

Why Some Teams Are Smarter Than Others

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ENDLESS meetings that do little but waste everyone's time. Dysfunctional committees that take two steps back for every one forward. Project teams that engage in wishful groupthinking rather than honest analysis. Everyone who is part of an organization — a company, a nonprofit, a condo board — has experienced these and other pathologies that can occur when human beings try to work together in groups.

But does teamwork have to be a lost cause? Psychologists have been working on the problem for a long time. And for good reason: Nowadays, though we may still idolize the charismatic leader or creative genius, almost every decision of consequence is made by a group. When Facebook's board of directors establishes a privacy policy, when the C.I.A.'s operatives strike a suspected terrorist hide-out or when a jury decides whether to convict a defendant, what matters is not just the intelligence and wisdom of the individual actors involved. Groups of smart people can make horrible decisions — or great ones.

Psychologists have known for a century that individuals vary in their cognitive ability. But are some groups, like some people, reliably smarter than others?

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