Foreword by Belinda Clark AO, Former Captain of Australia's Women's World Cup Champion Cricket Teams and Sports Executive

TEAMS THAT SWEAR

By each other, not about each other

ADRIAN BAILLARGEON

The power of a swear word

Saskatoon is a relatively small, yet very proud, city. With a population of over 270,000, it's a place where you can get anywhere in 15 minutes. We endure (and survive) long cold winters where the temperatures can dip into the –40s (yes that's Celsius).

Growing up, I had two brothers, a mum and a dad. Eventually we convinced our parents we needed to get a dog named Gypsy.

Mom* and Dad quickly helped us learn what it was like to work in a team. We all played team sports. We also learned early on how to share the work around the house. I vividly remember picking weeds in the back alley of our house on Cascade Street. This job seemed to come up more often when we were older and had been out late the night before. First thing Saturday morning, Mom and Dad would have us out in the alley with a table knife each, picking weeds and making our section of the back alley look good. Pitching in, taking pride in our surroundings and learning by doing were important to my parents.

Throughout my childhood I rarely heard my parents swear in front of us. Which is quite impressive when you think about all the chaos three young boys would have caused. My poor mum had to put up with us bickering over important issues such as who would play Ice Hockey on the Nintendo next. Yet I can't recall her using any well-deserved expletives. She later shared with me that she

^{*} In Canada we say 'mom' and in Australia we say 'mum', so in this book my (Canadian) mum is 'Mom' to me!

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associated swearing with anger and didn't feel it was right to swear in front of us, no matter how much frustration we may have caused.

During my summers while I was at university, Dad got me a job working at the same industrial plumbing and heating company where he worked. During those summers on the job site, swearing was the norm. For Dad to be in that environment every day and not bring it home was impressive.

However, I have learned that when it comes to working with people (using tools or not), swearing seems to have some sort of profound effect. I have often heard people say, 'I swear by this approach' or 'I swear that's what I heard', and of course the old classic, 'I swear on my mother's grave'.

When I moved to Australia in 2005, I noticed swearing was much more part of the regular conversation. I would crown the term 'bloody' as the great Aussie adjective. Encouraging drivers not to drink and drive, TAC, a state-based government agency whose responsibilities include promoting road safety, used the tagline, 'If you drink, then drive, you're a bloody idiot' in a wide-reaching campaign to reduce drinking and driving. Tourism Australia also jumped into the swearing game with the now-infamous 2006 'So Where The Bloody Hell Are You?' campaign.

It's not just the 'softer' swear words Aussies are comfortable with. Arguably the harshest word (it's a four-letter word, starts with the letter C and rhymes with 'runt') seems to be used as a term of endearment. When playing indoor cricket, I'd often hear 'Good on ya, $c _ _ _$ '. Or in a tongue in cheek manner, 'Ah, shut up $c _ _ _$ '. Full on, isn't it?

At work—in the corporate space—I experienced a similar use of profanities. Not as many C bombs, probably more F bombs. Some people were happy to drop an F bomb here and there. F that

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person, F the business, F the project, F the budget, F me! I worked with a great colleague who was very comfortable using this type of language. I playfully flagged my observations to her one day and so the debate began about whether swearing was good or bad.

Being somewhat competitive, I felt research would support my argument that swearing isn't good. Much to my bloody disgust, I was proven wrong. Cognitive psychologist Kristin Janschewitz, Associate Professor at Marist College in New York, has found evidence that suggests there is no proven harm in the impacts of swearing. Having observed over 10,000 episodes of swearing in public—with adults and kiddos—her work suggests that most uses of swear words are not problematic. Swearing doesn't lead to acts of violence, and for most people swearing leads to positive outcomes. Swearing to make people laugh for example, is quite common.

Janschewitz also noted that swearing can help achieve a number of positive outcomes "when used positively for joking or storytelling, stress management, fitting in with the crowd, or as a substitute for physical aggression".8

Ok, so swearing doesn't cause any harm if used the right way. But it actually helps and is good for me? There was still a part of me that didn't quite feel right about what I had discovered so I dug a little deeper. And to my colleague's delight, the case got stronger for her. Here's what I discovered:

 Swearing can increase an individual's pain threshold.
 Psychologist Richard Stephens at Keele University in Staffordshire in England discovered people could keep their hands submerged in ice water about 50% longer when they swore compared to when they used a neutral word.⁹

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- Move over steroids, swearing can make you stronger. Stephens performed two experiments that led him to this conclusion. The first involved a group jumping onto exercise bikes and riding for 30 seconds against a fair amount of resistance. The second involved participants challenged with a hand dynamometer (a squeezy type of thing) which measures grip strength. Surprise, surprise both groups performed better when repeating swear words during the activity compared to repeating neutral words. F me! For the squeezers, the results were 8% better, while the cyclists' results were between 2% and 4% better. Remember, all those one-percenters can make a difference.
- Swearing can relieve feelings of rejection or exclusion. In 2012 researchers at the University of Queensland asked 70 volunteers "to remember an experience of being excluded from a group or included in a group". Researchers asked one group to swear while retelling their stories, and another group to recount theirs without swearing. The group that included profanities in their stories reported lower feelings of social pain.¹¹
- And finally, and more closely aligned to the arena of high performing teams, research from Australia and New Zealand has shown that "risking a swear word of frustration, amusement or sympathy among members of a new social group is an important barometer of how much we believe that our good intentions are accepted". The researchers concluded that, "We tend to swear among those we trust, and swearing can help to create trust." In an interview with National Geographic, Emma Byrne, author of Swearing is Good for You, summed up the research best when she said, "jocular abuse,

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particularly swearing among friends, is a strong signal of the degree of trust that those friends share. When you look at the transcripts of these case studies of effective teams in sectors like manufacturing and IT, those that can joke with each other in ways that transgress polite speech, which includes a lot of swearing, tend to report that they trust each other more."¹⁴

So does this mean that to create higher performing teams, rolling out a tirade of expletives is the way to go? Remember, words have an impact. Big impact. Look at this list of words and think about the impact they have had on our world:

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'I have a dream'
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'I love you'

'I h@te you' (the H word is deemed a swear word in our house)

'No'

#metoo

'Make love, not war'

'Please'

'Thank you'

'If you build it, he will come'

When it comes to swearing in teams, it's not necessarily what you say, it's how you say it. And when, and to whom, and where. Hence the name of this book: we're aiming to create teams that might swear at each other, but it's because they swear by each other. These are high performing teams.

SECTION 1

Different Perspectives of Team Development

History of team development

The year 1965 was an influential one for mankind. Civil rights activist Malcolm X was shot dead in New York City. Gen Xers were first born, including JK Rowling, who would go on to become one of the most popular writers of our time. McDonald's shares were listed publicly for the first time. The famous scene of Muhammad Ali towering over Sonny Liston was etched into history when Ali knocked out Liston in the first round with what is still known as the 'phantom punch'. Earlier in the year, one of the most popular musical films of all time, The Sound of Music, starring Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer, was released. In the music world, The Righteous Brothers' 'You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling' reached #1 on the charts. And perhaps not for the first time, the Rolling Stones were fined £5 each for public urination. 16

When it comes to team dynamics, 1965 was also a big year. It marked the publication of Bruce Tuckman's popular theory of group dynamics. A PhD graduate of Princeton University, Tuckman's 'Developmental Sequence in Small Group' was published in the *Psychological Bulletin*. You may not recognise the name, but I suspect you will have heard of his stages of team development: Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing. And then in 1977 (a great year in

the Baillargeon household, I might add), Adjourning was added as the fifth stage.

Tuckman characterised these five stages in the following way:

Forming:

- When teams first come together, they are typically in the Forming stage.
- Some team members are excited to start something new, others may be anxious as they might not be 100% clear on what the team will do.
- Most members are positive and polite. Politeness may be superficial as team members get a feel for each other.
- Time is spent getting to know each other but with limited personal disclosure. There is a feeling of 'Will I be accepted?' and 'Can I trust them?'
- Leaders concentrate on setting direction and ground rules, and establishing individual roles.

Storming:

- The reality of what needs to happen and when hits home.
 People get really busy.
- Cliques can start to form, conflicts arise, power struggles emerge and personal agendas surface.
- Authority, ways of working and tasks may be questioned while others jockey to be in the good books with the leader.
- Leaders spend their time listening, coaching and building up levels of teamwork.

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Norming:

- Resistance and differences are overcome.
- Cohesiveness develops people start to appreciate individual team members' strengths, ask each other for feedback, and share more of themselves and their opinions more readily.
- Individual agendas are set aside for group goals, and confidence grows.
- Leaders challenge the team to avoid groupthink and start to include them in bigger picture decisions.
- This doesn't mean everything is smooth sailing there may be times when new tasks arise and the team slips back into Storming, but they can rebound back to Norming sooner.

Performing:

- Structure is set and works well for the team. Roles become flexible and functional.
- Members' confidence is high and channelled to the task, and they can work with minimal supervision.
- Members share praise and constructive criticism productively.
- Leaders spend their energy delegating, developing team members and aligning activity to emerging trends.
- Not all teams get here it all depends on how they manage conflict.

Adjourning:

 Some teams reach this naturally (think of a project with a beginning and end date), while others not so naturally (think

restructure or a significant number of members changing teams in a short period of time).

- It is important for this stage to be acknowledged the work and results achieved up to this point.
- The team needs to realise change is required and to move on from the previous ways of doing things. What worked here may not work in the future.

Tuckman's model of team development is still referenced and relevant today when it comes to identifying how teams work together and progress.

As good as Tuckman's model is, however, I am not sure if we have progressed that much in terms of how well we work together. In Australia, 91% of workers' compensation claims that involved a mental health condition were linked to work-related stress or mental stress, and 58% of those claims were due to work-related harassment, bullying and pressure. In Canada, it's not much better. Nearly half (47%) of working Canadians agree that their "work and place of work is the most stressful part of their day and life". In am not sure of similar statistics from the 1960s, however my instinct tells me they wouldn't have been much worse or better. According to Fierce Inc's 2011 study of 1,400 corporate executives, employees and educators, 99.1% prefer a workplace where people identify and discuss issues truthfully and effectively, yet only half of those said their organisations do so.

Norwegian adventurer Thor Heyerdahl once said, "Progress is man's ability to complicate simplicity." If this is the real definition of progress, then maybe we are doing a good job when it comes to working together. It seems working together is getting more complicated.

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So what's the answer to working better together, or to doing 'together' better? How do we get teams to swear by each other and not about each other? To swear in front of each other and not behind each other's backs?

If you believe in Dr Google, a search for 'characteristics of high performing teams' will provide you with around 53 million answers. Boom, perfect. With such an abundance of information available, leading a higher performing team should be as easy as putting together an IKEA bookshelf, right?

Wishful thinking.

Let's go back to Tuckman's model. I wonder if Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing and Adjourning do still apply in today's world. I am certain you could look at any of the definitions of the stages and place your team in one or two of them.

Where things may have changed is the pace at which teams need to move through these stages.

For example, imagine you are the CEO of a sporting event and you had less than 18 months to create a team of up to 60 people (plus over 1,000 volunteers) to deliver an event on a global scale. This was the case for Nick Hockley, CEO of the organising committee for the ICC T20 World Cup of Cricket in 2020. Nick and his team were responsible for delivering one of the biggest sporting events ever staged in the Southern Hemisphere.

Can you imagine Nick and his team taking:

- 3-4 months to get through the Forming stage
- Another 6–8 months to get through the Storming phase, and
- A couple more months to transition into Norming ... and then hopefully by the end of the year, Performing?

Bloody hell – I suspect if it took this team 12–14 months to get to the Performing stage, there wouldn't be any beer available to buy at the stadiums. No beer. Imagine the furore. The event would be over. Stadiums closed.

Why we need to change the time frames and be deliberate about team development

Think about how consumer and employee expectations have changed. Their patience is lower and they're not quite as forgiving as they once were. Consider:

- 47% of consumers expect a webpage to load in 2 seconds or less;
 40% abandon a website if it takes more than 3 seconds to load.¹⁹
- A 2013 study analysed an unprecedented 6.7 million unique viewers from around the world who in aggregate watched 23 million videos for 216 million minutes. The study discovered that online videos begin losing viewers at a delay of 2 seconds, and every 1 second of waiting after that marks a 5.8% increase in the number of people who leave.²⁰

Seconds people, we are talking seconds! This means we need to be much more efficient in delivering videos as well as working together in the workplace. In your case, it may not be seconds but it may not be far off. Email/text/WhatsApp/pick your weapon (or poison), communication often necessitates a response within hours, sometimes minutes. 'Necessitates' may be debatable, but in some cases it's true.

So where is your team at? If it's not in the Performing stage, then you have a couple of options. One – you can wait and hope for

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nature to take its course and for the team to (hopefully) get there on its own. Or two – you can take deliberate steps to help improve how your team develops as a group. You can accelerate the pace at which you create cohesiveness and work towards swearing by each other. And it can all start now.

Key Takeaways

- ☑ There are many models to help identify how teams work together, spearheaded by Bruce Tuckman's classic model of team development. You could also check out Rubin, Plovnick and Fry's GRPI Model of Team Effectiveness, Katzenbach and Smith's Team Effectiveness Model, Lombardo and Eichinger's T7 Model of Team Effectiveness, and Hackman's Model of Team Effectiveness, as well as LaFasto and Larson's book *The Five Dynamics of Team Work and Collaboration*, and Lencioni's work *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*.
- ☑ Working out how to manage conflict is key to moving from Storming to Norming to Performing.
- ☑ Some teams need to move through the stages more quickly than others. Therefore, you will need to put deliberate focus on the key activities of each stage.

Reflections

- Think about your team. On a scale of 0–10, with 10 being at its fullest potential and 0 being the opposite, what score would you give your team?
- What is interfering with your team reaching its potential?
 Once you answer this question, ask yourself, 'What else?'
- What else? And what else?

What the research tells us

Scott Dinsdale is a pretty interesting guy. Born in Kingston, Ontario, Canada, Scott at one stage was the head of global distribution and CTO for Sony Music, after which he led Accenture's Media and Entertainment business across Asia. He is now the Managing Director of Future Next, a digital advisory and business development service across media, entertainment, sports, finance and retail.

Not only is Scott's resume pretty impressive, you need to see his hair. He would give Michael Bolton a good run with his long, cool locks. On top of a good lid, Scott's passion growing up was music, and he even tutored a couple of the members of the Tragically Hip. The Hip was a band that was absolutely revered by Canadians. To give you an idea of what they meant to the country, Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau delivered the national eulogy at the passing of their lead singer. Anyways, I digress. Scott and I were discussing the Tuckman model and he suggested, similar to Tuckman, that it takes time for teams, whether in music or business, to operate at a high performing level. If the board or executives expect big results right away, they are going to be disappointed. And Scott is not alone in thinking this. Former Wallabies player and co-founder of GainLine Analytics Ben Darwin also suggests for a team to succeed, they need to be a cohesive unit, and that builds over time through shared experiences.

Building cohesion does take time. Look at music bands. Some of the world's greatest rock bands rose to the top after spending a ridiculous amount of time together. Some even started playing together when they were in high school. Members of Radiohead, Rush, Green Day and INXS have played together since high school. Mick Jagger and Keith Richards went to primary school together.²¹ Four of the five members of the Tragically Hip grew up in the same town and two went to school together, which is where their collaborations started. Perhaps one of the most famous stories about music, time and cohesion is The Beatles. They are renowned for having played over 10,000 hours together before they hit the big time in North America.*

Does more time together help teams perform better and therefore work more productively? In a leadership survey, McKinsey Consulting reported 72% of 191 organisations said team performance has an impact on productivity.²² I think it's fair to say time helps people connect, build trust and get a better understanding of how each other works. For many of us, we don't have 10,000 hours (which is roughly 5 years of Monday to Friday work) to become a high performing team. Often, we don't have 8–12 months as some would suggest is required to get through the different stages of team performance.

So what is the key to becoming a high performing team? Regardless of how much Japanese Roku gin a team drinks at an offsite, it (probably) won't happen overnight. What I've tried to do for the rest of this book is share with you what I've found makes a difference. I believe—as others do—if you deliberately and consistently focus on what makes a higher performing team, you

^{*} Malcolm Gladwell's *Tipping Point* goes into much more detail about this. I highly recommend reading this book.

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can generate better results. And in a radically quicker time frame than if you let things just 'naturally' occur.

The Wu-Tang Clan and the Russian hockey team

In 2017, McKinsey reported that, "Every year, more than 10,000 business books are published, and that's before you add in hundreds of thousands of articles, blogs and video lectures." I'd suggest a fair amount of those 10,000 business books touch on characteristics of high performing teams. Patrick Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* is an oldie but a goldie. Shane Snow's *Dream Teams* is also really valuable, particularly because it references the 1972 Russian ice hockey team and one of the greatest rap bands ever, the Wu-Tang Clan, as two high performing teams. The 1972 Russians and the Wu-Tang Clan? A match made in heaven. We will touch on some of the tactics used by the Wu-Tang Clan in Chapter 17.

If you are a left-brained research and numbers type of person, many studies have been conducted around the world on what makes teams work better together. Google's Project Aristotle looked at 180 teams across their business. When they analysed the differences between the teams that performed better versus those that didn't, five traits—in order of importance—stood out:

- **1. Psychological safety** Team members felt safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other. This was the most important trait in Google's study.
- **2. Dependability** Team members got things done on time and met Google's high bar for excellence.
- 3. **Structure and clarity** Team members had clear roles, plans and goals.

- **4. Meaning** Work was personally important to team members. They were working on what they cared about.
- **5. Impact** Team members thought their work mattered and created change. All team members felt their team was making a difference.

We will go into much more depth about psychological safety in Chapter 15, however its importance within teams cannot be understated. Psychological safety helps develop trust and respect in teams and allows team members to admit mistakes and ask for help. I suspect those working in the Australian banking sector could have used a little of this prior to the Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry. Again, more about that later.

'It's how you teach the game'

This was the slogan for Ajarty Sports Consulting, the first company I started, alongside baseball guru Sheldon 'Artie' Sawatzky.* We were hell-bent on helping well-intentioned parents, who were typically full-time workers with little experience in their children's sport, to become better youth sport coaches. We ran clinics for parent coaches and created a resource to support them. Our main message was for parents to avoid getting too hung up on teaching the technical components of skills and to focus more on running an effective practice that included a lot of movement, fun and energy. Teaching the technical components to young children was as difficult to teach as it was to

^{* &#}x27;Artie' is short for Arthur Murray, as in the school of dance. Apparently, Sheldon was such a smooth dancer in his heyday, he was given the nickname to recognise his moves, and the name has stuck ever since.

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learn. Try teaching a child who has never picked up a baseball and ask them to throw it overhand—one of the most unnatural movements ever—let alone trying to break it down into step-by-step instructions. So our main message was not to worry so much about *what* the parent coaches taught, but to focus more on *how* they taught the game.

It turns out we were onto something.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has undertaken several fascinating studies into human interaction. One in particular highlights that it's not necessarily who you hire that will drive success, but more how your chosen hire communicates with other team members. It's how they communicate, not necessarily who communicates.

Professor Alex 'Sandy' Pentland, a computer scientist who directs the MIT Connection Science and Human Dynamics labs, is one of the most cited scientists in the world. In 2011, Forbes declared him one of the "seven most powerful data scientists in the world". You know who topped him that year? Google's CEO. And the CTO of the United States Department of Health and Human Services. A pretty impressive crew to be associated with.

In 2012, Pentland released an article entitled 'The New Science of Building Great Teams', in which he shares a number of learnings he developed while working with 2,500 people from 21 organisations across a variety of industries. Being a data-capturing guru, he literally put his wares to work. By asking participants to wear sensors and wireless technology, Pentland was able to observe how people in teams engaged, with the aim of being able to predict which teams would succeed or fail based on how team members interacted. As Pentland stated, the technology captured "more than 100 data points a minute and work[ed] unobtrusively enough that we're confident we're capturing natural behavior".

One of the biggest surprises was the impact on team success of "individual reasoning and talent". Pentland's research suggests these two factors contribute far less to team success than one might expect. "The best way to build a great team is not to select individuals for their smarts or accomplishments," he noted, "but to learn how they communicate and to shape and guide the team so that it follows successful communication patterns."

Pentland was as surprised as everyone else with some of the results. As he commented, "It seems almost absurd that how we communicate could be so much more important to success than what we communicate."

Pentland's five key findings into what characterises higher performing teams were as follows:

Finding #1

The best predictors of productivity were a team's energy and engagement outside formal meetings. He credited these two factors with a third of the variations in dollar productivity among groups.²⁵ When working with a call centre in a bank, by simply encouraging teams to take their breaks together instead of one person at a time, Pentland found that the average handling time (an important KPI in call centres) improved by more than 20% among lower performing teams. Apparently, the call centre manager changed the break schedule at all 10 of the bank's call centres and forecasted US\$15 million a year in productivity increases. That's right, US\$15 million a year. This move also saw employee satisfaction improve by up to 10%.²⁶ Not bad.

Finding #2

Similar to the advice my mentor Miles Callaghan gave me, Pentland found when everyone on the team talks (shares their opinion) and

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listens in roughly equal amounts, teams perform better. Note that it's not 'everyone is given the opportunity' to contribute – they actually contribute. Verbally. The key is to keep contributions short and sweet. The task for leaders then becomes finding ways to ensure everyone contributes. And keeping those contributions short and sweet. Pentland also found that when members carry on back-channel or side conversations within the team—even in meetings—they perform better. Although it might sound counterintuitive, the findings demonstrated that at times, more than one person speaking doesn't hurt teams.

Finding #3

Pentland found that the best way for teams to communicate was face-to-face, facing one another, with conversations and gestures he characterises as 'energetic'. Get this – his research showed that "35% of the variation in a team's performance can be accounted for by the number of face-to-face exchanges among team members". Yes, 35%! Far out. Simply by speaking face-to-face, with a little care factor. Serial emailers – this is your time to run and hide behind a rock. Pentland found that texts, emails and instant messages were the least effective forms of communication. Videoconferencing can be effective but as the number of people increases, the effectiveness of the meeting goes down.

Finding #4

Teams whose members connect directly with one another—and not just with the team leader—perform better.

Finding #5

Pentland's research demonstrated that where team members periodically break—go exploring outside the team and bring

information back—perform better. Carly Loder, who at the time of her appointment was one of Australia's youngest chief marketing officers, has noted that her team has applied this approach on several occasions. While developing Kayo, the 'Netflix of sport', Loder and her team would occasionally consult globally with similar service providers outside of the sports ecosystem. As she described to me:

Because we were working on something that had never been done before (in the sporting landscape), there was no precedence, no internal learnings or experience we could leverage. So we started looking outside to see who else was doing this in a different industry and luckily we found one in the UK. It saved us time and a lot of fumbling around, all through a couple of conversations.

So what's the magic formula?

Similar to Google's algorithm for getting yourself onto page one of the search results, there is no single answer for creating teams that swear by each other. Pentland's approach is one of many. All these numerous studies and approaches, however, do start to point us in the right direction, and a number of common characteristics start to emerge for creating the foundations of higher functioning, higher performing teams. What if we could combine all these characteristics into one, simple model? A checklist to refer to when things are not going so well? Or even better when things are going well and could be even greater? Hmm, if only such a checklist was available. The good news is there is such a thing. Soon, you'll find out.

Key Takeaways

- ☑ *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* and *Dream Teams* are great resources to inspire higher performing teams. Recent research from Google and MIT also provide useful insights.
- ☑ Psychological safety has been proven to be a key factor in higher performing teams. It is fundamental to learning from one another's experiences, developing trust and avoiding the same mistakes over and over.
- ☑ How teams communicate is more important than getting the best talent on a team.

Reflections

- What form of communication does your team rely on the most? Ask your team and see what they say.
- In your team meetings, whose voices are heard most of the time? Whose are not?
- Based on Pentland's five findings, what's one step you could take to help your team increase the chances of more swearing by each other rather than about each other?