

Google's Research on Effective Teams

Over the years, people have wondered what makes the difference between a group of workers selected at random to work together and those special teams that get so much done. Google has researched the issue and reported on their findings. The important point is that rather than having high skills in any one person, people on the most effective teams were psychologically safe.

There was quite a bit of press reporting on Google's efforts to discover what makes for a good team. This research into effective teams is part of Google's efforts to continue to dominate their market. They know that companies tend to "decay" and become less and less effective over time. In order to keep their position in the market, they need to continue to have high functioning teams. Such high functioning teams are more likely to stick together. Fewer people leave for other opportunities. Such teams achieve higher revenue.

Google has a research group dedicated to understanding more about people. As befits a bunch of nerds, they have a team working to build measurable statistics about how teams work. But, it wasn't until they examined the "intangibles" that they started to find repeatable aspects that made for high functioning teams.

What makes for a good team starts with psychological safety – how safe is it to voice a different opinion and challenge the conventional thinking of the group? Other factors that they discovered are

far more known: dependability, structure and clarity of the work, does the work have meaning to the person, and do the goals of the group have impact to others.

This flies in the face of nearly every recruiting ad one can find. Managers are looking for a perfect, high skill person who will be the "rock star" on the team and pull it up. But teams built up this way can wind up in the bottom performance on any measure. In other words, the skills

of the manager to make a place safe to express opinions is far more important than the skills of the workers. Thus, we are starting to see "anti-rock star" ads, ones that say, "if you are a rock star, please do not apply for this position."

Of course, Google being google, they came up with

plans and ways to help groups identify where they are on these factors and how to improve the functioning of existing teams. They have exercises such as opening each meeting with people reporting on a risk that they took in the prior week.

The dry reporting glosses over the issues of dealing with individuals. Certain types of people can work together in one format while failing miserably in another format. Moving someone from one team to another could turn someone from a top performer into a liability or could turn someone from a person on probation into a top performer. Mixing types of people could result in major difficulties. Certain people need to be "eased out" of the team and possibly the organization. Sometimes, the spokesperson for the team is hiding the dysfunction they cause.

**Safe Teams
Perform
Far Better**

Cultural Tensions

In the 900's, the Scandinavian economy had three major sections; farming and fishing, raiding, and trade. Of the three, trade gets the least notice, but may have been the most consistent source of wealth. Each produces stress on society and we see the same stresses today in corporate cultures.

We know most about the Viking Raiders but economically, they were in the same position as people who win the lottery: The money gets spent quickly and the raiders are soon in need of more cash. However, they need to find new places to raid. Victims do not rebuild as fast as the raiders spend and may rebuild walls and fortresses first.

Trading was less ego satisfying than storming the beaches sword in hand and raiding an unsuspecting monastery, but far more profitable in the long term. The Swedes dominated the eastern trade routes that went as far as Byzantium and they brought back the best steel in the world from Persia (the source of the best sword steel).

Trading generates different attitudes than either raiding or farming. Farming tends to be conservative. Raiding celebrates destruction of and taking from others. Trading opens people up to new ideas and to welcome new people. Having all three in a culture causes stresses on that culture.

We see this three way tension in corporate cultures also. Do we build slowly and with deep roots? Do we try to take from others? Are we open to new ideas and pivot to trade with new people?

Successful managers build the proper culture and choose the right people based on character. Sometimes, they have to get rid of people who are great producers, but are destroying the culture of the rest of the company.

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Risky World

When we start demanding biometrics, we can run into problems. A man born without arms was unable to cash a check at a bank in Tampa, FL because he was unable to produce a fingerprint.

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