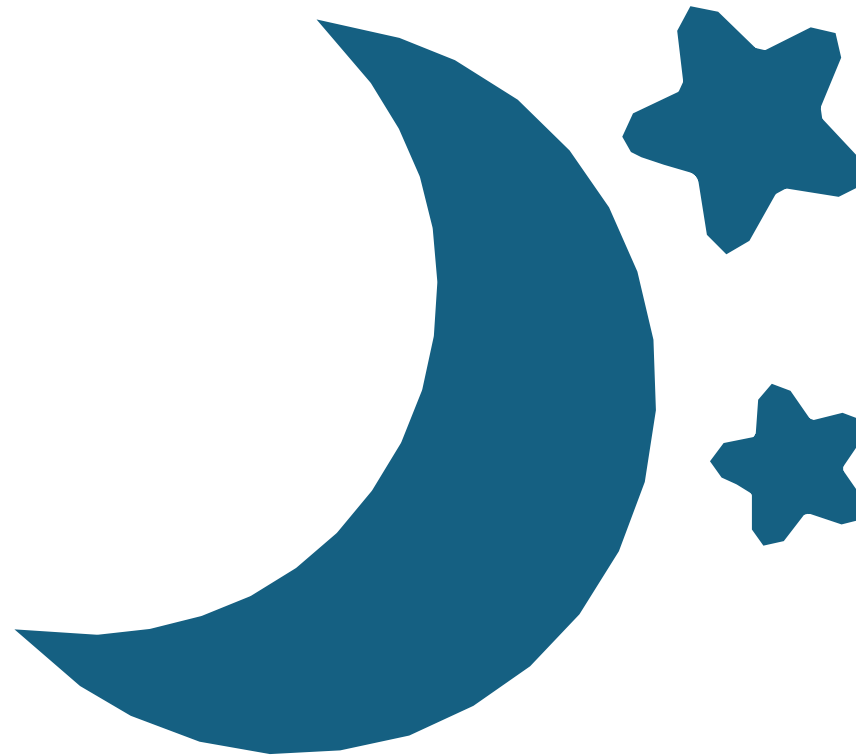


How Dream Teams Become Nightmares

The Apollo Effect in Traditional, Remote, and Hybrid Teams

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Research Problem

- Organizations frequently assemble their most talented employees into what are often called dream teams. The expectation is that combining top performers will naturally create superior outcomes. However, many organizations find that these teams do not perform as expected. The driving question behind this research is simple: Why does expertise sometimes fail to produce results? This question becomes increasingly important as organizations rely on specialized talent in remote and hybrid work environments.



The Apollo Effect

- The answer may lie in what researchers call the Apollo Effect. The Apollo Effect describes a paradox in which teams comprised primarily of experts experience conflict, excessive analysis, and competition rather than cooperation. Instead of leveraging collective knowledge, members often compete for influence and decision authority. As a result, teams spend more time debating than executing. The outcome is frequently slower decisions, reduced collaboration, and lower overall performance.

The Apollo Effect, or Apollo Syndrome, is a team-performance phenomenon identified by psychologist Meredith Belbin in which groups composed of exceptionally intelligent

Theoretical Foundation

The concept was first identified by British psychologist and management researcher **Dr. Meredith Belbin** during team-behavior studies conducted at what is now **Henley Business School** in the 1960s and 1970s. Belbin observed that groups consisting of individuals with the highest intellectual and analytical abilities often performed poorly in management simulations, frequently finishing near the bottom of competing teams.

This research is grounded in Belbin's Team Role Theory. Belbin found that successful teams are not built solely on expertise. Instead, high-performing teams demonstrate role diversity. They include coordinators, implementers, facilitators, communicators, and specialists. When every team member is focused primarily on being the expert, important collaborative functions are neglected. Psychological safety and effective followership further strengthen team effectiveness by creating trust and encouraging participation.

Research Questions



Three research questions
guided this study:



What aspects of team design
most significantly affect
productivity?



What aspects of
communication most
significantly affect
productivity?



How does remote work impact
team design and productivity
compared to traditional in-
person environments?



These questions formed the
foundation for exploring team
performance across different
workplace modalities.

Methodology

- The study employed a qualitative research design using interviews and focus groups. Both leadership and followership perspectives were represented to gain a comprehensive understanding of organizational experiences. Through thematic analysis, participant responses were coded and analyzed to identify recurring patterns involving communication, team design, leadership, followership, productivity, and remote work experiences.

To examine how the Apollo Effect emerges in modern organizations, this study utilized a two-part methodological approach that combined a comprehensive literature review with qualitative findings from my doctoral dissertation. The literature review provided the theoretical foundation by synthesizing research on Dream Teams, the Apollo Effect, leadership, followership, team design, communication, and remote work. Drawing from organizational behavior, psychology, leadership studies, and remote work research, the review helped establish the conceptual framework for understanding why teams composed of highly skilled individuals may experience reduced effectiveness despite their expertise.

To extend and validate the findings found in the literature, I incorporated empirical data from my dissertation, *The Double-Edged Sword: A Study in Remote Work from the Perspectives of Leadership and Followership on the Topics of Communication, Team Design, and Productivity*. This qualitative study was designed to capture the lived experiences of individuals working within remote and hybrid environments and to explore how organizational structures influence team performance.



Key Findings

- One of the most significant findings involved perceptions of expertise. Leaders frequently described their teams as groups of highly skilled subject matter experts, while followers often reported communication challenges, unclear roles, and collaboration barriers. This revealed a notable disconnect between leadership perceptions and employee experiences.
- Another key finding was the lack of intentional team design. Organizations invested heavily in hiring talented people but spent little time evaluating how those individuals would work together. Many assumed that assembling talented individuals would automatically create high-performing teams.
- Importantly, my qualitative interviews and focus groups found that most remote teams were not originally designed as remote teams. They were traditional in-person teams that transitioned online during COVID-19 without redesigning team structures, workflows, or communication processes. This suggests that the problem is not remote work itself. Rather, remote work exposed existing weaknesses in team design, making issues such as communication gaps, role ambiguity, and poor collaboration more visible. The findings support the idea that team effectiveness depends not just on expertise, but on intentionally designing teams to work effectively together.

Communication Findings

- Communication emerged as one of the most influential factors affecting productivity. Interestingly, technology itself was not viewed as the problem. Participants generally expressed positive views regarding tools such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom.
- Instead, challenges centered around transparency, clarity, and shared understanding. Leaders frequently believed communication was effective, while followers reported uncertainty regarding expectations, decision-making processes, and performance measurements. This disconnect often weakened trust and created confusion across teams. Additionally, many employees were unclear about how productivity was being measured, making organizational alignment more difficult to achieve.



Remote Work and Apollo Effect

- A major finding was that remote work does not create the Apollo Effect. Rather, it amplifies weaknesses already present within teams.
- Remote environments reduce opportunities for informal communication, spontaneous interactions, and relationship-building activities. They also increase the likelihood of misunderstanding due to limited nonverbal cues and asynchronous communication patterns.
- However, one surprising result emerged. Despite communication challenges and occasional isolation, both leaders and followers overwhelmingly preferred remote work. Most participants expressed little interest in returning to fully in-person arrangements. This suggests that organizations should focus less on eliminating remote work and more on improving the systems that support remote teams.

Implications for Leaders

- The findings offer several important leadership implications.
- First, organizations should stop assuming that expertise alone drives performance.
- Second, leaders should focus on role complementarity by building teams that include a variety of strengths and perspectives.
- Third, organizations should invest in psychological safety so employees feel comfortable sharing ideas, asking questions, and admitting mistakes.
- Fourth, communication systems must become more transparent. Employees need clear expectations and understandable productivity measures.
- Finally, organizations should intentionally develop followership. Strong teams are built not only through effective leadership but also through engaged and collaborative followers.

Key Takeaways

The central takeaway from this research is that talent alone does not create high performance.

Organizations should:

Design teams intentionally.

Balance expertise with role diversity.

Promote communication and trust.

Develop psychological safety.

Encourage both leadership and followership.

Adopt a systems-thinking perspective focused on collective success.

When these elements work together, expertise becomes a strength rather than a source of dysfunction.

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- Full Work Cited to be sent when full paper is published

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Questions & Discussion

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