Build a Better Team

What the Research Says About Trust, Conflict, Goals and Working Together

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2026 Edition | Free chapters 1 to 3

Chapter 1: Does Teamwork Really Matter?

Most people say teamwork matters. Fewer ask how much, and how we know. This chapter starts with the evidence, because the rest of the book builds on it.

WHAT A POOLED ANALYSIS FOUND

A systematic review and meta-analysis looked at the link between teamwork and performance in acute-care healthcare teams, such as operating-room and emergency teams. The reviewers searched PubMed without a date limit, found 2,002 articles and included 31 in the analysis, covering 1,390 teams. They counted studies that reported a relationship between a teamwork process, such as coordination or non-technical skills, and a performance measure, such as an expert's checklist rating or the number of errors. The weighted average correlation was r = 0.28, which the authors describe as a medium-sized effect and translate to an odds ratio of 2.8. They tested whether team professional mix, familiarity, average size, task type, how realistic the patient was, and the type of performance measure changed the result. None did, which suggests teamwork relates to performance regardless of those characteristics. The authors conclude that healthcare organisations should recognise the value of teamwork (Schmutz, Meier and Manser, 2019, BMJ Open).

WHAT TO MAKE OF IT

Be careful about where this comes from. The teams studied were in acute healthcare, so the figure is a result for that setting. It is still useful as an anchor: across 31 studies, better teamwork processes went with better performance, and the link did not depend on the team or task features the authors tested. A correlation of 0.28 also means teamwork is not everything. Skills, resources and luck matter too.

WHAT THIS BOOK COVERS

The next chapters take the parts of teamwork that research has measured: trust, trust at a distance, conflict, psychological safety, goals and learning as a team. Each states the study, its size and where it was done. Where the best evidence

comes from healthcare, the book says so and treats it as a guide, not a rule for every workplace.

A SHORT SELF-CHECK

These are practical questions, not findings from the study.

Do we know who is doing what? Coordination was one of the teamwork processes studied.

Do we talk to each other about the work, not just through managers?

Do we ever look back at how we worked, as well as at what we produced?

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A product team misses a deadline. Everyone points to a technical issue. When the team looks at how it worked, it finds that two people each assumed the other was handling a hand-off. Nobody was careless; the coordination step had no owner. The fix is a line in the weekly plan: "Hand-offs: who gives, who receives, by when."

PRACTICE EXERCISE

List the last three things your team delivered. For each, write one thing that went well in how you worked together and one that did not. Look for a pattern.

KEY POINTS

In 31 studies covering 1,390 healthcare teams, teamwork went with better performance ($r = 0.28$, a medium effect), regardless of the team and task features tested. It is a healthcare result, used here as an anchor. Teamwork is a set of processes you can look at and improve.

Chapter 2: Trust and Team Performance

Trust is the idea that team leaders talk about most and measure least. Researchers have measured it, and the pattern is clear enough to build on.

WHAT 112 STUDIES FOUND

A meta-analysis pooled 112 independent studies covering 7,763 teams to ask whether trust among team members is related to team performance, and when it matters most. Trust was positively related to performance, with an above-average effect size (a correlation of .30). The relationship held after the authors controlled for the team's trust in its leader and for the team's past performance, and it held across both thinking-based (cognitive) and feeling-based (affective) kinds of trust. The strength of the link depended on three features of the team: how much the tasks depended on each other (task interdependence), how much authority differed between members, and how much skills differed (De Jong, Dirks and Gillespie, 2016, Journal of Applied Psychology).

The abstract says the relationship varies with those three features. It does not say in which direction for each, so this book does not either.

WHY THIS IS USEFUL

Two cautions turn into a plan. First, the result is about teams in general across a large set of studies, not a promise for your team. Second, because the effect held after controlling for past performance, trust is not only a result of success. It is associated with performance beyond how the team did before.

WHAT TRUST IS MADE OF

The meta-analysis separates two kinds. Cognitive trust is believing that colleagues are competent and reliable. Affective trust is feeling that they care. Both showed the link.

HABITS TO BUILD TRUST

These are practical suggestions, not findings from the meta-analysis.

Do what you say, and say when you cannot. Reliability is the base of cognitive trust.

Share the reasons behind decisions. People trust what they can understand.

Ask for help, early and openly. It shows that being unsure is safe.

Give credit by name. Specific thanks build the feeling that colleagues notice.

Admit mistakes quickly. It is the cheapest way to show that you are reliable about what matters.

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A team lead says at the start of a project: "I will share the plan by Friday. If it slips, I will tell you by Thursday and say why." On Thursday the plan is not ready. The lead sends a message: "It will be Monday. The vendor changed the spec." The date moved, but the promise about telling people was kept. That small kept promise is trust at work.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

For one week, track your own promises to teammates, including small ones such as replying by a time. At the end of the week, count how many you kept and how many you warned about in advance.

KEY POINTS

In a meta-analysis of 112 studies and 7,763 teams, trust among members went with team performance (correlation .30), also after controlling for trust in the leader and past performance. Both thinking-based and feeling-based trust showed the link. The strength depended on task interdependence, authority differences and skill differences.

Chapter 3: Trust at a Distance

Many teams now work across offices, cities and time zones. Does trust matter more when people are not in the same room? Two studies speak to it.

WHAT 52 STUDIES FOUND

A meta-analysis of 52 studies with 54 independent samples, representing 12,615 individuals in 1,850 teams, looked at team trust and team effectiveness. The overall link was positive (correlation .33). The authors also tested two ideas: that the link would be stronger in virtual teams, because distance raises the perceived risk of working together, and weaker when team interactions are documented, because a record lowers that risk. Both held. The relationship between trust and team performance was stronger in virtual teams (.33) than in face-to-face teams (.22), and weaker when interactions were documented (.20) than when they were not (. 29). The authors conclude that documenting team interactions seems to be a viable complement to trust-building, especially in virtual teams (Breuer, Huffmeier and Hertel, 2016, Journal of Applied Psychology).

WHAT 101 VIRTUAL TEAMS SHOWED ABOUT LEADERSHIP

A field study of 101 virtual teams compared three sources of leadership: traditional hierarchical leadership, structural supports, and shared team leadership. As the teams became more virtual, the link between hierarchical leadership and performance weakened, and the link between structural supports and performance strengthened. Shared team leadership was related to performance regardless of how virtual the team was (Hoch and Kozlowski, 2014, Journal of Applied Psychology). The abstract does not define structural supports or give effect sizes, so we do not.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM THIS

Distance does not remove the need for trust; in these studies it raised it. The documentation result is a practical gift: written records of what was agreed and who does what can stand in for some of the trust that face-to-face contact gives for free.

HABITS FOR TEAMS AT A DISTANCE

These are practical suggestions, not findings from the studies.

Write down decisions. After a call, send a short note: decision, owner, date. It is the documentation the meta-analysis points toward.

Make roles visible. A shared page that says who owns what reduces guesswork.

Share the leading. Let different people run different parts of a meeting, since shared team leadership went with performance at every level of virtuality.

Create small moments of contact. A few minutes at the start of a call on a non-work topic gives people a basis for trust.

Be explicit about response times. Tell colleagues when you will reply, so silence is not read as indifference.

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A team spread over three time zones starts ending every call with a three-line summary posted in the channel: what was decided, who owns it, when it is due. Two months later, a member says she no longer has to ask what was agreed. The record did part of the work that hallway chats used to do.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

After your next team call, write and post a three-line summary. After four calls, ask the team whether it helped and what to add.

KEY POINTS

In 52 studies covering 1,850 teams, trust related to performance more strongly in virtual teams (.33) than in face-to-face teams (.22), and less strongly when interactions were documented. In 101 virtual teams, shared leadership was linked to performance whatever the degree of virtuality. Written records and shared leading are practical supports.

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