

WHAT GOOGLE LEARNED FROM ITS QUEST TO BUILD THE PERFECT TEAM

Do you ever wonder why some teams work well together and others don't? What's the secret ingredient – is it the people, their personalities, education, background, gender, or experience?

Teams have been studied at length by researchers. According to a recent New York Times [article](#), "What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build The Perfect Team," the secret ingredient is actually none of the factors listed above.

"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," according to Abeer Dubey, a manager in Google's People Analytics division.

The article profiles a 25-year-old Yale School of Management student, Julia Rozovsky, who participated in two study groups, hoping to find one she enjoyed. She found that both groups had people who were bright and outgoing. However, one group had people jockeying for leadership positions, criticizing one another's ideas, and experiencing conflicts around who was in charge. The other group was quite different – it was warm and friendly.

With businesses becoming more and more global and complex, employees are spending a majority of their day communicating in teams, according to a study published in the Harvard Business Review. Yet there has been little agreement, until now, on exactly what distinguishes the high functioning teams from the rest.

There's no question that people working in teams achieve better results. Teams tend to be more innovative, recognize mistakes more quickly, and come up with better solutions to problems. In a 2015 Yale study, executives say that profitability increases when workers are persuaded to collaborate more. And with better results comes higher job satisfaction, so there's strong evidence for the effectiveness of teams.

Perhaps you're thinking: How is my team performing? Are they really as cohesive and effective as they could be? How can you tell if your team is in trouble? More specifically, what are the signs that your team needs help?

At [LRI](#), we focus on developing high-performing teams and organizations based on high levels of trust. For nearly 20 years, we have worked with many different management teams and identified the following questions for assessing the overall health of the team:

In team meetings:

- Do certain people dominate the team's meetings?
- Do certain people stay quiet? Even when asked if they have an issue to raise, are they quick to say "no" or "not really?"

- Do people avoid asking each other tough questions? Yet, when you talk to them privately, they have many challenging issues to face?
- Do some people avoid making a commitment to getting things done?
- Does the team leader criticize members of the team?

Outside of team meetings:

- Do people disparage the team or question its value?
- Do people try to move to other teams or departments?

Much of what generates team cohesion and effectiveness has to do with whether team members feel safe sharing their ideas, thoughts, concerns, and opinions. Other important factors are having clear goals and group norms that govern how the team functions. What's unique about group norms is that even though team members may behave one way as individuals, they follow the group norms when they're together. Whether spoken or merely understood, norms have profound influence when it comes to teams.

In 2012, Google launched Project Aristotle – a quest to build the perfect team. They studied 180 teams to figure out why some faltered and others succeeded. They found no evidence that the composition of the team was influential in the outcomes. What they found was this: psychological safety was clearly vital to a team's success. This includes "equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking" and "average social sensitivity" (which means being intuitive to expressions, tone of voice and other nonverbal clues).

Bottom line: What mattered was a feeling – the feeling of being safe. Members of a team perform best when they feel safe. Feeling safe is about having equal time to talk. This means not feeling stunted, cut off, or criticized about what you have to say when you choose to speak up in front of the team.

Google's researchers concluded that it is not a matter of whether people are competitive or analytical, introverted or extroverted, etc., but that they are happiest in teams where they feel safe. Feeling safe is the secret ingredient to a team's success.