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[Home](#) > [Resources](#)

What Research Reveals About the "Team Brain"

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Summary: Many long-held beliefs about how work teams operate are being challenged by recent research findings that illuminate the workings of the "team brain." These discoveries mean organizational leaders must shift their thinking about how to help teams succeed.

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New research discoveries over the past two years may confirm your suspicions about the usefulness of traditional team-building activities for work teams. It turns out, as many have long suspected, these activities fail to create any meaningful change in the workplace. In many cases, they patronize your intelligent staff and reinforce outdated intellectual models and assumptions.

Recent and ongoing studies conducted by the Brain Research Institute at UCLA's School of Medicine—with partners Team Results USA, Sandia Labs, and the University of Arizona, among others—allow scientists and practicing team and leadership specialists to look directly at the "team brain" for the first time. In early 2013, researchers used EEG (electroencephalogram) technology to monitor the brains of Navy officers piloting a nuclear submarine in a variety of scenarios. While neuroscientists and doctors have used EEGs for decades, the use of simultaneous EEGs to monitor a whole work team as a means of researching teamwork is brand new.

These results were then extended to workplaces in general. The remarkable result is that we can now see inside the team brain and observe it directly. It turns out that many of the assumptions we've been taught in teamwork classes and MBA programs—assumptions with which many experienced leaders have felt uncomfortable for years—are, indeed, wrong. Here are a few.

Wrong Assumptions

Forming, storming, norming, performing. In 1969, psychologist Albert Tuckman framed this linear model to explain how teams evolve as they work on a task. Most practical leaders and CEOs see something different in reality: Teams move quickly, jumping all over the place as they accomplish a task,

sometimes with lightning-fast convergence and sometimes in a way that's agonizingly frustrating. Rather than plodding along like John Wayne's horse in an old western, modern work teams are highly nonlinear and agile.

The UCLA research has revealed that the team brain is faster than we ever imagined. The old model can be discarded and replaced with five simple states for any work team:

- dominant: one leader
- dyadic: a small clique of leaders
- outlier: a small clique of people who break away
- collegiate: the "kumbaya" mode in which people really do harmonize as one
- dormant: the opposite of collegiate, in which everyone is disengaged

Real work teams transition rapidly among all of these states, but some transitions are more common than others. Dominant states, for example, get more frequent as tasks gets harder; outlier states seem to be healthy in even the best teams; and the collegiate state occurs only about 4 percent of the time, even in the elite groups who pilot our U.S. nuclear submarines all over the globe. Which brings us to:

Together, everyone achieves more. No, they don't, as any experienced leader can tell you. Real leadership and proper team development requires more than hackneyed aphorisms. The reality is faster-paced and more complicated. In fact, the books and training programs that tell us, explicitly or implicitly, that teams should be in the harmonious "kumbaya" state all the time are not only widely (and rightly) ridiculed but also wrong. It turns out that perfect agreement and harmony are needed in small doses, like oil in an engine, but the other states supply the gasoline that gets a team from A to B. And that brings us to:

There's no "I" in team. Oh, yes, there is. In fact, the "I" in team turns out to be essential for speed and agility. Without it, there can be no asymmetric states like dominant, dyadic, and outlier, and teams lose their ability to innovate and change. This may be one reason why innovation is a little slower (but dependability is higher) in organizational and national cultures that deemphasize the individual.

If the greats of organizational psychology like Abraham Maslow, Carl Jung, and (yes) Tuckman had had the tools to let them look directly at the "team brain," they'd have used them. But the old models, based on just looking at behavior, simply don't agree with how the brain actually operates.

New Leadership Guidelines

Leaders and front-line managers can put these new ideas to work with three simple guidelines:

Don't wait for a crisis, or even a problem, to emerge before you invest in your work team. If you do, you've waited too long. Effective management of the five team states evolves over time and with practice. Waiting too long is like saving money on oil until the engine seizes.

Ask your team members what they see in the group's dynamics, rather than limiting your questions to the demands of the immediate task. You will get invaluable diagnostic information that can help you gauge the team's health quickly. Is it in the dominant state too much of the time? Is it dormant when it needs to be dyadic? Sometimes you may get lectured and hassled, but that's valuable information too: It tells you where the pain is.

Get good help from professionals, especially if time is the enemy and you need your team in peak shape sooner rather than later. You hire mechanics to work on your fleet and technicians to fix your photocopiers. Focus on the business and don't try to be the solo do-it-yourself genius, lying underneath the car with a wrench when you should be driving it.

The teamwork models taught most often are 40 to 60 years old. It's time to innovate and evolve.

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