

# Why Some Teams Excel: Validating the Human Factor



According to the *Harvard Business Review*, people spend 50% more time in “collaborative activities” than they did 20 years ago. That’s not surprising, given the increasing complexity of doing business in a global economy. As a result many organizations and university researchers are trying to help teams, not just individuals, perform more effectively.

One of them is Google. In a fascinating article by Charles Duhigg in *The New York Times*, he described how Google studied hundreds of its teams to determine why some excelled and others didn’t. They looked carefully at the expected factors—such as team makeup, mission alignment, individual skills—but none of these accounted for the difference.

Google’s researchers dug deeper. They learned that a common thread in its highest-performing teams was “how teammates treated each other,” Duhigg reported. This showed up in two ways. First, members tended to contribute to conversations equally; no one dominated. Second, the top teams were more sensitive to how its members were feeling.

Google concluded “psychological safety” was key to team success, Duhigg noted. But how do you promote such a culture?

One team in particular provided valuable insights. The team’s manager assembled the group to discuss a survey that showed they were unsure about the team’s purpose and impact of their work. Wanting them to “feel fulfilled” and build connections, he asked each member to share something about themselves. The

manager began by revealing he had advanced cancer, Duhigg said. The team was stunned.



The manager’s courage led others to share struggles they lived with and brought to work. When they turned their attention back to the survey, the group spoke more openly about the issues that “had been bothering them,” Duhigg wrote. The manager agreed to work harder to acknowledge the value of the group’s work. The team members said they would work hard to notice when anyone felt “excluded or down.” Trust and support grew.

The experience opened the team’s eyes. “I had separated things in my head into *work life* and *life life*,” one team member told Duhigg. “But . . . I spend the majority of my time working. Most of my friends I know through work. If I can’t be open and honest at work, then I’m not really living, am I?”

John Christensen had the same thought when he first visited the Pike Place Fish Market almost 20 years ago. As he watched the fishmongers work with enthusiasm, joy and synergy, he recalled what author David Whyte had recently told him. “We spend most of our waking hours at work,” Whyte observed. “Yet we leave much of our passion and creativity at home. If we can’t bring the best of ourselves



to work, we’re saying it’s OK to be unhappy or bored for a big part of our lives.”

In that moment Christensen recognized a truth in people that researchers are seeing in data: Human beings have emotional needs. When those needs are met, people are better equipped to meet the organization’s needs for performance.

Christensen’s company, ChartHouse Learning, made a film about the fishmongers called FISH!. The film introduced four simple practices—known as The FISH! Philosophy—that strengthen the relationships foundational to effective work cultures.

The FISH! Philosophy helps colleagues to create a Be There culture where people feel heard and supported, so they can support their internal and external customers. It reminds everyone to Make Their Day, so they can show colleagues and customers they are valued. It frees them to Play with new ideas and be themselves in an environment of “psychological safety.” And it helps people to be aware of their impact on others, understanding that to create the kind of day that leaves you fulfilled, you have the power to Choose Your Attitude.

The point of The FISH! Philosophy is not just a happy workforce. It’s that these practices empower people to use all of their resources—job training, experience, strategy—and work together more productively. The FISH! Philosophy is sometimes described as a set of “soft” skills, but it is really the solid backbone of team excellence.

Reference:  
Duhigg, Charles. “What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team.” *The New York Times Magazine*, February 28, 2016.

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