our quest to build the most effective teams at Google

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QCON NYC 26-Jun-2017
What kind of team are you on?
What kind of teammate are you?
What kind of leader are you?
According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics:

Each day we spend:
8.8 hours working
7.8 hours sleeping
2.6 hours doing leisure and sports activities
1.2 hours caring for others
Improving the effectiveness of teams in the workplace can make a meaningful difference in people's lives.
My experience with teams
What sets apart our best teams from the rest?
What does effectiveness mean?

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<tr>
<th>EXECS</th>
<th>TEAM LEADS</th>
<th>TEAM MEMBERS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>Ownership, Vision &amp; Goals</td>
<td>Team Culture</td>
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It took many inputs to attack the question.

- 201 interviews with 50 Tech leaders and 151 Tech team leads
- 180 teams surveyed (115 Tech teams and 65 Sales pods)
- 250+ inputs looking at team dynamics and team composition
- 3 outputs on team effectiveness
- 35+ stat models run
- 3,000+ lines of code written, 170K+ words coded
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Our search for the perfect algorithm.
Dependability of teammates
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Tenure of team members
Co-location of team members
Impact of team's work
Average level of team members
Tenure of team to the company
Team practices consensus-driven decision making
Psychological Safety
What were the difference makers?

Psychological Safety
Dependability
Structure and Clarity
Meaning
Impact
Effective Google teams exhibit five dynamics.

- **Psychological Safety**: Team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other.
- **Dependability**: Team members get things done, on time, and meet Google’s high bar for excellence.
- **Structure & Clarity**: The team has clear roles, plans, and goals.
- **Meaning**: Work is personally important to team members.
- **Impact**: Team members think their work matters and creates change.

1. Compounding items, in order of importance.
Takeaway

HOW A TEAM WORKS matters more than WHO’S ON THE TEAM
Teams that feel safe beat their sales targets.

- Safe team: +17%
- Unsafe team: -19%
Teams that feel safe are rated high on effectiveness by leaders.

Probability that an executive leader in Tech identifies team as effective:

- 40% Unsafe team
- 80% Safe team
Googlers break down psychological safety into three components.

Voice
Trust
Inclusion
Takeaway

Set the tone for psychological safety.

1. Frame work as a series of learning problems, not execution problems.
2. Model curiosity and ask more questions.
3. Admit your own fallibility.
Parting thoughts
Thank you.

Questions?
Appendix
Let's dig into psychological safety.

Psychological Safety Scenario 1 | Ideas & Innovation

Uli is a long time ABC manager known for his technical expertise. For the past two years he's worked as manager of team XYZ, which is responsible for running a large scale project/process for Google. He upholds very high standards, but in the past 6 months Uli has become increasingly intolerant of mistakes, ideas he considers to be “underpar,” and challenges to his way of thinking.

Recently, Uli publically “trounced” an idea submitted by an experienced team member and spoke very negatively about that person to the wider team behind their back. Everyone else thought the idea was strong, well-researched, and worth exploring. Ideas have since dried up.

Uli’s ideas drove the recent project proposal, but it was ultimately rejected because it didn’t meet the creativity and innovation criteria.
Let's dig into psychological safety.

Psychological Safety Scenario 2 | Career Conversation
Jessica is an ABC manager who leads a team of 5 analysts. Jessica and her team are working on an important project with a key deliverable due in 4 months. Sarah, an analyst on Jessica’s team, is a significant contributor to this project.

Sarah has been in her role for 2 years and is interested in transferring to another role in Android to develop new skills. She has identified an open role and wants to apply. Sarah is nervous about bringing this up with Jessica, but Sarah works up the courage to schedule time with Jessica.

Jessica listens to Sarah and is surprised to learn Sarah is considering leaving the team. Jessica is focused on ensuring her team hits their goal and asks Sarah to defer applying to a new role until after the deadline. Sarah is frustrated, but also has concerns about how Jessica will view and evaluate her over the coming
Let’s dig into psychological safety.

**Psychological Safety Scenario 3 | Decision-making**

Director Bob leads a team of L6 and L7 sales managers. Bob considers himself to be an inclusive manager and very often invites the team out for drinks after work. They have great conversations when they are off-site and often come up with their most exciting plans and ideas in that relaxed environment.

Last night, when out together, they “re-wrote” some parts of the strategy for the next 3 months. Everyone was there except Joan who could not make it (and often can’t). Bob told Joan this morning, very excitedly, and sure she’d be happy, about the new direction. Joan didn’t say anything but she was very upset to have been left out and feels this is a regular occurrence.
Let’s dig into psychological safety.

Psychological Safety Scenario 4 | Credit + “wins”

Director Sumi leads the Winterfell sales team in LCS. Andre is a sales associate on Sumi’s team. In their past few 1:1s, Sumi is uncensored and candid with her view on the Lannister team (another sales team in LCS that works on similar accounts).

Sumi doesn’t think highly of Lannister team’s work and often calls out the Stark team wins by slamming the Lannister misses -- and she does this in front of her team. This week, SVP Ned sent a congratulatory note to the whole Thrones org for hitting their numbers, and Sumi forwarded it to her team giving them a shout-out for edging out the Lannister team.

Andre feels this is not Googley and isn’t sure what to do or how to frame this to Sumi.
Let’s debrief psychologically safe & unsafe behaviors.

1. What behaviors do you see that reflect psychological safety?

2. What behaviors may signal that psychological safety is lacking in the scenario?

3. Why is psychological safety so important? What difference does it make in a team? What have you seen on your teams?
1. **Clarify** individual roles and ensure members know one another’s responsibilities.
2. **Coach** members throughout and if necessary help them **prioritize** and organize their tasks.
3. Ensure everyone understands which tasks are of highest **priority** and importance.
4. **Check** each individual’s **bandwidth** and give them the **autonomy** to ‘own’ their tasks.
5. **Celebrate** their work to foster trust and positivity.

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<th>Members trust one another to deliver quality results on time.</th>
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Use this as a handout.
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<th>Structure and Clarity</th>
<th>The team has clear roles, plans, goals and decision-making</th>
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<td>1. In 1-1s and team meetings, <strong>clarify/agree</strong> any roles and the decision making process (or options) in advance, include team in goal setting and defining roles</td>
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<td>2. <strong>Encourage ownership</strong> of particular areas</td>
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<td>3. Take time to <strong>review and adjust goals</strong> over time</td>
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<td>4. Provide clear definition of the team’s <strong>decision-making process</strong></td>
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How much structure? Depends on dependability.

Effectiveness

Dependable team

Undependable team

Structure & Clarity

Results:
We tested hundreds of variables as there were many possible stories that could have surfaced.

But here are FIVE things that we found, at Google, to be differentiating the highly effective teams from the rest:

In order of importance...

One. They 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 throwing out an idea.

Two. They feel as if teammates are dependable and can really be counted on to do high quality work on time.

Three. They have sufficient structure and clarity to guide their work: 1) know what the short & long term goals are, 2) know their own role and the role of their team members to get there, and 3) understand the plan to get that done.

Four. They feel as if work is personally meaningful, whether it’s the people they’re surrounded by or the output that they’ve created.

Five. They feel as if their work has impact, and clearly connects to what the organization is trying to accomplish.

Reflections:
Before we talk about these in a little bit more detail, let me share some meta reflections that we had as a research team about these findings...

How not Who.
When we started this research, we imagined that building an effective team would be more like putting together a human puzzle of ideal characteristics.

We thought we’d find an algorithm for just the right number of MBAs, and extraverts, and people from technical backgrounds to build a dream team.

But, we didn’t find that to be the case.

The things that popped to the top of the list, that differentiated teams based on effectiveness, were less about WHO is on the team, and more about HOW they interact.

Hiring Process.
One hypothesis we had for why we’re seeing this is because we have a super stringent hiring process.

Hiring process already screens super highly for technical ability, and general aptitude. The second hypothesis is that some of the compositional variables are much more tangible, if you don’t have a SWE or a PM, it’s very obvious and easy to adjust for.

However, these dynamics are much more subtle and harder to perceive...and as a result make a great deal of difference to the performance of the team.

What’s not on the list.
If you look at the list in isolation, it’s not a huge a-ha, hopefully it’s very similar to the list you would have put together yourself.

It’s interesting to us is all the things that COULD have been on this list...but weren’t.

For example, we looked at “consensus driven decision making on the team,” didn’t seem to vary too much between effective and ineffective teams.

The amount of workload, is it manageable or not...also didn’t seem to differentiate.

Number of top performers on the team, and generally how smart they are...we saw this in both the teams that were rated very effective and in the other extreme.

Although many things are important when leading teams, this is a shortcut of where to focus your Energy.

Manager Role.
Last important thing for this group in particular, is that while the manager role didn’t pop in our models as a direct predictor of effectiveness, we’ll show you towards the end of this talk...

Managers have a super critical role in ensuring this works.

[When talking to managers or leaders]
1. Give team members responsibilities they are passionate about.
2. Give team members **positive feedback** on something outstanding they are doing and offer **help/coach** them with something they struggle with or don’t realize they can do more effectively.
3. Be open to **learn from your team**; show them that their ideas and work are meaningful to you so that your team is involved in meeting goals together.
4. Frequently **advocate** (update and remind) **your team's accomplishments** to your manager / senior leaders of and how they support the broader organization’s goals.

**Meaning** | **Members achieve personal meaning from the work.**
---|---

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<td>2. <strong>Quantify the output</strong> of your team’s work to reinforce your team’s impact.</td>
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<td>3. Be an <strong>advocate</strong> for your team by sharing the impact your team is having on the organization/market.</td>
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<td>4. <strong>Help</strong> your team members <strong>prioritize/focus</strong> on the most meaningful and impactful tasks.</td>
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<td>5. <strong>Co-create a clear vision</strong> that reinforces how each team member’s work directly contributes to the team’s goals and how they relate to the broader organisation’s strategic goals.</td>
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**Impact**: Members feel the team is focused on high-impact work.
A great manager at Google does eight things.

1. Is a good coach.
2. Does not micromanage. Empowers the team.
3. Shows concern and interest in teams’ personal well-being + professional success.
4. Is productive and results-oriented.
5. Is a good communicator. Shares information. Listens.
6. Helps with career development.
7. Has a clear vision/strategy for the team.
8. Has key technical skills that help them advise the team.
“Unsafe” teams

“Our team meetings don't always feel like a safe zone for questions or thoughts. The tone in meetings can be condescending and aggressive at times.”

“I sometimes get a bit scared to speak my mind. I feel like there are so many individuals here that have been on the team for so long that it gets intimidating to say something.”

“I think it is harder to take big risks on this team. We are rewarded on completing our deliverables and moving things along. There hasn't been an example of a big risk or failure that we all agreed was the right thing to do.”
“Safe” teams

“The response to mistakes on this team is consistently in the spirit of ‘gotta break eggs to make omelettes.’”

“The team is very supportive if someone makes a mistake. We just find a way to fix it or deal with the consequences, whatever they are, when they come up.”

“We make it pretty obvious that it's OK to be wrong and not to know something.”

“We frequently ask each other questions about difficult privacy issues throughout the day. Everyone is open to questions from anyone at any time, and no question is considered a dumb question.”
Define: psychological safety

Shared belief held by team members that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.

A sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up.
Our search for the perfect algorithm.

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“The people I work with define everything.”
People decisions at Google are based on data and analytics.