

ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOUR





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DECODING TEAM SUCCESS: INSIGHTS FROM GOOGLE'S PROJECT ARISTOTLE

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, Google embarked on an ambitious endeavor to uncover the secrets of effective teamwork. Dubbed Project Aristotle, this initiative brought together experts from various fields - statisticians, organizational psychologists, sociologists, and engineers - to analyze hundreds of teams within Google, aiming to identify the key elements that differentiate successful teams from unsuccessful ones. This comprehensive analysis explores the profound insights gained from this groundbreaking study and examines their implications for team dynamics and performance in modern workplaces. As organizations increasingly rely on team-based structures, understanding the fundamental principles of effective teamwork becomes crucial for success in today's collaborative work environment.

DISTINGUISHING WORKGROUPS FROM TEAMS: THE ROLE OF GROUP NORMS

Project Aristotle's findings highlighted the crucial role of "group norms" - the unwritten rules governing how teams' function. The researchers discovered that the distinction between workgroups and teams lies not in their composition, but in their behavioral dynamics and shared understanding. As noted in the article, "Norms can be unspoken or openly acknowledged, but their influence is often profound" (Duhigg, 2016). Teams exhibited distinctive characteristics that set them apart from mere workgroups:



1. INTERDEPENDENCE - Team members rely on each other's expertise and contributions to achieve goals



2. SHARED GOALS AND ACCOUNTABILITY - All members work towards common objectives and share responsibility for outcomes

3. COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING - Decisions are made through collaboration and consensus rather than individual authority

The key difference emerged in how these norms manifested. In effective teams, norms fostered psychological safety and equal participation, whereas in workgroups, individual performance often took precedence over collective success. The research revealed that successful teams developed unique cultures that encouraged risk-taking, open communication, and mutual support.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY: THE FOUNDATION OF EFFECTIVE TEAMS

A critical finding was the importance of psychological safety, which 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 (Duhigg, 2016). This environment allows team members to speak up, share ideas, and make mistakes without fear of retribution or embarrassment. The absence of psychological safety can stifle creativity, hinder collaboration, and ultimately impact team performance.



THE FIVE KEY FACTORS: EXAMINING COHESION, SOCIAL LOAFING, AND COLLECTIVE EFFICACY



COHESION AND TASK PERFORMANCE

The findings strongly suggest that cohesion supports team performance when the group values task completion. According to the research, some teams had a bunch of smart people who figured out how to break up work evenly while other groups had average members, but they came up with ways to take advantage of everyone's relative strengths (Duhigg, 2016). This indicates that cohesion, when aligned with clear goals and mutual respect, enhances team effectiveness.

THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Teams with high emotional intelligence demonstrated stronger cohesion. Members of successful teams showed an ability to read non-verbal cues and emotional states, contributing to better communication and collaboration. The study found that "good teams all had high 'average social sensitivity'" (Duhigg, 2016), indicating that emotional awareness plays a crucial role in team dynamics.

COMBATING SOCIAL LOAFING

To combat social loafing in larger groups, several teamwork skills proved essential:

1. EQUAL PARTICIPATION - "On the good teams, members spoke in roughly the same proportion"

2. SOCIAL SENSITIVITY - Team members who "seemed to know when someone was feeling upset or left out"



3. CLEAR ROLE UNDERSTANDING - Ensuring each member knows their responsibilities and contribution value

4. MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY - Creating a culture where all members feel responsible for team outcomes

As evidenced in the study, teams where "everyone had spoken roughly the same amount" by the end of the day performed better, indicating that encouraging equal participation effectively counters social loafing (Duhigg, 2016). This balance in communication ensures that all team members remain engaged and contributive.

STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING EQUAL PARTICIPATION

- Implementing structured discussion techniques
- Rotating leadership roles for different tasks
- Creating opportunities for quieter members to contribute
- Making sure that all voices are heard on regular basis.

THE IMPACT OF COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

The research suggests that collective efficacy generally helps teams when properly cultivated. However, its effectiveness depends on the presence of psychological safety. As one engineer noted, his team leader created "a safe space for you to take risks," which contributed to the team being "among Google's accomplished groups" (Duhigg, 2016).



FACTORS INFLUENCING COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

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1. Past performance experiences
2. Vicarious experiences (observing similar teams succeed)
3. Verbal persuasion and encouragement
4. Emotional states within the team

TEAM A VS. TEAM B: ANALYSIS AND CHOICE

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Looking at the two team scenarios, I would choose to join Team B. While Team A appears efficient on the surface, Team B exhibits stronger indicators of psychological safety and effective collaboration. The contrast between these teams illustrates the difference between traditional efficiency-focused groups and truly collaborative teams.

TEAMWORK SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

Team A:

- Efficiency-focused
- Task-oriented
- Strong individual expertise
- Structured communication
- Limited emotional expression
- Hierarchical decision-making



Team B:



- Collaborative problem-solving
- Active listening
- Psychological safety
- Flexible thinking
- Emotional openness
- Shared leadership

Team B demonstrates stronger teamwork competencies because they align more closely with the findings from Project Aristotle. Their interactive, supportive environment fosters the psychological safety that the research identified as crucial for team success.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONVERSATIONAL TURN-TAKING

One of the most significant findings from Project Aristotle was the importance of "conversational turn-taking." In successful teams, members spoke in roughly equal proportions throughout the day. This balance ensures that all perspectives are heard and that no single voice dominates the conversation. Team B exemplifies this principle through their interactive discussion style, where members freely contribute and build upon each other's ideas.

BUILDING THE PERFECT TEAM

As a leader of Team B, I would focus on instilling these additional competencies:

1. Structured goal setting while maintaining psychological safety
2. Balanced time management without stifling creativity



3. Documentation of decisions and action items

4. Regular reflection on team dynamics

5. Conflict resolution skills

6. Appreciation for diversity in thinking and problem-solving approaches

These competencies are critical because they combine the best aspects of both teams while maintaining the psychological safety that Project Aristotle identified as fundamental to team success.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

To develop these competencies, several strategies could be employed:

1. Regular team-building exercises focused on trust and communication

2. Workshops on effective feedback and constructive criticism

3. Creating opportunities for social bonding outside of work tasks

4. Establishing clear team norms and revisiting them periodically

REAL-WORLD APPLICATIONS

CASE STUDY: MATT SAKAGUCHI'S TEAM

The article presents a compelling case study of Matt Sakaguchi, a Google manager who applied Project Aristotle's findings to his team. By sharing personal vulnerability - disclosing his Stage 4 cancer diagnosis - Sakaguchi created an environment where team members felt safe to open about their own challenges. This led to improved communication and team performance, demonstrating how psychological safety can transform team dynamics.



CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION



While the principles identified by Project Aristotle are powerful, implementing them can be challenging:

1. Overcoming ingrained organizational cultures
2. Balancing efficiency with emotional openness
3. Measuring and quantifying soft skills
4. Maintaining psychological safety during high-stress periods

CONCLUSION

Google's Project Aristotle has revolutionized our understanding of team dynamics by emphasizing the importance of psychological safety and equal participation over individual brilliance or rigid structures. The research demonstrates that effective teams aren't built on the traditional metrics of individual performance or expertise, but rather on creating an environment where all members feel safe to contribute, take risks, and be themselves. As we move forward in creating and leading teams, the focus should be on fostering these elements while balancing them with clear goals and accountability.

The study's findings challenge conventional wisdom about team composition and leadership. Rather than focusing solely on assembling the most talented individuals, organizations should prioritize creating the right environment for team success. This involves cultivating psychological safety, encouraging equal participation, and developing emotional intelligence among team members.



The perfect team, as it turns out, isn't about perfection at all - it's about creating a space where imperfect humans can work together effectively, supported by mutual trust and understanding. As workplaces continue to evolve, the insights from Project Aristotle provide a valuable roadmap for building teams that are not just productive, but also emotionally intelligent and psychologically safe. In this environment, innovation can flourish, challenges can be overcome, and true collaboration can thrive.

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