

Groups share information in workplace, but not the 'right' information

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From the operating room to the executive board room, the benefits of working in teams have long been touted. But a new analysis of 22 years of applied psychological research shows that teams tend to discuss information they already know and that "talkier" teams are less effective.

"We're seeing a widespread trend toward a more virtual and [globalized world](#) and this is transforming the way people in the workplace communicate," said the article's lead author, Jessica Mesmer-Magnus, PhD, of the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

"We need to better understand how [teams](#) will perform in this new setting and, to do that, we need to look at how they've worked in the past."

Mesmer-Magnus and Leslie DeChurch, PhD, an organizational psychologist at the University of Central Florida, analyzed research on [information](#) sharing in the workplace, consisting of studies of approximately 4,800 groups and more than 17,000 people. Their findings are reported in the March issue of the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, which is published by the American Psychological Association.

Their analysis showed that teams that spent time sharing new information performed better overall in their tasks. But they also found that most teams spent their time discussing information that was already known by the rest of the group. Groups whose members talked more openly during meetings were on better terms with one another but that

did not necessarily mean they performed better.

"What this suggests is that teams who talk more amongst themselves aren't necessarily sharing useful information. Therefore, they're not actually coming to a better result. Rather, it's more important what the teams are talking about, than how much they are talking," said Mesmer-Magnus.

The researchers also found that teams communicate better when they engage in tasks where they are instructed to come up with a correct, or best, answer rather than a consensual solution. For example, teams were more effective when selecting candidates for a job opening or solving a crime when they had been encouraged to share their unique insights and to work to determine the best solution rather than a quicker consensual one. And although team members are often chosen because of their diverse professional and personal backgrounds, teams tended to share more information when the team was composed of members of similar backgrounds, according to the analysis. "This highlights the conundrum surrounding team tasks," said Mesmer-Magnus. "There's a separation in what teams actually do and what they should do in order to be effective."

The authors say their findings show group productivity can be enhanced by:

- Structuring team discussions
- Promoting a cooperative team environment
- Highlighting team members' skills and knowledge
- Focusing on communicating new and unique information

"Teams do have a distinct advantage over individuals in the work setting," said Mesmer-Magnus. "But leaders should be aware of how to effectively maximize their team's potential with effective communication."

Source: American Psychological Association ([news](#) : [web](#))

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