

Just the right touch

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Globe and Mail Update

Published Sunday, Oct. 03, 2010 5:52PM EDT

Most people feel comfortable encouraging friends and family members with a pat on the back, a little hug, or a squeeze on the arm. But touching people has no place in the office, right?

Wrong, actually. Though a strict hands-off policy has reigned in the workplace since the early 1980s, when the threat of sexual harassment made touching taboo, new evidence is building that some forms of physical contact provide compelling signals to colleagues that would otherwise be missed.

Touch is one of the biological mechanisms that helps us form and sustain intimate bonds, bonds essential to our survival in groups. It also cements our relationships in the workplace, research shows.

One soon-to-be-published study from a lab at the University of California at Berkeley demonstrates how consistent physical contact predicts which people will shine in competitive environments.

Led by research scholar Michael Kraus, psychology student Cassy Huang and social psychologist Dacher Keltner, the study focused on the “high fives,” shoulder bumps, hugs, and team huddles exchanged among National Basketball Association players during their 2008-2009 season.

When the researchers analyzed what transpired between players during and after their games, they discovered that moments of physical contact indicated more than simple bravado: The amount and the type of non-verbal communication between players was clearly tied to the performance of the group. The more team members bonded via fist bumps and group hugs, the more success they experienced.

The most physically demonstrative ball players turned out to be the best performers, the researchers discovered. And the effect wasn't only at the level of individual players. A team's late-season success could be clearly predicted by the amount and type of early-season physical contact within the group. Even after controlling for other factors, such as a player's status, the pre-season expectations of a team, or a team's margin of victory, more early-season signs of physical bonding between players spelled greater team performance later on.

So what's going on?

“Touch is a really good way to indicate who is on your side. We essentially distribute our neural processing of stress across other people,” said University of Virginia research psychologist James Coan, who studies the effect of touch on the brain's response to stress and fear.

Being with someone you trust allows a person to “contract out” his or her stress management, Dr. Coan explained, and touch is simply a shortcut to communicating that trust.

In business, where to be successful you not only have to monitor the bottom line but also regulate your negative emotions and level of stress (all of which are executive tasks involving your pre-frontal cortex), any reliable sign of trust means that you don't have to monitor your environment as much, Dr. Coan said.

The result is you free up your pre-frontal cortex for problem solving, decision making, or creative tasks.

One might be tempted to conclude, then, that reaching out to touch someone leads to better performance and a more effective team. But there's a catch.

In correlational studies such as the one from the Berkeley team, which track the relationship between two factors, we don't really know what comes first. Is it talent and self-confidence that prompt a person to high-five his or her teammates? Or does the increased trust fostered by a group hug make it easier to co-operate, and then reach a common goal?

We don't really know. But it's safe to say that strong players tend to be more touchy-feely than weak ones. And groups that aren't afraid to use physical signals tend to be more cohesive.

"When people work together in close proximity, touch – with the caveat that the touch is comfortable for everyone involved – should improve team performance by building trust between co-workers," Dr. Kraus wrote in an e-mail.

So reach out and touch someone. Just keep it in the neutral zone so you score points, not a personal foul.

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