

Managing Team Chemistry



In a Nutshell

I heard a baseball analyst say that the fight between Mike Piazza and Guillermo Mota last week provided a chance for Piazza's team to improve its chemistry. His rationale was pretty complex, but I think he's right. Team chemistry is a complicated issue, but it's also the key to getting the most out of a team's talent.

Team chemistry is one of the most complicated keys to the success of organizations. Effective teams are more than just a collection of talented members. To be effective, a team has to be able to combine the efforts and abilities of members in the right way. Just as no two people are identical, no two teams are identical. Consequently, what works well for one team may not work well for others. However, research has identified several factors that usually produce good team chemistry:

- Diversity
- Role taking
- Constructive norms
- Leadership
- Cohesiveness
- Common vision

In This Issue

- [Mets Fight for Team Chemistry](#)
- [What We Know About Team Chemistry](#)
- [Managing Team Chemistry](#)
- [About the Newsletter and Subscriptions](#)
- [Good, Clean Joke](#)
- [LeaderLetter Web Site](#)

Mets Fight for Team Chemistry

I heard Tim Kurkjian explain on an ESPN radio program last week that the incident of Mike Piazza charging to the pitcher's mound to fight Guillermo Mota after Mota hit him with a pitch on March 12 provided an opportunity for Piazza's team, the New York Mets, to improve their chemistry. First, Piazza is a leader on the team and his actions set the tone for the rest of the team. Piazza has never retaliated against another pitcher, Roger Clemens, who hit him with a pitch that knocked him out during a game in the 2000 season, and Piazza has been faulted by many observers for not getting even Clemens. In contrast, Piazza showed Mota in the strongest manner he could that he would not tolerate such treatment. That helps foster a sense of toughness and pride on the Mets team. Charging the mound also provided Piazza's teammates an opportunity to show support for him. The Mets' dugout cleared as all the players ran out onto the field ostensibly to defend their teammate. The Mets pulled together to confront a common enemy, and that tends to promote a sense of unity. I agree with Kurkjian that the episode might have been good for team chemistry.

The Mets have a need for improved chemistry. When evaluating their team on the basis of the talent the players had individually demonstrated prior to the 2002 season, one would expect the Mets to have contended for the National League pennant and a World Series appearance in 2002. But the Mets were not in the running.

Why does a talented team fail to realize its potential? Often the problem is poor team chemistry.

What We Know About Team Chemistry

Team chemistry is the composition of a team and the relationships among team members. Good team chemistry helps a team achieve its goals, and it results when (a) a team has members who possess the right competencies and (b) they work effectively together to achieve synergies. We most often notice that a team has poor chemistry when the members are talented but fail to work well together to make the most of their abilities. For instance, team members failing to play roles that their teams need someone to play or engaging in unproductive conflict are examples of problems with team chemistry.

At the risk of taking the "chemistry" metaphor too far, we can think of teams as having the following properties: elements (members), interactions (roles and norms), catalysts (leaders), energy (motivation), attraction (cohesiveness), and mass (size). By examining these properties, we can identify a number of keys to good team chemistry.

Elements. People are the elements that make up a team, and the diversity among people is probably the single greatest reason why teams are so complex. Nevertheless, diversity of team members can also be the greatest strength of teams. Diverse team members have diverse viewpoints, knowledge bases and skills. That's why a team working properly tends to produce better decisions than any single member of the team could produce working alone. Certainly, the quality and diversity of the members of a team affect its performance, but there's also much more to team chemistry than putting together the best elements.

Interactions. Team members have to interact constructively in order to perform effectively. Roles and norms are an important aspect of team interactions. To be effective, team members need to take the appropriate roles, and develop and enforce appropriate norms.

A **role** is a set of duties that a team member performs. The most prominent role in a team is leadership. When there's no formal leadership role on a team, different members may take responsibility for leadership at different times. Nonetheless, teams tend to perform better when there's a single direction for the team, and that's normally best achieved by having a single leader.

Even though only one member is typically identified as a team's leader, nonleaders often take roles that assist the leadership of the team. Such nonleader roles augment the efforts of the leader and may subtly influence the leader to redirect the team, but they don't normally obstruct the efforts of the leader or challenge the leader's authority. Struggles for power in teams are necessary at times, but a team is unlikely to perform at a high level during a power struggle.

As a team member, you're engaging in what's known as **role-making** behavior when you spontaneously take responsibility for certain tasks, and **role-taking** behavior when you accept responsibility for duties that others would like you to perform. In effective teams, members are inclined to take initiative and accept their roles.

Effective teams also develop and enforce **norms** that promote the efficient and effective operation of the team. Norms are informal rules that all group members are expected to conform to. Examples of constructive norms that many teams develop include responsiveness to customers and a willingness to do things that aren't strictly in anyone's job description. Not all norms are constructive. Examples of dysfunctional norms that some teams develop include quitting work early and censoring dissent within the group. Whether the norms are functional or dysfunctional, team members tend to sanction those who violate their norms through subtle but important actions such as cold treatment, a reluctance to provide help, stopping any socializing, and even pushing the violator off the team if he or she won't conform. However, there are occasions when a team member who does not comply with a norm causes the team to give up that norm. That kind of influence can be positive or negative. It's positive when a team member takes a stand against a dysfunctional norm and gets the team to change it.

Catalysts. In terms of the chemistry metaphor, leaders are catalysts because they promote interaction among the elements. Leaders provide direction, structure activities, share information, encourage participation, promote positive relationships, and support and encourage members. Mike Piazza has a chance to play a leadership role as a catcher, because he largely decides which pitches should be thrown by the pitchers. Piazza is also one of the most talented, experienced and famous members of the Mets. Younger players will naturally tend to see him as a role model. More than most players, Piazza can influence the team's norms.

Energy. Human motivation is the energy in teams. Unfortunately, motivation is not only directed toward

teams' goals. A lot of energy can also be devoted to conflict.

In a perfect world, all of a team's energy might be directed toward doing the work required to achieve the team's goals, but in reality it never is. Carrying the chemistry metaphor a step further, some of the team's energy takes the form of heat ... due to friction ... i.e., **interpersonal conflict**. Because people are not omnipotent, differences of opinion among group members are natural and necessary. Each of us has a unique knowledge base and a unique way of perceiving and processing information. Consequently, team members often disagree, and it would be counterproductive for members to hide their disagreement. Hence, effective teams experience disagreement, and it enhances the quality of their decision making by challenging assumptions and expanding the number of ideas considered. On the other hand, teams that hide their internal disagreement, let interpersonal conflict become personal rather than business-related or spend too much time debating, tend to be less effective.

To reach the highest levels of performance, team leaders should ensure that members have **goals** that motivate them. Furthermore, the highest performing teams are driven by a **vision** of the future to which the team aspires. Team leaders who can articulate a vision for their teams can create passion and inspire exceptional performance. While goals are normally specific and measurable (often expressed numerically), a vision is a vivid picture of something exciting that a team can achieve. For the Mets, their vision should be to win their division and contend for the World Series. An example of a goal would be winning 35 games by Memorial Day.

Attraction. When team members appreciate being a member of the team and feel an attraction to it, they're committed to working toward the team's goal. This **cohesiveness** facilitates collaboration, spontaneity and mutual support, and it reduces counterproductive conflict. Effective teams tend to be cohesive.

Cohesiveness can be created through many processes. Smaller groups are more likely to develop cohesiveness than larger groups. When group members have many things in common, they tend to develop higher levels of cohesiveness. Cohesiveness also tends to develop as team members spend more and more time together. Interestingly, one of the ways to build cohesiveness is by making members go through a tough initiation before joining the team, and communicating to them that they've been selected as team members because they're special in some way. Success also engenders cohesiveness. It's difficult to feel excited about being a member of a team that loses, and much easier to feel an affinity for a team that succeeds. Ironically, while cohesiveness increases the likelihood of a team being successful, success also tends to increase cohesiveness. *The cause-and-effect relationship between cohesiveness and success is reciprocal.* Finally, having a common opponent can bring team members together. The realization that working together and supporting each other is the best way to defeat an opponent tends to promote a team's cohesiveness. Piazza's teammates took the field to defend him, and that tends to create a sense of unity.

Mass. While large teams have more resources (e.g., viewpoints and knowledge), small teams tend to be more efficient and cohesive. In large teams, individual members don't see their efforts affect the overall performance of the team as clearly as members of small teams do. Members of large teams are more likely to feel inconsequential. On average, members of small teams put forth more effort than members of large teams for that reason.

There are many variables affecting team chemistry--members' competencies, roles, norms, leadership, conflict, vision, goals, cohesiveness and size are some of the most important factors. The challenge of fostering good team chemistry is sizable, but chemistry can be managed.

[back to the top](#)

Managing Team Chemistry

Since team chemistry is so complicated, it helps to have many members committed to fostering good team chemistry. Both leaders and nonleaders can help.

Leadership Roles

Develop credibility. To effectively influence team members, leaders should have credibility. Credibility is developed in the following ways:

- **Demonstrating integrity:** having values and behaving in ways that are consistent with them; keeping promises and confidences.
- **Confidently expressing direction for the team:** being self-assured, but not dogmatic; being open to discussion, but not easily deterred.

- **Being positive and optimistic:** complimenting members' achievements; offering encouragement and assistance when performance is low; expressing optimism that the vision will be realized.
- **Finding and using common ground:** focusing on points of agreement when trying to influence others.
- **Managing disagreement:** presenting both sides of an argument when members are inclined to disagree with the conclusion.
- **Coaching:** showing the way and providing advice while granting a degree of autonomy to members.
- **Appreciating team members' perspectives:** inquiring about their agreement with decisions, the obstacles they encounter, the dissatisfactions they experience, their needs and the interpersonal problems they may experience.
- **Disseminating information:** sharing key information that only the leader can obtain.

Articulate a vision. The kind of vision that energizes a team is a vivid picture of the future that's ambitious and exciting. To motivate a team to its highest level of performance, there must be passion. Perhaps the best metaphor here is falling in love. When we fall in love, a lot of our attention is directed toward the object of our affection, and our passion moves us to be creative and heroic. A leader's vision can produce similar passion, but the vision has to be **connected to the values** and priorities of the team members. When you articulate a vision for a team that you lead, make sure that you clearly make that connection. If your vision inspires passion, you can expect a high level of motivation and impressive performance. Thus, your vision should be **ambitious**. The vision should also be creative and original so that it's perceived as really interesting. Finally, as you describe your vision, use **colorful, emotional, and metaphorical language** to trigger the passion.

Set goals. After articulating a vision, break down the work to be completed into SMART goals. Smart goals are more concrete and manageable than a vision, and they point effort in a specific direction. (See the "[Motivating Others](http://www.wright.edu/~scott.williams/LeaderLetter/motivating.htm)" *LeaderLetter*: <http://www.wright.edu/~scott.williams/LeaderLetter/motivating.htm>).

Encourage constructive debate. Research on catastrophic group decisions (e.g., the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Watergate cover up, the space shuttle Challenger disaster) has identified a distinctive pattern in the teams that have made the poor decisions. One of the pitfalls of those groups is censorship of dissent. If team members pressure themselves or each other to suppress dissenting opinions in order to maintain harmony, the diversity of members' insights is wasted and lousy decisions can be made. Accordingly, effective team leaders understand that a moderate amount of task-focused conflict is constructive. If their teams are not debating issues, effective team leaders promote debate by playing the role of devil's advocate.

Encourage role-making. It's neurotic and counterproductive for team leaders to think that only they should influence team members. Effective leaders don't perceive the role-making behavior of other team members as an inherent threat to their leadership. When nonleaders take the initiative to direct work activities or build relationships, effective leaders credit their initiative and shape their efforts to bring them in line with the vision.

Promote cohesiveness. There are a variety of things that team leaders can do to promote cohesiveness:

- **Keep the size of the team to a maximum of about 12 members**, because people feel more attracted to small, intimate groups. Groups larger than 12 can be subdivided into teams.
- **Promote the perception that membership in the team is an honor.** Members feel more attracted to the team when it makes them feel special. One of the ways this can be achieved is by using a tough initiation.
- **Physically isolate the team** to promote intra-team interaction as an alternative to interaction with outside parties.
- **Have the group face challenges that require cooperation for success.** Through such exercises, members learn to pull together and rely on each other.
- **Stimulate competition with other groups** to emphasize the team's identity and the members' interdependence.
- **Reward the team, not individual members** to highlight interdependence and reinforce cooperation.
- **Focus on the team's successes**--success engenders cohesiveness. It's easy to feel attracted to a successful group. Who feels attracted to a team of losers?

Nonleadership Roles

Task-facilitating roles. Leaders are primarily responsible for providing direction to their teams. However,

nonleaders can take the initiative to assist leaders' task-related efforts. Nonleaders can perform task-facilitating roles by ...

- developing plans and procedures for the tasks assigned,
- disseminating information,
- asking for clarifications,
- directing members' efforts back to the task,
- monitoring performance and identifying necessary corrections, and
- enforcing norms.

Relationship-building roles. Pleasant and supportive interpersonal relationships promote collaboration and cooperation, so building good relationships promotes team success. Nonleaders can perform relationship-building roles by ...

- crediting other's ideas and efforts,
- mediating conflicts,
- relieving tension with humor or other diversions,
- challenging inappropriate interpersonal exchanges,
- empathizing with other team members, and
- exuding enthusiasm and encouraging others.

In Summary ...

Team chemistry is difficult--but not impossible--to manage. Key variables to consider include members' competencies, roles, norms, leadership, conflict, vision, goals, cohesiveness and size. There are roles both leaders and nonleaders can play to promote favorable team chemistry. It's well worth the effort. Good team chemistry is essential to getting the most out of a team's talent.

[back to the top](#)

About the Photo

New York Met's Mike Piazza squares off against Montreal Expo's pitcher Guillermo Mota in this image from television, Wednesday, March 12, 2003 in Port St. Lucie, Fla. Mike Piazza charged the mound and started a bench-clearing brawl Wednesday night after he was hit by a pitch from Mota during the Los Angeles Dodgers' 13-6 win over the New York Mets in a split-squad game. (AP Photo/MSG: e-mailed to me from *Yahoo! News*; news.yahoo.com)

Sources

George, J. M., & Jones, G. R. (1999). *Understanding and managing organizational behavior*, (2nd ed.). Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Robbins, S. P. (2001). *Organizational behavior*, (9th ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Whetten, D. A., & Cameron, K. S. (2002). *Developing management skills*, (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

About the Newsletter and Subscriptions

LeaderLetter is written by Dr. Scott Williams, Department of Management, [Raj Sooin College of Business](#), Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. It is a supplement to my MBA 751 - Managing People in Organizations class. It is intended to reinforce the course concepts and maintain communication among my former MBA 751 students, but anyone is welcome to subscribe. In addition, subscribers are welcome to forward this newsletter to anyone who they believe would have an interest in it. To [subscribe](#), simply send an e-mail message to me requesting subscription. Of course, subscriptions to the newsletter are free. To [unsubscribe](#), e-mail a reply indicating that you would like to unsubscribe.

[back to the top](#)

E-mail Your Comments

Whether you are one of my former students or not, I invite you to share any insights or concerns you have regarding the topic of this newsletter or any other topic relating to management skills. Please [e-mail](#) them to me. Our interactions have been invaluable. **Every week, I learn something new from *LeaderLetter* subscribers!** Let's keep the conversation going.

Good, Clean Joke

In the mood for a little humor at the expense of the French? See ...

www.wright.edu/~scott.williams/LeaderLetter/french.doc

[back to the top](#)

RAJ SOIN
College of Business
WRIGHT STATE
UNIVERSITY

