Why You Need More Women on Teams with Anita Woolley (Transcript)

Chris Congdon: If you've been working for any amount of time, you've probably been on a team that's struggled and just could never get going. So what is it that makes some teams click, while others fail? Our guest today is Anita Woolley who has been studying the science of teamwork and she's here to share what she's learned about what makes a great team. Spoiler alert – it's not having a lot of brainy people on your team.

Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host Chris Congdon alongside our producer Rebecca Charbauski.

Rebecca Charbauski: Hi Chris.

CC: Rebecca, can you tell us a little more about Anita and her work.

RC: Anita's work on teams is extensive. She is an Associate Dean of Research and Professor of Organizational Behavior and Theory at Carnegie Mellon. She holds a PhD in Organizational Behavior from Harvard and her research on teams has been published in several peer-reviewed journals. Her studies explore how teams problem-solve, collaborate and she's developed an interesting understanding of a concept called collective intelligence.

CC: That's this idea – that when you put some people together, the team is able to do better work because of the group.

RC: If our listeners enjoy this conversation with Anita, please share this episode with a friend or colleague.

CC: Thanks Rebecca. Anita, welcome to Work Better Today.
Anita Wooley: Hi. Thanks for having me.

CC: I really want to talk about your research about teams because honestly, there's a lot of conversation about teamwork, and sometimes we might think, do I really want to hear anything more about teams? Is there anything more to be said about it? But I found your work was really different and interesting, and this notion of collective intelligence that you've been studying, I think is something we can learn a lot from. So could you tell us what that's all about?

AW: Yeah, thanks. I joke with my colleague sometimes that as much as we've already been studying teamwork for years and years, it's still a problem that hasn't been solved. And so I'm glad people are still open to hearing about the science that we're working on. So the collective intelligence work that we've done was really starting from the ideas in psychology about individual intelligence, which is a quality of an individual that allows them to have the ability to perform a wide range of tasks over a long period of time. And so in our work, what we have found is that there's a similar quality in teams, meaning that leaders could create the conditions for a team to be collectively intelligent, and then that team is likely to perform well in the future, well into the future. It's actually an important source of value for the organization. And so sometimes when people think about teamwork, they think about it as, oh, it's this ephemeral thing. It's this random magical thing that comes and then it goes, and that's it. But that's not actually true. There's a lot of things leaders can do to create collectively intelligent teams, and once they're together, they're actually, again, a valuable asset. They are something that organizations should really try to protect and preserve.

CC: Let's talk about what makes up a collectively intelligent team a little bit more, because sometimes you don't always get to choose who's on the team. You don't always get to pick the players, so to speak. It's this person and that person, and you're put together. So let's talk a little bit more about how you go about creating that collectively intelligent team, and then maybe what do you do when you don't get to choose?

AW: Yeah. Well, I mean, most of the time we don't really get to choose, and sometimes you put together a team that you think is going to work well, but you didn't necessarily know all the qualities of the people who were going to be involved. And so there are definitely some qualities of the people for sure. In early studies that we were doing, initially, we were observing a correlation between the proportion of women in the team and collective intelligence, which was something that was on one level, not surprising from life, but as a scientist, it was surprising to see how consistently that showed up. But we dug into it. It really was about these other qualities related to social intelligence, specifically social perceptiveness or the ability to pick up on subtle nonverbal cues. And women tend to have this skill to a greater degree than men. And that was why we were seeing this correlation between the proportion of women and the team and collective intelligence. So that was one of the early things that we picked up on. We also have seen how having a mix of members with different thinking styles is important, as well as other forms of diversity have shown up as beneficial in our work on collective intelligence. And so thinking about the mix of people, thinking about people who are good at collaborating, but importantly, I think an important point to keep in mind is that people who are not good at collaborating, and especially if they're not really motivated to be good at collaborating, can have a disproportionately negative effect. And so I'd say probably a key thing that a team leader could do is just to be aware of when those issues might be at the root of a problem or when they're composing a team who might actually really cause some problems for the rest of the team, because you don't want to put together a bunch of great collaborators and then have one person sort of sucking all the energy out of the team. And so thinking about how to deal with that situation, if that's the case.

CC: Right? There is so much to unpack there. So I have to go back a couple steps. First, because I can't let you go too far without, let's talk about the female factor that you mentioned earlier. So the proportion of women on a team makes a difference in terms of collective intelligence.

AW: That's right. Yeah. So initially in our studies, it looked like a linear correlation, more women: better; all women: Great. As the more data has flowed, in some studies it's more of a curve of linear effect. Having a majority of women is beneficial, but once you get to all women, it doesn't seem to be as strong consistently. And so there are a variety of potential explanations for that. One being that in both male and female groups, when you have a mixture, people behave in a different way than if it's a homogeneously male or female group. And so with guys, and I think I understand it with women as well, that women behave differently if there are men around as well. But the reason why the majority of females are useful in addition to these social skills is that when women are in a group, when they're just one of a few women, they tend not to talk very much.

CC: Interesting.

AW: And so the group doesn't get the benefit of having the women on average. Certainly there are women who've adapted to different professional settings and are very effective even if they're the only woman. But overall, on average in a lot of settings, women get very quiet when they're in the minority, but when they are in the majority, they participate a lot more, but the men still participate too. So you actually get more engagement when you have women, at least at parity, if not in the majority in a group.

CC: That is so interesting, but that is linked to this notion that you talked about with social perceptiveness. So what is social perceptiveness and how do I know if I have that?

AW: I bet you do, because given what you're doing here now, social perceptiveness is the ability to pick up on subtle cues and draw inferences about what people are thinking or feeling. And so it's an ability that is part of the group of things that people who are socially intelligent do. So perceiving things as part of it, sort of reasoning about those things and using them to inform your behavior to manage a social situation is another big part of it. So it's easiest to measure the perception part. So we measure that a lot in our studies and when people are good at picking up on subtle cues and it contributes to collective intelligence because then they use that information to manage the collaboration of the group. So they'll pick up on something such as, oh, I haven't heard from this person. I wonder, or does she not agree with what we're doing? Or they'll notice if they're talking too much and maybe they should let other people in. And so what we see in a group that has higher social perceptiveness is that there's more communication, but there's more equal communication as well because they're noticing these things and getting people involved, and that gets more information into the group and lets the group be more effective overall.

CC: Is that something that you can interview people for to figure out how socially perceptive they are? I mean, you were just saying you can measure it, but is it something that a leader could say, oh, I am going to bring Anita onto the team because she's clearly showing these traits of social perceptiveness?

AW: Yeah, I think especially once you're attuned to it and you have a sense of what you're looking for, or if you're in an interview situation, you could certainly set up situations that would give you a sense of if this person is picking up on a clear cue that you would expect them to respond to, either by changing what they're doing or maybe seeing if somebody is not agreeing with them or somehow adjusting their behavior. Depending on the role and the situation, you could come up with something, a behavioral question or even a situational interview where you'd expect them to respond in a certain way, but it would be something where they are seeing something that's a pretty clear cue that somebody else is uncomfortable or the person needs to change what they're doing, and then looking at how they respond to that if they pick up on that or not.

CC: That's really helpful. The other thing I want to go back and double click on is this person you talked about who's maybe not highly motivated to collaborate, and who are those people? How do you know that there's somebody in the group who's not all that interested in the collaboration?

AW: I guess one reason I make that point is because I know that today we're also becoming more aware of neurodiversity. And so there are some people, there's a biological basis to social perceptiveness in addition to a motivational piece. There are certainly some people who more easily pick up on these cues and others who have to work harder at it, but those who have to work harder at it can do it. And I've seen teams that have worked with people who do struggle and don't have the natural ability. Everybody adjusts their behavior to accommodate that. So I want to be clear that we're not saying there are some people who just can't do teamwork. I think everybody can do teamwork, but there are some people who maybe because they've struggled and they've had a lot of bad experiences or maybe who knows the variety of reasons why somebody might not want to collaborate.
They may just have some bad attitudes about what teams are capable of, but these are people that are not receptive to feedback about it, are not really responding to direct requests or following the norms that the team is setting about communication, about follow-up, about information sharing. And so in some cases, I mean, it might be somebody who can adjust the incentives of this person needs to make clear that this is an expectation, or it could be if they simply can't collaborate, won't collaborate, that the leader needs to find a way to have their contribution, maybe be more of an individual contributor, an outside contributor to the team, just to recognize that there are these people who can really sink a team if you continue to try to collaborate with them when it's clear they don't want to collaborate. And it can again, be a disproportionately negative influence. You can have four fabulous people and one person who really just drains everything. And it's frustrating to those of us who want to improve teamwork, how we know with much more certainty how easy it is to destroy teamwork. And that's definitely one of them.

CC: Yeah, I think we can all probably in the back of our minds think of situations and teams that we've been on where we've had that individual who just clearly does not seem interested in collaborating or just is kind of that dominant personality sometimes in the room where it's kind of hard for everybody else to participate fully.

AW: Absolutely. And again, many good teams also have norms of information sharing, maybe feedback and learning. And so if somebody is willing to learn and adjust, then I think even somebody who starts off with some bad habits can still be a contributor. But there is a motivational component and it's important to recognize that.

CC: What can leaders do? I imagine there's probably some mistakes that leaders make when it comes to supporting teams. What are some of the things that we could do better or differently?

AW: I think we've talked a lot about who's in the team. So that's one step that's probably an important foundation. A second step has to do with goal setting and clarity and aligning priorities. So what are we doing? What's important to focus on? What is the relative importance of the different things? And also making sure everybody's individual goals are aligned with those goals and addressing it when they're not. Because if you have competition in the team, for example, it's because somebody has an individual goal that they're putting before the team goal. And it doesn't really matter what else you do until you fix that. And that is not something that stays fixed. It's an ongoing kind of situation. And then finally creating opportunities for the team to collaborate effectively, but doing so in ways that allow both variation in time together to be highly interdependent and collaborative, but also time to actually do their work. I think leaders can fall off the balance beam by going too much in one direction or the other. And so I think that's an important step as well.

CC: I think that's good advice. We spend so much of our time from Steelcase and a lot of our listeners thinking about the physical environments where teams are coming together because we're always trying to think about how we can make this better? How can we do something to a physical space that helps? And I'm wondering through your research, if there are things that you saw that you would say you really need to support these kinds of behaviors, you really need to think about fostering this kind of interaction when you're thinking about your spatial interventions.

AW: I think if I had another career to do in parallel, I think architecture would be interesting in this aspect that you're talking about. I think there's a lot about physical space that really matters. So one of the things that we've looked at a lot in our research more recently is this notion of burst. This can happen virtually or in face-to-face environments, but it's essentially looking at the pattern of communication within a group and interaction and whether it's concentrated in smaller pockets of time or whether it's more random and interspersed across time. And what we find is that teams that are more responsive to each other and have these more concentrated bursts of activity tend to be more collectively intelligent. They tend to be more creative and integrated because people are responding and getting the information they need from one another, but they're also having the opportunity to have their uninterrupted focused work, which we know is also really important. I think work environments that both enable that collaborative getting together activity in a way that's very efficient and conducive to integration is important, but also having the space to have some quieter work as well. And I know that's hard to accommodate. It takes a lot of creativity on the part of designers to make that possible, but it's really important.

CC: That is interesting. You also touched on another area that I think we're always trying to think about, which is whether you call it hybrid work or distributed teams distributed collaboration. But today just the reality is we're almost always in a situation where some people might be together in the room, but there's other people who are going to be showing up on video. What are some of the things, the behaviors that you think we really need to try and focus on when we're trying to get that collective intelligence, but we don't have everybody in the same space?

AW: Well, I think the fact that the hardest version of hybrid is when you have some people all together and some people in other various places, sometimes also together, somewhere else, sometimes not. And the reason for that is because of the communication gaps that occur, it's easier to talk to the person that's there. You forget that you didn't tell the people out there. And so people don't all know what's happening. I think organizations that try to set things up so that when the group is communicating, everybody has equal access to the information. So even physical spaces, for example, if we're having a video conference, and some of us are together, but some of us aren't, a lot of are starting to do creative things to make it so that everybody can see everybody and everybody can hear everybody. And that has to do with the physical setting where the people together are as well as the access of the people off site. But thinking about how we transmit information, how we store information so that it's equally accessible whether you're in this building or in this other building, all of that, setting it up so it doesn't matter in some ways where you are, I think can be a really important step to helping organizations manage that more effectively.

CC: I think basically equity that I hear you talking about, it can be really hard to try and achieve that, but that feels like that's a really important thing for us to focus on, to have effective collaboration and a higher level of collective intelligence.

AW: That's right. People are experimenting with all kinds of apps and tools about taking notes, making summaries. You could imagine the people in the office even doing that, even if they don't need to for themselves, but to make it available for other people and make use of some of the technology that could help with that.

CC: So Anita, I want to ask you one question that's maybe a little different, but maybe related to the work that you've been doing, but it's something that we're thinking about this season and talking to all of our guests about, which is I think people are very focused on the need for wellbeing at work and teamwork is part of that, if it goes well or if it doesn't go well. And so I just want to ask you, what might be some experiences that you've had or things that have maybe brought you a little joy or happiness at work and what can you share with us about some of your experiences there?

AW: Yeah, I think that, well, I'm lucky in the work I do. I mean, I could just period, full stop there. There's a lot of awesome things that I'm really blessed to be able to do in my job. But I think the thing that I really get a lot of energy from is when I'm working with students, when I'm working with some of my junior colleagues, when I'm helping them accomplish their goals and then seeing them do that. Luckily I have a bunch of smart people around me, so I get to see that pretty regularly when people get a paper published or they get some recognition or they finish a study, even have something cool that they find in their data. And so that's absolutely top of the list I think for me.

CC: That's very cool. Anita, before I let you go, I just want to ask, are there any last words of wisdom, advice, thoughts that you would offer to our listeners about what you've learned about collective intelligence?

AW: We know that we need to have women on the team or people who have social intelligence. Actually, it's interesting. The social perceptiveness piece I think is something that has been intriguing and the fact that anybody who develops that and cultivates that contributes to collective intelligence. And so I'd say that really focusing on that and the qualities that go with that for yourself, for the people who work with you can be a really important thing for their life. We even see in the economy there are more job opportunities and better salaries when people have these skills. And so I think that that's probably one of the places to focus for sure. As well as the goal setting. I push on a lot because I talk to a lot of people in organizations who are pulled in so many different directions and they're really stressed out and sometimes having many priorities is having no priorities. So the power of really making it clear to people what's expected and letting them focus, I think is also key.

CC: I think those are really good words of wisdom. So Anita, thank you so much for joining us today on Work Better. I've found this really helpful and very practical, so I think we can apply all of us in our daily work.

AW: Thanks. Thanks. I'm happy to share. Thank you.

CC: Thank you for being here with us Anita. Rebecca who's on tap for next week?

RC: Next week we're talking to Dr. Elena Sabinson, who is an assistant professor in product design and architecture at the University of Colorado-Boulder. As a neurodivergent researcher and someone who has been diagnosed as neurodivergent herself, Elena is passionate about neurodiversity and design and she will be sharing how you can create work environments where all people can flourish.

CC: Thanks Rebecca. And, if you enjoyed this conversation – share this podcast with a friend or colleague and visit us at steelcase.com/research to sign up for weekly updates on workplace research, insights and design ideas delivered to your inbox. That was a great conversation. We hope you'll join us for that one. Thanks again for being here – and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.