

How To Build A Better Team? New Meta-analysis Says Active Learning

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Whether you work in healthcare, engineering, or as a professional soccer player, working together smoothly with your colleagues is essential. Teamwork is so important for organizations that a whole industry of teamwork training has sprung up to help teach employees how to be better team players. But do these kinds of team-building interventions actually work?

To find out, a team of Canadian researchers recently conducted a massive review of the research on teamwork training interventions. Their results suggest that, overall, teamwork training really does seem to help teams of all stripes boost their performance.

“Bringing a group of highly-skilled individuals together is not sufficient for teams to be effective,” the researchers write. “Rather, team members need to be able to work well together in order for the team to successfully achieve its purposes.”

Led by psychological scientist Desmond McEwan of the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, the meta-analysis included 39 interventions from 33 studies comprising a pool of more than 8,000

participants.

From bringing in motivational speakers to multi-day workshops, there are many different approaches to teamwork intervention. The researchers started their review by classifying different interventions into one of four general categories:

- classroom-style lectures where a group listens to speakers on teamwork-related topics;
- hands-on workshops that might include interactive discussions of the team's purposes and goals;
- simulation training, where teams practice various skills that they actually use (e.g., an airline flight simulator or a medical emergency dummy);
- and in-situ reviews where team members provide feedback on each other's work in real time.

The researchers also analyzed several other factors that might influence the effectiveness of a training, including how long the team had worked together, how improvements in productivity were measured, and whether the study took place in a lab or in a real-world context. Additionally, McEwan and colleagues only included studies that compared a control group (i.e., employees that did not receive teamwork training) to an experimental group (i.e., those who received teamwork training).

Across the board, teamwork interventions had a significant positive impact on team performance.

“[T]eamwork interventions were shown to be effective at enhancing both teamwork and team performance across a variety of team contexts, including laboratory settings as well as real-world contexts of health care, aviation, military, and academia,” the researchers write.

Interestingly, interventions seemed to work better for new teams compared with already established ones.

“It is possible that teamwork processes might be more malleable and display greater potential for improvement with new teams compared to more established teams whose teamwork processes may be more entrenched,” the researchers explain.

The researchers note that a far higher proportion of the studies included in the meta-analysis focused on new teams compared to already established ones.

The analysis also showed that “all four training methods were effective for enhancing team performance,” but some were far more effective than others. Specifically, classroom-style instruction was found to be far less effective than the three types of interventions which included hands-on components.

“This suggests that simply providing educational lectures wherein team members passively learn about teamwork is not an effective way of improving teamwork,” McEwan and colleagues write.

What works for boosting the effectiveness of teams of doctors and pilots also appears to be true for teams of astronauts. A 2015 review published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* looked at the emerging field of teamwork in space. One of the best ways to improve the quality of teamwork, the researchers found, was to incorporate active involvement into team-building exercises.

For organizations, this means that interventions that utilize interactivity and active learning are likely to be more effective than lectures or other forms of passive instruction.

References

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