



10 action items that support smart teams

1. Agree together on the processes and protocols you'll use to make decisions.
2. Call out examples of individuals making inappropriate attempts to influence colleagues.
3. Ensure you build and actively maintain a 'speak up' culture where challenge, debate and dissent are the norm.
4. Focus hard on inclusion so that all voices and perspectives are heard, not just those of the dominant minority.
5. Establish shared norms for critical thinking and problem solving. Ensure these include techniques suited to complexity.
6. Use shared thinking tools to support collaboration and minimise competition.
7. Practise their use so that the team becomes familiar with them and develops their ability to think together, not just alone.
8. Implement meeting protocols that stress the need to listen to colleagues to grasp underlying meaning and intentions.
9. Ensure you recruit and promote for interpersonal skills and social sensitivity not only technical expertise.
10. If your team is global, include 'cultural competence' in your recruitment criteria.

WHY SMART TEAMS CAN MAKE YOU FEEL BRAIN DEAD

Smart teams in higher demand than ever!

These days, it's widely accepted that teams have the potential to achieve much more than individuals working alone. The sheer complexity of the issues your organisation faces plus the relentless pressure to deliver high quality outcomes mean that you're likely to need multiple brains working together.

Teams offer the promise of improved performance because they can combine much greater knowledge, expertise and experience to solve problems and make decisions more effectively than any individual working alone. So it's not surprising that a key research question over the last ten years has been: what makes a team intelligent?

The first answer was the obvious one you're probably thinking too! Surely, if your HR department provides you with highly intelligent, well qualified people and you then allocate them to various teams, all that collective brainpower will produce amazing results. But it's been shown that such teams often fail to capitalise on their potential. All too often, teams of very smart people can even be less productive and less innovative than other teams comprised of less highly qualified members.

Collective intelligence

Over the last ten years, a team at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, led by Anita Woolley, has explored the notion of 'collective intelligence'. The term captures the range of skills and attributes a team needs to deliver consistently well. This includes speaking up, influencing others, being inclusive, communicating openly and also, most importantly, social sensitivity. Woolley and her team have now verified the importance of 'collective intelligence' in a wide range of settings and sectors.

They've proved conclusively that 'social sensitivity' is key a predictor of a team's effectiveness, even if that team is a technical one, and even, too, if it operates virtually. Conversely, they found that when a team scored low on social sensitivity, team members were more likely to compete against each other and engage in behaviours that harmed their performance.

Woolley's research certainly illuminates why some teams of intelligent people fail. Angus Hildreth at Cornell has taken things further. His background is relevant. Hildreth graduated from Cambridge with an MA in Maths and then qualified as an actuary. This took him into consulting work at the highest level, first with PwC in London, then in an even more prestigious role in New York. As you might imagine, Hildreth was tackling very complex, high profile issues for the firm's most important clients – and doing this in team settings of equally clever peers. What he found surprised him.

In an interview in 2018 with BBC science writer David Robson, Hildreth described what he consistently observed, "Everyone in the room was a really effective individual who got to where they were because they were good at what they did. But when they came together in these group contexts, I was surprised at the dysfunction and the difficulties they faced. I was expecting this platonic ideal of leadership: you put all the best people in the room and obviously something good is going to happen." But, in general, "something good" did not happen!

Hildreth was intrigued. He returned to university and studied for a PhD in organisational behaviour. This has led to a new career at Cornell in the US where he continues to explore just what can go wrong when clever people come together in a team.

One of his key findings echoes what we also discovered when we took cameras into organisations and filmed teams of high achieving professionals thinking together to solve problems and make decisions. Quite often, these 'high potential' team members were less focused on the task and more interested in competing for status in the team. They wanted to show off their star quality. In such teams, people were less likely to listen fully to each other, less likely to share information (knowledge is 'power'!) and less likely to integrate perspectives to arrive at a robust decision – or even any decision. Boris Groysberg at Harvard found the same issues in his study of clever analysts working at a New York company. His conclusion was, "Too many cooks spoil the broth – high status individuals can decrease group effectiveness."

Why does this happen?

A study at Virginia Tech used fMRI scans as participants engaged in various types of problem solving. They found that status conflict and competition reduced the ability to communicate and cooperate. Essentially, competitiveness was associated with high activity in the amygdala, a bundle of neurons deep in the brain involved in emotional processing. At the same time, participants had reduced activity in the prefrontal cortex – the area behind the forehead associated with problem solving. The researchers concluded that humans can't separate our cognitive abilities from our social environment. One of the researchers summed it up this way, "You may joke that meetings make you feel brain dead but our findings suggest they may make you act brain dead as well."

The study of collective intelligence in teams is a lively and fast changing field. But even already the signals are clear. Applying what we know will help you lead and manage others, such that each team member can help to bring out the best, not the worst, in their colleagues.