

# Does team chemistry actually exist?

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Willie Mays, the greatest baseball player of all time, doesn't believe in team chemistry. And Michael Lewis, author of *Moneyball*, a writer known for his focus on analytics, downplays its importance.

But others, like Golden State Warriors head basketball coach Steve Kerr, winner of eight championships as a player and coach, and Hall of Fame baseball manager Tony La Russa, winner of three championships and a four-time manager of the year, can't believe it's even a question. "Every once in a while you hear an expert that says team chemistry is overrated," says La Russa. "You just write that person off."

What gives?

We know team chemistry is real. We've experienced it, experts confirm it, and, says author Joan Ryan, "We're wired to crave to belong, to be a part of something."

How to make sense of it all?

in her new book, *Intangibles*, that's what award-winning journalist Ryan sets out to do. Relying heavily on her experience as a long-time sports columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and as the media consultant for the San Francisco Giants, Ryan takes on team chemistry through the lens of baseball. She writes, "America's 'national pastime' is more like a regular workplace than any other sport. In most offices, employees are alone in a cubicle performing an individual task. The employee's task is integral to the common goal, whether manufacturing cell phones, designing software, or putting out a newspaper. Understanding how team chemistry works in a baseball clubhouse, consequently, helps us understand how it works in any group with a shared purpose."

## What is team chemistry?

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### Team Chemistry definition

Team chemistry is an interplay of physiological, social, and emotional forces that elevates performance

(Source: Joan Ryan, *Intangibles*)

Consider that for a minute. The *function* of team chemistry is to elevate performance. We're talking about teams that are *doing something well*. They're accomplishing goals, they're winning. They might not be the championship-winning teams, necessarily, but they're experiencing success. Otherwise, there wouldn't be any chemistry. Right? A losing team, a poorly performing group – it's pretty clear that among the things they're lacking, one is chemistry.

But chemistry can't manufacture talent. Chemistry *ignites the talent* a team already has. So, when a team's chemistry improves, it stands to reason that the results should also improve.

What people often misunderstand – and this goes especially for the star-studded list of team chemistry scoffers like Willie Mays – is that team chemistry isn't just about *social* chemistry. Or camaraderie (fellowship) and cohesion (state of being). Far too many, in sports and business, think only of “social chemistry” when they think of team chemistry overall. So when they blanch, it's usually because they're reacting to something that often seems inauthentic, manufactured, touchy-feely, or downright unimportant. (Trust falls, anyone?) And in many cases, they'd be right. (Though not every attempt at team bonding is bogus, of course.) But social chemistry isn't the only contributing factor to *overall* team chemistry.

### Social chemistry vs. task chemistry

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A team with great social chemistry would be nothing without task chemistry. Or, as Ryan writes: “There are no wins without task chemistry, but very few *champions* without social chemistry.”

Let me explain. Task chemistry relates to the performance of duties. You've got a role, your assignments and responsibilities, and you're expected to carry them out. When you're on a team with people who work their butts off, who consistently nail the tasks they're assigned, you're on a team with high *task chemistry*.

“In business,” says Ryan, “task chemistry is so important, and you don't have as many opportunities [for social chemistry]. But if you're really, really committed to the shared goal, that eventually is gonna morph into being committed to each other because it goes hand in hand.”

And the truth is, there is connection created by great work. Even if one of your high-performing teammates is difficult to work with sometimes, if they're always delighting you with what they produce, you feel a bond. You can rely on them. You're confident in what you can expect from that teammate.

Part of the problem with an overemphasis on social chemistry is an assumption that chemistry can't exist if people aren't like-minded in most ways. Task chemistry allows for some difference. What works for her, and the way she performs the best she can? *That* ultimately helps the team, and can contribute to team chemistry, despite her dislike of team dinners. Maybe she's not a "typical" teammate, but does she work hard? Does she prepare? Does she come through when needed?

Real team chemistry is about accepting everybody for who they are. It's what I keep telling these guys: In the end we love people for who they are to us.

*Carolina Panthers head coach Ron Rivera*

Of course, social chemistry is important – *very*. Remember, task chemistry is required for some level of success; social chemistry can take a team to the next level. So it seems a deeper appreciation of what contributes to overall team chemistry will help teams better understand and nurture it.

## **But can you quantify team chemistry?**

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This deeper understanding of chemistry – task and social – had a big affect on the naysayers in *Intangibles*. When Ryan presented it to former San Francisco Giant and league MVP Jeff Kent, a known grouch and individualist, he had to reconsider his stance.

Check out this excerpt of a conversation Ryan had with Kent:

*From Intangibles*

I shared a comment from a player who said teammates lifted his performance in ways he couldn't do for himself.

"Can he quantify it?" Kent asked.

"No," I said. "Does that mean the effect isn't real?"

He said maybe for highly emotional players, it's real. "And even if it's real," he said, "if you can't quantify it..."

I interrupted. "OK, you say you love your wife. But you can't measure it, right? So how do you know it's real?"

"Because I'll take a bullet for her."

“And there’s the baseball equivalent to that, right?”

The toothpick bobbed. “Sure. I’d take a bullet for a guy on the mound whether I like him or hate him,” he said.

He smiled. “Yeah. I get your point.”

Ryan explains: “If his willingness to take a bullet for his wife means his love is real, then his willingness to do the same for a teammate means that something deep and even profound existed between him and his teammates.”

Many have trouble – even resist – believing something unless it’s measurable. To prove, the thinking goes, one must quantify. But there’s a difference between measuring speed, and measuring love. And remember: measurement won’t make chemistry real, only measurable. “Of course, what do we measure?” says Ryan. “The question always is, are you measuring the right thing, or are you just measuring what you think to measure?”

And just because something might be hard to measure doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.

Ryan writes, “Analytics are a tool. Like a wrench or a hammer, they have a specific function, which is to shape strategy. They cannot carry out the strategy. Only humans can do that. This is where analytics-obsessed leaders can lose their way. They produce a game plan so dazzling and innovative, they’re blinded to the human side of the equation: Who is *executing* it?”

“So,” says Ryan, “if you don’t understand human nature, and you don’t understand what motivates actual humans, your strategy is never going to flourish in the way that you need it to.”

### **300 passes**

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When Steve Kerr took over as the head basketball coach of the Golden State Warriors in 2014, he inherited a talented but underperforming team. Before the season started, Kerr met with the team’s metrics guru, Sammy Gelfand, to see if they could figure out a way to boost team performance with the assistance of analytics.

Kerr wanted a more ball movement-oriented offense with many extra passes like he was used to from his playing days. (Kerr had the great good fortune to play for 13-time NBA champion head coach Phil Jackson and five-time NBA champion head coach Gregg Popovich.) But Kerr didn’t have any hard evidence that more passes translated to more wins, despite knowing (as most basketball players and coaches know) that sharing the ball leads to better play.

Gelfand found something amazing. The previous season, the Warriors had averaged just 247 passes per game, *by far the worst in the NBA*. But he also found that when the team passed the ball more than three times per possession, they led the league in points per

possession. Kerr asked Gelfand for a “magic number” of passes per game. The answer was 300.

Writes Ryan, “Kerr immediately recognized that Gelfand had just handed him a cornerstone principle on which to build the Warriors’ new culture, which was a synthesis of analytics and team chemistry.”

The 300 passes per game benchmark combined sophisticated analysis with core basketball teamwork fundamentals, what Ryan describes as “a tribal reliance on one another.” It was brilliant. Gelfand had figured out that 300 passes would mean more points, plus “an increase in passing not only would unite players around a specific goal, but it would also solidify a team-first mind-set by constantly sharing the ball,” writes Ryan.

The Warriors won the NBA championship that year, their first in 40 years, and averaged 315.9 passes per game. They were arguably one of the most exiting teams to watch in NBA history, largely due to their style of play which, with such an emphasis on sharing the ball, showcased visible joy, unselfishness, and camaraderie.

## **Play (and work) for each other**

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So, what gets players (and colleagues) to buy in, to commit to the team? Coaches and leaders say similar things, give similar locker- and boardroom speeches. Sometimes it sticks, sometimes it doesn’t. Plus teams vary widely based on talent, experience, and so much else.

Was there something underpinning it all?

What came to the surface was this: play for each other. “In the military,” says Ryan, “it’s not about God and country when you’re on the battlefield. It’s about the guy next to you. Commitment to purpose morphs into commitment to each other, and it takes place over time.”

And from coaches and leaders, it seemed to come down to authenticity, genuine care, and commitment. I asked Ryan, why did some players listen to a coach, like Steve Kerr, when they must’ve heard similar things from other coaches. “It’s about his [Steve Kerr’s] commitment,” she said. “He has his player’s backs. He treats them each like an individual. He understands who they really are and what they need, and when he doesn’t, he admits he doesn’t.”

Ryan talks about how team chemistry happens every minute of every day you’re working together. It happens in small increments, and this is why you have to have the right people with each other, players and coaches, workers and leaders. Over time, and by removing complainers and malingerers and “clubhouse lawyers” (and other team chemistry detractors), the group that endures together grows its commitment to one another, and commitment to purpose.

“On great team-chemistry teams,” writes Ryan, “meaning and purpose evolve beyond winning gold medals or even making history. Your teammates become the meaning and the purpose.” The evidence abounds of how people will perform better, will dig deeper, will find “another gear” in the service of their team – their teammates – beyond what they can do individually.

Take for example the story of the pitcher Jake Peavy, winner of the Cy Young Award (the best in baseball), and a big believer in team chemistry. Peavy, an extremely hard-working and dedicated player on the field, who always looked to be giving 100 percent on every play, didn’t appear like someone who needed any chemistry. But he said, “Your teammates bring out a fight in you that you can’t willingly summon for yourself.”

## How to influence team chemistry

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When we describe a team as a “well-oiled machine” it’s actually a bad analogy. Machines are *complicated* systems. Teams, on the other hand, are *complex* systems. A complicated system – like a computer motherboard, or a car engine – has interchangeable parts. If something fails it can be replaced, and the results are predictable.

A team, made up of human beings, is a complex system. “In complex systems,” Ryan writes, “a tiny alteration might, in fact, cause a tiny change. Or it might cause an enormous one. There is so much less predictability.”

Understanding this distinction can help when thinking about what’s influencing (or taking away from) your team’s chemistry. An important aspect of this: teams are never made up of equals. But for chemistry to thrive, there needs to be a sense of equality.

So, can we influence team chemistry?

“We are made whole from the outside in,” writes Ryan. “We influence each other’s breathing, hormones, heart rate, metabolism, energy, emotions, sleep, productivity – everything. Our oversized, social brains are brilliant at interpreting the tiniest shift in tone of voice, the most fleeting twitch of a facial muscle.”

We can influence each other through vocal support, by welcoming new teammates, and with humor. Ryan says, “You can’t have a teasing relationship with people you don’t really care about,” and that it’s only among teams and teammates who feel a certain level of comfort with each other that teasing can even take place. “That’s a real sign because you can’t tease somebody or needle somebody unless there’s already some existing trust,” says Ryan. “You know they’ll get your intention, and they’ll laugh about it, and maybe you’re sending a bit of a message. But you can laugh about it. And so, teasing cultures, joking cultures – are really healthy cultures.”

What more human way of interacting do we have than using our humor?

More than anything, though, it's a deeper recognition, appreciation, and understanding of what makes us, us. Paul Zak, an economics professor and the founder and director of the Center for Neuroeconomic Studies at Claremont Graduate University, says "You have to love the people that you are on a team with. In a really fundamental sense."

Wait, love influences team chemistry?

Love is such a slippery word when it comes to the business world, and talk about unquantifiable. How could we make *love* more palatable at work? Ryan says, "When you really start to think about the different tribes in our lives, they're always developed on some version of love if you're really a tribe. We have our family tribe, and then we have our friend tribe, and we have our work tribe. The biggest thing – and every athlete will tell you this too or anyone who's ever been on team – I am that version of me only in that tribe. Love is such a big word," she adds, "but it's definitely that. In our own way that we have with each other."

"You need to feel like people have your back," says Ryan, "really have your back, and that you can mess up because we all do. And it's like getting caught being human. That's all it is really."