

Dr. Colin M. Fisher, author of *The Collective Edge: Unlocking the Secret Power of Groups*, reveals the hidden forces that make some teams thrive while others falter. He shares research-based insights on team dynamics, challenging common assumptions about collaboration, group size, and the causes, and cures, of social loafing. Colin offers a new perspective on team development, and the best predictors of team success.

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Intro

COLIN FISHER: So, if you're giving your teams complex whole pieces of work that are things that teams should be doing, and then you define the goals and the ends and paint a vivid picture of the future, but give them autonomy on how to realize that, you'll be amazed what your team can come up with.

WENDY GROUNDS: Hello, and welcome to [Manage This](#), the podcast by project managers for project managers. We are thrilled to have you with us today.

Today we're diving into a topic that shapes everything from Monday morning meetings to our midnight group chats: The secret power of groups. And our guest is someone who's swapped jazz clubs for lecture halls, and he still thrives on improvisation. Only now he is in team strategy and organizational dynamics. Join us in saying hello to Dr. [Colin M. Fisher](#), an Associate Professor of Organizations and Innovation at University College of London's School of Management.

Colin has spent decades exploring what makes groups tick; how they stumble; and, most importantly, how they thrive. You may have seen his insights in the BBC, Forbes, NPR, and the Times, and he has a Harvard Business Review piece asking the tough question, "Are you really a good listener?"

But today we're digging into his brand-new book, "The Collective Edge: Unlocking the Secret Power of Groups." It's a brilliant guide to turning invisible team dynamics into your biggest asset.

BILL YATES: It's so important for us as the leaders of project teams to get the most from our teams. We really want project success. Reading through this book by Colin, it just strikes me there are so many gold nuggets in here. Can't wait to cover them. Some of them are brand new to me.

WENDY GROUNDS: Some of them are very new to me. There were some really good concepts. So, folks, if you are leading a team, if you are collaborating on a project, or

you're just trying to navigate your family group text, buckle up because we're about to discover why the real power isn't in the person, but in the people.

Hi, Colin. Welcome to Manage This. Thank you so much for talking with us today.

COLIN FISHER: Thanks so much for having me, Wendy.

A Group Lens

WENDY GROUNDS: Yeah, well, this has been a great book. Bill and I have both read your book, "The Collective Edge," and we've learned so much. I mean, we've had many conversations on teamwork, and I'm sure our audience knows that, as well. But I think today we've just got some novel fresh ideas, things I haven't heard before. So, I'm very excited to just share the content with our audience. Now, the first question I have, how does seeing through a group lens, change the way that we lead and collaborate and we innovate on a team?

COLIN FISHER: So, I would say for some people it's going to change everything. So many of us are thinking about ourselves as individuals, as the primary way we think about the world. And there's good reason for that; right? Like we're hardwired in some ways to see the world through our own eyes because how else are we going to see it? But for other people I think it's going to really validate some things they may have intuited about leading and managing teams, but maybe don't have a language for. Because we also are really social animals who live our lives in groups.

And for those of us who really get a language and a vocabulary for thinking about how groups are influencing us and how we as individuals can reciprocally influence our groups, I think that can be really powerful and really transformative.

It certainly has been for me in the years I've been studying groups. So many things that you kind of intuit are good things to do, you find out, oh, there's a real science to this, and there's a real system. And then there's other things. I would say the main thing that studying groups has taught me is we make so many assumptions about people seeing the world the same way as we do, about people understanding the tasks, the goals, the roles in the same way that we do. And the biggest thing that studying groups has taught me is you should not assume that.

Group Influence

BILL YATES: You got the attention of our listeners because project managers face that every day at work. We don't understand – I'm speaking from my own experience – I don't understand why the team is not where I am on this topic. So, there are so many assumptions that I bring into those teams and groups that I lead. And that's what got me excited as I read through your book. You shine the light on some things that need to be truths for us as project leaders. So, thank you for that. We're excited to jump into some of these details.

COLIN FISHER: Groups are influencing us all the time. I think some of the most powerful examples of that are groups that we really identify with and think of kind of as part of ourselves. And so, some of the times in the book, I'm using really extreme examples like the national culture we're a part of, and the invisible ways that that

influences the way we communicate with other people, the things we think are important, the things we think are moral and valuable.

But at other times it can go as far as thinking about cults. In fact, I talk about one cult called Love Has Won where the sort of slide of this group away from reality is really, really gradual.

But it really did start with people who just kind of share the common interest and like to sort of talk about spirituality online, getting together, not talking to other people more and more and more, going and living together in the forest, and that you can just trace this really gradual drift away from reality.

So you can see almost any group you're a part of, whether it's your family, whether it's your friends, whether it's a school you went to, whether it's the town you went to, or for most of us, the organizations we work for and the teams that we're a part of shape what we think is important, what we think is valuable, what we think is worth talking about, and how we think we should work, manage and lead.

Social Loafing

BILL YATES: So true, yeah, there are quite a few warning signs that you bring out in the book. And one of the terms that we wanted to get into with you is new for me, I think for Wendy also, this idea of social loafing. As you described it, I'm like, oh yeah, I've definitely seen that. Gosh, I'm a participant in that, too.

WENDY GROUNDS: Yeah, yeah.

BILL YATES: I do that. So go ahead for our listeners, describe what social loafing is. And I think they'll quickly get the connection to project teams, too.

COLIN FISHER: Social loafing is the phenomenon where, when we believe there are other people working with us on the same task, we don't try quite as hard as we would if we were working alone. And the studies of this are, you know, were really, really clever. The classic studies were in the 1970s, this researcher named Bibb Latané and his colleagues were doing these studies where they would have people clap alone in a room.

So, you'd get these cool 1970s headphones, and you're wearing them, and I'm sure, I think they looked really cool. And the researchers would either tell you, you're clapping alone, and these are there to cancel out the noise; or sometimes they would tell you, you're clapping in a group of two, of three, or of six, and then they'd pipe in a little bit of cheering noise there.

And what they found was the people who believed they were clapping alone clapped much louder than the people who believed that they were clapping along with other people, even though everyone was given the same instruction to clap as loud as we can. And I hope this resonates with everyone. It certainly resonates with me. And it's something that's just wired into our psychology, that when we are doing any kind of task, and we know that other people could pick up the slack for us, our brain wants us to conserve resources for other stuff.

It says, "Hey, you know, you've got other important things to do. Everyone else is doing this too. You maybe don't have to try quite as hard." And so, this is something that we don't overcome naturally. This is something that we're going to have to compensate for

with leadership, with management, because this is what our brain naturally wants us to do.

So, one thing that at least I encounter, especially as a professor, is students telling me about, “Oh, we’ve got these free riders in the group, and there’s somebody who’s not pulling their weight.” And that certainly, you know, that definitely happens. And there often are people who are doing that. But it’s not always for the reasons we think.

But I think giving a little grace to others when we think, “Oh, you’re not trying as hard as I am,” it’s often good to remember, “Hey, social loafing is a real thing. My brain is programmed for this.” And I think it’s also good to remember one other thing, which is that we all take more credit for our contribution to the group than we probably are able to give.

BILL YATES: No, it’s so true.

COLIN FISHER: Yeah.

BILL YATES: And it was so interesting. Like with the concept of social loafing when you say, “This is especially true for simple tasks or for, like physical tasks like, you know, rope pulling, that kind of thing.” But if it’s a more complex task where then the team members are – they’re really challenged, and they see, “Okay, there’s only three of us working in this brainstorming exercise, for instance, on the project. I really need to be fully engaged here because the three of us have got to figure this out.” You know, it’s more complex.

So, then I think social loafing is not, and the research shows, then as a leader, I don't have to worry about social loafing as much because this is a more complex task. This is something where there is that built-in accountability with the team of, "Okay, we're brainstorming for a solution to this problem. We've got to figure this out for the good of the team."

The Best Weapon Against Social Loafing

COLIN FISHER: Yeah, absolutely. The task is so important in determining whether a group's going to have a big problem with social loafing or not. And that these simple, repetitive tasks are the ones that are most prone to social loafing. What we see in the research is the best team tasks don't have that simple, repetitive characteristic.

So, you can get away with a team that shovels snow every day, or you can say, "Oh, I've got a team, and we have a call center where we're adding up individuals and calling that a team." But you're going to have problems with motivation if you're managing people doing that kind of relatively repetitive work that doesn't have a lot of variety.

So, your best weapon against social loafing is giving people complex, whole pieces of work. And by "whole pieces of work," just as you're saying, it's things where you can see the outcome of your labor. So, when I do this, I can see my idea get to the client. I can see the document that we were working on or the slide deck we were working on. I can see that being presented and being used.

And that we have more social loafing when we have the opposite. When we have people kind of do work in silos, and they do their bit, and then they throw it over the

fence to somebody else, but then they don't know what happens to it. They don't see the result of that. And that's another time when we're going to have social loafing.

So, these kind of ways that you structure the tasks so that there are whole pieces of work where people have a variety of skills that they have to apply and that they have autonomy over how they get to conduct their work, that you're not telling them this is exactly the way you have to do it. Those are your best weapons against social loafing in your teams.

The Ringelmann Effect

WENDY GROUNDS: That's excellent. Now, another thing that ties into that is, you talk about the group size, and the Ringelmann effect. Can you just give us a little bit more information on that?

COLIN FISHER: Yeah. So, the Ringelmann effect is great. I mean, in a way, the Ringelmann effect and social loafing are very closely related, and that I'm kind of sad that we have stopped calling it the Ringelmann effect because I think it captures this idea that, for each person you add to a team, the individual effort is likely to go down. So, every person is likely to try harder in a group of three than they are in a group of four. In a group of four, people are likely to try a lot harder than they are in a group of 20. So, the more we feel like we can get lost in the crowd, the more social loafing is going to be a problem.

BILL YATES: It's interesting, too. I think you give the example of the company, IDEO, and I think they had said, you know, three to six was an ideal team. It's so interesting

because this is something that comes up often with project managers, with whether it's traditional or an agile team. You know, what's the right size?

And, I mean, my biggest takeaway from what you'd written about the Ringelmann effect and looking at organizations that have been successful with this, yeah, three to six is the ideal team size. Then as a project leader you're going to run into more and more difficulty managing larger and keeping people fully engaged and fully accountable for each other.

Work in Smaller Groups

So, you know, you give great advice, which is, okay, hey, man, I'm a project manager, and my team happens to be 20 people. What do I do? I see the science behind it. I've got to split my team up. I mean, the reality is you have a team that's oversized, you need to address it.

COLIN FISHER: Yeah. I mean, I think that's the number one thing I find when I am working with teams and organizations is that you talk to the manager, and they say, oh, yeah, I've got the team of 25. Well, that's great, but actually you should think of what you're doing as not leading a team, but leading a small organization, and that you've got to create real teams of the size of three to six within that small organization of 20-25 people.

And so, thinking again in terms of tasks; right? If I've got a whole piece of work, what's the minimum number of people I need to do that whole piece of work? Well, let's really give that to that smaller group of people. And you can have lots of different systems

where, you know, if you have to meet, we can have sort of elected representatives or subgroups or task forces or decision-making committees.

And you don't want to overcomplicate your life. But the worst things are to always have meetings of 20 to 25 people. And that if your work is filled with this, this is what gives meetings and gives groups and teams a bad name is that we just, we get 20 people into a room, and there's no way that we can all contribute when we're all there. You know, it would just take way too long.

We'd all look like Congress if we were trying to make decisions this way all the time. And so, if you have the power to make decisions, do really whole pieces of work in smaller groups, you should do it. And then you have to have a mechanism to say, well, we really do need everyone's buy-in, and we do need everyone to vote on this or give input into this proposal. But that meeting all the time as a whole group of 20 isn't the way to do that.

Balancing Autonomy with Direction

WENDY GROUNDS: Colin, you mentioned humans are motivated by autonomy. But often what we get wrong is that they like the autonomy to achieve their goals, but there needs to be an agreement on what those goals are. So why don't you talk about how a leader can balance the need for autonomy as well as the equally important need for clear direction of what that goal actually is.

COLIN FISHER: So, I'm sure you guys have heard autonomy has almost become like a buzzword in a lot of organizational contexts where we had these companies that were like Valve or Medium were experimenting with organizational structures that they called

“holacracy,” right, where everyone, you know, has autonomy to do everything. You can take vacation days whenever you want. You can propose whatever projects you want to propose. And these are really difficult structures to keep up. So, it’s true that autonomy is a really deep psychological need.

So, there’s a great psychological theory called self-determination theory, which kind of gives away the game in the name, where one of the main things we want, especially at work, is to feel like we’re the masters of our own destiny. We do not want to feel controlled like we’re somebody else’s puppet, and that our motivation goes down when we feel that way. We’re less creative. We don’t learn as much. There’s all kinds of bad effects of people feeling deprived of autonomy. But when we’re in a group or team, if we give every individual complete autonomy, how are we going to coordinate? How are we going to collaborate?

And so, the thing where we need some agreement or we need some leadership ahead of time is what are we trying to achieve? I think an easy metaphor for this is thinking about like if we’re trying to coordinate on physically ending up in the same place. So, if I say, “Hey, meet me in Georgia,” that’s not a very helpful instruction; right? And the chances that we’re going to end up in the same place are very, very low. We have to be much more precise than that if we want to think about actually working together. So having very clear goals is important, and having a shared vivid vision of the future that’s going to emerge from us accomplishing those goals will keep us together.

And so that’s, you know, in case maybe we don’t know how to measure our goals, maybe we don’t know exactly what metrics are important right now. But we can still paint a vision of the future, whether it’s a happy client, whether it’s a technical problem

that we've solved, we can say, at the end of our work, this is what we want the future to look like. And that allows us to coordinate.

But then the autonomy comes in on how do we get there, and that groups thrive when we all know what kind of future we're trying to realize, but we experience autonomy on, oh, it's on us to figure out how we get there.

And there's a number of other reasons that that ends up being beneficial, one of which is, if you really are micromanaging your team, and you tell them this is exactly how I want you to get to this outcome, and something goes wrong, whose fault is it? So, your team's not going to think it's their fault. They're going to think it's your fault because those were your steps.

Whereas when it's their steps, they experience accountability and responsibility for the work that they're doing, and they're just going to do better work. So, if you're giving your teams complex whole pieces of work that are things that teams should be doing, and then you define the goals and the ends and paint a vivid picture of the future, but give them autonomy on how to realize that, you'll be amazed what your team can come up with.

Empowering Your Team

BILL YATES: Yeah. I've got to read your quote because you quoted U.S. Army General George Patton in the book. He said: "Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do, and they will surprise you with their ingenuity." This is something that project managers need to be reminded of because for many of us we kind of grew up being the "how" champion; right?

It's like, hey, I figured out this process, or I figured out this tool, and it's made me successful in projects. And then somebody tapped me and said, hey, why don't you lead projects? You're a project manager now. Okay. Hey, here's the tool everybody should be using because it worked for me.

No, no, no, no. You know, we need to step back and think about this holistically and how can I empower people to have all the resources they need and then agree to the goal, you know, speak into the goal, but then go about it and do their thing; right? Bring their magic to the team.

COLIN FISHER: I would add to that. So, I think that's totally right. And I'm also glad you have the quote there because I wasn't positive, I was going to get it 100% right if I did that off the top of my head. But giving people autonomy over the process, if you're a project manager, that doesn't mean you can't give people help and advice about what process to use. It's just about where that's coming from.

So it's a difference between you saying, "Here's how I think you should do this," and saying, you know, "Here's something that's worked for me, but you guys do what works for you," or simply saying, "You guys figure it out; but if you need help or you want my advice, I'm always here, and I'm going to, you know, keep offering that help at every step of the process."

So, because, you know, at the very beginning, certainly I find this in academia, I train a lot of new Ph.D. students who are running these big research projects for the first time, and they need a lot of process advice. They need some structure around how they're managing these big projects for the first time. And if I just turn them loose and say, "Hey, you do whatever, I'm not going to tell you anything," that's also bad. But it's the

difference between people feeling like that's help and advice versus that's somebody dictating to me what I must do.

Are We Still Storming?

BILL YATES: This was a lot of fun for me. As I'm reading through the book, you challenge the classic team-building narrative that comes out in Tuckman's model. And I think for all the project managers who've taken the PMP exam to get that certification, they probably had to study it. And it's the old, the forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning model.

And I think some people kind of misapply or misinterpret. They think, okay, well, based on Tuckman, we need to build trust first thing with our team. Newly formed team, people come from different departments, they're just getting to know each other, shaking hands for the first time. Let's go build trust. And you sort of throw a monkey wrench at that and say, "Whoa, let's step back here." Talk a bit about that.

COLIN FISHER: Yeah, I love that. And I love that you have an audience that's likely already familiar with [Tuckman](#). And certainly, in business schools around the world, people are teaching the Tuckman "forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning." Yeah, his rhyming got a little worse as the years went on, and they did adjourning. Yeah. So, Tuckman's model, I'll give you a quick history lesson about this model, that at the time, there were what they called T-groups, which were training groups.

You know, post-World War II they had a lot of veterans come in, and they were sort of being trained for new purposes after being soldiers for so long. And this was designed by a lot of people who were trained in sort of an almost Freudian psychodynamic

tradition, but also in a more humanistic tradition that really honored autonomy, as we were just talking about. And so, what they would do is they would get these veterans into a room. And they all thought they were there to be trained for management or leadership or something. And there was a facilitator in the room. And that facilitator would just stand in the corner and not say anything.

And after a while, you know, these were people used to taking charge. There were former officers in the room and so forth. And they'd go like, "Hey, what are you doing? Why is this happening?" And they'd start to get mad at the facilitator. And then after a while they, you know, kind of figure out, it's like, wait a minute. Is this part of it? Are they doing this to us on purpose? And then they'd start to kind of come up with some norms and say, "Oh." And then the facilitator would step in and go, "All right, now you guys are ready. You've figured out that this is what's going on."

And Tuckman's research was based on these T-groups. And so, you can see how, if you watch that process, and you watch those T-groups, you're going to see forming, storming, norming, performing because that's how they worked; right? That is in fact what they did.

So, it was a very accurate model for a very specific kind of group. And that we now know that the kind of group that that's most accurate for are groups that are the clients of their own work, that do not have deadlines. So, if it's like a social club, it's your book group, it's something like that where, again, there's not deadlines, you guys are the only ones who have to be happy with it. You do see forming, storming, norming, performing quite a bit.

Gersick's Punctuated Equilibrium Model

But in task-performing groups, there was a researcher called [Connie Gersick](#). And in the 1980s she heard this from both her supervisor and mine, Richard Hackman. He was teaching the Tuckman model of team building at Harvard in the 1980s, just like everybody else. And Gersick was somebody, she had come to grad school, and she had had a career as a leader already. And she listened to that model, and she's like, "No task-performing group I've ever been a part of sounds like that. I don't think that's right." And so, she set out to do research that showed that that wasn't always right.

And so, she studied all different kinds of groups. She studied project groups at banks, studied student project teams, studied these beer delivery teams, all different kinds. And she found that what actually happens is groups get together really, really quickly, and they develop norms usually right in that first meeting, like often in the first few minutes of being together. And then they usually actually don't change very much until about half the task is gone. And then once we're halfway to the deadline, everyone looks up at the clock or the calendar and goes, "Oh my gosh, half the time's gone. We'd better do something different."

And then we see this kind of radical change to some new sets of norms, new processes, new ways of working, up until right before the deadline. And then we see another bunch of radical change. And she borrowed a concept from evolutionary biology called punctuated equilibrium, which unfortunately does not rhyme and did not prove nearly as catchy as Tuckman's model. But, you know, for most of us who are working in organizations, Gersick's punctuated equilibrium model is actually a much more accurate way of understanding the teams that we act in every day.

So, to go back to your original question, the way the Tuckman model misleads us is it makes us think that we need to go through these forming storming phases where, you

know, facilitators and people who've kind of taken this forward say, "What we need to do is we need to build this trust before we actually get to performing." And the problem with that is the only really valuable trust we have in work is where I see that when you and I are interdependent, and you have a task that I'm depending on you to do and vice versa; that when you're supposed to do it, you do it. And I do that. The best way to actually build valuable trust is to do something that's really close to the task you're going to do anyway.

And so, for a lot of people, that means you're better off just kind of getting to work, finding a really small win that we can start to build trust off of, and stacking those small wins. And that's how we're going to build trust. Whereas the kind of trust we build in, you know, a ropes course or a team building exercise or trust falls, that can be fun and engaging. But if I was expecting a document or an email from you, and you don't deliver it, that's all out the window almost immediately.

So, the research shows that teams that work on team building in task-like simulations or by getting to work really fast outperform other kinds of team development exercises. I think it's not so much that Tuckman was wrong. It's more that people have applied it to the wrong kinds of groups and taken some of the wrong lessons from it moving forward.

The Five Task Traits

BILL YATES: That's good. And, our work as project leaders is very much tied to tasks. So, this idea of the five task traits that you identify. And we've spoken about autonomy. That's a key one there for sure. But I think it's worth mentioning the other four also, They're variety, identity, significance, and feedback. Just give us a feel for what do those words mean. And then as a project leader, I need to think about how I'm letting

team members take on the work and the task to make sure that I'm doing this in a way that keeps everybody engaged.

COLIN FISHER: No, those are super important. So, the characteristics of a task as we talked about, we need to have autonomy over our work processes. And we talked a little bit about task identity, which is this idea that I'm going to be able to see the results of my labor in the final product, in the impact on clients or users or whoever's there. Right? But that often we need to imbue work with that characteristic because, if we're doing a project that's more internally focused in our organization, often you are just kind of throwing it over the wall at the end, and you don't see what happens to it. In too many organizations, sometimes the leader or the manager knows what happened, but that doesn't get fed back to the team.

BILL YATES: That's a great point right there. The leaders need to point that out. If they see the big picture, they have to make sure their team sees the big picture.

COLIN FISHER: Yeah. And often we don't even know who our clients are; right? Like who's seeing this work at the other end. And so that's another way you can foster both task identity and this next part, which is task significance. So, the task significance, it's psychologically meaningful to the people doing the work. And different kinds of things can be significant, that sometimes people get misled by significant, meaning weighty, and we're supposed to be changing the world.

But that, you know, I play music. Music is really significant to me. And when I play music in a group, it's significant to everyone there, too. So, we get to determine what's significant for ourselves, but we're much more likely to think somethings significant when we believe it has a positive impact on the world. And that we're a lot more likely

to understand our work as having a positive impact when we have that task identity. We see its impact on clients. So, they're definitely related things.

So, task variety is that we're not doing these repetitive tasks that are, you know, the same thing we were talking about with simple and complex tasks, that a simple task or a task with low variety has us do the same skill over and over again. Right?

So, I think back in the days where we actually sent letters to people, right, if we're just stuffing envelopes with letters and putting the stamps on them, that's a really repetitive task with really low variety. And that variety, again, is mostly cognitive, that it's asking us to both come up with new ideas, to problem solve. Maybe there is a little bit of repetitive work so we can take a break from the more cognitively demanding work. But having that variety keeps us motivated by the work itself.

And when we have that autonomy, we get to kind of switch when we need to switch. When we're tired, we don't have to keep doing this really hard cognitively demanding work, but we have something other than simple, repetitive work to maintain through. And there's actually a lot of good research that shows we are more creative when we do have this ability to switch between more boring and more complicated creative tasks. So, there's a lot of benefits to having task variety.

Feedback that Fuels the Work

And then the last characteristic is feedback from the work itself. So, the more that our tasks have the characteristic, like when you play the game of Pac-Man or some really simple video game, right, you're a little circle gobbling up dots, and you can see those dots disappearing. And when all the dots are gone, you're done with that task. And that

the more work has that characteristic where, when we're doing the work, we can see it getting done, that we know we're closer to completing the task, the more motivating that work is.

Now, the problem is when we're doing, you know, certainly in my work as a, as an author and as an academic, it's really hard to tell sometimes when you're like, oh, I'm looking for a good idea that solves this really big, abstract problem. You don't always know if the work you did in the last half hour, hour or day got you meaningfully closer or not.

And so, the challenge then is how do we create that? How do we break this down into smaller wins, into things that we can see, that we can observe, or that we within the team recognize as being progress?

And sometimes that means recognizing things as progress. There are things like making mistakes, trying an experiment that shows you it doesn't work, and that that's just a switch that, you know, a team can make, that a manager can make, to recognize steps that are progress in a really amorphous task that's not giving you a lot of feedback. That's one of the main, I think, tricks and the art to bringing these principles from research to life.

Social Sensitivity and Team Success

WENDY GROUNDS: I want to talk about something else that stood out for me and I thought was quite fascinating. You refer to a study by organizational scientists on predicting group effectiveness. And, you know, sometimes we think, well, I'm going to get the group together of the smartest people, or I'm going to have so many introverts

and so many extroverts or, you know, just the combination of people that I need in my group to make it the most effective group. And what they found following this study, that it wasn't intelligence, it was something called social sensitivity that was the best predictor of team success. So, can you tell us about that?

COLIN FISHER: Yeah. So, this is a terrific study by Anita Woolley, Christoph Riedl, and Thomas Malone. They were looking for something that really was like the team version of intelligence. For what they called collective intelligence, the ability of the same group to perform well across a variety of different kinds of tasks. And that there is a long history of searching for like the right combination of introverts and extroverts or something like that to put on your team, or people even using the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory, or the MBTI. And the science on that just is very, very murky. The chances that you're going to succeed in composing a team that way is quite low.

So, they were looking for is there anything? And they happened to measure this one trait called "social sensitivity," which the test, if you can find it online, there's free versions, and it's really fun. It's called the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test. And what they do is they give you pictures of somebody's eyes, and it's just cut out so you can only see the eyes. And then there's four options for what that person was feeling. And the researchers know what that person was feeling; right? So, there's a right answer. And the number of those you get right, there's like 30 of them or so, is your score on this social sensitivity test.

So, it's kind of your ability to figure out what someone else is feeling without them telling you is what this is supposed to measure. And that the average level of social sensitivity was the only thing that predicted this collective intelligence, this ability of a team to perform across tasks, not intelligence.

So, like if you average everyone's SAT score, whatever measure of intelligence you want to use, that does not predict team performance. Having one really smart person on your team, again, does not predict collective intelligence. It's really only this social sensitivity. And that was a really big discovery because, in the science of groups, we've been looking for stuff like this for a very long time, and it's really hard to find them.

Now that said, I want to put one caveat here, though. My researcher doesn't want us to over-interpret this finding so that social sensitivity is the one thing that we can measure and that significantly predicts team performance. That doesn't mean it predicts a ton of the variants; right? Like, so that's a relatively small slice of this, and it's still more important that your team is the right size, and it's got the right mix of knowledge, skills, and information to complete the task.

That those things will trump the social sensitivity of the team because especially on a lot of complicated projects, if you don't have people with the right skills, they can be really socially sensitive, and that's not going to completely overcome this; right?

BILL YATES: Yeah, yeah.

COLIN FISHER: So, I don't want to over-interpret it. But once we know we've got a team that's the right size, we've got a team that's got the right knowledge and skills, then the next thing that we'd be looking for is do we have enough social sensitivity on this team that they can, you know, understand some things about what each other are thinking and feeling without having to tell each other every little thing.

Now, even if you're not socially sensitive, though, there's still lots of other ways to find out. And a main way to compensate if you don't think you're that socially sensitive is to

ask a lot of questions and listen carefully to the answer. And that gets you most of the way there really fast. So, if you're like, "Oh, boy, I never know what anyone's thinking or feeling unless they tell me," that's okay. You can still be a great team member, a great team leader. It just means you probably need to ask more questions. And honestly, that's a really good thing for the team, too.

BILL YATES: Exactly, yes.

COLIN FISHER: So, there's a lot of ways to do this.

BILL YATES: Yeah, that's a great word. And that's the beautiful thing is, obviously the examples you just gave, emotional intelligence is something that we can all grow in. So hopefully this sensitivity we can all recognize and grow in as well as a team so that we can take our performance to the next level.

COLIN FISHER: Absolutely. It's something, like I said, the goal is for us to understand each other, for us to understand what other people on the team are thinking and feeling. And that one way to do that is to just, you know, happen to be skilled at knowing that without people telling you. But another way is to develop your skills in asking about that, in really to develop your skills in listening to when people are telling you things that they may be telling you what they're thinking and feeling. So, it's definitely something that we can grow in as a team if we think of the goal of this is shared understanding of one another.

When Norms Get Sticky

WENDY GROUNDS: So, one of the things that also popped out to me was something you call “sticky norms,” talking about how a group forms very quickly, and they find these norms. But these norms can get sticky. Why don’t you talk to us about that?

COLIN FISHER: Yeah. In a way, it is very much about the same thing Tuckman was trying to figure out, but that norms aren’t always forming through this very gradual process that he thought they were forming through.

For the most part, when we don’t know how to behave in a situation, so especially when we’re in a new group, when we’re doing a new task, even when we’re just with people who we don’t know very well, we’re looking around the room for cues about what’s appropriate. Is this a meeting where we’re going to make small talk before the meeting, or is it okay for us to just all sit in silence and check our phones? Are we a really punctual group, or are we always going to start these meetings five minutes late?

And that, with those kinds of things that we may not have very strong opinions about, the norms that are established are just kind of who acts first, who joins in, and then those norms tend to really stick. So, where we sit in a room, who talks first, who talks the most, whatever happens in that first meeting tends to be really sticky.

And that that’s, when I talk about sticky norms, I’m talking about the phenomenon where whatever happens really early in a group’s life, usually in the first meeting, usually in the first few minutes, tends to persist in that group and continue to influence how the group interacts till, usually as we talked about with Gersick’s punctuated equilibrium model, till about halfway through the group’s work.

Then groups often do change their norms a bit, sort of of their own volition. So sticky norms are really important in that, you know, I think we're all agreeing with Tuckman that like norms are this unspoken invisible influence on how groups work. Each group has their own set of norms. They tend to be very idiosyncratic. They're not something that the same leader can always make the group feel the same across all the time. And the key is to then take advantage of the fact that norms formed really early, and they're really sticky. And when you know that, and you know that, like, actually everyone's just waiting for some cues about how we are going to behave in this group, you have the ability to influence that.

You can have a norm where we're going to ask each other a lot of questions when we don't know what's right. We're going to all share our ideas and that we're going to have a norm where everybody contributes. We're not going to just have the, you know, the person who's the highest status and talks the most influence all of our decisions. And we can make that explicit.

And so when we use that knowledge to create psychological safety, the sense that it is safe to speak up, to ask questions, to make mistakes; when we use these norms to make sure that we're communicating effectively and that everyone knows how we're communicating; how quick I'm supposed to respond to your emails, if we're using Slack or Notion or some other tool; that we know where our information's going to be stored, and that we have norms for those things.

When we use that knowledge that, oh, everybody wants to know how to behave, and I can influence that a lot if I do it right away, then we're doing it productively. But it gets progressively harder because norms are sticky. So, if I, in meeting three, now I'm like, oh, you know, we've been emailing this way, but now I'd like us to change, that's a

much harder task, yeah, than to use these sticky norms to your advantage right from the start.

Relaunch and Refocus

BILL YATES: I'm glad you brought this up. Think about this in terms of when you're launching a new project, you know, the team's coming together. Meeting one, the first emails that are going out, the first time you guys all meet together as a team, they're a sponge. They're looking for cues as to what those norms are going to be. The longer you let things go, whether it's a good habit or a bad habit, an atomic habit, it's going to be tougher to readdress it.

However, you give great advice, which is, as a leader, don't be afraid to relaunch. It's like, I've got a project team, and I can come to the team and say, I'll be honest, as a leader, I've let some things slide, and I've gotten a bit sloppy, so I need to reset expectations. It could be something simple and logistical like, well, we said we're going to start our meetings on time, but I've let things slide. So, launching and relaunching are two things that I think the leader should have in their tool belt, and feel free to use those as we address those sticky norms.

COLIN FISHER: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, relaunches are one of my favorite tools for a group that, you know, whether it's struggling or just feels like it could be a little bit better than it is, because it's really, really hard unless the group feels like there's some impetus to change their interaction patterns, to change those sticky norms. And that relaunches, you know, especially if you do them in a different room, if you do them at a different time of day than you usually meet, can create this feeling that, like, oh, yeah, I could think of this as a new task.

And that, I think that's my go-to when you are trying to affect meaningful process change in an ongoing group is to relaunch whenever you feel like you've got a chance to do it, and that there will be a benefit because you almost always can improve on things with a relaunch.

Synergy and All That Jazz

WENDY GROUNDS: So, I want to completely change the subject, but something that interested me about you was you were a professional jazz player. Now, we've seen the commonalities a few times between musicians and project managers. We've actually spoken to trumpet players before. Yeah, you're a trumpet player. And we also, yeah, I've just pulled up, it's Gerald Leonard in [Episode 189](#). He was a professional jazz musician. He was a bass player. So, talk to us about your trumpet playing and how that has correlated into your work that you do.

COLIN FISHER: Being a jazz musician was part of what got me interested in both teamwork and the other things that I study, creativity and improvisation. So, I was a professional jazz musician for about 12 years. I went to music school. So, I really came at this being a social scientist from a different angle.

And what got me interested in the social science of it was this phenomenon in jazz where you would have a group of people, often a group of people who maybe had never met. In one case, I can think of one time I was playing at a festival in Ethiopia, and we were kind of jamming after the main festival with people from all different bands.

And we literally did not speak the same language. And yet I could go "Autumn Leaves, one, two, one, two, three, four." And I knew, that would be fine. We were going to be

able to make music together. And that I think this phenomenon of the things that make a group able to collaborate on the fly like this are really built into the structure of jazz, right, where we have so many tools that allow us to collaborate spontaneously because that's, you know, such a big part of the job.

But the real magic was in what I call in the book "synergy," those moments where the group as a whole is producing something that no one of those people could have ever thought of before. And those felt much more mysterious.

So, it wasn't mysterious to me how jazz musicians can collaborate reliably and not fall apart even when we don't know each other, even when we can't speak the same language. But it was much more mysterious about these moments of synergy. And it turned out that that was also kind of mysterious in the research literature, that we're not great at predicting precisely when synergy is going to emerge.

And my advisor in my Ph.D., Richard Hackman, was somebody who was working really hard on this, that he was coming from a time in psychology when a lot of people didn't believe synergy existed. That there were a lot of scholars that said, "Oh, yeah, groups are always going to have social loafing. They're always going to be less than the sum of their parts. That's just groups. They're going to lose something in motivation. They're going to lose something in coordination relative to the individual capabilities of people."

And they essentially didn't believe that groups could be vehicles for building commitment and motivation that was greater than you would have had on your own. That groups were vehicles for teaching and learning from one another. And that we

could actually get better as individuals from being part of a group. And so, you know, as a jazz musician, that was something I had experienced a lot.

And so, I didn't come in going, "Oh, I don't believe in this because I'm a social psychologist who's read all this data." You know, spent so much time looking at group process, looking at how leaders can help the teams that they're working on, to help them to be more creative, to do these kind of complicated tasks and make better decisions.

So, it's been a huge source of, you know, motivation and curiosity, but also confidence that there were things that we didn't know about teams that were definitely out there, even if we hadn't discovered them yet. And I think those are still out there if anyone wants to come back to school and study teams some more. I'm the Ph.D. program director, so we're always looking for people who know those things.

BILL YATES: There you go.

COLIN FISHER: Who want to come discover them.

Find Out More

BILL YATES: And the first step they need to take is to find your book, whether it's in print or the audio version. Because I found it fascinating, and this idea of taking a team and boosting their performance has always been interesting to me. So, the content that you cover there and the tips and advice that you give are excellent.

COLIN FISHER: Thanks so much.

WENDY GROUNDS: Yeah, other than your book, where else can listeners go if they want to find out more about the work you do?

COLIN FISHER: So, you can find the book and the work I do at ColinMFisher.com. C-O-L-I-N-M as in mouse, although that's not my middle name, uh, Fisher, F-I-S-H-E-R. It's got my free newsletter that I write periodically about these things. And you can also follow me, especially on LinkedIn, where I'm sharing tips about teamwork and research all the time.

BILL YATES: Well, thank you so much for your time, Colin. This is pertinent information for our project leaders, and we really appreciate it.

COLIN FISHER: Thanks so much, Bill. Thanks so much, Wendy. It's been a real pleasure. I've had a great time on it.

Closing

WENDY GROUNDS: Thank you for joining us on Manage This. You can visit us at Velociteach.com, where you can subscribe to this podcast and see a complete transcript of the show.

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