MedicalXpress

Does team training save lives? A new science gives it a rigorous evaluation

December 16 2011

Whether the task is flying a plane, fighting a battle, or caring for a patient, good teamwork is crucial to getting it done right. That's why team-building and training courses are big business in the U.S., and have been for decades. But lately something has changed: "There's a demand for evaluations—an emphasis on showing that team training makes a difference in safety, decision-making, communication, clinical outcomes—you name the ultimate criteria the industry has," says Eduardo Salas, an organizational psychologist at the University of Central Florida.

The answer to that demand is the subject of a new article in *Current Directions in Psychological Science,* a publication of the Association for Psychological Science. "We are developing a new science to show what works and doesn't work and why," says Salas, who wrote the article with graduate students Marissa L. Shuffler and Deborah Diaz Granados.

A team is not just a machine for doing things; it is a system of social relations. Team training is about instilling knowledge, skills, and attitudes—needed competencies. Team building helps individuals on a team learn to about each other, clarify roles, work through problems, and cooperate toward accomplishing shared goals. Most interventions focus on the latter—"team building is the largest human-resources intervention in the world," says Salas—even though it has been found to improve performance little or not at all. "One conclusion we can begin to reach is that maybe both have a place; they are distinct interventions." But organizations rarely do the front-end work of figuring out which they

need.

The science of teamwork is young, Salas allows. For one thing, the successes get published, while the failures fade into the ether. And while it's relatively easy to find out if people liked a program or absorbed some of the knowledge it imparted, it's far more complicated to evaluate whether workers have adopted the behaviors they've been trained in or are meeting longer-term goals such as improving safety, decision-making, or patient outcomes. But financial officers are no longer willing to take people off the job and invest millions on team training without some assurance that they'll get what they paid for.

The demand has been invigorating for the science of teamwork, Salas suggests. "Because of the push for results, we are getting better at collecting the data and are making a better case for cause and effect," he says, "I'm a little cautious, but the data are encouraging: We are showing that training produce results."

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

Citation: Does team training save lives? A new science gives it a rigorous evaluation (2011, December 16) retrieved 12 June 2026 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-12-team-science-rigorous.html