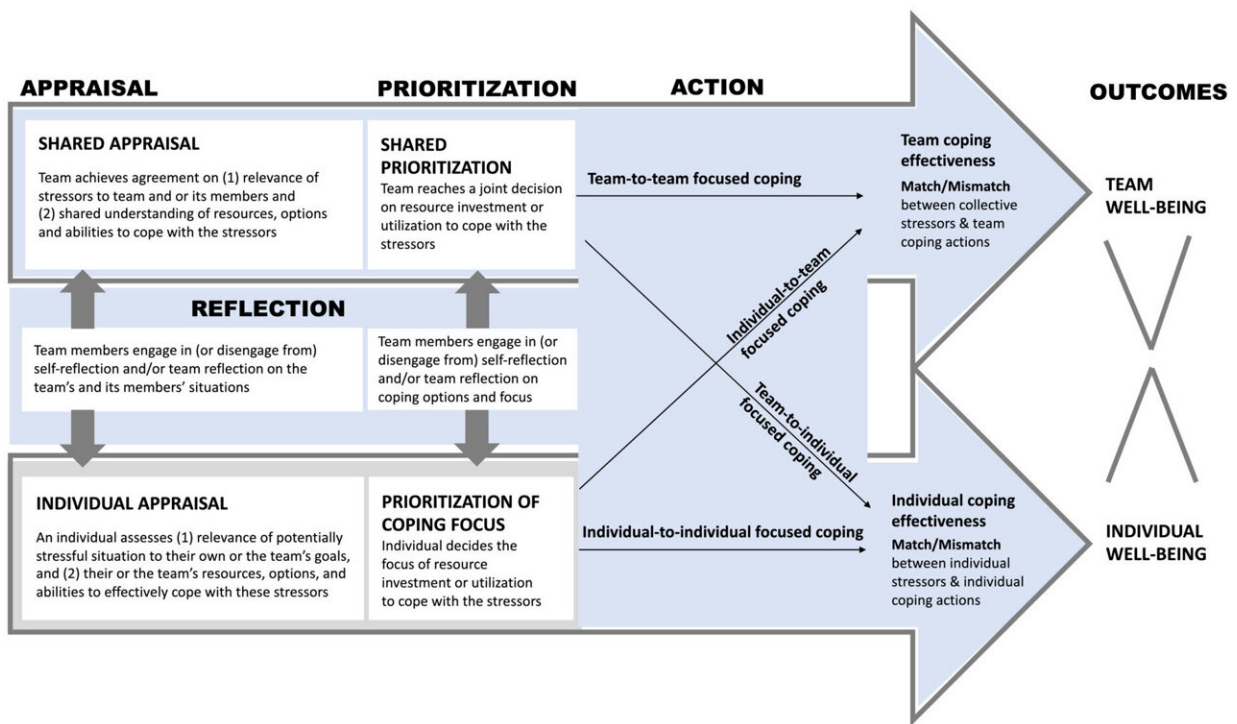


# When a team is less than the sum of its parts: Tensions between individual and team well-being

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Multilevel coping process model in teams. Note: (1) primary appraisal; (2) secondary appraisal. Credit: *Journal of Organizational Behavior* (2024). DOI: 10.1002/job.2782

New research highlights the conflict between the needs of a team and the needs of the individuals in the team—and what leaders can do to strike

the right balance to keep things ticking smoothly.

"If a team focuses only on the well-being and needs of the team, the individuals in it may be at risk of burnout. And the same is true in reverse: if individuals only care about themselves, team well-being suffers," says Emma Nordbäck, Assistant Professor at Hanken School of Economics.

The study, which was published in the [\*Journal of Organizational Behavior\*](#), studied 69 people across 12 teams during COVID. Participants kept a qualitative diary, and the researchers also used questionnaires to measure individual work engagement and the risk of burnout, as well as team viability, team satisfaction, and the quality of interpersonal relationships among members.

"Today's work life, where disruptions cascade one after another, highlights the differences between what teams need and what individuals need. Many of the participants in our study prioritized their own needs without regard for the well-being of the team, bringing down team morale and commitment," says Assistant Professor Niina Nurmi of Aalto University. Other people prioritized the survival of their teams and put a lot of effort into that at the expense of their own well-being—which meant their risk of burnout increased.

"Organizations do a lot of pulse surveys of employee well-being and measure individual engagement, but the well-being of a team isn't just the sum of the well-being of the people in it. The danger is that the results of surveys measuring individual well-being may look really positive, but at the same time, teams may no longer work at all," says Nurmi.

## **Well-being through reflection**

The responses also revealed that people's coping strategies often don't actually contribute to their recovery. "People often don't know what's stressing them and what to do about it. For example, if a person is feeling lonely, running alone in the woods may not be the best solution. On the other hand, if your team is overcommunicating and you feel overwhelmed, the team should create some rules for communication to enable both connection and focus time," says Nordbäck.

According to the study, the teams that engaged in reflection were the ones that did best, both as [individuals](#) and as a team. Team members openly shared their experiences and concerns, and then the team and members adapted their practices to ensure everyone's well-being. But these teams are in the minority, according to the study.

"Working life is now very individual-oriented, which means that the team may be forgotten altogether. That has an impact on the viability of organizations for the long haul," Nordbäck continues. Team leaders should make sure that [team members](#) are communicating and making informed compromises with each other so that individual and team well-being both receive enough attention.

**More information:** Emma Nordbäck et al, The multilevel well-being paradox: Towards an integrative process theory of coping in teams, *Journal of Organizational Behavior* (2024). [DOI: 10.1002/job.2782](https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2782)

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