For Better Teamwork, Let People Choose Whom They Work With

Next time a project requires your colleagues to divide into teams, consider letting them choose for themselves who their collaborators are.

Researchers from Ohio State University, the University of Michigan and the University of South Carolina recently set out to determine what makes people cooperate well – especially because evolution pits beings against each other and human cooperation counters this instinct.

They found that teams thrive when members have the ability to pick and choose who they're working with. Chances are, they'll be more effective at working with those who are already established members of their network.

The study, which appears in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, asked 810 participants to play online games together. Each player began with 1,000 units of money which added up to $1. If one player was willing to give another player 50 units, the recipient would gain 100 while the provider would forfeit only 50.

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Some games were made up of random groups of people, while others involved small groups of people who were connected to one another, similar to how humans tend to congregate in real-life scenarios. Within each of these two types of arrangements, the researchers allowed some teams to be static, meaning they couldn't add or drop people from their teams, and some to be dynamic, allowing such flexibility.

Information about certain players' reputations for sharing money also factored into some games. However, the researchers found that those with positive reputations were not more coveted teammates. The groups that collaborated best played in teams with those they were connected to and had the ability to swap players on their teams.

"What really seems to matter is the ability to alter the structure of a network," study lead author David Melamed said in a summary of the findings. "And the pattern of relationships also made a difference. Those in a known cluster with multiple connections collaborated more, which seems intuitive if you think about how we interact in the real world."

While the study was supported by the U.S. Army to gain insights into what structures could promote competition and thwart enemy forces, Melamed noted that the findings could be applicable in the workplace as well.

It may seem beneficial to introduce colleagues who don't normally interact to spark interdisciplinary thinking, but the results of this study indicate that giving co-workers who have a rapport with each other the autonomy to form their own teams might yield more results.

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