Worried About Getting the Right People on Your Team? It's Not as Important as You Think

Author : Peg Carlson

Categories : Group Process, Leadership Development, Organizational and Personal Leadership, Tools and Practices

Tagged as : group norms, leadership, teams

Date : July 8, 2016

An assistant city manager recently told me about her frustration with a team she had formed to work on a special project for the city. Their task was to develop solutions to reduce the number of errors in the utility bills sent to customers.

Like many organizational issues, this one was not restricted to one department, so she pulled together a cross-functional team of employees to identify the source(s) of the errors and recommend ways to fix them. These were smart, dedicated folks who had a proven track record of getting the job done.

Months later, the team had made little progress. When some team members suggested possible solutions, other members reacted defensively and interpreted the suggestions as criticisms of how they were running their departments. Meetings dissolved into blaming and finger-pointing. The team had virtually ground to a halt.

The assistant manager was considering replacing some team members to jump-start the group. Will that help?

According to recent research conducted by Google, who is on the team is far less important than how they treat each other when they get together.

In 2012, Google set out to discover the secret of how to build the perfect team. The research is described in more detail in Charles Duhigg's new book **Smarter Faster Better: The Secrets of Being Productive in Life and Business** (Random House, 2016).

After tracking over 180 teams for several years and measuring every variable they could think of, the researchers found lots of data about what didn't seem to make a difference.

Factors that didn't affect a team's performance include:

- Personality type
- Socializing outside work
- Gender balance
- Length of time working together
- Educational background

And on and on. No matter how the researchers arranged the data, they couldn't find patterns that indicated that the team composition mattered much.

So what did make a difference? Group norms: the "unwritten rules" of how team members behave toward each other. Specifically, two group norms showed up consistently in the high-performing teams:

1. Conversational turn-taking. On the best teams, everyone got a chance to talk. If only one person or a small group of people spoke all the time, the collective IQ went down.
2. High social sensitivity. Team members were good at picking up on what others were thinking and feeling, based on nonverbals like tone of voice and facial expressions. They noticed when someone was feeling upset or left out.

Taken together, these two norms are important aspects of psychological safety: a sense that the team is a safe place to take risks, and that people won't be embarrassed or punished for speaking up.

Touchy-feely? When one of the premier data-gathering organizations on the planet finds these results, maybe it's time to eliminate that phrase from our vocabulary.