



The Secret
Sauce of

Team Performance

Understanding the neuroscience
behind interpersonal synchrony



A group of diverse people are gathered around a table in a meeting. A man with a beard and a blue shirt is smiling and looking towards the right. A man with a beard and a brown cardigan is smiling and looking at a laptop screen. A woman with long hair and a white sweater is also looking at the laptop. The background is blurred with warm lights.

Have you ever been on a team where everyone seemed to be in sync and everything felt like it was just *working*?

Team leaders have been trying to nail down this experience for decades—to pinpoint this ingredient in order to facilitate better teamwork for bigger success. Colloquially, this experience has been referred to as “chemistry”. “Chemistry” has been heralded as the “secret sauce” of team performance. In baseball, statisticians estimate that **chemistry accounts for up to 40% of unexplained variance in team performance.**

Many people believe that chemistry is unexplainable, but in fact, neuroscientists have found a way to measure it.

They have also found a way to create it.



“Chemistry,” it turns out, is a social shorthand for complex patterns of synchronization of neurological activity.

Neuroscientists call these patterns “interpersonal synchrony,” a phenomenon where neurological, emotional, and physiological activity aligns between individuals. Interpersonal synchrony can result in **increased subjective liking, empathy, cooperation, support, rapport, learning, and processing speed**, leading to higher-rated engagement and performance in teams.

Synchrony has been localized to the mirror network and the mentalizing network, both parts of the brain’s social network that specialize in managing our connections with others.

TYPE	DEFINITION	MEASUREMENT	RELEVANCE
 Cognitive	The mental connection between individuals, where neural activity aligns in brain regions associated with cognition, memory and decision making.	Directly measuring brain activity using brain imaging tools, like fMRI or EEG.	Increased understanding of the actions, intentions, and mindsets of others.
 Emotional	Synchrony of emotional experiences that align in valence (positive or negative) and intensity (high or low).	Monitoring facial expressions. Using wearables (like a FitBit or Apple Watch) to measure heart rate, sweat gland activity, 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	Synchrony of physical movements and actions.	Observing body language and physical movement or using motion detecting software.	Physical synchrony can increase empathy, subjective liking, cooperation, trust, and understanding between individuals.

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When scientists synchronize brain activity in two mice, the animals groom each other, which strengthens their social bonds. When people make eye contact or mirror each other, synchrony goes up, increasing trust and cooperation.”

Michael Platt,
neuroscientist and author of
'The Leader's Brain'

Managing synchrony

A recent Korn Ferry study found that only 21% of top teams were considered outstanding, while a staggering 79% were rated as mediocre or poor.

High levels of synchrony can improve team performance by increasing trust, empathy, and cooperation. But higher synchrony also has a downside: it can reduce creativity by suppressing the natural instincts of highly creative people.

The “right” level of synchrony, in other words, will depend both on the task and the people involved. Synchrony, therefore, should be managed strategically, according to the unique needs of a team.

Once a leader has determined the optimal levels of synchrony, they can identify gaps and opportunities to manage cognitive, emotional, and physical synchrony. **Then, act on it.**



Research from Gallup confirms a relationship between turnover and team performance: when team members feel more interconnected, they have almost 60% less turnover, and they score in the top 20% for engagement.

Here are some levers managers and employees can pull to find the synchronous sweet spot in their teams:



Make eye contact:

Pupillary synchrony rises and falls naturally during a conversation. When people make eye contact, synchrony increases. When they break eye contact, synchrony decreases.



Move together:

Humans have an innate capacity to track micro-expressions, and an unconscious tendency to mimic them when they are in sync with each other. Teams can do some body language mirroring exercises on remote video platforms. Even listening to music together is a way to get physiological rhythms aligned.



Just talk:

Being open and vulnerable increases synchrony. Using deep conversation prompt cards that cut through the standard surface-level chat may create deeper connections faster.



Find common ground:

People have a tendency to find and protect their tribes. People perceive others more positively when they identify them as part of their group. The definition of what makes a tribe—the basis for group membership—can be narrowed and expanded by context.



Give it time:

The more time people spend with one another, the greater synchrony they exhibit. In baseball, 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. Get feedback, measure impact, and improve over time.

Conclusion

There is a delicate balance between improving efficiency and success without compromising the diverse skillsets and backgrounds of team members.

Teams today 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. Managing for synchrony is about considering the interpersonal conditions that set the stage for success, and that optimal levels 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.



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