

The New York Times

What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team

A condensed version of the article written by Charles Duhigg in The New York Times, Feb 25th 2016.

Summary

1. Studies show that people working in teams achieve better results
2. In 2012 Google embarked on a project to discover what made the perfect team!
3. Despite studying 180 teams across Google, the research team initially failed to discover any patterns about the composition of the best performing teams
4. What the researches realised is that performance was more determined by group norms than any other factor;
5. Two key norms the researchers identified were - equal turn-taking; and demonstrations of empathy, or 'social sensitivity' - creating a culture that Amy Edmondson has termed 'Psychological Safety'

Many of today's most valuable firms have come to realize that analyzing and improving individual workers isn't enough... at many companies, more than three-quarters of an employee's day is spent **communicating with colleagues**.

In Silicon Valley, software engineers are encouraged to work together, in part because studies show that **groups tend to innovate faster, see mistakes more quickly and find better solutions to problems**. Studies also show that people working in teams tend to achieve better results and report higher job satisfaction. If a company wants to outstrip its competitors, it needs to influence not only how people work but also how they work together.

Five years ago, **Google**... became focused on building the perfect team. In 2012, the company embarked on an initiative — code-named **Project Aristotle** — to study hundreds of Google's teams and figure out why some stumbled while others soared.

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Project Aristotle's researchers began by reviewing a half-century of academic studies looking at how teams worked. Were the best teams made up of people with similar interests? Or did it matter more whether everyone was motivated by the same kinds of rewards? Based on those studies, the researchers scrutinized the composition of groups inside Google: How often did teammates socialize outside the office? Did they have the same hobbies? Were their educational backgrounds similar? Was it better for all teammates to be outgoing or for all of them to be shy? ... They studied how long teams stuck together and if gender balance seemed to have an impact on a team's success.

No matter how researchers arranged the data, though, it was almost impossible to find patterns — or any evidence that the composition of a team made any difference. “We looked at 180 teams from all over the company,” Dubey said. “We had lots of data, but there was nothing showing that a mix of specific personality types or skills or backgrounds made any difference. The ‘who’ part of the equation didn't seem to matter.”

As they struggled to figure out what made a team successful, (the researchers) kept coming across research by psychologists and sociologists that focused on what are known as “group norms.”

Norms are the traditions, behavioral standards and unwritten rules that govern how we function when we gather: One team may come to a consensus that avoiding disagreement is more valuable than debate; another team might develop a culture that encourages vigorous arguments and spurns groupthink. Norms can be unspoken or openly acknowledged, but their influence is often profound... when they gather, the group's norms typically override individual proclivities and encourage deference to the team.

After looking at over a hundred groups for more than a year, Project Aristotle researchers concluded that understanding and influencing group norms were the keys to improving Google's teams.

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...What interested the researchers most was that teams that did well on one assignment usually did well on all the others. Conversely, teams that failed at one thing seemed to fail at everything. The researchers eventually concluded that what distinguished the “good” teams from the dysfunctional groups was **how teammates treated one another. The right norms, in other words, could raise a group’s collective intelligence, whereas the wrong norms could hobble a team, even if, individually, all the members were exceptionally bright.**

As the researchers studied the groups **they noticed two behaviors that all the good teams generally shared.** First, on the good teams, **members spoke in roughly the same proportion**, a phenomenon the researchers referred to as “equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking.”

Second, the good teams all had **higher than “average social sensitivity”** — a fancy way of saying they were skilled at intuiting how others felt based on their tone of voice, their expressions and other nonverbal cues...

Within psychology, researchers sometimes colloquially refer to traits like “conversational turn-taking” and “average social sensitivity” as aspects of what’s known as **psychological safety** — a group culture that the Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson defines as a *“shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.”* **Psychological safety is** *“a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up,”* Edmondson wrote in a study published in 1999. *“It describes a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves.”*

.. For **Project Aristotle**, research on **psychological safety** pointed to particular norms that are vital to success. There were other behaviors that seemed important as well — like making sure teams had clear goals and creating a culture of dependability. But **Google’s** data indicated that **psychological safety**, more than anything else, was critical to making a team work.

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...What **Project Aristotle** has taught people within **Google** is that no one wants to put on a “work face” when they get to the office. No one wants to leave part of their personality and inner life at home. But to be fully present at work, to feel “**psychologically safe**,” we must know that we can be free enough, sometimes, to share the things that scare us without fear of recriminations. We must be able to talk about what is messy or sad, to have hard conversations with colleagues who are driving us crazy. We can’t be focused just on efficiency. Rather, when we start the morning by collaborating with a team of engineers and then send emails to our marketing colleagues and then jump on a conference call, we want to know that those people really hear us. We want to know that work is more than just labour.

Project Aristotle is a reminder that when companies try to optimize everything, it’s sometimes easy to forget that success is often built on experiences — like emotional interactions and complicated conversations and discussions of who we want to be and how our teammates make us feel — that can’t really be optimized.