# THE NOT SO OBVIOUS REASONS YOUR TEAM IS UNDERPERFORMING

Imagine you are sitting in an airport waiting for your flight. The airport is busy and you are at that low ebb in the day where you are looking for any external stimulus to get you through the boredom. You look around in the hope of seeing something entertaining and you notice two pilots walking down the concourse in the general direction of the boarding gates where you are waiting.

They walk side by side and stride purposefully. They look straight ahead. This is no time for small talk. Flying a plane is a serious business with serious responsibilities. Their backs are straight and their heads held high. Their uniforms are freshly laundered and pressed, and their shoes are polished. Their hats are on straight. The top button of their shirt is done up and their ties are snug to the collar. Their eyes are clear and fresh. The kind of look you have after a good night's sleep - when you wake up ready to take on the world. You see that the Captain with his four bars has just the right amount of grey peeking out from under his hat that shows he has done this for many years, but he is still youthful in his energy as he strides with authority through the terminal.

His co-pilot looks to be in his mid-thirties. Not quite old enough to have his fourth bar, but as First Officers go, there are no indications of a lack of experience.

You then notice a second crew around 50 feet behind, also walking towards your area. This crew has a similar age profile to the first. They have little else in common. These pilots have rounded shoulders, slightly hunched posture. They look just in front of their feet. Their gait has minimal effort to it. They are not dragging their feet, but they are close to it. They murmur casually to each other, and some wry smiles and glances are exchanged. The Captain smothers a yawn. At this point, you notice their eyes have redness and dullness to them. Their jackets have been slung over their flight bags, and their uniforms have been pressed – but not this week. Their shoes have not been polished in at least a few days. They are wearing their hats but they are not on straight and the rule that they must wear their ties and do up the top button of their shirts is not being observed. You glance around to see if free seats might be available. They do look like they could do with a sit-down.

As you watch both crews approach, which do you hope is flying you and your fellow passengers to their destination?

Now that you have made your mind up, I can give you an additional piece of information about each crew. The first are not talking to each other because they have never flown together before. The second crew has flown together many times before as indicated by the casual, but familiar interactions they are having.

Does that change your mind at all? Does it even sway you a little, or are you still sure about which pair of pilots you want in the cockpit? The latter piece of information is leading. I want you to ask yourself: In your mind is familiarity more important than fatigue in a flight crew?

I suspect most people would intuitively say that fatigue would be the greater danger in pilots. We are all terrible when we are tired. No one gets better as they get more tired. It's well known that performance suffers as fatigue builds, and fatigue must be the dominant factor here.

I have some bad news for you. If you interrogate the NTSB database of air accidents you will find that 73% of all accidents involve crews that are on their first day of flying together (1).

Additionally, NASA undertook research in 1986 that gave a clear conclusion. Even fatigued crews that have flown together previously make half the errors of rested crews that have never flown together (2). The academic summary of the research is this - flight crews that have not flown together before really suck!

I have another scenario for you. Imagine you are in the unfortunate position of needing cardiac surgery. The hospital's Dean of Medicine comes to you before you go under the knife. He says he has a couple of choices, and you should decide which team you would like to perform your surgery.

The Dean is excited because they have recruited some newly qualified staff to the surgical teams. In order to integrate the new staff and give them an excellent experience, they have formed two teams. In the first, they have paired a very experienced cardiac surgeon with over 10,000 operations to his name with a new support team who have been recruited from the great schools all over the country specifically to work in this hospital. They all finished close to the top in their respective classes. He expects them to excel in their fields.

In the other team, they have recruited a newly qualified cardiac surgeon with only a few dozen surgeries under her belt, but they have paired her with a support team that is very experienced as a unit, having worked together for many years, and each member is experienced in their own right. So, what is your choice - the experienced surgeon with the new team, or the inexperienced surgeon with the team that has worked together for many years?

If you think this is not as clear-cut as the pilot scenario, here are the poignant pieces of research:

In a study of cardiac surgeons(3), it was noticed that patient outcomes did not improve with the experience of the surgeon. They were about as skilled on their first surgery as their last, but patient outcomes did improve with the length of time the whole team worked together. It is also true in knee surgery(4). Patient outcomes improve, and the speed of surgery increases when surgical teams are together for a longer period of time.

If you want a positive outcome, you should believe the statistics and put your faith in the new surgeon's hands, purely because of the team behind her.

If we combine our learning from the research in the medical field with that of our conclusions from the research into flight crews we can expand our academic summary – we can now say that new surgical teams suck as much as new flight crews. There seems to be a pattern here. But is it applicable in other industries - those with which the office-bound amongst us may be more familiar?

A study of a software company(5) found that teams that were together for longer performed better. In the teams that had been together for a while, there was a 19% decrease in bugs and a 30% decrease in variations on the budget. Even in auditing and consulting(4) – those teams that worked together longer could expect client satisfaction scores around 10% higher than those who had not. That's enough to be the difference between retaining or losing a client.

And in sports, a study of teams in the NBA showed that new teams significantly under-perform compared to where they peak – which is after 3 or 4 years. After that, they decline (It's not clear why this decline phenomenon happens in sports, but the armchair fans theorize it is because either the team dynamics or player attitudes change, or opponents learn to read the team and counter their style of play, or a mix of the aforementioned occurs)(6).

The evidence appears solid – we can say with a good degree of confidence that new teams suck, no matter what the team. It seems new teams should be avoided – always. There is not a shred of evidence to support a preference towards a new team over an established one to do the same job. All you "new ideas", "fresh blood", "reinvigorate" team leaders out there, take heed.

In practice though, we have to have new teams. An established team has to first be a new team. If we did not accept new teams there would be no new entrants to an industry or profession. Flight scheduling would be impossible. There would be no new surgeons. No new companies formed. Innovation and fresh thinking would be a rare commodity. No exciting new players in the sports world.

So what to do? Is the answer to just accept that a new team performs poorly and wait for them to become familiar with one another? Maybe we should just go a little gentle on them, let them make their mistakes. They will get there eventually.

As a passenger on an aircraft, I am not so happy if that is an airline approach. Nor am I feeling relaxed about that as I am about to go under the surgeon's knife. I am also pretty upset about the buggy piece of software I'm relying on. Certainly, I'm thinking of throwing in my season tickets because the coach keeps changing my beloved team, trading players in and out, and yet they continue to lose.

What we want is a team that performs well now, whether it's new or established. The challenge is to accelerate a new team through this 'dead zone' and transform them from a bunch of newbie losers into a high performing group of people.

One of the keys to high performing teams appears to be how much they know about each other(6). Not the small stuff, like how a colleague prefers their tea.

I'm talking about the knowledge of each other's values, behaviors, ideal work preferences, and life priorities. How we prefer to communicate outwards, and how we like to receive communication. Understand the things that motivate us, so we will each give more, and achieve more as a result. Matching and aligning these variables determine how well we fit together as a team.

The better we fit together the faster we get to work at a higher performance level. The more we appreciate the way the team works and we understand our place in that team, the better we become as individuals in that team and the better the team operates. As people, we figure this out intuitively over time. Some of us are better than others at these team working assimilation skills, but we are all fairly slow at it, as it's based on our own personal experiences.

Unfortunately, we have a bias towards getting it wrong. Sometimes it takes us a while to work out that we're not going to work very well in a particular team, or to spot that others aren't fitting in. The mismatches come to the fore eventually, but by then the team may be beyond salvaging, and those excited and keen new team members are now jaded, disengaged and looking for their next role.

We need to form the team well initially so that it's able to accomplish the familiarization task as quickly as possible, minimizing the 'learning about each other' and the 'trial and error' communication and work styles.

The good news to this dire set of circumstances is that we now have the ability to use AI to help accelerate the process of evolution into a high performing team. There is some amazing and exciting work being done in this area. There are companies now able to define personalities, core values, behaviors, preferred communication styles, ideal work and project environments, and the task success outcomes that will motivate a particular individual (if you ask a strongly creative person to up their output on a mundane repetitive task, how likely do you think that will motivate them and you get the success you need?).

They can predict with solid accuracy which people will work well together without much effort and which mix of people will be detrimental to performance outcomes. They can define the ideal team culture when forming a new team, and so fit new team members into it to get high performance more quickly.

The results of utilizing AI are impressive. Companies have reduced the time it takes to identify great team members, with less cost and effort searching. In one case, it was typical for a firm to interview 8-10 candidates before making a candidate an offer, but after applying AI that number was cut in half. Even more significantly in a team environment, there are reduced failures in the first 90 days of team formation. An upscale restaurant, that takes guest experience very seriously, reduced its 90-day turnover rate from over 65% to just 10%.

They are considered the employer of choice in the hospitality industry in their region and they credit their AI platform as being the single biggest factor in the success of their business.

Some companies have been trying to do the kinds of things that the AI does for a while but typically have significant human input into the process. They have been taking hours of time to complete assessments, often needing a consultant to help, and taking even more time to do the analysis and get something that is workable. Their process rarely produces repeatable behaviors. Furthermore, due to the difficulty of implementation, the initiatives often wither on the vine and for sure your wallet is significantly lighter than when you started.

With breakthroughs and advancements in AI technology, it is now possible to gather all the data needed and perform the analyses in a fraction of the time and cost. Using data gathered over a 15 year period and algorithms honed using big data analytics, clear and actionable results across whole teams can be had for under $30 per team member. The assessments take less than 15 minutes per individual to complete. Those are numbers that even the busiest teams and tightest budgets can absorb.

So what of the people lucky enough to be in established teams – things must be going great! Unfortunately, the picture probably does not look much better. Gallup's annual employee engagement surveys consistently show that in the US only around 30% of employees consider themselves engaged.

In the UK, it's a shameful 8%, and even in Germany, with its workers' councils and employee representation on the boards of companies mandated by law, it is still only 15%, the same as the international average.

When you add in that around 20% of workers are "Actively Disengaged", meaning they are actively working to harm the company they work for, then it's very difficult to say with a straight face that if 85% of your team is made up of team members who are disengaged or worse, that you have a crack team comparable with the best of the best! If we have established through scientific research that new teams are definitely under-performing, then there is a strong possibility that existing ones are as well.

Imagine what you could achieve if you realized even just some of all this untapped potential. To give you some idea of scale, an engaged employee is 147% more profitable than a disengaged one(7).

So, should you evaluate your teams whether they are established or new? If it can be done in less than 15 minutes and under $30 per employee it is certainly the easiest question I have posed today.

# REFERENCES

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