



**(un)Effective Teams**

**Career Development**



“A person is smart. People are dumb... .”

— Agent K (Tommy Lee Jones), from the movie Men in Black (1997)

It's the old problem of mob mentality. Put otherwise normal people in a group and their collective intelligence plummets.

George Carlin made a similar quip: “Never underestimate the power of stupid people in large groups.”

But Carlin got it wrong. You don't need stupid people to create a collective catastrophe; smart people are just as capable. History is riddled with tragedies, calamities and genocides caused by very intelligent people.

When it comes to intelligence and groups, the whole is often less than the sum of the parts.

But it's not just mobs and populist politics that illustrate this dilemma. You see it at the office everyday. We've all been part of an incompetent team: a collection of very smart, savvy and sage individuals who end up making obviously stupid decisions.

Individually, we may not have made the same mistakes. Yet we still watch it happen. Among friends and colleagues we nod, accept or acquiesce. But why do we allow ourselves to be carried away by a dysfunctional team?

Psychologists have a long list of explanations: confirmation bias, anchoring and cognitive dissonance

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are just a few. “Group think” is a common explanation. And, of course, there is the social deference we give to the leaders of a team. But are we cursed to suffer a collective depression in our IQ every time we join a group?

At MIT, the Center for Collective Intelligence ponders just this problem. In a series of reports published since 2010 they have analyzed teams in clinical settings, looking for the unique characteristics of more successful groups.

And, to date, there are three attributes of intelligent teams identified by the research:

1. The members contribute equally, without one or two people dominating the conversations;
2. The members are better able to identify the emotions and feelings of others (i.e., higher emotional intelligence); and
3. The smartest teams have more women.

So if you want to create an intelligent, effective team, make sure you invite emotionally intelligent individuals who share the conversation. And be sure to include lots of women.

A great deal can be said about emotional intelligence in teams. Most behavioral psychologists agree that our ability to read the emotions of others, and modify our behavior in response, is an important characteristic of any successful working relationship.

And women, in general, tend to rank higher on emotional intelligence than men. If you are a non-female reader, you may take offense at this suggestion. Men can be just as emotionally intelligent as women. But in most cultures men are still expected and trained to be stoic. Emotional intelligence is not an encouraged trait among young men and it’s hard to break free of social norms.

Which leaves the last attribute of an intelligent team: equal participation.

The participants, and especially the leader of a group, dictate its dynamic. And when one individual dominates the conversation, or even worse, multiple people compete aggressively to dominate, you can expect a dismal outcome.

Experience proves this is true. Probably only recently, even today, you attended a meeting dominated by a few individuals. They set the tone, framed the conversation and implicitly directed the goals of the discussion. It takes a special person to step back, understand the group dynamics and resist the collective momentum. It takes a talented person to do this without becoming part of the problem, dominating the conversation.

And often, it’s the lawyer who has to play that role. You are the independent voice from whom others expect and need contradiction. It is an uncomfortable, unpopular role. But if you are skilled — especially skilled in the art of emotional intelligence — it can make a wonderful difference.

For in-house counsel, this is a daily assignment. We are part of the team, but must think apart from it. We are integrated with the business, but must observe others critically. And we must do all of this without creating enemies within.

You can still be stoic — just think of Tommy Lee Jones — but you must also speak up diplomatically and nudge the group away from disaster

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