

Project Aristotle - Making Great Teams

Google researchers undertook a project to understand what makes a good team. The project was called Aristotle, after the quote “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”. I find the results intriguing, as it was not stacked with what you might classically think of as drivers for team performance. The full story can be found [here](#), but I will hit the highlights in this post.

The group went through the first step of defining what is a team, and from there, moved to what defines an effective team. The researchers measured team effectiveness in four different ways:

- Executive evaluation of the team
- Team leader evaluation of the team
- Team member evaluation of the team
- Sales performance against quarterly quota

The qualitative evaluations helped capture a nuanced look at results and culture, but had inherent subjectivity. On the other hand, the quantitative metrics provided concrete team measures, but lacked situational considerations. These four measures in combination, however, allowed researchers to home in on the comprehensive definition of team effectiveness.

SOURCE: [THE REWORK STUDY](#)

The team ran studies across a large population of teams and narrowed down the determining factors to a handful of key attributes. Following is a summary from that section of the research.

The researchers found that what really mattered was less about who is on the team, and more about how the team worked together. In order of importance:

Psychological safety: *Psychological safety refers to an individual's perception of the consequences of taking an interpersonal risk or a belief that a team is safe for risk taking in the face of being seen as ignorant, incompetent, negative, or disruptive. In a team with high psychological safety, teammates feel safe to take risks around their team members. They feel confident that no one on the team will embarrass or punish anyone else for admitting a mistake, asking a question, or offering a new idea.*

Dependability: *On dependable teams, members reliably complete quality work on time (vs the opposite - shirking responsibilities).*

Structure and clarity: *An individual's understanding of job expectations, the process for fulfilling these expectations, and the consequences of one's performance are important for team effectiveness. Goals can be*

set at the individual or group level, and must be specific, challenging, and attainable. Google often uses Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) to help set and communicate short and long term goals.

Meaning: Finding a sense of purpose in either the work itself or the output is important for team effectiveness. The meaning of work is personal and can vary: financial security, supporting family, helping the team succeed, or self-expression for each individual, for example.

Impact: The results of one's work, the subjective judgement that your work is making a difference, is important for teams. Seeing that one's work is contributing to the organization's goals can help reveal impact.

1

Psychological Safety

Team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other.

2

Dependability

Team members get things done on time and meet Google's high bar for excellence.

3

Structure & Clarity

Team members have clear roles, plans, and goals.

4

Meaning

Work is personally important to team members.

5

Impact

Team members think their work matters and creates change.

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The fact that the number one item on the list is psychological safety is a big clue as to how to grow strong teams. When there is room to fail, and room to try without judgement, team members are much more likely to be creative and take the risks that might make the difference. Your mileage may vary on this one, depending on the personality types involved, but it seems a pretty safe generalization in corporate America based on the data set used in this study.

Also informative, is the collection of factors that made little difference in this study, though again, your mileage may vary based on context, background, etc...

The researchers discovered which variables were not significantly connected with team effectiveness at Google:

- Colocation of teammates (sitting together in the same office)
- Consensus-driven decision making
- Extroversion of team members
- Individual performance of team members
- Workload size
- Seniority
- Team size
- Tenure

I find the co-location one to be a surprise, as I have repeatedly heard that as a key factor to effectiveness and cohesiveness. I imagine access to technical tools to close the gaps would help in this, but still, to see it at the top surprises me a bit - I find face to face communications a very effective tool in building strong inter team relationships.

I encourage you to [read the full article](#) and form your own thoughts around it - I am posting about it here as I find it relevant and helpful, and worth keeping track of and sharing.

There is a worksheet you can use to get started on this evaluation [linked here](#), and also available on the reWork site.