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The Key to Building a Successful Team

Researchers found that if a group has worked together effectively in the past, it can be more important than their individual skills



Pro sports leagues—and a multiplayer online game—may hold lessons in team-building for the business world. Photo: Noah Graham/NBAE/Getty Images

By Lisa Ward

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When it comes to building a winning team, the best approach may be to look backward.

Researchers investigating what makes for a successful team found that a key variable was shared success, or when players have effectively worked together in the past.

“Shared success is a distinguishing factor above and beyond skill,” says Brian Uzzi, a co-author of [the study](#) and a professor at Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management.

The researchers analyzed statistical data from professional sports leagues and a multiplayer online game. But Dr. Uzzi says there could be a similar relationship in the business world, especially in fields such as technology where the talent level is high and top performers are spread pretty evenly across organizations.

Shared success is a concept taken from psychology. The idea is that when groups experience success, individuals are better able to recall the event and articulate what went right or even what went wrong. That's important because it allows teammates to better understand each other's competencies and deficiencies, says Dr. Uzzi. By contrast, when the experience is negative, people are less likely to remember and discuss it. They essentially shut down, making it more difficult to learn from what happened.

The study found that increasing the rate of shared success between team members from an average level to above average was associated with a bump in team scoring—and improved odds of winning. In the case of the National Basketball Association, it was associated with a 28% increase in scoring for the 2013-14 season. By contrast, increasing a team's skill level from average to above average had little or no effect on team outcomes.

The authors found a comparable relationship for Major League Baseball, English Premier League soccer, cricket in India's Premier League and the multiplayer online game Defense of the Ancients 2.

Dr. Uzzi believes the lessons from this study and the theory of shared success can be applied to business managers looking to build strong teams. First, managers should use positive outcomes as teachable moments, a time when team members will be better able to process key insights about what they are doing right and what improvement they should make. On the other hand, if the team is performing poorly, managers should emphasize the positive aspects of the experience or even sponsor an activity outside of work—say, a night at an escape room, where the team can experience success together, understand one another's competencies and better learn to share information.

When it comes to recruiting, some fields, such as academia, are able to scoop up multiple people who worked well together previously, perhaps collaborating on groundbreaking research, says Dr. Uzzi. But in fields where cluster recruiting is more difficult, managers may want to focus on how potential recruits are likely to relate to other members of the team, perhaps by watching them solve difficult problems and seeing how they perform under pressure, Dr. Uzzi says.

The final takeaway for managers is to pay more attention to the role of supporting players. Professional sports teams are better at this than many companies and scientific institutions, says Dr. Uzzi. Take former NBA player Shane Battier. His personal statistics—points, assists and rebounds—weren't phenomenal, but the statistics of his teammates were significantly better when he was on the court. If businesses were to better measure shared success, they would likely find more people like Mr. Battier—professionals playing important supporting roles, critical to the team's success, who operate under the radar.

“It's important for team member to get the recognition they deserve,” Dr. Uzzi says.

Ms. Ward is a writer in Mendham, N.J. She can be reached at reports@wsj.com.