

Google's Project Aristotle

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How psychological safety captured the world's attention

For a while, from around 1999 to 2014, the term '[psychological safety](#)' was relatively well known in academia, but barely mentioned, let alone understood in the world of practice, the world of work itself. Then, a project led by Julia Rozovsky at Google changed all that. It catalyzed worldwide interest in [psychological safety](#) in the workplace.

Project Aristotle and Performance

Project Aristotle was a research project undertaken by Google to understand what increases **performance** and makes teams successful.

It followed the success of [Google's "Project Oxygen"](#) research which studied what makes a great manager and Project Aristotle used a similar method to surface the elements of effective teams at Google. Called Project Aristotle due to Aristotle's famous line, "*the whole is greater than the sum of its parts*", the project recognized that people can achieve greater results working together than alone. Part of the initial research involved defining what we mean by "team" – essentially a group of people who depend on each other in order to achieve a goal.

Project Aristotle Methodology

Project Aristotle aimed to identify patterns and behaviours within teams that led to high performance. Starting in 2012, Google spent two years studying 180 of their teams – 115 in engineering and 65 in sales – examining 250 different team attributes. These teams ranged from three to fifty people, with a median size of nine members. Initially, they predicted that the recipe for a successful team would be a combination of high performers, an experienced manager and unlimited free resources. Later, they would find out they were wrong.

[Julia Rozovsky](#), the leader of Project Aristotle, was already interested in the way people worked. During her [previous studies at the Yale School of Management](#). Rozovsky had two contrasting experiences with study groups. Both were composed of bright and friendly people, yet as a team, one study group quickly became fraught and struggled to learn together. Although she couldn't understand the reasoning at the time, it was through her work with Project Aristotle that things started to make sense.

In order to establish which teams were high or low performing, Project Aristotle used both quantitative metrics, such as sales performance data, as well as qualitative evaluations of the teams by executives, managers and team members. The researchers explored how both team

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composition – such as personality traits, interpersonal skills, and demographics – and team dynamics, like what it feels like to work with teammates, influence team effectiveness. They used double-blind interviews with leaders, and existing survey data (such as the annual employee engagement survey and gDNA, Google’s longitudinal study on work and life), to examine which factors could be related to team effectiveness.

In these surveys, respondents were invited to rate agreement with statements such as “*I feel safe expressing divergent opinions to the team*” and “*I am good at navigating roadblocks and barriers*” on a Likert scale. The statements chosen also drew on elements from the [Big Five](#) personality assessment and the [Toronto Empathy Questionnaire](#). Demographic variables such as tenure, level, and location were also collected.

Through this, Rozovsky and her Project Aristotle team identified four key factors that created a successful team; *dependability, structure and clarity, meaning, and impact*. However, they know there was still something missing. Teams that scored highly in all these areas on these still showed large differences in performance. Then, Rozovsky and her team came across [Amy Edmondson’s 1999 paper on Psychological Safety](#) and this quickly filled the gap. Going back to their research, they found that of the 180 teams being assessed, those who were highest performing were also those where team members felt comfortable expressing their thoughts and ideas openly, leading to more productive discussions and innovative solutions. In other words, **the high performing teams were the ones with greatest psychological safety.**

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The team behind Project Aristotle had initially guessed that successful teams primarily required a structured hierarchy of intelligent minds. Instead, guided by [Edmondson's 1999 paper](#), they found that teams with a culture focused around value and respect were more successful. Essential to the success of the team was team members feeling safe to speak up, **share ideas, questions,**

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concerns and mistakes without fear of embarrassment or humiliation. These findings challenged conventional beliefs about team composition and management styles.

For Rozovsky, this also offered a personal lightbulb moment in making sense of her earlier experiences with the two different study groups at university. She could now better understand why one group was far more productive, happy and ultimately successful than the other; it was to do with their implicit group norms and the resultant degree of psychological safety experienced by those in the group.

Learning from Project Aristotle

To implement their findings, Google set out to create more psychologically safe environments by encouraging open communication, empathy and understanding. Their results had shown them that ***“even the extremely smart, high-powered employees at Google needed a psychologically safe work environment to contribute the talents they had to offer.”*** Rather than focusing on who the team was made up of, Google redirected their resources into making sure their 5 key factors were fostered in a team – the most important of these being psychological safety.

One tangible output of their research was Google’s creation of a [‘team effectiveness discussion guide’](#). The guide focused on the 5 key factors for a successful team, helping organizations to identify areas where they might want to improve and explaining how they could start.

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