
How the Right Team Can Outshine Star Power



By Vlad. N. Mares , INSEAD

The future of innovation belongs not to geniuses but well-combined teams.

In the pursuit of breakthrough innovation, it is easy to be dazzled by star performers, from successful CEOs and prominent lawyers to award-winning scientists. Mention electric vehicles, and Elon Musk springs to mind; radioactivity research, and Marie Curie comes to the fore. However, this fixation can overshadow the crucial role played by the constellation of collaborators – most of us mere mortals – that surround the star.

In a new [study](#) published in *Management Science*, my fellow researchers* and I challenge the prevailing notion that stars are the dominant drivers of progress. Our analysis of more than 500 research projects at a leading university highlights the synergistic effects when talented individuals join forces. The most successful teams, we found, are those where neither the star nor their less-renowned colleagues dominate.

Our study has interesting implications for individuals and organisations across industries. Firms should prioritise building collaborative teams, where

members complement each other's strengths and weaknesses over recruiting and retaining top talent. Individuals should clearly define their unique value proposition and seek out complementary partners.

The rich become richer

Trying to measure individual contributions to a **team** is by no means easy or simple. The synergies among team members, the selection process that brings them together and the multidimensionality of their contributions are all factors to be considered.

One method relies on the identification of extreme events like the **death of a CEO or star scientist**, and measuring the pre- and post-event performance of their respective teams. Past research has identified two key mechanisms in the superior performance of teams with stars. The first is the Matthew effect. Often referred to as the "rich get richer" phenomenon, it describes how star performers attract more resources and opportunities, which amplifies their success and leads to more resources, and so on. The second is the spillover effect, where each party enhances the capabilities of their collaborator. The whole is then greater than the sum of the parts.

Our study introduces a novel methodology to parse the contributions of both stars and their constellations within the context of research collaborations. By integrating the collaboration selection process and the resulting joint value creation, researchers can estimate the relative contributions of each party.

This approach goes beyond traditional econometric methods that often struggle to address the fact that many teams are self-selecting, i.e. talented individuals are more likely to choose to work with other talented individuals.

Innovation is a team sport

We focused on academic research collaborations resulting in invention disclosures – the first step in the commercialisation process – at a prominent research university. We analysed a dataset of 555 collaborations involving 1,003 scientists, including 30 identified as "stars" based on publications and citations.

Our analysis revealed that in only 14.3 percent of collaborations did the star's contribution surpass that of the team. Likewise, teams dominated in just 9.5 percent of cases involving a star scientist. The vast majority of the

time - over 75 percent of collaborations - neither party clearly dominated.

We also found that **joint value creation** is often maximised when both stars and constellations possess a degree of "uniqueness" in the academic marketplace. In other words, star scientists paired with constellations offering rare and complementary skillsets achieve the highest levels of value creation. The same holds true for constellations working with less replaceable star scientists.

Intriguingly, our study suggests that dominance by either party can hinder overall productivity. When one side is easily replaceable, it reduces the incentive for deep collaboration and limits the potential for transformative discoveries. A dominant player might be able to claim a larger slice of the pie, but they're working with a smaller pie overall.

Implications

Our research offers a compelling argument for a more nuanced approach to talent development and **team-building** for innovation. Star performers are often put on a pedestal, but it is also important to give due recognition to the rest of the team.

Here are a few concrete suggestions on how to harness the complex interplay between individual brilliance and collective synergy:

Build star teams instead of individuals

Instead of prioritising individual talents, dedicate effort to building well-rounded teams with complementary skillsets. In other words, build all-star teams for critical or high-priority projects. Apple, for instance, **stacked** the team working on its iOS 10 operating system with its best engineers. Rewards were applied team-wide, i.e. no one person could receive an exceptional performance appraisal unless the entire team did.

Invest in collaboration

Foster a collaborative environment where individual contributions are valued and where teams can leverage their collective expertise to drive innovation and success.

Understand your value proposition

Whether you're a job seeker or a company, clearly define your unique value proposition and seek out partners who complement your strengths and weaknesses. For example, as AI increasingly automates specialised tasks, generalists with a broad range of skills may become more valuable than narrow specialists. This suggests that developing a versatile skillset and focusing on collaboration will be critical for success in the evolving business landscape.

In the age of innovation, perhaps it's time to update our celestial metaphors. Instead of marvelling at lone North Stars, we might do better to behold the intricacy of the entire night sky – a vast network of interconnected brilliance, each point of light lending its glow to illuminate the whole.

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About the research

[*"Stars in Their Constellations: Great Person or Great Team?"*](#) is published in *Management Science*.

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