

How to determine the right mix of skills for any given project?

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Today, big companies, small start-ups and university laboratories are dedicating their efforts to understand team dynamics and patterns with one aim: to make employees faster, better and basically more productive assets for their professional employers. Boston university denotes that it all comes down to figure out why someone is much more effective than another one (Duhigg et al., 2016).

A Harvard Business Review article (Cross et al., 2021) tells us that people working in teams tend to achieve better results and innovate faster. But it also showed that the 'best' employees or top performers at companies were the ones that felt less engagement in their team, which prompts us to the right question: how to build the perfect team? The answer seems to be not that simple, since the article HBR wrote denies the common sense answer of 'gather the best people together'.

There are three important types of collaborative resources: informational, social and personal. Informational resources are knowledge and skills; social resources are awareness, access and position; and personal resources are a person's time and energy (Cross et al., 2021). These resources are involved in productivity, and therefore, building a team with the right mix of skills (informational resources) involves the correct balance of the other types of resources. The relationship between this balance seems to be that the greater number of connections in the team, the less personal resources demands resulted in a productive team. This feeds many other questions regarding the right mix of skills – and collaborative resources.

Google had a project called Project Aristotle in which the company looked for the recipe to form the perfect team. They studied 180 teams, and the results were impactful, but not in the right way: there was no pattern, and lead researcher at Project Aristotle, Abeer Dubey, said that "there was nothing showing that a mix of specific personality types or skills or backgrounds made any difference" (Duhigg et al., 2016). However, a study made by MIT and Carnegie Mellon (Woolley, 2010) studied further on soft skills – or social resources and found out that the teams that achieved the most effectiveness were the ones where each member **spoke the same amount** of time, that is, the conversation time for each member of the team coincided with the average conversation time of the team. The other characteristic of these successful teams was that they had a **high average social sensitivity**, meaning that the members were skilled in knowing how others felt based on nonverbal language. This, in turn, makes the team members feel safe, and enhances their risk-taking skills.

The last characteristic in successful teams, the ability to infer social context from nonverbal language, may help us identify a potentially productive team. Erving Goffman, a famous Scottish researcher, wrote in his book *The presentation of self in everyday life* (Goffman, 1956) that the concept of the definition of the social

situation in which a group of people are is essential to a person's sense of belonging to a group. When an individual projects nonverbally a definition of the social situation at a given time, he or she expresses a demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him or her in the manner that persons of his or her kind have the right to expect. If this demand is not met, the person disconnects from the group.

Although Goffman's theory might seem to be too dense for an essay about teams, much can be concluded from the concept above. Both MIT/Carnegie Mellon (Woolley, 2010) and Goffman (Goffman, 1956) agree on the fact that nonverbal understanding in the team members is essential to, in very formal terms, fulfill the social demand of a person to be accepted as he/she decides to present themselves. The inability to read the social connotation or definition of the situation coming from a team member results in the subconscious rejection of the person's social view, which in turn makes them feel unsafe. This results in much more identifiable traits of an unsuited team, like the fact that one or two persons lead the conversation time, as Google's research shows. The key component of a productive team is the ability to understand unspoken norms.

The MIT/Carnegie Mellon (Woolley, 2010) study was also cited in another New York Times article (Woolley, 2015), where it is stated that teams with more women gave a better performance than those teams with more men. This comes in handy to touch on the topic of diversity that most team-building theory talks about. This fact showed that it wasn't diversity that enhanced team performance, because that would mean the same number of men and women; it was simply the fact of having more women, since women are better at 'mindreading' nonverbal signs than men. Therefore, a team that reaches top performance is not about diversity either.

To conclude, the right mix of skills for a group of people that wants to be productive seems to avoid common sense choices of team building such as 'introverts with introverts' or 'the more diverse, the better'. Actually, various studies confirm that the required skill for a top team is social sensitivity. This skill will ensure others, such as conversational skills and risk-taking skills. The ability of a group of people to identify emotions and beliefs based on nonverbal communication will ensure the right group-dynamic regardless of hard skills or knowledge. Thus, for any given project, the right mix of skills in the team is defined by the amount of social sensitivity in the project team members, and in order to define the perfect combination of skills, one must first ensure the nonverbal skills of the member. The rest will come naturally.

References

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