People Skills: Building the Perfect Team—A Change Management Perspective

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Abstract. This is another in a series of articles about some of the most effective models, methods, and processes of organization development (OD), also known as change management, a discipline that offers much to professionals who are intent on solving real-world problems. Because it is based on a systemic view of organizations, OD includes the whole universe of fuzzy people issues that increasingly determine the success or failure of efforts to implement otherwise flawless technical solutions. This article examines the principal findings of Google's perfect-team project, and suggests how best to implement those findings, based on established change management principles and processes.

Why Build a Perfect Team?

Teams are integral to the operation of today's organizations. Yet more than 50 percent of team-based projects fail, many for nontechnical reasons (Levasseur 2010). We should not be surprised, therefore, that organizations want to know why these projects fail so they can increase their odds of project success. One such organization is Google, where the quest to build a perfect team began about five years ago, spearheaded by Project Aristotle, with a focus on the characteristics of employee teams that relate to project success (Duhigg 2016).

What Is a Perfect Team?

Experience and common sense suggest that a perfect team consists of a diversified group of highly motivated, intelligent, and knowledgeable people with a blend of hard and soft skills. Not necessarily, suggests Google's extensive internal research. "After looking at over a hundred groups for more than a year, Project Aristotle researchers concluded that understanding and influencing group norms were the keys to improving Google's teams," and that creating *psychological safety* for group members by (a) taking turns speaking and (b) having high social sensitivity (i.e., being sensitive to the needs and feelings of fellow team members) were the "two behaviors that all the good teams generally shared" (Duhigg 2016).

Institutionalizing Group Norms

The challenge for Google and all organizations that extensively use teams is to figure out how to instill these essential group norms in their teams. One way, based on Google's research, would be to make these norms mandatory team behaviors. This has a certain appeal, especially if you believe that the presence of the norms is sufficient to result in heightened team performance. In practice, however, this approach has several problems. First, many teams include people who are uncomfortable sharing their feelings or do not care about the feelings of others to the degree required to ensure the psychological safety of their teammates. Second, taking a rule-based approach to institutionalizing behavior can create problems, instead of solving them. For example, telling an introvert that he or she must speak because it is his or her turn is more likely to induce anxiety in the introvert than to create a sense of psychological safety. So, what can an organization that is determined to improve the success rate of its teams do to encourage team members to exhibit the two essential behaviors of Google's successful teams— listening to each other and being sensitive to feelings and needs?

A Better Way to Implement Group Norms

Given the severity and urgency of the problem, as reflected in the pervasiveness of teams in modern

organizations and the chronically high average team-project failure rates, a two-stage approach to instilling these two essential behaviors seems justified. First, do something to create quick wins in the short term, and then engage in a more ambitious effort, which addresses the root causes of the problem, to develop sustainable change.

In the short term, a more effective alternative to mandating that teams adopt practices based on norms of conversational turn taking and heightened social sensitivity is to do what a good group facilitator would do—suggest that existing teams experiment with a collaborative process for establishing team ground rules, that is, to encourage people to listen to each other. Team members should discuss the importance to their success as a team of hearing from everyone on the team who has something to say on an issue. They should ensure that all team members who wish to speak have a chance to speak, but only when they are ready, not when it is "their turn." When the team members are ready, they should create a ground rule to ensure that this happens consistently. They should write down the ground rule and display it with other team ground rules at all team meetings. If the team lapses into old habits, it should self-correct by returning to the established practice of giving everyone a chance to speak. Repeated over time, this behavior will become a standard practice, which is the operational definition of a group norm. To encourage people to be sensitive to the other team members' feelings and needs, team members should follow the same collaborative process for establishing team ground rules. Levasseur (2012) contains more information on how to develop ground rules to guide the behavior of team members as they work together in traditional or virtual team settings.

What Google discovered from doing its research on the perfect team, as team builders and group facilitators know (Levasseur 2000), is that group norms are essential to the functioning of a successful team. The work of Kurt Lewin, a pioneer in the field of group dynamics, provides theoretical support for Google's empirical findings. Lewin (1951) argued that behavior is the result of interaction between a person (P) and his or her environment (E):

$$\text{Behavior} = f(P, E). \tag{1}$$

If the goal is to improve the odds of project success by requiring teams to adopt group norms to create psychological safety, such as the two norms that Google identified as being characteristic of its successful teams, then Lewin's formula suggests that a way to make this happen would be to create an environment E that supports the use of such norms, which Google has done, and select individuals for important team projects with a predisposition, based on their personality P, to want to listen to others and work together to solve problems.

If teams were not so pervasive, this is all that would be necessary to achieve the goal. However, many potential team members may not be team players, but may have skills or knowledge required for team success; therefore, the real problem is to determine how to change the behaviors of these individuals when they are engaged in team projects, to ensure that they work effectively with the other team members. One approach, as we have seen, is to mandate that all team members adhere to the two group norms. However, telling people, especially knowledge workers, what to do is seldom a good idea. Another approach is to require all team members to attend some form of group-process training; however, this could be expensive and the skills learned might not be transferable to the real team setting. Fortunately, modern change management principles, based on the work of Lewin, provide the additional insights needed to solve this challenging problem.

A Change Management Perspective on the Perfect Team

Mandating the use of the two essential group norms for team success teams is one way to encourage their use, as Google discovered in the process of conducting research into the perfect team. This is essentially a top-down solution. An alternative, using change management principles provides a collaborative alternative that is arguably much better. One model, which Lewin originally developed and many organizational change experts use, is Lewin's three-stage change model. The three steps in Lewin's model are unfreezing, moving, and refreezing (UMR). Underlying Lewin's model is the basic field-theory formulation captured in Equation (1) (Lewin 1951, Levasseur 2001).

How might we motivate team members, particularly those who are not team players by nature, to adopt those ground rules for creating psychological safety? Lewin suggested that the best way to unfreeze a situation was

to reduce the strength of the forces that were hindering movement in the desired direction. In this case, these forces would include (1) a lack of incentive to change, (2) teams with a history of not having operated based on group norms, and (3) people's natural resistance to change. Notice that the top-down strategy, mandatory usage, addresses only the first of these issues, and would probably result in a strengthening of the hindering forces due to people's natural resistance to change.

A change management approach to *unfreezing* (U) the situation, based on Lewin's model, would require management to communicate the need for change, with the goal of sharing the findings of the Google perfect-team research, and engaging all employees in a common goal of improving project success by working more collaboratively. This approach would include adopting the group norms that produce psychological safety as ground rules for team behavior. Note the subtle, but important, difference between the mandatory-use strategy (which is essentially a push strategy) and the engagement strategy (which is essentially a pull strategy). The former tends to create resentment in employees, while the latter tends to empower them.

In the *moving* phase (M) of the change management approach, teams would try out the new ground rules and share their experiences with the new norms and others that emerged as helpful to team success, in an organized, collaborative effort aimed at organizational learning and development. Finally, in the *refreezing* phase (R), teams would voluntarily commit to ongoing use of the new set of ground rules and group norms, because these rules and norms work for them, not because they are mandatory.

Arguably, the engagement-oriented, collaborative change management process would be much more likely to achieve the required goal of universal use of the psychological safety ground rules by all teams, thus ensuring a much higher level of ownership and commitment than a top-down strategy.

Conclusion

In this article, we discussed the vital topic of developing a perfect team, as well as several ways to implement the group norms for enhancing psychological safety, which Google discovered through its internal research on nearly 200 teams. We discovered that a change management approach, which involves the active engagement of teams in the process of change, holds much greater promise for spreading the use of such norms throughout an organization in a way that is both universal and persistent than other possible methods, like a management directive to use them or mandatory training that requires team members to learn about and practice them in a non-work setting. The conclusion we reached is that Google's data-driven research findings, if implemented using modern change management principles and processes, offer much promise for improving the odds of project success in any organization.

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