership provides clear direction and agile teams are built to enable greater responsiveness and performance. However, the evolution from the bureaucratic organisational form to the more relationally based form has taken quite some time to develop. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, scientific management focused primarily on task efficiency and was characterised by time and motion studies, which regarded employees as a cog in the production machine. Next came the human relations movement pioneered by Elton Mayo and the famous Hawthorne experiments which highlighted the importance of the human factor in production and in particular the necessity to view an organisation as a social system. In France and Germany, sharp sociological critiques centred on the dysfunctions of bureaucratic organisations. In the 1950s further qualifications emerged from the Carnegie school of organisational learning. The long wall studies of coal extraction summarised by Trist et al. (1963) highlighted the importance of sociotechnical systems including teamworking, interdependence, and the importance of maintaining good social relations between individuals and groups involved. At the same time, motivation theories emphasising relational working began to be widely taught in business schools. In the 1960s and 1970s, the quality of working life movement emerged as a force in the US with its emphasis on job satisfaction, work enrichment, empowerment, job design and work–life balance. All these initiatives emphasise the importance of relationships. From the 1980s onwards, the network analysis of organisations emerged emphasising the importance of social relations in communication, brokerage, and mobilisation. The limitations of bureaucratic organisation include restricted communication, internal focus, rigid rules, and a lack of cross-unit collaboration (Heckscher, 2015). In response to these limitations a variety of organisational forms and team-based designs have been advanced. One of the most prominent of these has been the theory of relational co-ordination developed by Jody Gittell and colleagues at Brandeis University.

While researching the airline industry, Gittell (2003) developed the theory of relational coordination. Southwest Airlines had outperformed the other major airlines in terms of profitability for the previous 31 years, according to Gittell (2003). In fact, in 2002, Southwest had a larger market share than all other major US airlines combined. Southwest's success began with the provision of efficient and high-quality airline service while steadily and strategically expanding (Gittell, 2003). According to Gittell, Southwest's success was sustained by 'its ability to build and sustain relationships characterised by shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect' (Gittell, 2003: 12).

Initially developed in the airline industry, the theory of relational coordination has been further developed and tested, for example, in the contexts of surgical

care (Gittell et al., 2000), medical care (Gittell et al., 2008a), long-term care (Gittell et al., 2008b), care across the continuum (Weinberg et al., 2007), entrepreneurship (de Esteban Escobar, 2020), education (Margalina et al., 2017) and the criminal justice system (Bond & Gittell, 2010). It is to that theory we now turn, recognising its potency in breaking down organisational barriers, creating a shared vision, problem solving, shared knowledge and customer focus.

Relational coordination: theory and evidence

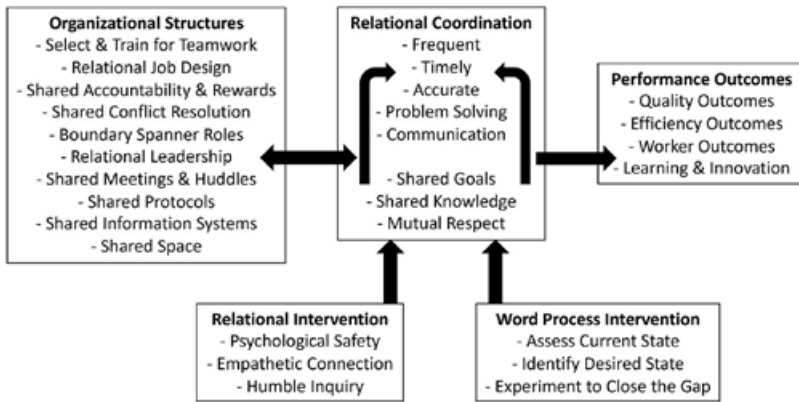
Accountability (determining who is responsible for what task), predictability (determining where and when task elements are likely to occur), and common understanding (developing shared perspectives on organisational goals and tasks) all assist in developing coordination mechanisms (Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). In this sense, coordination is both a work and a structural process, as well as a relational process. Relational coordination, a theory which focuses on the relational aspect required to carry out coordinating work, is a coordination mechanism that relies on interpersonal networks of interdependence (Gittell, 2002). To put it another way, relational coordination is the management of the interdependencies between role activities or tasks and the stakeholders who perform these tasks/activities (Gittell et al., 2008a). It is a mutually reinforcing communication and relational process for task integration.

Relational coordination explores seven components that allow individuals, workgroups, and/or organisations to collaborate and actively manage the interdependencies of their tasks. Four components describe communication characteristics: frequency, timeliness, accuracy, and a focus on problem solving (Gittell, 2006). Participants' communication frequency (i.e., how often stakeholders communicate regarding their work process) has been deemed to be important for coordination. Frequent communication keeps participants informed on, for example, task progress, and at the same time develop relationships as this allows team members to become more acquainted with each other's roles and work styles through frequent interaction. Effective coordination also requires timely communication i.e., how quickly professionals report significant information about a work process. Communication must also be accurate, because providing incorrect information causes errors and delays, as well as influencing future knowledge seeking. Similarly, communication improves when the emphasis is on problem solving rather than blaming (Gittell, 2002; Levin & Cross, 2004).

Gittell (2002) proposed three further components of high-quality relationships: shared knowledge, shared goals, and mutual respect. These three specific relationship components serve as the foundation for coordinated work (Weinberg et al., 2007). Shared goals motivate stakeholders to take on a holistic perspective beyond what they are responsible for and to direct their sub-work processes to the same overall objectives; shared knowledge engages systematic thinking which eases information processing and informs stakeholders of how they and others are contributing towards the shared goals; while mutual respect creates an understanding of, and consideration for, the contribution other stakeholders make towards achieving the desired outcomes (Gittell, 2002; Gittell et al., 2010; Bolton et al., 2021). Managers need to build relationships where knowledge is shared freely so that the team's collective expertise and contribution is leveraged towards a shared goal (Malhotra et al., 2007). Staples and Webster (2008) found that individuals are more willing to be part of teams where knowledge sharing is expected for performance regardless of task interdependence levels.

The main purpose of relational coordination is task integration and delivering high-performance outcomes consistently (Gittell, 2002; Prati & Prati, 2014; Claggett & Karahanna, 2018). Initially, relational coordination was perceived as a linear process (see Figure 12.1, top panel) with three main components: relational coordination, a mutually reinforcing process for work coordination and integration through communication and relating; organisational structures, aimed at strengthening the relational coordination; and performance outcomes, the consequences of relational coordination (Bolton et al., 2021). It was conceptualised that the stakeholders would move from fragmented relationships towards coordinating through cohesive relationships using linear organisational (unidirectional) structures. However, in practice relational coordination is not linear as work uncertainties are not predictable (Staples & Webster, 2008; Gittell et al., 2010; Claggett & Karahanna, 2018). To address this issue, the theory emulated other theories of change and took on a dynamic approach where relationships were developed across role networks through cross-cutting structures (Gittell, 2016). As seen in Figure 12.1, the arrow is bidirectional between the three components of relational coordination, as opposed to the linear model where the arrows were unidirectional.

For relational coordination to be effective in meeting performance outcomes such as increased efficiency and improved quality, it needs to be agile, as it involves a network of interdependent roles and relationship ties that are reinforced and supported by accurate, timely, frequent, and problem-solving communication (Gittell, 2002; Gittell et al., 2008a; Gittell et al., 2010). Therefore, this necessitated a re-evaluation of this assumption, and a more dynamic



Source: Bolton et al. (2021).

Figure 12.1 The linear and dynamic theory of relational coordination

theory was proposed to include two additional paths (see Figure 12.1, bottom panel) (Gittell, 2002; Prati & Prati, 2014). Relational interventions are aimed at shifting the culture towards a high level of relational coordination by creating new ways of thinking and relating, such as feedback strategies and coaching, while work process interventions are directed towards increasing participation in which the gap between a desired outcome and the current outcome is closed, such as a lean or agile approach to work (Schein, 2013; McMackin & Flood, 2019).

Relational, work process (Gittell et al., 2008a) and structural (Gittell et al., 2010) antecedents of relational coordination predict the development and strengthening of relational coordination. Relational interventions, for example, refer to the process of creating a psychologically safe environment in which people can speak up, make mistakes, and bring their whole selves to work (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). This includes identifying relational patterns, participant learning and behaviour modelling throughout the organisation. Work process interventions that support changes in the work itself include process mapping, role and goal clarification, and structured problem solving. Lastly, the implementation of cross-cutting organisational structures to institutionalise the new roles serves as an example of a structural intervention. Research shows that high levels of relational coordination are sustained when relational and work process interventions are paired with structural interventions which would reduce siloed thinking, as stakeholder attention will be directed towards the whole (Gittell, 2002; Gebo & Bond, 2020). The following section explores the

relational, work process and structural interventions that would strengthen relational coordination levels within the organisation.

Relational interventions

Relational interventions enable employees to view the organisation from a systemic perspective, that is, to be aware of the various organisational functions and the synergy required between them. It also raises awareness about how employees perceive themselves and their roles within the organisation. The interventions include facilitated dialogues, relational diagnosis, surveys, and role modelling. The orientation of these interventions is to 'level up' and make it so individuals/roles with historically less power are 'just as' influential as those with more (Gittell, 2016: 274). Relational interventions can also include the implementation of shared goals and shared decision-making processes, which can lead to greater trust and cooperation between team members.

Trust is an essential component of effective teamwork and is critical to the success of any organisation (Legood et al., 2023). When team members consistently fulfil their commitments and demonstrate their dependability, integrity, and competence, trust is built. When team members trust one another, they are more likely to share information, work together to solve problems, and take risks. Open and honest communication fosters trust by allowing team members to express their ideas, opinions, and concerns without fear of retaliation. This type of communication contributes to the development of a culture of trust and mutual respect, which is required for effective teamwork (Dirks & de Jong, 2022). Additionally, leadership development and coaching can also be effective in building strong relationships and improving performance.

Work process interventions

Work process interventions refer to intentional changes made to the way work is performed, i.e., transforming the work itself, in order to improve efficiency, quality, and effectiveness (Gittell, 2016). This can include changes to tasks, procedures, technology, and resources used in a work process. Gittell and Hajjar (2019) assert that a key strategy for developing work process interventions is to assess the current state, identify the future state, and experiment to close the gap and process mapping, role and goal clarification and structured problem solving, as tools that may aid in designing interventions.

Structural interventions

According to relational coordination theory, the strength of relational coordination depends on how organisational structures are designed (Gittell, 2000; Gittell & Douglass, 2012). Organisations can create opportunities for coordination through cross-cutting structures in three ways: human resource practices, programmed coordinating mechanisms and non-programmed coordinating mechanisms.

Human resource (HR) practices

HR practices are one way to introduce cross-cutting structures into the organisation. While most studies supported a positive relationship between selection and training for teamwork and relational coordination, one study found that there was no effect in team training in the youth service sector (Bolton et al., 2021), showing that structural interventions may be effective when paired with other forms of interventions. Relational job design calls for roles to be clearly defined but also fluid, seemingly opposing qualities especially in a linear model. However, research has found that relational job design promotes relational coordination and relational coordination supports relational job design, lending further support to the dynamic theory of relational coordination (Gittell, 2016). Relational leadership focuses on ‘the relational processes by which leadership is produced and enabled’ (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 667) and is especially effective when smaller supervisory spans are used, as these encourage a more relational approach to leadership (Bolton et al., 2021). A dynamic approach to relational coordination would include the input of the supervisees and taking a collaborative approach to work (Huber et al., 2020). Conflict resolution should be embedded as part of the formal structure for managers as research shows the higher the levels of relational coordination, the lower the levels of conflict (Bolton et al., 2021).

Programmed coordinating mechanisms

Programmed coordinating mechanisms have shown support for a dynamic theory of relational coordination. For example, shared protocols and routines have a reinforcing cycle with relational coordination whereby shared protocols strengthen relational coordination and high levels of relational coordination increase alignment of protocols, processes, and guidelines to work practices (Bolton et al., 2021). However, the implementation of shared information systems is more effective when there are moderate to high levels of relational coordination.

Non-programmed coordinating mechanisms

Non-programmed coordinating mechanisms increase relational coordination when two or more are used together. For example, some studies found that inter-organisational boundary spanners, individuals who connect the different roles to better coordinate their interdependence, were negatively associated with relational coordination but this improved when shared relational spaces were available (Bolton et al., 2021). Similarly, others showed that non-programmed coordinating mechanisms were only effective when the relational coordination is developed and strong (Gittell et al., 2010; Claggett & Karahanna, 2018). The section that follows discusses the performance outcomes associated with relational coordination.

Outcomes of relational coordination

Relational coordination improves quality, safety, efficiency, customer satisfaction, customer engagement, and worker well-being, while encouraging learning, innovation, and productivity (Gittell et al., 2010; Gittell, 2016). Furthermore, the need for relational coordination is heightened under three conditions: (1) interdependence, (2) uncertainty, and (3) time constraints (Gittell, 2002). Some of these outcomes may seem to be in opposition to each other, such as quality and efficiency, however, relational coordination has demonstrated that it is possible for an organisation to achieve multiple performance outcomes that may appear to be in tension with each other (Caldwell et al., 2017; Estriegana et al., 2021). Some outcomes are discussed in further detail below.

Relational coordination may improve quality where clients are co-producers of the outcomes as this reduces the chances of errors, lapses or delays (Gittell & Douglass, 2012). For example, patient care improved post-hospital discharge where family members or care givers were prepared for the care the patient needed at home (Bolton et al., 2021). When clients receive accurate and consistent information, it increases their confidence and trust in the providers which then increases customer satisfaction. However, in their systematic review, Bolton et al. (2021) found that some studies did not support a positive relationship between quality outcomes and relational coordination. This may indicate that co-production may not always be possible depending on the work context and task complexity.

Relational coordination is positively associated with efficiency which often leads to positive financial outcomes for organisations. Efficiency is likely to increase productivity which reduces time and costs while increasing output volumes (Bolton et al., 2021). This association was strongest when the conditions were uncertain, further supporting the argument for strong relational coordination (Gittell, 2002). However, not all studies support a positive relationship between efficiency and relational coordination. In those instances, it is possible that the level of uncertainty and task complexity may moderate this relationship (Bolton et al., 2021).

Relational coordination also has benefits for the employee in form of increase engagement and well-being (Gittell, 2008a). High levels of relational coordination may also provide employees with access to resources they need but may not have previously had, thereby increasing their opportunities to perform well (Gittell et al., 2008a).

With shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect it is easy to create an environment that would encourage learning especially as innovations transcend organisational boundaries (Bolton et al., 2021). With greater visibility of other stakeholders and open timely communication, the easier it is to find opportunities for innovation especially.

Relational coordination is a practical theory that considers how best to engage stakeholders in coordinating their interdependent roles. Initially, it was conceptualised as a linear theory, but it did not clearly describe how stakeholders could move from fragmented relationships to cohesive ones to coordinate their interdependent roles. The theory then evolved into a dynamic theory through which organisations can learn how to coordinate work across networks and role redesign where needed (Gittell et al., 2010). Structures were previously assumed to support relational coordination linearly, but research has shown that for effective implementation of these structures, a strong relational context is required (Claggett & Karahanna, 2018). Organisations are now able to use relational and work process interventions, such as cross-structural changes, to help stakeholders realise their desired outcomes. Outcomes can be organisation- and client-centric, such as quality and efficiency outcomes, and they can also be employee-centric, such as worker and learning and innovation outcomes (Gittell, 2002).

Change imperatives to implement relational coordination

Relational interventions and effective change management are concepts that are inextricably linked. In this regard, two distinct but complementary change approaches can be distinguished to implement relational, work process and structural interventions. Relational change models (e.g., Gittell & Hajjar, 2019) and change management models (e.g., Kotter, 2012) are two different approaches to managing and implementing change in organisations. While both models are designed to help organisations navigate change, they take different approaches to achieving this goal. While both approaches have distinct features and strengths, they differ in their focus and approaches to change.

Relational change models focus on the interpersonal relationships and dynamics that exist within organisations. These models seek to understand the complex relationships between individuals and groups, and how these relationships impact the success of change initiatives (Gittell, 2000). They also consider the psychological and emotional factors that influence behaviour and attitudes towards change, such as resistance, motivation, and commitment. These models emphasise the importance of communication, trust, and collaboration in driving change, as well as the need for leaders to engage employees and create a change-supportive environment (Gittell et al., 2010; Gittell, 2016). Change management models, on the other hand, focus on the process of change itself. These frameworks provide a structured approach to planning and executing change initiatives, and often include steps such as defining the change, identifying stakeholders, creating a communication plan, and monitoring progress. The goal of change management frameworks is to ensure that change is implemented smoothly, efficiently, and effectively (Lewin, 1951; Hughes, 2016).

Another factor to consider is the role of the change agent. In relational change models, the change agent is often viewed as someone who facilitates change by building relationships and assisting individuals and groups in understanding the benefits of change (Gittell, 2016). In change management models, the change agent may be a specific individual, e.g., the leader in charge of overseeing the implementation of change (Kotter, 1996). This difference in approach to the role of the change agent can have an impact on the success of change initiatives, as who leads change has a significant impact on how it is received and implemented.

While relational change models and change management frameworks are distinct approaches, they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, many organisations

employ a hybrid of the two models to manage and implement change. For example, an organisation may use a relational change model to understand its interpersonal relationships and dynamics, and then use a change management model to plan and implement change initiatives. Finally, relational change models and change management frameworks are both effective tools for managing and implementing change in organisations. The choice between the two approaches will be determined by the organisation's specific needs and goals, as well as the nature of the change initiative. Both models have advantages and disadvantages, and organisations may choose one or the other.

However, a number of key factors must be met before introducing relational coordination as a change initiative. These are outlined as a set of the following suggested conditions:

Condition 1: Understand the reasons for change

The value of using a diagnostic approach to understand a change problem or opportunity has been well documented (Armenakis & Harris, 2009). This refers to understanding the nature, cause, and scope of the problem, need, opportunity, or challenge that is being addressed. All key stakeholders must understand 'why' change is required. To put it another way, the reasons for change and how they will benefit individuals and the organisation must be communicated to all stakeholders. This aids in the development of understanding and support for the change effort. Regardless of the source of the change, it is critical to approach change management with a focus on maintaining and improving relationships rather than solely on the change itself (Gittel et al., 2010).

Condition 2: Using a relational leadership lens

Perhaps a more effective approach to leading change can be achieved by replacing the fundamental assumption about effective leadership as individual action with a relational leadership lens or using a relational leadership approach (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). This point of view emphasises co-creation rather than a leader-centric approach in which the leader's role is to formulate, communicate, and align employees to the vision. Uhl-Bien (2006: 665) defines relational leadership as 'a social influence process through which emergent coordination... and change (e.g., new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviours, and ideologies) are constructed and produced'. Relational leadership is therefore concerned with the development of positive relationships between leaders and followers, as well as among followers themselves. It entails creating a workplace where employees feel valued, supported, and empowered

to achieve their goals (Gittell, 2002). The relational leadership model emphasises communication, collaboration, empathy, and mutual respect in order to build strong relationships and achieve shared goals.

One of the fundamental concepts of relational leadership is that leadership is a two-way process. While traditional leadership models emphasise the leader's ability to influence and control their subordinates (Bass, 1999), relational leadership recognises that followers have agency and can influence their leaders (Gittell et al., 2010). This implies that the leader must be open to feedback and willing to listen to the needs and concerns of their followers. One of the key benefits of relational leadership is that it leads to higher levels of job satisfaction and employee engagement (Gittell et al., 2008a). When employees feel valued and supported, they are more likely to be committed to their work and to go above and beyond what is expected of them. This can lead to higher levels of productivity, innovation, and creativity. As a result, change is implemented through relational dynamics that play out within an organisation – people live and work in relation to others. Leadership is inextricably linked to complex relationships and collective sense-making processes (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012).

Condition 3: Creating a vision

A vision for change is a clear, inspiring, and compelling picture of what a company hopes to accomplish through change. It helps to align everyone within the organisation around a common goal by providing direction and focus for the change effort, i.e., translating opportunity into action (Kotter, 2012). A change vision can also motivate and engage employees by giving them a sense of purpose and direction. A change vision should be specific, measurable, and achievable, and it should consider the organisation's current state, desired future state, and the steps required to get there (Landau et al., 2006). Using a relational leadership approach, leaders will seek input and ideas from a wide range of stakeholders when developing a vision for change. This approach creates an inclusive vision that reflects the needs and aspirations of all stakeholders. Putting it differently, leaders can create a sense of shared purpose and meaning by taking a relational approach to change, which can help to drive the change forward and ensure its successful implementation.

Condition 4: Psychological safety and trust

It is critical to create an environment in which employees feel psychologically secure. This means that employees believe they can express their feelings and opinions without fear of repercussions. Employee perceptions of the con-

sequences of interpersonal risk-taking are thus referred to as psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). Employees who feel psychologically safe at work are more likely to ‘grow, learn, contribute and perform effectively in a rapidly changing world’ (Edmondson & Lei, 2014: 41). Similarly, trust can be considered a core component of psychological safety, i.e., trust in the organisation is required to feel that the organisation is supportive and open to new ideas (Ahmad & Huvila, 2019). Psychological safety can be regarded as an important organisational condition that facilitates and enables change. Employees who are willing to be vulnerable, share their emotions, speak up, and trust their leaders are more likely to view the proposed change positively and support the organisational change.

Condition 5: Communication

Employees must be mobilised to accept, commit to, and adopt proposed changes in order for organisational change to occur. Therefore, the communication should be enthusiastic, frequent, and communicate realistic expectations (Lewis et al., 2006). It must communicate the future direction by providing honest answers to the ‘what’, ‘why’, and ‘how’ of the change. Change recipients must understand: (1) what is going to change; and (2) how they will contribute to the change, i.e., what the change expectations are. This means that effective change communication will address employees’ informational as well as emotional needs. Relational leadership emphasises communication as a critical component in developing and maintaining strong relationships with followers. In fact, effective communication is frequently regarded as a pillar of relational leadership (Gittell, 2016). Leaders must recognise that communication is a two-way process that requires both communicating and active listening. This means that they are not only communicating their own ideas and perspectives to their followers, but they are also carefully listening to their followers’ feedback and ideas.

Condition 6: Understanding the context

Managing change is complex and there is no formula or recipe that can be used to implement and manage change effectively. It seems the way ahead is to formulate a customised implementation strategy which integrates best practice and is built on an understanding of the operating context of the organisation. Balogun and Hope-Hailey (2008) argue in this regard that the start-point in designing a context-sensitive approach towards change is to do a contextual analysis, as this will inform the change implementation options. This means asking questions, for example, about variables such as culture, power networks, rewards to consider, skillsets of people and availability of

resources, time available to implement the change, scope of the change and change readiness of individuals and the organisation. Identifying the enabling and restraining forces allows strategic alignment between the context and the development of a change implementation strategy.

Relational coordination: a research agenda

In this section, we look at major patterns that we believe should be crucial components of the relational coordination research agenda. We believe that the following areas are worth of study:

1. Conducting research in understudied healthcare settings such as rehabilitation, hospice, nursing homes, and public health clinics, as well as among interdisciplinary healthcare team members.
2. Increasing the number of qualitative, mixed-methods, or intervention studies that investigate relational coordination and staff outcomes for healthcare professionals. Qualitative research, for example, would provide a more in-depth understanding of healthcare professionals' job satisfaction and how relational coordination or lack of it may influence healthcare professionals' job satisfaction.
3. Remediating the lack of research on how demographic and diversity factors influence relational coordination among healthcare professionals and staff outcomes. Variations in education and experience levels, race, age, and gender may influence collaborative relationships among members in a workgroup.
4. Recognising the growing need for well-coordinated work calls for an evidence-based theory that can guide us to better coordinate work across boundaries and inform us about how such coordination can optimise desired outcomes.
5. Developing interventions to support RC within teams, across professions, across organisations, and in different care delivery settings.

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