

How the Most Effective Teams Communicate and Work Together

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Alex Pentland says he and his colleagues in the Human Dynamics Laboratory at MIT have identified the elusive group dynamics of high-performing teams – the “buzz” of energy, creativity, and shared commitment that sets successful teams apart from others. “These dynamics are observable, quantifiable, and measurable,” says Pentland. “And, perhaps most important, teams can be taught how to strengthen them.”

Pentland and his group used electronic recording devices to gather data on teams in a variety of workplaces – hospital post-op wards, call centers, backroom operations, innovation teams, and others. They noticed these patterns in the most productive teams:

- Everyone on the team talked and listened in roughly equal measure.
- In meetings, members exchanged ideas with each other, not just with the team leader.
- Members faced one another and their conversations and gestures were energetic.
- Members’ contributions were short and to the point.
- Members carried on back-channel or side conversations with team colleagues.
- Members interacted informally outside team meetings.
- Members would periodically go exploring outside the team and bring information back.

These were the surface characteristics. Further study revealed three underlying factors that define effective teams’ performance:

- *Energy* – The personal voltage in exchanges among team members, for example, a comment followed by a “Yes” or a nod of the head. “The most valuable form of communication is face-to-face,” says Pentland. “The least valuable forms of communication are e-mail and texting.”

- *Engagement* – This measures the distribution of energy among team members. “If all members of a team have relatively equal and reasonably high energy with all other members, engagement is extremely strong,” says Pentland. “Teams that have clusters of members who engage in high-energy communication while other members do not participate don’t perform as well.”

- *Exploration* – This is communication outside the team. “Exploration essentially is the energy between a team and the other teams it interacts with,” says Pentland. “Higher-performing teams seek more outside connections, we’ve found... Successful teams, especially successful creative teams, oscillate between exploration for discovery and engagement for integration of the ideas gathered from outside sources.”

How can this research be put to work? Pentland suggests three steps: (a) Observing and charting a team’s interactions, for example, how equally team members are participating in meetings; (b) giving team leaders and members graphic feedback on their interactions and using it to spur more successful practices – for example, the team leader ensuring more equal participation, stressing the importance of face-to-face communication, or bringing in new team members; and (c) measuring results in the team’s productivity.

What are the characteristics of ideal team members? Pentland lists the following: they are democratic with their time, communicating with everyone equally and making sure all team members get a chance to contribute; they feel comfortable approaching other people; they listen as much as or more than they talk; they're very engaged with whomever they're listening to – “energized but focused listening”; they connect their teammates with one another and spread ideas around; and they are appropriately exploratory, seeking ideas from outside the group – but not at the expense of group engagement.

“The New Science of Building Great Teams” by Alex “Sandy” Pentland in *Harvard Business Review*, April 2012 (Vol. 90, #4, p. 60-70), no e-link available