GOOGLE Research Identifies 2 Key Success Factors for Teams

Interviewing a team member a few years ago, I asked the seemingly innocuous question "What's going well in this team?" and was taken aback when the person said "Honestly? Nothing". That's an unusual response, yet *we meet many leaders and managers who recognise something isn't working and instinctively know that successful team working leads to more innovation, speedier solutions, better results, and more satisfaction. The challenge is how to get there – some teams thrive, and others seem to struggle. Why? What really makes the difference?*

Google conducted a 3-year piece of research which came up with some interesting insights. They reviewed over 50 years of research and analysed over 180 teams. Abeer Dubey – a manager in Google's people analytics division commented that in all this data "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".

What seemed to make the most difference was how teams treated one another – the norms of the group. These varied significantly between teams. Google's data indicated that psychological safety was the most significant element. In short, this is *"a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves"* (Amy Edmondson, HBR 1999). This means they can share uncomfortable, maybe even scary things, without fear of recriminations. In a successful team people can talk about the messy, frustrating stuff or colleagues who are irritating.

Really? Surely, we just need to focus on getting stuff done? After all this is business. It seems not. Organisations are social systems. We all have a strong need to belong and feel part of something. To do that we need to bond.

I was excited to read what Google's research confirmed about the most successful teams and that the findings chimed with our research and experience using the Team Health Check. Google found that they cultivated 2 things which help bonding – conversational turn taking and empathy. They:

- **Share airtime** over the course of a meeting or day so that people speak in roughly the same proportion.
- Team members are attuned to and skilled at **spotting how others feel** (based on verbal and non-verbal cues such as body language, expressions, and tone of voice).

I've witnessed leaders actively stimulating the conditions for their teams to bond and thrive. For example, a senior Executive I worked with was joining an organization. Before he arrived, he sent a 1-page bio to his new team. In it he shared his aspirations in life, what was important to him, details about his family and then added a few words at the end about his credentials for the role. It sent a ripple through the team whose previous leader had a more driven, directive, task focused style.

Matt Sakaguchi (a leader at Google) found that having a questionnaire was useful to highlight where the team was strong and could improve. Having data in front of them enabled the team to talk about things they all knew but didn't voice. That's our experience using the Team Health Check too: the data makes it possible to cut through to the heart of the things that are blocking a team. In one team we worked with, a team member said, "the thing is we don't trust each other – can you help us with that?". An hour into the first session, another voiced the key issue "we're not having the real conversations in the room".

The Google findings are also similar to the conclusions we drew in our meta-analysis of research underpinning the Team Health Check. Matt Sakaguchi started a meeting by sharing that he had Stage Four cancer. This highly personal information made it easier for people to talk about what was really bothering them. We've found that where teams rate themselves lower on the elements of Feeling Trust and High-Quality Thinking (which connect with Google's findings), they were usually struggling and finding it hard to speak up and succeed. Using exercises which enable bonding and build trust are often the most important step. Ensuring that everyone feels they have a voice, are heard and matter (drawing on Nancy Kline's Time to Think work) quickly establishes more positive norms and creates the foundations for psychological safety.

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References:

For more information on Google's research visit:
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https://hunterwalk.com/2016/09/03/google-finds-that-successful-teams-are-about-norms-not-just-smarts/

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