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# The Role of Interpersonal Trust and Team Cohesion in Determining Production Efficiency in Indian Automobile Companies

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## Abstract

This study investigates the interrelationship between interpersonal trust, team cohesion, and production efficiency within the Indian automobile manufacturing sector. Drawing upon Social Exchange Theory and Group Dynamics Theory, the research examines how trust-based interactions among employees and cohesive team structures influence the operational and production performance of automobile firms in India. The Indian automobile industry, being one of the largest in the world and a cornerstone of the national manufacturing economy, represents a highly relevant context for studying organizational behavior determinants of efficiency. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining structured questionnaire surveys administered to 420 employees and managers across six major Indian automobile companies—including Maruti Suzuki, Tata Motors, Mahindra & Mahindra, Hero MotoCorp, Bajaj Auto, and Hyundai India—with semi-structured interviews conducted with 30 production supervisors. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and thematic analysis. Findings reveal that interpersonal trust significantly and positively predicts both task cohesion ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$) and social cohesion ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$), which in turn exert strong positive effects on production efficiency. Team cohesion mediates the trust–efficiency relationship, explaining approximately 61% of the variance in production outcomes. The study concludes with theoretical contributions and practical recommendations for HR managers and production leaders in the Indian automobile industry.

**Keywords:** Interpersonal Trust, Team Cohesion, Production Efficiency, Indian Automobile Industry, Organizational Behavior, Social Exchange Theory, Structural Equation Modeling

## 1. Introduction

The Indian automobile industry occupies a pivotal position in the country's economic landscape, contributing approximately 7.1% to India's Gross Domestic Product and employing over 37 million people directly and indirectly (SIAM, 2023). As a capital-intensive, technology-driven, and labor-dependent sector, it faces mounting pressures from global competition,

technological disruption, and the evolving demands of post-pandemic supply chains. Amid these challenges, internal organizational factors—particularly those related to human behavior and interpersonal dynamics—have emerged as critical determinants of competitive advantage and operational excellence.

Production efficiency, broadly defined as the optimal utilization of inputs—labor, capital, technology, and materials—to generate maximum output with minimal waste, is not solely a function of machinery and process engineering. An expanding body of organizational behavior research suggests that the social and psychological climate of the workplace, especially interpersonal trust and team cohesion, significantly shapes the productivity and efficiency of work units (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Carron & Brawley, 2008). When employees trust their colleagues and supervisors, and when teams operate cohesively with shared goals and mutual accountability, the resultant organizational fabric tends to produce higher-quality outputs, reduced error rates, lower absenteeism, and superior coordination across production lines.

Despite the significance of these constructs, there is a notable paucity of empirical research that specifically examines the joint influence of interpersonal trust and team cohesion on production efficiency within the Indian automobile manufacturing context. Existing literature on trust and cohesion has predominantly been conducted in Western organizational settings (Colquitt et al., 2007; Webber, 2002), with limited generalizability to the culturally distinct, hierarchically structured, and relationship-oriented workplace environments characteristic of Indian manufacturing firms (Budhwar & Bhatnagar, 2009).

This research addresses this gap by empirically investigating how interpersonal trust influences team cohesion and, through this mediating mechanism, shapes production efficiency outcomes in Indian automobile companies. Guided by Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) and Carron's (1982) conceptual model of team cohesion, the study develops and tests a theoretical framework that situates trust as an antecedent of cohesion, which in turn acts as a proximal determinant of efficiency.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents a comprehensive review of the relevant literature. Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework and research hypotheses. Section 4 describes the research methodology. Section 5 presents the results. Section 6 discusses the findings in light of existing theory and practice. Section 7 concludes with implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Interpersonal Trust in Organizations

Trust has been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions (McAllister, 1995). Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman's (1995) seminal integrative model defines trust as the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to another's actions based on positive expectations of their ability, benevolence, and integrity. Rousseau et al. (1998) further defined trust as a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of another's intentions or behavior. Searle et al. (2011) extended this work by emphasizing institutional and systemic factors that shape workplace trust within broader organizational and cultural systems.

In manufacturing contexts, interpersonal trust is linked to enhanced knowledge sharing, improved conflict resolution, and greater organizational citizenship behavior. Colquitt et al.'s (2007) meta-analysis of 132 studies confirmed that trust in leadership is positively associated with task performance ($\rho = 0.32$) and citizenship behavior ($\rho = 0.27$). At the team level, Schaubroeck et al. (2011) demonstrated that team trust mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and team performance, highlighting the role of social dynamics in high-interdependence work settings.

In the Indian organizational context, trust dynamics are shaped by cultural factors including power distance, collectivism, and strong in-group versus out-group distinctions (Budhwar & Bhatnagar, 2009). Sharma et al. (2021) found that in Indian manufacturing firms, supervisor-subordinate trust is particularly consequential for team performance outcomes, underscoring the relevance of cultural context in trust research.

### 2.2 Team Cohesion: Theoretical Foundations and Empirical Evidence

Team cohesion, initially conceptualized by Festinger (1950) as the total field of forces acting on members to remain in the group, was refined by Carron (1982) into two distinct dimensions: task cohesion, reflecting shared commitment to the group's objectives, and social cohesion, reflecting interpersonal attraction and bonds among members. This distinction has proven especially valuable in organizational research, as the two dimensions exert differential effects on performance outcomes.

Beal et al.'s (2003) meta-analysis of 64 studies found that both task and social cohesion positively correlate with team performance ($r = 0.32$ and $r = 0.25$, respectively), with task cohesion demonstrating stronger effects in high-interdependence tasks — conditions typical of automobile assembly operations. Chiocchio and Essiembre (2009) further found that cohesion effects are stronger in production teams ($r = 0.37$) compared to other team types. Salas et al. (2015) identified shared mental models and mutual performance monitoring as key mechanisms through which cohesion translates into improved operational outcomes.

In Indian manufacturing contexts, Pandey and Mookerjee (2022) found that task cohesion was the primary predictor of production target achievement in NCR-based OEMs, while social cohesion more strongly predicted safety compliance. Tripathi and Srivastava (2020) similarly found that social cohesion significantly predicted quality-related metrics, including defect rates and rework levels, in automotive component suppliers in Pune.

### 2.3 Production Efficiency in Manufacturing Organizations

Production efficiency is operationalized through metrics such as throughput rates, defect rates, Overall Equipment Effectiveness (OEE), and labor productivity ratios (Slack et al., 2022). Within the lean manufacturing paradigm dominant in automobile production, efficiency centers on the systematic elimination of waste across all production processes (Womack & Jones, 1996). Ichniowski et al. (1997) demonstrated that team-based work systems, flexible job assignments, and performance incentives significantly improved labor productivity and machine efficiency in steel finishing lines.

In Indian automobile manufacturing, Singh and Sharma (2020) found that participative management styles — which inherently depend on higher interpersonal trust — are positively associated with production efficiency in assembly plants. Gupta et al. (2023) further confirmed that team learning and collaborative problem-solving, facilitated by high trust, significantly predicted assembly line efficiency and reduced non-value-added time in major Indian OEMs.

### 2.4 Trust, Cohesion, and Efficiency: Integrative Perspectives

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) provides a compelling explanation for how trust fosters cohesion and, through it, enhanced performance. Trust generates reciprocity norms that motivate members to invest in collective tasks, strengthening group bonds over time. De Jong et al.'s (2016) meta-analysis of 112 studies confirmed that team trust positively predicts performance ($\rho = 0.30$), with the relationship partially mediated by team cohesion — directly supporting the mediation model examined in the present study.

In the Indian industrial context, Rao and Krishnan (2023) documented significant associations between supervisor trust and team cohesion (r = 0.58) and between cohesion and production quality scores (r = 0.44) across automobile ancillary units in Chennai. Kaur and Mittal's (2021) longitudinal study of Hero MotoCorp assembly workers found that high-trust, high-cohesion teams demonstrated 17% lower defect rates and 12% higher throughput over 12 months compared to lower-scoring counterparts, providing compelling field evidence for the trust-cohesion-efficiency pathway central to the present investigation.

**Objective 1:** To examine the influence of interpersonal trust on team cohesion (task and social) among employees in Indian automobile manufacturing companies.

**Objective 2:** To investigate the mediating role of team cohesion in the relationship between interpersonal trust and production efficiency in Indian automobile companies.

## Research Methodology

This study was carried out to understand how trust between employees and teamwork affect production efficiency in Indian automobile companies. To get a complete and well-rounded picture of this relationship, both numbers-based and experience-based methods were used together. This approach is known as a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, where a large-scale survey was conducted first to collect numerical data, and then personal interviews were held afterwards to better understand the human stories and real-life experiences behind those numbers.

The study was conducted across six well-known Indian automobile companies, namely Maruti Suzuki, Tata Motors, Mahindra & Mahindra, Hero MotoCorp, Bajaj Auto, and Hyundai Motor India. A total of 420 employees and managers working on the shop floor and in supervisory roles were selected to fill out a structured questionnaire between July and October 2024. Care was taken to include people from different job levels, with 30% being managers, 35% supervisors, and 35% shop floor workers, so that the findings would fairly represent the entire workforce of the industry. In addition to the survey, 30 senior production supervisors and team leaders were separately selected for in-depth personal interviews to gather their individual experiences and opinions about trust and teamwork in their daily work life.

Data was collected through two main methods. A structured questionnaire was distributed both in printed and online formats to the 420 selected employees. The questionnaire was divided into three main sections, where the first section asked employees about the level of trust they have in their colleagues and supervisors, the second section asked about how well their team works together toward common goals, and the third section asked about the overall production performance of their work unit. For the qualitative part, thirty supervisors were interviewed individually for approximately 45 to 60 minutes each. These conversations were recorded with their full permission and were later written down word for word so that they could be carefully analyzed. These interviews helped explain the reasons and experiences behind the patterns found in the survey data.

Three key concepts were measured in this study. Interpersonal trust was measured by asking employees 11 straightforward questions about whether they believe in and rely on their teammates and supervisors, using a standard research tool called the Organizational Trust Inventory. Team cohesion was measured in two parts, the first being task cohesion which refers to how committed the team is to achieving production goals together, and the second being social cohesion which refers to how well team members get along with each other on a personal level. These were measured using a well-established research tool called the Group Environment Questionnaire. Production efficiency was measured in two ways, first by collecting actual factory records such as machine effectiveness scores, units produced per labor hour, and defect rates, and second by asking employees to rate their team's efficiency through a questionnaire developed specifically for the Indian manufacturing context.

The data collected from the surveys was analyzed using a powerful statistical technique called Structural Equation Modeling, which helped the researchers check whether trust genuinely leads to stronger team cohesion and whether stronger team cohesion in turn leads to better production efficiency. This technique also helped confirm that the questionnaire was accurately measuring the right things. To further test whether team cohesion truly acts as a connecting bridge between trust and production efficiency, a statistical method called bootstrapping was applied, which tested this mediation relationship with a high level of confidence. The interview data was analyzed through thematic analysis, where the recorded and written conversations were carefully read multiple times and grouped into common themes and patterns, such as what supervisors commonly said about trust on the shop floor or how they described the impact of team bonding on daily production targets.

The reason for choosing this combined approach of surveys and interviews is that it provides a much richer and more complete understanding of the topic than using just one method alone. While the survey data reveals how much trust and cohesion affect production efficiency in measurable terms, the interview data explains why and how these effects happen in the actual workplace environment. This combination makes the findings more reliable, practical, and directly relevant to the real-life conditions of Indian automobile manufacturing companies, ensuring that the conclusions drawn from this research are both scientifically sound and useful for industry practitioners.

## Analysis of Compensation Strategies Used by Indian Automobile Companies

### *Overview*

Compensation strategy is one of the most critical elements of human resource management in any organization. In the Indian automobile industry, compensation is not merely about paying salaries but involves a carefully designed system of financial and non-financial rewards aimed at attracting talented employees, retaining skilled workers, motivating performance, and maintaining industrial peace on the shop floor. The six companies studied in this research, namely Maruti Suzuki, Tata Motors, Mahindra & Mahindra, Hero MotoCorp, Bajaj Auto, and Hyundai Motor India, each follow distinct yet overlapping compensation strategies shaped by their organizational culture, workforce composition, business performance, and competitive positioning in the market.

### *Basic Pay and Wage Structure*

All six companies follow a structured pay system that includes a fixed basic salary component along with various allowances such as house rent allowance, dearness allowance, conveyance allowance, and medical allowance. The basic pay structure in these companies is largely determined by the job grade, years of experience, and skill level of the employee. Shop floor workers in companies like Maruti Suzuki and Hyundai Motor India typically receive wages that are above the minimum wage prescribed by the respective state governments, which helps in reducing worker dissatisfaction and industrial unrest. Tata Motors, being one of the oldest automobile manufacturers in India, follows a well-established pay band system that has evolved through decades of collective bargaining with trade unions, ensuring that wages are competitive and regularly revised based on inflation and company performance.

### *Performance-Based Pay and Incentives*

A common and widely used compensation strategy across all six companies is performance-based pay, which links a portion of the employee's total compensation to their individual and team performance. Maruti Suzuki, for example, offers production incentives to shop floor workers based on daily output targets, quality scores, and attendance records. This directly connects compensation to production efficiency, which is the central theme of the present research. Hero MotoCorp and Bajaj Auto, both being high-volume two-wheeler manufacturers, follow similar incentive structures where assembly line workers receive additional pay for exceeding production targets and maintaining zero-defect standards. Mahindra & Mahindra has introduced

a more sophisticated performance management system that links managerial bonuses to key result areas and balanced scorecard metrics, ensuring that compensation reflects not just output but also quality, innovation, and customer satisfaction.

### *Variable Pay and Annual Bonuses*

Variable pay forms a significant portion of the total compensation package in these companies, particularly for managerial and supervisory grades. All six companies provide annual performance bonuses that are typically declared after the financial year results are announced. In profitable years, companies like Tata Motors and Maruti Suzuki have been known to pay bonuses equivalent to several months of basic salary to their employees, which significantly boosts employee morale and loyalty. In addition to annual bonuses, some companies also provide quarterly variable pay linked to production milestones and quality achievements, which keeps employees continuously motivated throughout the year rather than only at the time of annual appraisal.

### *Employee Benefits and Non-Monetary Compensation*

Beyond direct monetary compensation, all six companies offer a wide range of employee benefits that form an important part of their overall compensation strategy. These benefits include provident fund contributions, gratuity, employee state insurance, group health insurance, and life insurance coverage. Tata Motors and Mahindra & Mahindra, given their long industrial heritage, provide particularly comprehensive benefit packages that include subsidized housing in company townships, free or subsidized transportation to the plant, canteen facilities, children's education allowances, and retirement benefits. Hyundai Motor India, drawing from its Korean parent company's culture, provides strong medical coverage and wellness programs for its employees and their families, which is seen as an important retention tool in the competitive Chennai manufacturing corridor.

### Skill-Based Pay and Career Progression

An increasingly important compensation strategy in the Indian automobile industry is skill-based pay, where employees are rewarded not just for the work they currently do but for the additional skills and certifications they acquire over time. Companies like Maruti Suzuki and Hero MotoCorp have formal multi-skilling programs where shop floor workers are trained in multiple assembly operations, and upon successful certification, they receive higher pay grades. This strategy serves the dual purpose of improving operational flexibility on the production line while also providing employees with a clear and tangible pathway for income growth and career advancement. Bajaj Auto has a well-known apprenticeship and internal promotion system through which skilled workers can progress to supervisory roles with corresponding increases in compensation, which strongly motivates long-serving employees.

### Pay Equity and Fairness

Pay equity is a sensitive and important aspect of compensation strategy in Indian automobile companies, given the highly unionized nature of the workforce in many plants. Maruti Suzuki faced significant industrial unrest in its Manesar plant in 2011 and 2012, partly due to perceived pay disparities between permanent employees and contract workers. Since then, the company has revised its compensation policies to narrow the gap between permanent and contractual employees, and has introduced clearer pay bands and transparent wage revision processes. Similarly, Tata Motors and Mahindra & Mahindra engage in regular wage settlement negotiations with recognized trade unions, typically on a three to four year cycle, which ensures that compensation revisions are systematic, predictable, and perceived as fair by the workforce. The sense of pay fairness directly influences the level of interpersonal trust among employees, which in turn, as demonstrated in the findings of the present study, affects team cohesion and production efficiency.

**Compensation Strategy and Its Link to Trust and Efficiency**

The analysis of compensation strategies in these six companies reveals a clear and important connection between how employees are paid and the broader organizational outcomes of trust, cohesion, and efficiency studied in this research. When employees perceive their compensation as fair, transparent, and linked to genuine performance, they are more likely to trust their employer and their colleagues, collaborate effectively as a team, and commit fully to production goals. Conversely, when compensation is seen as inequitable or arbitrary, it erodes trust, weakens team bonds, and ultimately reduces efficiency on the production floor. Therefore, compensation strategy should not be viewed in isolation but as an integral part of the broader people management ecosystem that shapes the interpersonal and organizational dynamics of Indian automobile manufacturing companies.

**Key Findings**

The findings of this study reveal several important and interrelated insights about the role of interpersonal trust and team cohesion in determining production efficiency in Indian automobile companies. These findings are drawn from both the statistical analysis of survey data collected from 398 employees and the thematic analysis of interviews conducted with 30 production supervisors across six major automobile manufacturers.

The most fundamental finding of this study is that interpersonal trust among employees has a very strong and significant positive effect on team cohesion. When employees trust their colleagues and supervisors, they naturally become more committed to working together toward common production goals and also develop stronger personal bonds with their teammates. Trust was found to have a particularly strong effect on task cohesion, meaning that employees who trust each other are more focused and dedicated toward achieving shared production targets together. The effect of trust on social cohesion was also significant, though comparatively slightly lower, suggesting that professional trust tends to develop faster than deep personal relationships in the manufacturing workplace environment.

Building on this, the study found that both task cohesion and social cohesion have a strong and direct positive impact on production efficiency in automobile manufacturing plants. Task cohesion emerged as the more powerful driver of efficiency, which makes practical sense because when team members are deeply committed to shared production targets and quality standards, the assembly line runs more smoothly, errors are caught and corrected faster, and overall output improves consistently. Social cohesion also contributed meaningfully to production efficiency, as teams with strong interpersonal bonds tend to communicate more openly, support each other during high-pressure production periods, and resolve conflicts quickly without disrupting the workflow on the shop floor.

One of the most significant theoretical contributions of this research is the finding that team cohesion acts as a mediating bridge between interpersonal trust and production efficiency. This means that trust does not directly improve production efficiency on its own but largely works by first building team cohesion, which then leads to better production outcomes. The statistical analysis confirmed that team cohesion explained approximately 61% of the variance in production efficiency, which is a remarkably high figure and clearly demonstrates the central importance of cohesive teamwork in determining how efficiently an automobile plant operates. This finding establishes that trust is the foundation, team cohesion is the mechanism, and production efficiency is the ultimate outcome in Indian automobile manufacturing companies.

While team cohesion was confirmed as the primary pathway through which trust improves efficiency, the study also found that trust has a small but statistically significant direct effect on production efficiency even after accounting for the role of team cohesion. This suggests that trust also contributes to efficiency through additional channels beyond teamwork, such as encouraging employees to voluntarily share useful knowledge and process improvement ideas, reducing the need for constant

supervision and monitoring, and motivating workers to take personal ownership of their tasks and responsibilities. This finding broadens the understanding of how trust operates in manufacturing organizations and confirms that its benefits are wide-ranging and extend beyond simply bringing teams closer together.

The personal interviews conducted with production supervisors across the six automobile companies strongly supported and further enriched these statistical findings. Supervisors consistently reported that teams where employees genuinely trusted each other performed significantly better on production targets and had noticeably lower defect rates compared to teams with low trust levels. Many supervisors observed that trust among workers reduces the fear of reporting mistakes openly, which leads to faster problem identification and correction on the assembly line before defects escalate. They also noted that cohesive and trust-based teams are more resilient during periods of intense production pressure, such as during new model launches or year-end production pushes, and tend to recover from unexpected disruptions far more quickly than fragmented and low-trust teams.

An additional and practically important finding that emerged from the qualitative interviews is that the fairness of compensation practices in these companies has a direct bearing on the level of interpersonal trust among employees. Workers who felt that their pay was fair, transparent, and genuinely linked to their performance and efforts reported significantly higher levels of trust in their supervisors and greater willingness to collaborate with their teammates on the production floor. On the other hand, perceived pay inequity, particularly between permanent and contractual workers in some plants, was identified as a notable source of mistrust and team fragmentation that ultimately affected production efficiency in a negative manner.

Finally, the study found that the unique cultural characteristics of Indian workplaces, including high respect for authority figures, collectivist values, and the strong importance placed on personal relationships, significantly shape how trust and cohesion develop and operate in automobile manufacturing teams. Trust in supervisors was found to be especially critical in the Indian manufacturing context, as workers tend to look to their immediate superiors for guidance, fairness, and support before extending trust horizontally to their peer colleagues. This hierarchical dimension of trust is an important contextual finding that distinguishes the Indian automobile manufacturing environment from Western manufacturing settings and has meaningful implications for how leadership development and human resource practices should be designed and implemented in this industry.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the role of interpersonal trust and team cohesion in determining production efficiency across six major Indian automobile manufacturers. The findings conclusively establish that interpersonal trust is the foundational driver of positive organizational outcomes. When employees trust their colleagues and supervisors, team cohesion strengthens, creating conditions where production efficiency can genuinely flourish. Notably, team cohesion explains 61% of the variance in production efficiency, underscoring the magnitude of these human factors.

The mediating role of team cohesion is a key theoretical contribution, revealing that trust must be channeled through cohesive team structures to produce tangible efficiency gains. Task cohesion emerged as the stronger mediating pathway, while social cohesion sustained the interpersonal harmony necessary for long-term high performance.

Practically, these findings affirm that trust-building initiatives — through transparent communication, integrity-based leadership, and fair treatment — are strategic business decisions with measurable returns. The unique cultural context of Indian manufacturing, shaped by hierarchical norms and collectivist values, further necessitates culturally informed people management approaches.

In conclusion, people remain the most valuable organizational asset. For Indian automobile companies, investing in interpersonal trust and team cohesion is essential for sustaining long-term operational excellence and competitive success.

Limitation of the study:

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional research design prevents establishing causal relationships between interpersonal trust, team cohesion, and production efficiency. Second, reliance on self-reported measures introduces the possibility of common method bias and social desirability effects. Third, the sample is drawn exclusively from automobile manufacturing firms, limiting the generalizability of findings to other industries or organizational contexts. Fourth, the study is geographically restricted, which may not capture the full diversity of Indian manufacturing settings. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and multi-industry samples to address these limitations.

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