TEAM COHESION AND PERFORMANCE

Measuring and Improving Group Emotional Intelligence and Cohesion

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Introduction

Organisational structures across the globe are evolving as advances in digital and artificial intelligence (AI) relentlessly change the pace at which we work. The gig economy shifts our perceptions of what it is to be an employee. The transitory nature of the workforce is forcing organisations to rethink their approach to performance management and employee development.

Traditional structures cannot keep up with the new direction workplaces are headed. Hierarchical models are being deconstructed, organisational redesign has become a priority, and the need for high performance is driving a new organisational flexibility and fluidity.

Future success is characterised by a team-centric structure. This new ‘network of teams’ mode with its strong communication and information flow is capturing businesses and organisations across the globe. Empowering teams, introducing team leaders and organising teams by purpose or mission is the latest thinking that defines this team-based approach.

This new people-focused structure comes with its challenges. Where individual performance was once the focus of leaders, team-based behaviours must now be identified and understood in order to be managed.

To address these widespread organisational challenges, organisational behaviour experts and psychologists are using research to understand how people function in teams and what conditions are necessary for teams to work together effectively. A review of the findings from recent teamwork studies indicate that interpersonal dynamics and emotional intelligence are highly significant in developing high performing, cohesive teams.

The teamwork model presented in this paper is designed to help teams across the world gain a competitive edge in a rapidly changing market.
The Shift towards Teamwork

According to Deloitte’s 2019 Global Human Capital Trends Report, the workplace landscape is changing, and businesses are seeing a fundamental shift away from hierarchical management models and towards team-based organisational models.

Research shows that this team-based way of working significantly improves performance for the organisations that execute it well.

While organisations recognise the link between team-based models and performance, few have the knowledge and resources to build their own high performing teams. The 2019 Deloitte survey found that amongst those who at least partially worked in cross-functional teams, sixty five percent of respondents viewed this move towards a team-centric model as important or very important, but only 7 percent felt ready to execute it.

More work needs to be done to prepare organisations for this team-based way of working. Business are looking for evidence-based approaches for measuring effective teamwork, which prompts questions around how a team functions, what factors make a successful team, and ultimately how this knowledge can be translated into a model for teams to evaluate their performance and introduce behaviours to become a high performing team.
How to Build an Effective Team

The challenge of improving team effectiveness has entered the public domain, as individuals and businesses work to improve our global understanding of how people function in teams. Whereas previous organisational behaviour studies often focused on how to improve individual performance in organisations, researchers are now studying how to evaluate and assess team performance, and specifically the collaborative factors involved in teamwork.

Google recently conducted one of the most public studies about teamwork, as they sought to understand how to build the perfect team. Project Aristotle was extensive, combining historical accounts with statistical data to identify the key factors that drive team effectiveness.

The researchers balanced the study by measuring effectiveness with the assessment of both culture and results. They found that what essentially matters is not who is on the team, but how the team works together.

In order of importance, the 5 key factors driving team effectiveness were:

1. **Psychological Safety**: Team members feel safe to take risks around their team members and confident in the belief that team members won’t embarrass or punish them for offering a suggestion, admitting a mistake or asking a question.

2. **Dependability**: Team members take responsibility for their work and reliably complete tasks on time.

3. **Structure and clarity**: Individuals understand both their own and the team’s goals and how to achieve them.

4. **Meaning**: Having a sense of purpose in the work impacts team effectiveness, the meaning of work differing from one person to the next.

5. **Impact**: The sense that one’s work will have a greater impact on the goals of the organisation.

Patrick Lencioni’s influential book ‘5 Dysfunctions of a Team’ (2002) has impacted a wide range of audiences including professional sports teams, not-for-profit organisations and the military. Lencioni identifies the dysfunctions that must be addressed in order to build high performance:

The studies by Google and Lencioni strongly emphasize the importance of building a safe and trusting culture by developing certain traits, such as allowing all members of a team to speak in roughly the same proportion. Their research suggests team effectiveness is largely about developing agreed behaviours, shared understandings and cohesion among team members.

Psychologists Leslie A. DeChurch and Jessica R. Mesmer-Magnus conducted a meta-review of all literature related to teamwork to understand the role of cognition in building effective teams. The study ‘The Cognitive Underpinnings of Effective Teamwork: A Meta-Analysis’ (2010) found that behavioural processes, motivational states and cognitive states are all important drivers of team effectiveness, or specifically team cohesiveness. Out of the study emerged a form of ‘team cognition’, which referred to the way that knowledge is mentally organised, represented and distributed. High performing teams often coordinate their behaviour without needing to communicate. This form of team cognition enables teams to predict one another’s actions, which is an important factor in team cohesion.

The study reveals that an effective and high performing team requires a set of behavioural processes, motivational and cognitive states which are conducive to cohesion and collective efficacy (collective trust in the team’s capability). In other words, cohesiveness and group efficacy are important measures of high performing teams.

**Cohesion and Group Efficacy**

According to the Oxford Brookes University article, ‘Characteristics of a Group: Cohesiveness’ (2013), ‘cohesiveness is a measure of the attraction of the group to its members (and the resistance to leaving it), the sense of team spirit, and the willingness of its members to coordinate their efforts’.

The idea that cohesiveness is critical to developing groups has been around since Tuckman published an article called ‘Developmental Sequence in Small Groups’ (1965). Tuckman’s model describes the stages of team development: forming, storming, norming and performing. Once the group have formed knowledge of one another, challenged one another about the
group structure, established norms and then reached a conclusion and implemented a solution to a problem, cohesiveness is developed. In Tuckman’s model, cohesiveness is the main goal of team development, and the indicators of a cohesive group include creativity, initiative, flexibility, open relationships, pride, concern for people, learning, confidence, high morale and success.

In the article ‘Building Group Cohesion in the Workplace’, psychologists Alvarez, Butterfield and Ridgeway added to Tuckman’s work by exploring the factors most important to developing a cohesive team. The study had similar results to Google’s Project Aristotle, indicating that trust is one of the more important factors in teamwork and group cohesion. Once trust is established, an individual can focus on their own work and can trust others to carry out tasks up to the same standard. Trust permits individuals to share advice with one another, and it ultimately enhances connectedness between team members, encouraging team cohesion.

Neuroeconomist Paul Zak was able to prove the significance of trust for building high performing teams in ‘Trust Factor: The Science of Creating High-Performance Companies’ (2018). The book revealed a series of studies demonstrating that oxytocin is the chemical released when people experience trust. During these experiments, Zak was able to predict levels of trust in an organisation based on employee oxytocin levels. He found that employees at high trust companies have 50% higher productivity, 40% less burnout, 106% more energy at work, 74% less stress and 29% higher life satisfaction. His study demonstrated that organisational and leadership practices that release oxytocin among colleagues increased the efficiency of teamwork and improved business outcomes.

“High trust companies have 50% higher productivity, 40% less burnout, 106% more energy at work, 74% less stress and 29% higher life satisfaction”

From a social, psychological and biological perspective, trust is identified as a key factor for building effective teams because it enables the qualities of cohesiveness and group efficacy in teams.
Group Emotional Intelligence

Trust has been widely studied in relation to team and organisational performance. In ‘Building the Emotional Intelligence of Groups’ (2012), organisational behaviour experts Druskat and Wolff name the three fundamental conditions needed for team effectiveness: trust, group efficacy and group identity. In other words, in addition to having a trusting culture, an effective group must also have a shared identity and purpose, and collectively feel they are capable of performing. To enable these conditions teams must develop attitudes and behaviours which are centred on group emotional intelligence.

Druskat and Wolff have developed an internationally recognised model that uncovers how emotional intelligence works in groups. Individual emotional intelligence means being aware of one’s own emotions and being able to regulate them. Becoming emotionally intelligent in a group means being aware of the groups’ emotions and being able to regulate those collectively. An example of this might be, during a team meeting three out of four people want to go in one direction, and the fourth wants to go in a different direction. Most teams would go with the majority, whereas an emotionally intelligent team would listen to the fourth member and ask why they are objecting. They would actively question whether there any perspectives that haven’t yet been considered and take these on board when making decisions.

According to Druskat and Wolff’s theory, group emotional intelligence is the foundation for the fundamental conditions of group trust, identity and efficacy. The willingness to commit to the task and effectively participate with the group then follows, ultimately leading to better decision making, more creative thinking and higher productivity.
A similar argument is made by organisational behaviour and management experts Haas and Mortenson in ‘The Secret of Teamwork’ (2017), which emphasizes the importance of having a shared mindset in highly effective teams. Having conducted nine large-scale global research projects with teams over a period of fifteen years, Haas and Mortenson were able to identify the conditions that enable effective teamwork: a compelling direction, a strong structure, a supportive context, and particularly for modern teams: shared mindset. These conditions require a type of leader who is clear on the team’s purpose and direction. One who recruits new team members based on what unique quality they might add to expand the diversity of skills, knowledge and perspectives of the existing team. The leader must also ensure a reward system is in place and all the resources needed for team members to do the work are there to support them. Creating a cohesive team largely rests on the ability of the team leader to provide direction, structure and support, but also to create an environment that enables emotionally intelligent norms.

Modern teams are often perceived as being made up of smaller subgroups rather than one cohesive team. This perceived structure results in an ‘us and them’ tendency, where one views their own subgroup as more positive than others, which creates tension. Making time for unstructured discussion is one of the ways that team leaders can build a shared mindset in their team. Doing so enables people to understand one another’s situations and experiences, which helps them to better interpret and understand their colleagues’ attitudes and behaviours, particularly if they are in different locations. Creating emotionally intelligent processes such as this helps to develop the norms required for a shared mindset both within and across teams.

**Measuring Team Cohesiveness**

The research studies in this paper indicate that by actively implementing emotionally intelligent attitudes and behaviours into a team’s daily functioning, that team will develop a set of norms or conditions necessary for its effectiveness. The fundamental conditions required for high performance are cohesiveness, group efficacy and group identity. The team leader is an essential player in the development of emotionally intelligent norms; it is their responsibility to provide clear direction, a diverse workforce, necessary resources. But also, to lead the way by acting with emotional intelligence; to demonstrate trust in the team, display respectful communication, to listen and act on new ideas and show empathy with others.
Trust has been a key focus in a lot of research on team effectiveness, but there are other important factors that also require emotionally intelligent practices, that should be discussed separately from trust. Research tells us that trust, resilience, collective energy and harmony are all critical elements for developing an effective team. In ‘Team resilience: How teams flourish under pressure’ by Alliger et al (2015), resilience is found to be highly significant in team effectiveness. Grouping resilient individuals doesn’t make a resilient team. A team must be able to collectively ‘bounce back’ from stressors, which requires a combination of trust and appropriate support. Without resilience, members can lose sense of the collective identity of the team and become self-focused, hindering cohesion.

Müceldili and OyaErdil have written extensively on the role of energy in teamwork. In ‘Cultivating Group Cohesiveness: The Role of Collective Energy’ (2015), they demonstrate the link between group connectivity and collective energy. When a team has high levels of connectivity and energy, they demonstrate the characteristics of openness to others’ ideas and the utilisation of new opportunities. Groups that are willing to learn and pursue ideas generate positive energy, which in turn creates a psychologically safe environment. Connectivity, energy and psychological safety are interconnected, each playing a key role in enhancing team cohesion.

The concept of ‘team cognition’ that was previously mentioned in relation to the DeChurch and Mesmer-Magnus (2010) article describes the harmonious relations that occur between cohesive team members. Achieving harmony in a team means working in synergy with one another by listening, observing and attending to one another while collectively pursuing a goal. It is a concept most studied in relation to sports teams but it can also be applied to other team contexts. A team that is working in harmony can be a strong indicator of cohesion. When a team is highly cohesive, this is often demonstrated by its members accelerating their efforts and relentlessly pursuing their goals in such a way that their actions are in harmony (Asamoah and Grobbelaar, 2017).

**Indicators of Cohesiveness**
Based on the work of Druskat and Wolff, this adapted version of their group emotional intelligence model points to a set of indicators for measuring cohesiveness in teams. Incorporating processes and behaviours which are emotionally intelligent provides the groundwork for everything else, and requires a leader who is effective in the ways previously outlined in this article. Trust, resilience, energy and harmony are important components for the remaining stages to follow; these are essential for team members to feel willing, committed and capable of completing a task. When team members have reached this stage and demonstrate trust in one another's capability, accountability follows. As Patrick Lencioni states ‘accountability is the glue that turns commitment into results’ (2002). Each of these former stages lead to improved decision making, higher levels of productivity, a highly effective service delivery and positive stakeholder relationships.
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