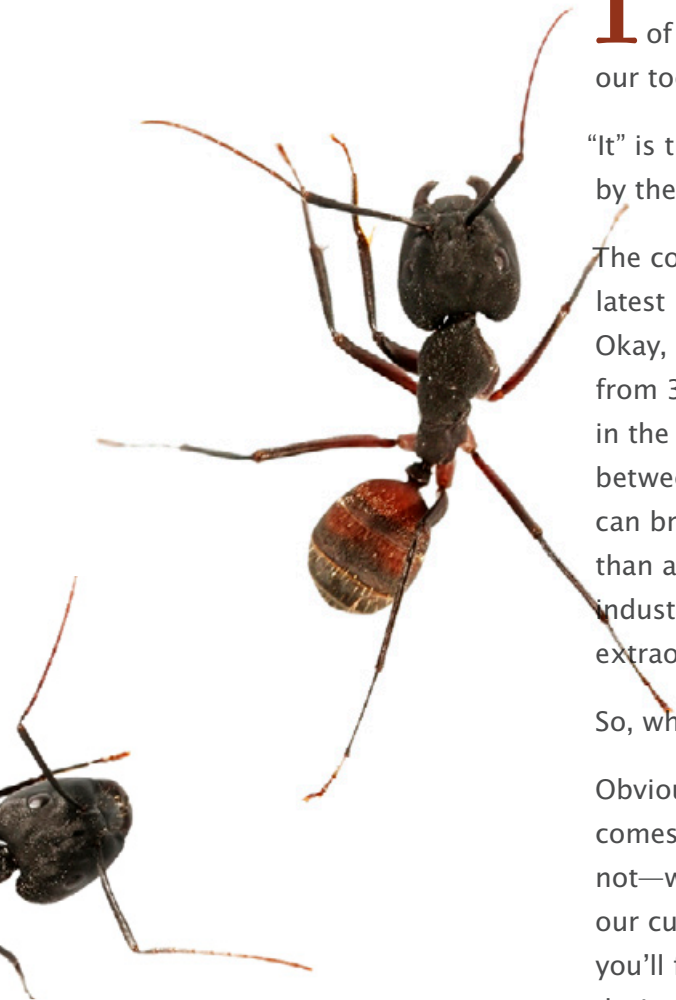


The Strength Is the Group: A Business Case about Ants, Chips and Your Team's Breakthrough Results



Adrian Gostick & Chester Elton



In the mid-cretaceous period—sometime around 120 million years ago—a concept emerged that changed the world as we know it. And although the science to prove the significance of this concept has rested under our noses, under our feet, and even sometimes crawling onto our toes, as humans most of us are dumbfounded by it.

“It” is the concept of teamwork. It has been perfected by possibly one of the smallest insects seen by the human eye—the ant—and yet it is an elusive concept to master in business.

The common ant makes a case for teamwork that far surpasses the research we included in our latest book, *The Orange Revolution: How One Great Team Can Transform an Entire Organization*. Okay, so ant colonies have millions more years of practice than we do. Still, we have data collected from 350,000 people, as well as analysis and insight from many of the top-performing teams in the business world. And all this tells us teamwork is one of the most powerful concepts shared between living organisms. Working together, nearly any task be accomplished: a colony of ants can bring down a man-made structure, a flock of geese can fly 70 percent further in V-formation than alone, and a small group of designers and engineers from Apple can turn the entire music industry upside-down with a little gadget called the iPod. Groups, working together, possess extraordinary strength.

So, why is the concept of teamwork still so hard to grasp in the office?

Obviously innate to the animal kingdom, a big question must be raised about teamwork when it comes to the human species: Are we biologically unable to work together effectively? Of course not—we understand it, and emphatically hope to achieve it. Yet, as the most intelligent of all species, our current social and systemic structures actually drive us away from true teamwork. And, as you’ll find out in this manifesto, research proves that the human species, on an innate level, greatly desires to experience true collaboration.

Ants form colonies that are often described as super-organisms because the ants operate as a unified entity, collectively working together to support the entire group. Thus, if we can internalize this concept in business, we can accomplish almost every organization's dream scenario—people working together for a common goal.

Teamwork: The Workplace History

During our research we encountered workers who provided us with some key perceptions on the concept of teamwork.

Perception #1 | Teamwork has become cliché. The word “teamwork” has been diluted over the last twenty years. It's been tossed around so liberally inside organizations that people think it's just a nicety—because it's politically incorrect to call an employee a worker, a subordinate, or even a crewmember anymore. And, maybe there's a small fantasy that if you label people “a team” they'll perform like one. In the process of this lip-service, the true definition of a coveted entity has been bleached.

Perception #2 | Leaders don't know what real teamwork looks like. We didn't find anyone in the workplace lambasting the notion of teamwork. Everyone seemed to respect the idea that groups could, and should, be more powerful, successful, efficient, and productive than a single worker. Nevertheless, we encountered a surprising struggle to find groups that were truly operating as a team, or people who even recognized their workgroup as a “team.” Many workers told us that leaders today are pitching a notion of teamwork that doesn't satisfy the definition of esprit de corps—there's no true team spirit, shared identity, or shared vision.

Perception #3 | Breakthrough success is derived from brilliant leaders. Ask anyone to recite their favorite breakthrough success story and they might tell you about Oprah Winfrey, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Herb Kelleher or even Colonel Sanders. They might tell you about a sporting legend like Walter Payton, Wayne Gretzky, or Michael Jordan. Or they might tell you about historical figures such as Henry Ford, J.D. Rockefeller, or Thomas Edison. Ironically, all of these individuals accomplished breakthrough results with teams behind them. The irony of the perception of the lone genius is that even though people believe that teams can create more results than individuals, we naturally want to assign the credit to an individual.

Is Teamwork Natural to Humans?

For almost 20 years now, we've entrenched ourselves into the inner-workings of organizations across the globe. Admittedly, we didn't start our research focusing on teamwork—we were focused on employee recognition and engagement. We focused on figuring out how to accelerate human performance on an individual level—studying the natural drivers of the human species. We studied how people responded when they felt appreciated for their actions. We studied the responses of people when they received kind words of recognition, and how that recognition played a more significant role if it was presented in front of their work peers. And, although our theories were proven accurate through a 10-year, 200,000 person study throughout North America, and then a massive global study, data arose from those studies that we couldn't ignore—one of the primary drivers of human and organizational performance is in fact, the impact of teamwork.

Some of the most definitive results supporting the “teamwork” theory came from our study measuring employee engagement in 13 countries conducted for us by independent researchers Towers Watson. We learned that performing work that matters in a team environment makes a statistically significant impact on employee willingness to work harder, longer, and with substantially higher levels of engagement.

The global study showed us statistically that:

- 75 percent of employees who understand how their work as a team affects the overall goals of the organization were engaged in their work.
- Only 29 percent of employees who didn't understand how or if their work as a team affected the overall goals of the organization reported were engaged.

A 29 percent to 75 percent difference in engagement indicates that something remarkable happens when we understand how teams help build organizational success. And that's what we really wanted to understand; how teams impact an organization, how group decisions produce results, and how we could tap into the true brilliance of teamwork—unleashing the innate human quality that thrives within a group. Basically, if we could understand it, track it, dissect it, and analyze those things that make powerful teams, then we could emulate them.

As we dug into details—interviewing some of the greatest teams in the world, and collecting data from more than these 350,000 working adults (with the help of the Best Companies Group)—we began to uncover the similarities between attitudes, processes, and perspectives of great teams.

The irony of the perception of the lone genius is that even though people believe that teams can create more results than individuals, we naturally want to assign the credit to an individual.

The Evolution of Breakthrough Teams

In nature, there is no concept of a “manager.” Teamwork is not a concept that needs to be communicated as much as it needs to be understood—meaning, once you experience true teamwork, you know exactly what it feels like. And, this is where teamwork really gets interesting: there is a common methodology to breakthrough teams—an evolution that happens as team members realize a shared understanding. That’s the critical trait, talent, and skill of each member—they understand the shared goal. Furthermore, it means that great teams aren’t necessarily composed of great team members, but instead, they’re composed of great team practices that create “understanding” among team members.

These team practices, when performed, create a very specific path (which we call the Orange Path) that leads to true teamwork with resulting esprit de corps and breakthrough results. No matter how the data is spliced, or which great team is analyzed, the same path exists. It’s like tracking the DNA of great teams. It’s clear. It’s exact. And, if teams follow this path, they end up in the same location—success.

Does Research Correlate With Reality?

The beautiful thing about statistics is that they are a reflection of reality. Sure, within any group of dazzling data, there will be a sole situation that seemingly disproves any theory. Surprisingly, even though we expected to find the “disprover,” we couldn’t. One organization after another showed us how they operated as a team. With each one, we could detail where they accelerated, or where they fell short.

In *The Orange Revolution*, we spotlight numerous teams at Pepsi Beverages Company, Zappos.com, American Express, the National Basketball Association, Texas Roadhouse, Madison Square Garden, Apple, Medical City Dallas Hospital... and the list continues. Some of the organizations we specifically approached because we had been informed that they practiced the traits along the Orange Path, but others we researched simply because they had accomplished something amazing—and we wanted to find out how teamwork played a role.

Sure enough, if they had accomplished breakthrough results, it wasn't just a matter of great leadership. Instead, it was methodology of teamwork—the same methodology we had witnessed in our research. And, if they had experienced setbacks, it could quickly be attributed to one of the areas of teamwork. Fascinating? We thought so, because we never imagined that the path to success as a group could be so clear-cut.

Teamwork is not a concept that needs to be communicated as much as it needs to be understood—meaning, once you experience true teamwork, you know exactly what it feels like.

The Trail to Results

All those ants, in perfect formation are going somewhere, with a unified cause. As we studied our data, and interviewed managers and team members from various companies around the globe, we uncovered similar components that existed within breakthrough teams—a perfect formation.

Those components are:

1. Every breakthrough team starts with, and **shares a common cause**. The ultimate vision is the same and is very clear, and the motivation to achieve the cause is shared by all members.
2. The teams already adhere to, and commonly practice, the **Basic Four of Leadership + Recognition**, which includes **Goal-Setting, Communication, Trust, and Accountability**. These concepts are detailed in our earlier book, *The Carrot Principle*.
3. Here is the lifeblood of our research on breakthrough teams. All great teams—every single one of them—adhere to a set of rules. We've captured the most common, which we call the **Rule of 3**:
 - **Wow**—The standard performance of great teams is always world-class.
 - **No Surprises**—All team members are accountable for openness, honest debate, and each knows what to expect from the others.
 - **Cheer**—Team members support, recognize, appreciate, and cheer others and the group on to victory.
4. Great teams achieve a heightened level of Esprit De Corps, which includes camaraderie, engagement, and satisfaction. Esprit De Corps isn't as much of a practice as it is “the understanding” which we spoke of earlier.

Where Are the Chips?

In Costa Rica not too long ago, we witnessed the inspiration for this manifesto. *The Orange Revolution* had already launched. The book had found places on the bestseller lists, and we were already out in the world sharing our stories at conferences and within organizations through training and speeches. But, there beneath our feet was a line of leaf-cutter ants stretching out of one part of the forest and into another. The greenery the workers carried was evidence of the final goal, and the reason the colony thrives—because there was a payoff.

In the workplace, we also had to prove that teamwork lead to increased revenue, profits, productivity and performance. Someone needed to bring back the chips at the end of the day—as opposed to eating it where it originally rested.

Results of our research also proved the financial results of teamwork via direct and indirect outcomes. Through data and interviews we found:

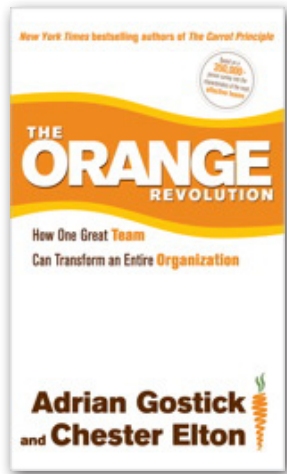
- Employees who felt they were part of a motivating team reported that they were more likely to work longer hours or pick up extra assignments to help their team members.
- Employees who reported feeling that they were part of a strong team felt more trust in the organization and more pride.
- Employees who reported having friends at work were substantially less likely to want to leave the organization.
- Employees who felt they were part of a strong team scored much higher in all employee engagement categories.

The list of benefits from building strong teams could continue (all the data is detailed in *The Orange Revolution*). However, in viewing the whole, the most important piece of evidence (variable from organization to organization) may be this. In the companies where employees reported strong levels of esprit de corps, breakthrough accomplishments could be pinpointed, and financial results could be attributed to those accomplishments.

Where to Start?

“Where do we start?” is typically the first question we get asked by managers or team leaders seeking breakthrough results. First, as a team, define your noble cause. Next, commit to the Rule of 3: Wow, No Surprises, and Cheer. Define the world-class results you and your team want to achieve; learn to communicate honestly and outline exactly what a No Surprises culture looks like; and then Cheer with the purpose of motivating your team—individually, and as a group.

Most importantly, start your cheering today. You’ll be shocked at how quickly your team will line up with your common cause. It’s really that simple. **It’s so simple in fact that an ant can do it.** 🐜



BUY THE BOOK

Get more details or buy a copy of Gostick and Elton's [The Orange Revolution](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

New York Times and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling authors and acclaimed speakers Adrian Gostick and Chester Elton have spent the past 20 years researching and working with the world's best companies such as Pepsi Beverages Company, American Express, Wal-Mart and Avis Budget Group. Considered "The thought leaders on employee engagement," Gostick and Elton have appeared on CBS's *60 Minutes*, NBC's *Today Show*, CNN, ABC and National Public Radio. Their work has been quoted in *The New York Times*, *Fortune*, *The Economist*, *Newsweek* and many other publications. For more information visit adriangostick.com and chesterelton.com.

SEND THIS

[Pass along a copy](#) of this manifesto to others.

SUBSCRIBE

[Sign up for our free e-newsletter](#) to learn about our latest manifestos as soon as they are available.

BORN ON DATE

This document was created on January 20, 2010 and is based on the best information available at that time.

ABOUT CHANGETHIS

[ChangeThis](#) is a vehicle, not a publisher. We make it easy for big ideas to spread. While the authors we work with are responsible for their own work, they don't necessarily agree with everything available in ChangeThis format. But you knew that already.

ChangeThis is supported by the love and tender care of 800-CEO-READ. Visit us at 800-CEO-READ or at our daily [blog](#).

COPYRIGHT INFO

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit [Creative Commons](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/) or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

Cover image from [iStockphoto](#)®

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You are given the unlimited right to print this manifesto and to distribute it electronically (via email, your website, or any other means). You can print out pages and put them in your favorite coffee shop's windows or your doctor's waiting room. You can transcribe the author's words onto the sidewalk, or you can hand out copies to everyone you meet. You may not alter this manifesto in any way, though, and you may not charge for it.