Great (digital) teams:

How they collaborate and how you measure it

Interested in how high performing teams collaborate? Want to know how you measure this? Below we're summarising the top traits for high performing team collaboration, show you what it looks like on Microsoft Teams and provide you with tangible metrics.

Much research has gone into finding out how great teams collaborate. The most influential authors and academics in this area is arguably stalwarts like MIT's Professor Alex (Sandy) Pentland mentioned above, the 'father' of team dynamics Harvard Business School Professor Richard Hackman, as well as Professor Amy Edmondson and her work on researching the importance of psychological safety[1] and 'conversational turn-taking' as key predictors of team performance.

Together with other influential thinkers and practitioners such as US Army General Stanley McChrystal (famous for his book Teams of Teams[2]), Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and management guru Steve Denning, they have all made significant contributions to our understanding of how great teams collaborate.

We've passionately followed their research and work for years, and here are the **five core traits of great teams**[3] they all consider critical:

1. The team is bound by a common purpose.

2. There are not more than 10 members.

3. Everyone on the team talks and listens in roughly equal measure, keeping contributions short and sweet. Members connect directly with each other, and not just with the team leader.

4. There is psychological safety. Members carry on back-channel or side conversations only within the team.

5. Members periodically break, go exploring outside the team, and bring information back.

Below we'll outline these in more detail and also describe what you would expect to see in Microsoft Teams that reflects the above. We'll also provide a set of measurable indicators that will enable you to measure how you compare against the collaborative practices of a great team. Using our global benchmark study of the collaboration patterns on Microsoft Teams between 47,000 people across 5,300 teams in 15 organizations, we looked closely at

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1 Edmondson, A.C., 2018. The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth. John Wiley & Sons.

2 McChrystal, G.S., Collins, T., Silverman, D. and Fussell, C., 2015. Team of teams: New rules of engagement for a complex world. Penguin.

3 References all the research mentioned here is provided in Appendix B of the SWOOP Analytics Microsoft Teams Benchmarking Report 2020 available at www.swoopanalytics.com/benchmarking

the top 700 most active teams to determine what a high score looks like for each of the measures. This allows us to provide you with goals that, while aspirational for most, are attainable.

Let's have a look at the traits, what it looks like in Microsoft Teams and the associated performance indicators.

Traits of a great team – and what it looks like in Microsoft Teams

### #1:   Team is bound by a common purpose.

Both McChrystal, Denning and Hackman highlight the importance of being bound by a common purpose. The common purpose is the reason why the team exists in the first place. In Microsoft Teams we would expect to see a Team having been created and the team members have been invited. Everyone knows what their role is and what they need to do. The name of the Team reflects the common purpose.

There's no single objective indicator for this, but at least ensure that at Team has actually been created in Teams. If the team is truly bound by a common purpose their interactions will show this. As such, we suggest that unless the team scores high on the traits below then it is a cause of concern.

#2:   Not more than 10 members.

Hackman[4] and Bezos suggest that there should be a limit to the size of the team. For example, Bezos has said a team should be able to be fed by no more than two pizzas. Among all the researchers, there seems to be a consensus that the **team should not have more than 10 members**. In Microsoft Teams you'd want to avoid the temptation extend the membership. It's almost too easy to invite stakeholders and other interested parties, but refrain. Instead create another area, e.g. on Yammer, where you can interact with others.

In addition to keeping the team at max 10 members, also look at the proportion of team members who actively interacting. Based on our benchmarking data the goal should be that 100% of the team members participate.
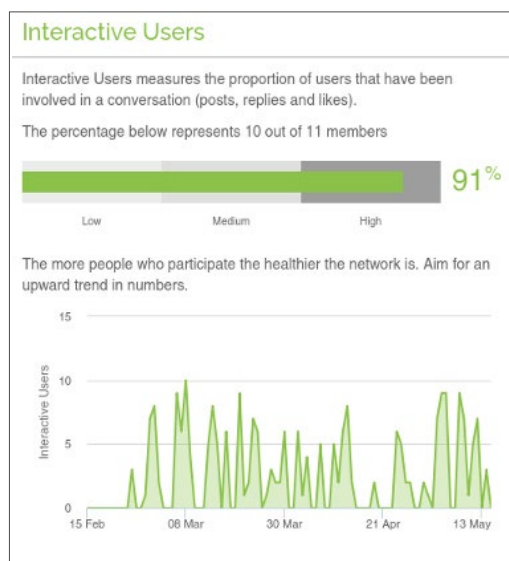
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4   https://hbr.org/2009/05/why-teams-dont-work

#3: **Everyone on the team talks and listens in roughly equal measure, keeping contributions short and sweet. Members connect directly with each other, and not just with the team leader.**

Pentland has done extensive research on this using socio-metric badges that records interactions in physical space. He found that in great teams everyone on the team talks and listens in roughly equal measure keeping contributions short and sweet. Both Denning and Pentland also suggest that members connect directly with each other, and not just with the team leader.

In Microsoft Teams we will see this reflected in the Channel discussions. Everyone participates, and interactions do not depend, or revolve around, on a single person. All team members are active posting and replying just like they would face-to-face. Team members are @-mentioning each other drawing attention to relevant information. Unlike email, messages are short and sharp. The are written in a way that encourages conversation and participation.

From a measurement perspective we can analyse the interactions between team members and then determine the team's collaborative persona.

SWOOP Analytics has performed statistical cluster analysis of millions of interactions in Microsoft Teams which has resulted in us determining five different team personas. The one associated with 'everyone talking to each other' we call a 'self-directed team'. This persona is achieved when the vast majority of the members are active, the active members have a high proportion of two-way relationships, and there isn't a high reliance on a single team member. When a team relies too heavily on a single person, the team persona changes from a 'self-directed team' to a 'single-leader team'. If the team membership grows and some members are not active, then the team persona changes to a 'forum' or a 'community of practice'. If you want to be a great team, then ensure you become 'self-directed' and stay that way.

The screenshots below from SWOOP show the team what its persona is, and the team network map shows the interactions between the team members.
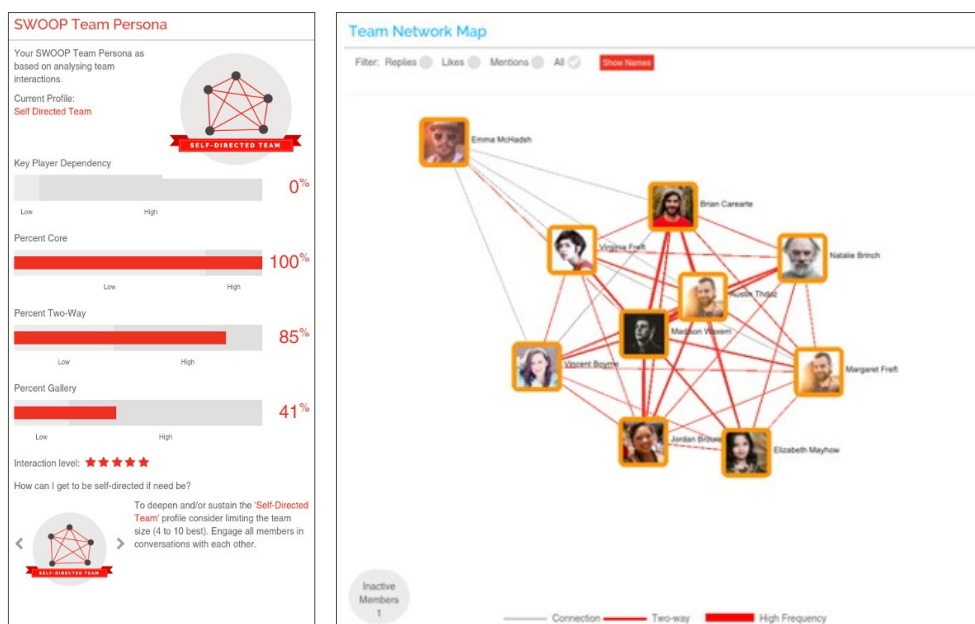
There are two additional KPIs that indicates the extent of team communication. Posting is equivalent to talking, and replying/liking is equal to listening, so we want to know how many posts get a reply. Our high performing teams achieved an 80% or higher response rate to posts.
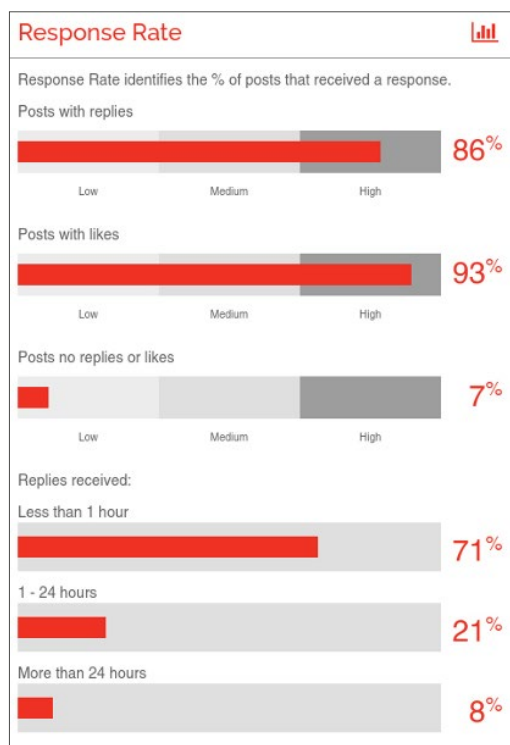
Second, channels can be very noisy and @-mentioning is a very effective way of balancing open conversations, where everyone can feel included, with the tagging of people that are required to do something. Our high performing teams achieved a rate of 40%.
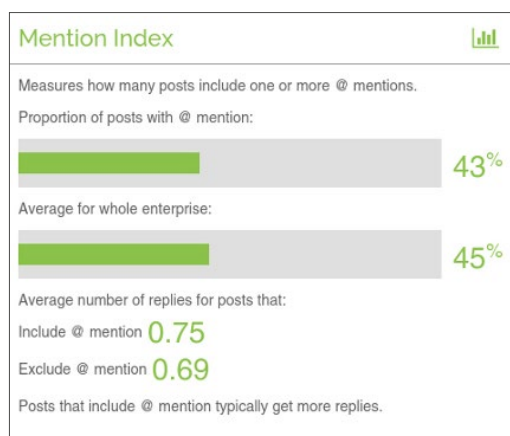
#4: There is psychological safety. Members carry on back-channel or side conversations only within the team.

A high level of trust and **psychological safety** is a distinguishing trait of a great team. Team members feel safe to air concerns, to ask questions and to engage with everyone. Related to this Pentland talks about the importance of **side-conversations happening within the team** (as opposed to outside the team).

Psychologist and author Liane Davey writes in the HBR that "Great teams are adept at engaging in productive conflict as a means of improving ideas, sparking innovation, and mitigating risk.", and whereas other teams "pull back from important discussions for fear of triggering an emotional outburst"[5].

In Microsoft Teams we should expect that the conversations in Teams aren't always praise and applause. In fact, you'd expect the sentiment of conversations have a combination ofboth positive and negative. What you need to keep an eye out for is any evidence of 'pull back'.

An indicator for this is the proportion of two-way relationships that exist between the team members. That means that when A posts, B replies and when B posts, A replies. This is in essence a reflection of having a normal balanced conversation. If some of the team members have unresolved tension or conflict, you're likely to see a drop in the level of two-way relationships.

Based on our benchmarking we've determined that great teams have 80% two-way relationships. As the score drops below 80% you need to start paying close attention to the dynamics in the team. Is the drop in two-way relationships due to unresolved tension?

Edmondson explains that an important signal that reveal psychological safety is when team member ask question[6]. Asking questions is also has the added benefits of unlocking learning and improving interpersonal bonding[7]. Therefore we'd want to see team members using Microsoft Teams to ask questions rather using the platform to post broad-casting style updates. Since the Channels in Microsoft Teams include threaded discussions this makes them well-suited to asking questions that require some reflection, as the reply is can easily be read in the context of the question.

Curiosity Index

Measures how many messages include a question mark.
Proportion of messages with question mark:

11%

Average for whole enterprise:

15%

Average number of replies for messages that:

Include a question 1.04
Exclude a question 0.84

Asking questions can create a stronger engagement and a more open and sharing culture.

Based on our benchmarking we been able to determine that in great teams 20% of channel messages include a question. Falling below 20% may not necessarily be a problem as the scope of the work perhaps doesn't require questions to be asked, but you should convince yourself that any lack of asking questions doesn't indicate a lack of psychological safety.

The last metric we suggest you look at relates to the use of private channels. These are channels where only some members are allowed access, but everyone can see they exist. This creates only suspicion and/or makes people feel left out and should therefore be avoided if you want to have a great team. The metric is therefore: No private channels.

Two-way Relationships

A high percentage of Two-way Relationships reflects real conversation, and often indicates a higher level of trust, between participants.

85%

Team Channel Activity

Top 10 channels by activity, number of users and percentage of active users.

Channel	Activity			Users
	Total	Trend	Last	% Active Users
Project Deliverables	587		12 May 2020	91%
Project Planning	243		14 May 2020	82%
General	0			0%

5   https://hbr.org/2019/12/let-your-team-have-that-heated-conversation
6   Edmondson, A.C., 2018. The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth. John Wiley & Sons.
7   https://hbr.org/2018/05/the-surprising-power-of-questions

#5: Members periodically break, go exploring outside the team, and bring information back.

Since Microsoft Teams can be used for other things that is strictly speaking 'teamwork' (e.g. using it has a shared collaborative space for a business unit, a shared space for a geographically based set of people etc), we would expect team members have joined additional Teams. Team members sharing updates in Yammer groups would also be expected as Yammer's purpose is one of building community within the enterprise.

Diversity Index

Diversity Index considers the spread of individual activity amongst various teams.

The index shown below is the average of 11 individuals, who were active within the relevant date range.

62%

In SWOOP we measure the extent to which team members in Microsoft Teams (or group members in Yammer) are actively participating in multiple Teams/Groups. When people are actively contributing to multiple teams/groups they are in a position to bring back new information to the team. We use the Geni-Simpson Index (also called the Blau Index) to measure this. We suggest the target should be 50% or more which means that each team member, on average, is actively contributing to somewhere between 2-4 Teams.

Summary of traits and metrics

We can now provide a summary of the five traits and the respective measures as outlined in the table below:

Behavioural trait	KPIs for great teams	What it looks like
1. Bound by a common purpose	• A Team has been created	• A team or channel exists to perform specific things known to the entire team or deliver a project • Everyone who is a member of this team knows why they are there and what their role is and what the purpose of the team is
2. Not more than 10 members	• Max 10 members • 100% active	• Max 10 members
3. Everyone on the team talks and listens in roughly equal measure keeping contributions short and sweet. Members connect directly with each other, and not just with the team leader	• Team Persona is a 'Self-Directed Team' • Response rate is +80% • Mention Index is 40%	• Posts and replies made in the Team are spread equally among all team members • Posts and replies made in the Team are not dependent on the team leader, or any other single individual, to make them happen • Team members use @mentions instead of emailing one-another

Behavioural trait	KPIs for great teams	What it looks like
4. There is psychological safety. Members carry on back-channel or side conversations only within the team	• Two-way Relationships are +80% • No use of private channels	• Team members are surfacing issues in Teams • We see problems being raised and honest conversations happen • All conversations are visible to all team members • Sometimes the conversations are tense, but issues get resolved
5. Members periodically break, go exploring outside the team, and bring information back	• Diversity Index of +50% (members are active in multiple Teams)	• Team members are active in other teams too • They periodically post relevant insights and updates about what they have learned and explains the relevance to the team

In this article we've distilled five traits of great teams and suggest a set of accompanying metrics that will help you and your team determine which aspects you may need to work on.

The five traits and accompanying metrics are only relevant in a traditional meaning of a team, so if you are using Microsoft Teams for other purposes there are other metrics that apply. In our SWOOP for Teams benchmarking report we recommend targets for the other team personas, i.e. single-leader team, forum and community of practice. We encourage you to explore these to help you set the right goals for the collaborative practices on Microsoft Teams.

To learn if your team has the traits of a great team, set up a trial of SWOOP Analytics today.