

# The surprising ingredient in high performing teams



Marie-Claire Ross.

Is it as simple as that to build a great team you need great people? MARIE-CLAIRE ROSS investigates.

**A**s a facilities manager, being able to seamlessly work together with teams and other business units is critically important for you to deliver an effective service.

But it's not always easy.

Despite humans having an inherent need to work with others, the stark reality is that many workplace teams deteriorate into a group of people working independently, refusing to share important information or even ideas. Our competitive drive and selfish need for survival often unwittingly sabotages our efforts.

Whether you love them or loathe them, teams are here to stay. According to the CEB Corporate Leadership Council, engaged teams grow profits three times faster than disengaged ones.

Given how important teamwork is for organisational success, what can you do to improve how well your team performs?

## THANK YOU DR GOOGLE

Many of us love Google for being able to instantly provide us with answers to our most pressing questions from "Am I a psycho?" right through to "Where is the internet?" Now, we can also love it for spending millions of dollars to uncover what makes a great team.

Five years ago, Google was baffled as to what made its teams effective. Google's top brass assumed that throwing in bright people – a PhD and some highly technically accomplished engineers – and getting them to work together was the answer. In other words, who was on the team. But they were wrong.

Over four years, Google researched over 180 active teams and sifted through 50 years of academic research. They studied the validity of an astonishing 250 attributes that affect teams – attributes such as: were the best teams made up of people with similar interests or motivated by the same rewards or who socialised outside work hours? The results were astounding.

None of these commonly valued attributes were important. It didn't matter if close friends were on a team or even people with high intelligence. What Google discovered was that who is on the team doesn't actually matter. What was critical was how the team functioned together.

## THE POWER OF GROUP NORMS

In psychology and sociology, how a team functions is classified under the term 'group norms'. These are the unwritten rules and behavioural standards that dictate how we behave when we get together.

When Google studied all of the different behaviours exhibited in teams, they found that only two impacted high performance. These were:

- **Equality in conversational turn-taking** – everyone in a team gets a chance to talk and speak up. Over a couple of months, everyone gets roughly the same airtime.



## If we don't trust those in a team, we shut down, stop cooperating and leave our best selves at home.

If only one person or a small group spoke out frequently, the collective intelligence of the team fell.

- **High social sensitivity** – Members expertly question how others feel based on their non-verbal cues such as tone of voice or facial expression. Poor performing teams were less sensitive to each other. The only proviso for these behaviours was that they had to all be modelled by the team leader, in order to make them standard behaviours for the team.

But what these two behaviours produced together was the most important of all – psychological safety. That's the secret ingredient of high performing teams.

### FEELING SAFE

In teams and the workplace in general, employees need to see and feel evidence that their workplaces are safe and that their fellow co-workers are looking out for them. More importantly, workers need to trust that their boss and their colleagues really care.

To foster a work environment where people feel safe, it all boils down to trust. Trust is essential; without it, social groups can't function properly. Trust is how you connect to everyone in your workplace.

And it all starts with the leader.

Google has now introduced a checklist for every team leader that specifies acknowledging each member, listening to everyone in meetings and querying non-verbal cues.

It's not rocket science. But what it highlights is that the little things really do matter.

Of course, the irony is that this outcome is nothing new. It's just that Google engineers used the power of data to validate what most of us really know deep down, but are too afraid or even confused to vocalise. If we don't trust those in a team, we shut down, stop cooperating and leave our best selves at home.

Now, Googlers (Google employees) understand their feelings when they walk out of a team meeting feeling unsatisfied. They also have the common language and framework to discuss those emotions.

In the end, while those data nerds may not have been able to express their feelings before, they have helped not only themselves, but the rest of the world realise the power of leaders who champion emotional safety and trusting their teammates. ●

\* These are examples of some of the most common questions typed into Google. They are not actual queries typed in by the author.

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