KORN FERRY

MIND TO MIND

How leaders can operationalize synchrony to optimize team performance

Thought Leadership

Historically, we have overemphasized a leader's personality or actions to explain organizational outcomes, or to zoom in on charismatic leaders. The covers of business magazines have shown single powerful faces rather than powerful groups.

Yet, there has been increasing dissatisfaction with the heroic CEO figure. There is growing consciousness that success has rarely (if ever) come from leaders who personally, heroically transform entire organizations. And demands on leaders are rapidly outdistancing the capabilities of any single person, no matter how talented that one person may be.

This focus on the hero CEO has led to a noteworthy lack of focus on the development of teams. Research indicates that senior leadership teams—perhaps the most important and influential team in any organization—are struggling. A group of Korn Ferry consultants, in collaboration with researchers and professors from Harvard University, studied over 120 senior leadership teams from around the world to gather information about their overall effectiveness. To gain a comprehensive perspective on the teams, their processes and their performance, the group used surveys, observed the teams as they worked, and interviewed stakeholders who received the output of the teams' work. They also worked with the teams over time to determine what it takes to make them effective, as well as how to help leaders and teams implement those elements. Their sample included small businesses, multinational conglomerates, and not-for-profit and public sector organizations spanning a variety of industries around the world. Their results, drawn from the observations of experts who had both direct contact with the teams and the constituents which the teams served, indicate that only 21% of teams surveyed were considered outstanding, while a staggering 79% were rated as mediocre or poor.

Teams are like beehives: when a group of people put their skills together in pursuit of a common goal, they can create something so much greater than the sum of their parts. Thalia Wheatley, a leading researcher in psychological and brain sciences at Dartmouth

"In a sense, people are like bees and society a beehive: Our intelligence resides not in individual brains but in the collective mind. To function, individuals rely not only on knowledge stored within our skulls but also on knowledge stored elsewhere: in our bodies, in the environment, and especially in other people. When you put it all together, human thought is incredibly impressive. But it is a product of a community, not of any individual alone."

– Philip Fernbach and Steven Sloman, *The Knowledge Illusion*

In collaboration with:

Wharton University of Pennsylvania NEUROSCIENCE Initiative

Synchrony describes the alignment of patterns of neurological, emotional, and physiological activity between individuals, which can result in **increased subjective liking, empathy, support, cooperation, rapport, learning,** and **processing speed,** leading to **higher rated engagement** and **performance**.

University, refers to this phenomenon as the creation of a "superbrain" or "ubermind." But up to this point, the "superbrain" has been elusive, and creating great teams seems to be trial and error—an exercise in hypotheses and hunches. Leaders focus on "building chemistry" without having any tangible sense of what that really means. Instead of leading with clarity and intention, they often stumble onto great teams and try to pick apart what it is that made them so after the fact. There is a delicate balance between improving efficiency and success without compromising the diverse skill sets and backgrounds of team members. Leaders have not yet mastered the trick of pulling the right combination of levers at the right time to enable super teams.

Typically, when people talk about high performing teams, they refer to the "chemistry" of the team and its members. "Chemistry" has been cited as the "secret sauce" of team performance. In baseball, statisticians describe these factors as "intangibles" and estimate that they account for up to 40% of unexplained variance in team performance. But neuroscience research has begun to demystify what "chemistry" really means. "Chemistry," we have learned, is a social shorthand for complex patterns of synchronization of neurological activity.

Recent advancements in neuroscience technology enable researchers to scan more than one brain at a time, opening the door to new insights into how collaboration, coordination, and partnership work. This research, which has largely come from clinical research and applications to sports teams and classroom dynamics, has substantially deepened what we understand about cooperation, teamwork, and interaction by showing how these processes operate in ways not directly observable to the eye and offering insight into new ways to promote synchrony. It has illustrated that our brains and bodies reliably fall in and out of sync with one another, and that fluctuations in this alignment are both indicative and predictive of important interpersonal outcomes, such as increased empathy, innovation, and cooperation. There is an opportunity to bring this research into organizations; the new knowledge that these patterns can be leveraged to better support leadership goals holds significant implications for what we can achieve if we learn to operationalize its nuances.

The Business Case

In the modern business environment, most teams are transient. People rally to achieve particular objectives, then disperse and reconfigure. As a result, it becomes increasingly important to figure out how to manage teams to achieve their potential—and to do so quickly. In addition to the fundamentals of team development (productive norms and relationships, disciplined process, right people, team leadership, continuous development, and compelling purpose), researchers have reaffirmed a key ingredient for team effectiveness: shared mindset.

Shared mindset can be activated when leaders foster a shared identity or common understanding, or when a group is united by a shared purpose, and is linked to improved cooperation, information sharing, and overall team effectiveness. In some contexts, such as sports, shared mindset may be closely linked to team chemistry. In casual social contexts, we might credit it with two people's experience of "clicking." Research shows that when people are cooperating well with one another, their patterns of neuronal activity and physiological processes align, supporting team chemistry and shared mindset. Synchrony is the neurobiological basis of that "click" we experience and have tried to name, but which, until now, few people have really understood. By whichever name, this phenomenon of synchronization has important implications for team success. Synchrony between people leads to increases in prosocial behavior, subjective liking, empathy, engagement, processing speed, learning, and cooperation.

There are numerous contributing factors to the level of synchrony of a group or a team. The cognitive, emotional, demographic, and genetic diversity of a group impacts the way their brains and bodies synchronize. Some studies suggest we have a greater

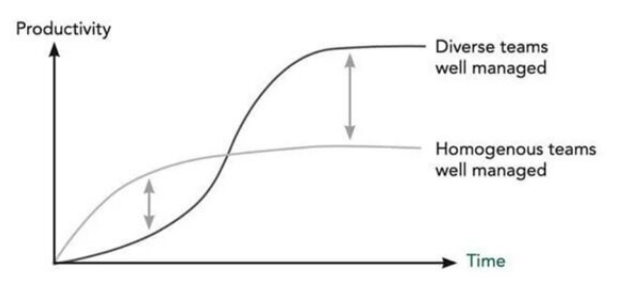
"When humans interact with one another, they do not merely experience the same event; they also know they are experiencing the same event. And this knowledge that they are sharing their attention changes more than the nature of the experience; it also changes what they do and what they are able to accomplish in conjunction with others."

– Fernbach and Sloman,
The Knowledge Illusion

natural tendency to synchronize with people who are more like us. Research from the NeuroLeadership Institute also shows that the less diverse a group is, the better and easier work tends to feel.

Despite work feeling easier among a less diverse group, a more diverse group actually produces better work. But research indicates that having a diverse team is not enough. Diverse teams may be slower to produce those outcomes compared to homogeneous teams due to the inherent disruption that can result from highly varied backgrounds, thinking, communication styles, and perspectives. Enhanced performance is not achieved from the beginning; there is intentionality and investment of time required with a belief there will be a return for this investment. Research shows that diverse *and inclusive* teams are 87% more likely to make better decisions and better solve complex tasks. In order for teams to benefit from a diverse composition, it is critical that inclusive leaders also lead them.

Figure 1
Timeline for team potential, based on team makeup.
Source: Tapia & Polonskaia, 2020



The value of synchrony in team development is not just about finding people who naturally synchronize with one another. It is also about working with diverse teams, understanding when synchrony is (and is not) beneficial, and strategically leveraging synchrony to support cohesion and collaboration. It is not necessarily the case that synchrony drives people to make the same sorts of choices, nor should it be the goal necessarily. Rather, synchrony in words, tone, body movements, and emotions tends to reduce the experience of threat and creates space for people to be authentic, open, and involved. Synchrony may be a key tool to create alignment in diverse teams, enabling them to leverage the power of their similarities and their differences, and reduce the learning curve of diverse teams.

In his recent book, *The Leader's Brain*, neuroscientist Michael Platt illustrates how synchrony has been empirically identified as an important ingredient for performance outcomes in various contexts. In classrooms, greater synchrony between teachers and students is associated with higher engagement and improved performance. In sports, teams that had more synchronized heart rates demonstrated higher levels of group flow. Committees performing a collective decision-making task with higher physiological synchrony were more likely to reach a correct consensus; committees with low physiological synchrony failed to reach consensus, or made wrong decisions, indicating that they were having trouble communicating and cooperating. Focusing on building and developing teams that strategically leverage this kind of alignment—both by knowing when it is valuable and when it is counterproductive—could be the skill that sets leaders and organizations apart.

The Neuroscience of Synchrony

Synchrony can be conceptualized as three separate, but related states underpinned by neurobiological processes: cognitive synchrony, emotional synchrony, and physical synchrony.

Cognitive synchrony can be measured by directly quantifying brain activity using fMRI or EEG. Brain synchrony measured with resonating patterns of brain activation in regions associated with cognition, memory, and decision making through fMRI may be indicative of a shared experience, mindset, or view of the world. This may account for homogeneous groups displaying higher baseline levels of cognitive synchrony. However, cognitive synchrony is not simply an indicator of similar ideas and opinions; rather, it facilitates an increased understanding of the actions, intentions, and mindsets of others—which is highly beneficial in diverse teams. Synchronous EEG activity would denote something similar to fMRI, though the tool is less precise. Synchronous engagement is observed using EEG through synchrony in left-right frontal asymmetry in alpha band power, synchrony in memory is observed though synchronous delta wave activity, and synchronous engagement and distraction is denoted by alpha wave synchrony.

Emotional synchrony indicates that a pair or group's emotional experiences are aligned in terms of valence (positive or negative) and intensity (high or low). Emotional synchrony can be measured by tracking facial expressions. Face emotion recognition could reveal synchrony based on the amplitude of positive vs. negative facial expressions with the absolute value suggesting synchronous intensity of emotion. Humans have an innate capacity to create and detect facial movements with speed and precision. This capacity is coupled with a propensity to imitate, which appears long before the capacity for emotional understanding and the development of empathy, observed in infants from the time they are only days old. In social interactions, people tend to mimic even the most subtle changes in the facial expressions of their partners. These changes, called micro-expressions, are so subtle that sometimes they are not consciously detectable. Though we are not always aware of these changes, nor do we react to them voluntarily, we process these expressions through synchronization of facial expressions and physiological activity. This indicates an innate tendency to reflect information about a partner's emotional experience through their own physiology.

Table 1. Types of synchrony

Type	Definition	Measurement	Relevance
Cognitive	Synchronization of neural firing patterns including brain wave activity and the activation in regions associated with cognition, memory and decision making.	Directly quantifying brain activity using fMRI or EEG.	Increased understanding of the actions, intentions, and mindsets of others.
Emotional	Alignment of emotional experiences in terms of valence (positive or negative) and intensity (high or low).	Facial expression monitoring. Wearables can be used to measure heart rate, galvanic skin response, and respiration rate.	Emotional synchrony can predict how people feel about an interaction, how they feel about a partner, or how they interpret their own personal value in a social situation or a relationship. It can result in increased empathy and increased subjective liking of a partner.
Physical	Synchronization of bodily movements and physical actions.	Observation of body language and physical movement or motion detecting software.	Physical synchrony can increase empathy, subjective liking, cooperation, trust, and understanding between individuals.

In addition to measuring facial expressions (an emotion measurement technique championed by Paul Eckman, a prominent emotion researcher), emotions are also measured with physiological arousal. This kind of synchrony can be picked up by measuring changes in heart rate, galvanic skin response, and blood pressure, which can be measured by wearables like a Fitbit or Apple Watch. Emotional synchrony can predict how people feel about an interaction, how they feel about a partner, or how they interpret their own personal value in a social situation or a relationship. Emotional synchrony can result in increased empathy and increased subjective liking of a partner.

Physical synchrony refers to individuals synchronizing bodily movements and physical actions. Body movement synchrony might be related in some cases to activation, but in other cases might index a different process. (Unlike emotional synchrony, it would only reveal resonance in arousal—the emotional intensity without the valence.) It has been shown, for example, that moving in synchrony induces synchrony in heartrates. And movement synchrony, such as body movement mirroring, induces behavioral and cognitive states associated with physiological synchrony, such as cooperation and trust. Physical synchrony can also increase empathy, subjective liking, and understanding between individuals.

In some situations, these three kinds of synchrony are tightly linked. But there are also likely situations in which they diverge. Imagine, for example, an argument between two people with different political affiliations. It is likely that both physical synchrony (both individuals displaying similar kinds of body language) and emotional synchrony (both individuals feeling highly aroused and unfavorably about their conversation partner) might be high, but cognitive synchrony may remain very low (mutually low understanding of the other's beliefs and behaviors).

While there are cases in which one kind of synchrony is not linked with other kinds, there are other cases in which one kind of synchrony may create the conditions for the emergence of another kind of synchrony. For example, in a study measuring collegiate rowers, synchronized heart rates were strongly associated with group flow—a sense of connection or oneness, an indicator of cognitive synchrony. Committees with higher levels of physiological synchrony are more likely to reach a consensus. And one person mirroring the body language of a partner increases the neural synchrony between the pair. In these cases, we see physiological alignment giving rise to neural alignment.

Research on interpersonal coordination, such as that done by psychologists Oded Mayo and Ilanit Gordon, suggests that the tendency to synchronize with each other and the tendency to act independently from each other exist simultaneously. Moreover, some researchers hypothesize that the balance between these two tendencies reflects an adaptive interpersonal strategy, characterized by flexibility and an ability to self-correct to the social context. Though the nuances of this strategy have yet to be fully elucidated, the remainder of this paper explores the possible team performance contexts in which synchrony and asynchrony may be differentially valuable, and how context-specific optimal levels of synchrony can be achieved.

Managing for Synchrony

One of the most common mistakes that leaders make when organizing teams is assuming that chemistry (synchrony) comes from luck, hope, or chance. Research definitively shows that synchrony is not epiphenomenal—a simple byproduct of physical events. Rather, there are things we can do to achieve higher or lower levels of synchrony in teams. Recent advancements in neuroscience suggest that different

circumstances benefit from different levels of synchrony, and that we can act with precision and intention to both upregulate and downregulate synchrony according to our goals.

Understanding the neural basis of synchrony is the key to managing it effectively. Synchrony is social; it is derived from coherent interpersonal interaction and a tendency to cooperate with one another (cooperative interaction hypothesis), not just functional similarity of common tasks (similar task hypothesis). The emergence of synchrony reflects a distinct underlying neural process that is activated by cooperating with others that facilitates high-level social cognitive processing.

Synchrony between individuals can arise in both neurological and physiological processes. Synchrony has been localized to the mirror network and the mentalizing network, both parts of the social brain network, which specializes in managing our connections with others. In addition, levels of oxytocin are positively correlated with synchrony, further underscoring the social nature of synchrony.

There is no question that it is possible for synchrony to be strategically managed, and there are a number of ways that it can be upregulated to support empathy, cooperation, learning, and engagement. However, the highest achievable levels of synchrony are not necessarily best for all contexts. Dancing or playing music with another person, for example, would likely benefit from higher degrees of synchrony than simply walking alongside someone else.

In order to manage team synchrony effectively, leaders may benefit from having a sense of how synchronous their team is now, in addition to how synchronous they would like their team to be. It is likely that most leaders do not have access to the kinds of tools and equipment that scientists use to measure cognitive and emotional synchrony, though perhaps there will be a time in the future when this is possible. However, leaders can get a sense of the synchronicity of their team members by observing physical and behavioral synchrony.

Synchrony should be managed according to the needs of a team and an organization. Teams differ in structure, function, and purpose. There are short-term project teams and stable leadership teams. The needs of these teams differ from one another, and the needs of the teams themselves differ depending on where they are in their lifecycle or what they are trying to accomplish. A temporary team brought together to launch a new product needs to be in sync so that they can move fast in order for the company to be seen as a first mover. The playbook for how to launch a project has been written and tested—now the team needs to collaborate to execute. From what we understand of the scientific literature, having a high degree of synchrony can be ideal for getting people mentally and emotionally aligned and putting them in a position to execute when the team has a specific task or a goal. High levels of team synchrony can support fast completion of the task, improve the quality of performance, and result in fewer mistakes. High levels of synchrony, therefore, may be particularly beneficial to this team.

Defining the process of synchrony

The mirror network: Comprising the primary motor cortex, inferior frontal gyrus, superior temporal sulcus, inferior parietal lobule and occipital lobe, and is involved in understanding and imitating the actions of others, as well as theory of mind, social communication, social cognition, and empathy...

The mentalizing network: Also known as the temporo-parietal region, where temporal and parietal lobes come together.

Oxytocin: A neurotransmitter implicated in mammalian behaviors like pair bonding and maternal care.

Compare that with an executive leadership team tasked with transforming a traditional oil and gas company into an energy company. This uncharted water may be a place where the company is best served by having a well-managed diverse team. If they are at the beginning of their life cycle, high levels of synchrony may help flatten the learning curve and establish a safe environment for open discourse and connection. However, for a well-established team dealing with circumstances that are more uncertain, less synchrony may set a better stage for dissent and variation in how team members see and interpret a situation, thereby resulting in greater creative problem-solving and innovation. In addition, researcher Hua Xue and colleagues showed that synchrony is negatively correlated with originality, indicating that when cooperation is achieved through compromise or imitation, ingenuity may be hindered. Still, executive teams may benefit from cognitive and emotional synchrony—especially as it lends itself to clarity and commitment around a team's purpose, collective work, and how to get it done. It's quite possible that more difficult or more open-ended decisions, over longer time scales, might be solved by moving out of—and then back into—synchrony (that is, diversifying mindset initially to identify potential solutions, then collaborating to select and take one course of action).

Synchrony may contribute to the conditions for that which become the unique value for leadership teams. Psychologist Yi Hu and colleagues conducted a study

exploring the relationship between inter-brain synchrony, cooperation, and creativity in teams and found that individuals asked to collaborate on a project showed higher levels of synchrony than individuals on teams asked to compete. The "right" level of synchrony might not only depend on the kind of task at hand, but also on the kind of people involved. The same study found that teams comprised of low-creativity individuals show higher levels of synchrony compared to teams comprised of high-creativity individuals. In creative tasks, high levels of synchrony among highly creative people may actually undermine their natural creative inclinations. To be sure, this is not to suggest that it is better to have a team made up of low-creativity members. It does, however, suggest that if you have highly creative members performing a highly creative task, higher synchrony between those members may not be optimal for best outcomes.

Research shows that episodes of social gaze may provide a helpful framework for the emergence of synchrony. For example, in their most recent study, cognitive scientists Sophie Wohltjen and Thalia Wheatley demonstrate that pupillary synchrony rises and falls naturally during a conversation. When people make eye contact, synchrony increases. When they look away, synchrony decreases. Leaders can use the research behind eye contact not only to upregulate synchrony, but also to downregulate it. Being deliberate about doing varied actions or activities is one way leaders can downregulate synchrony when circumstances call for it.

Team leaders may be able to find creative ways to promote synchrony in our current reality and create shared experiences over distance. The global COVID-19 pandemic, which has touched everyone one way or another, brought in new traditions of virtual happy hours and coffee chats. This provides a unique opportunity to bond over an entirely new and universally shared experience, which has been shown to increase production of oxytocin and boost synchrony. Being open and vulnerable is another way to increase emotional synchrony in a group, that is still achievable on Zoom or over the phone. Research from the Wharton Neuroscience Initiative suggests using deep conversation prompt cards that cut through the standard surface-level chat may create deeper connections faster. The pandemic may create opportunities here, too. Most (if not all) people experienced isolation, loneliness, loss, unexpected challenge, and unforeseen obstacles. Leaders can set the stage for openness by being candid about their own experiences and being vulnerable themselves.

Nonverbal communication is known to be important for sustained interaction and cooperative tasks like turn-taking. Humans have an innate capacity to track micro-expressions, and an unconscious tendency to mimic them when they are in sync. However, people can take this unconscious process and make it deliberate and intentional. Teams can do some body language mirroring exercises on remote video platforms. Before a meeting, for example, try to subtly match the tone, inflection, word choice, and body language of the person across from you. Check whether someone is engaged and connected with you by throwing in a non-task related motion, such as scratching your head or rubbing your eyes (keeping in mind the parts of their body that are visible in the feed) and see if the other person follows suit. This can be an indicator of how in sync you are with one another. Organizations like Meta are teaching bots how to recognize and repeat micro-expressions, thus improving their ability to determine and replicate the most human-like expressions. This research pushed us toward a long-standing goal of robot intelligence that will sustain real-time interactions with humans. The outcomes of this research hold important implications for how we may interact in the digital world moving forward, as well as what it might look like to interact with the digital world, such as with social robots. This kind of research may bring us one step closer to something we have not yet seen in the literature: synchrony with virtual agents.

Remote and hybrid work also provides unique ways to reduce synchrony when the circumstances would benefit from it. Turning cameras off or holding meetings by phone rather than video conference is one way to reduce levels of synchrony in a group or a pair. In addition, some individuals feel that virtual platforms make it easier to have more meetings, meaning that it is more possible to schedule one-on-one or small group meetings rather than having every meeting be whole-group discussions.

Sustaining the Magic

In managing teams for optimal levels of synchrony, it is critical to consider the effects of time. Trust and affection tend to increase when you share someone's company more often. Research from Gallup confirms a relationship between turnover and team performance: when team members feel more interconnected, they have almost 60% less turnover and score in the top 20% for engagement. Research from MIT-Sloan shows that company-organized social events, such as happy hours and team-building excursions, are associated with higher rates of retention. Neuroscience studies also show that the more time people spend with one another, the greater synchrony they exhibit. The analysis of baseball team performance paints much the same picture: players seem to learn to create chemistry, players' intangible contributions tend to increase with age (peaking very late in a player's career), and teams with less turnover hit more home runs.

The relationship between turnover and synchrony is particularly timely. The past year has been termed the "Great Resignation." In 2021 alone, more than 40 million workers quit their jobs—the highest number recorded since 2000, when the US government first began keeping track. Some companies are experiencing 20% turnover of their workforce. These data indicate that now more than ever, we can't rely on time to let synchrony develop in our teams naturally. Leaders have to take more deliberate action to create synchrony, and they have to do so quickly.

Synchrony Promoters

The neural basis of synchrony is inherently social. So are the strategies for increasing it. One such strategy is the use of eye contact. Eye contact activates the mirror neuron system and the cerebellum of the people engaged in social gaze. It helps prepare us to understand the actions and intentions of others. In fact, one study, led by Suzanne Dikker and David Poeppel, showed how two minutes of sustained eye contact between teachers and students in the classroom resulted in enhanced neural synchrony, higher engagement, and subsequent improvement in performance.

Eye contact can be challenging in the age of remote and hybrid work. Fortunately, there are alternative strategies for triggering the production of oxytocin that do not rely on sustained eye contact. Letting someone know how much you appreciate them can increase prosocial feelings on both sides—the person expressing the gratitude gets the same boost in happiness as the person receiving it. As a leader, make a point of expressing gratitude to your team. Doing something as a team that no one has done before may also trigger oxytocin release as a result of bonding over the unique experience. Finally, listening to music has been shown to increase oxytocin levels, thereby improving mood, motivation, and the ability to create bonds with others. Whether a meeting is virtual or in-person, team leaders can consider having music playing before a meeting starts as people enter the space.

Another strategy for promoting synchrony is to help team members find common ground. Humans have a tendency to find and protect their tribes. What's more, people perceive others more positively when they identify them as being part of their group (Mauss, 1938; Tajfel et al., 1979). By creating common ground and common identity, leaders can strengthen empathy, understanding, and willingness to cooperate. The definition of what makes a tribe—the common ground by which we base group membership—can be narrowed and expanded by context. "Tribe" can refer to who is wearing matching shirts or who is rooting for the same team. Studies show that people exhibit higher inter-brain synchrony with others when they are connected by shared attention or common goals. Establishing common ground on a team by identifying the group's purpose is one way to create common ground that transcends demographic or personal characteristics. Leaders can be deliberate about establishing shared purpose to create frameworks for tribes that maximize inclusivity, collaboration, and success.

Lastly, research suggests that certain highly influential people may act as "chemistry creators." One recent study examined baseball teams that outperformed their projected win/loss record based on summed statistics of individual players. It found that there were specific players whose presence on the team predicted the tendency to overperform. The researchers hypothesize that they function as "chemistry creators"—those key players that push a team beyond the sum of its parts. Interestingly, these team members are not always the most talented, but they have a unique ability to create chemistry amongst their groups. It has not been clearly determined what it is about these individuals that confers this unique ability, however.

Laboratory research corroborates the existence of such "chemistry creators" and the impact they have on the levels of team synchrony. These people influence the degree of synchrony a team experiences by how much they talk in a group setting. When these people talk, there is greater inter-brain synchrony across the group. Those individuals we consider the "stars"—those individual contributors who make the largest tangible contributions to a team—often make the largest intangible ones as well. But it may cut both ways. The same baseball study suggested that those players who started out their career with enormous potential but never achieved their star status can become some of the greatest chemistry disruptors. Though researchers don't know exactly why this is the case, it may be a result of resentment of unfulfilled promise.

Synchrony on Zoom

The power of eye contact is why interacting on platforms like Zoom make it more difficult to feel as connected as we do when we sit across from someone in real life. It is impossible to hold real eye contact because the camera is not positioned where the faces show up on the screen, so we have to choose between looking at the other person's face or looking at the camera so that it looks for them like we are looking at their face. Real sustained eye contact—but not looking at faces more generally—is linked to increased production of oxytocin. Technology has yet to catch up to what we know about the unique effects of social gaze. Fortunately, there are alternative strategies for promoting synchrony that do not rely on sustained eye contact. Expressing gratitude, bonding over the unique experience, and listening to music have also been shown to boost synchrony levels and help create bonds with others.

Conclusion

Historically, teams have been relatively stable, homogeneous groups that worked face-to-face. But teams are more distant, diverse, digital, and disrupted than ever before, leaving them more prone to incomplete information and incoherence as a result of overly asynchronous processing. This was true even before the COVID-19 pandemic, but certainly even more since. In accordance with our natural human tendency to lump people and things into categories, the result has been a decreasing tendency for teams to perceive themselves as functional coherent units, but rather as collections of subgroups. The challenge of this phenomenon is that we are naturally inclined to view our own subgroups (our organization, our line of business, our interest group, etc.) as superior, which can create real obstacles for effective collaboration.

Leaders can strategically operationalize synchrony to optimize team performance. Yet, too few leaders work intentionally to manage team synchrony as they should—though understandably so. This is newly emerging research that has primarily been applied in athletic and military contexts. The applications for business and leaders remain largely opaque. And, admittedly, not all of the strategies outlined above are even possible in many organizations today. Yet, the current climate—the pandemic, the "Great Resignation", political polarization—may be the very reason that deliberately managing for synchrony is so important.

Too often, leaders treat teams like horse races, imagining that the best results will come by getting the fastest and the strongest together on one track. And the fact that they're running toward the same finish line can create the illusion on teamwork, when, in reality, they've got a stable full of superstars who are running their own race, albeit in the same derby. Managing for synchrony enables leaders to move past the guess-and-check method of chemistry creation. Establishing a shared purpose and getting clear on goals are critical first steps to effective team building, but synchrony may be the key to developing super teams. Managing for synchrony is about considering the interpersonal conditions that set the stage for success, and that optimal levels of synchrony may be higher or lower depending on the goals of a leader and of a team. By better understanding its nuances, leaders can operationalize synchrony to optimize team performance.

"Evolution has wired us not merely to form dominance hierarchies but to work together when a vital task demands more than any single individual can accomplish alone. Organisms from ants to antelopes work closely together to fend off attacks from other groups, to capture resources that others enjoy, to cope with developing disasters, and to create structures that promote the collective wellbeing. Leading a complex organization is at least as demanding of coordinated collective work as is protecting territory, harvesting food, or constructing colonies."

– Debra A. Nunes, et. al,
Senior Leadership Teams

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