

THE 601 GROUP

The Case for Doing

Why Teams That Create Together Connect Deeper

By Mike Mudrey

A research-based guide for leaders, managers, and anyone who builds teams

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The Problem with Forgettable Events

Every year, companies invest millions of dollars in team building. Happy hours. Escape rooms. Bowling nights. Catered dinners. Box seats at the game. And yet, by Monday morning, most of those experiences have evaporated—not because people didn’t have fun, but because fun and connection are not the same thing.

A pleasant evening together generates goodwill, but goodwill isn’t trust. Shared laughter at an event is not the same as the kind of relationship where a team member will speak up in a tense meeting, admit they don’t understand something, or go out of their way for a colleague. That kind of connection requires something deeper—and decades of organizational psychology, neuroscience, and behavioral research tell us what that something is.

The difference between a forgettable team event and a transformative one often comes down to a single dimension: **passive vs. active**. Were your people observers, or were they creators?

This paper makes the case—backed by research—that teams who *do* something together, who create together and share the result, build meaningfully stronger bonds than teams who simply attend something together. And it explains why one particular form of shared creation may be the most neurologically and socially potent of all.

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The Science of Active vs. Passive Experience

Doing Creates Stronger Memory—and Stronger Bonds

Cognitive psychologists have known for decades that performing an action creates far richer memory traces than observing or hearing about the same action. This phenomenon, known as the **enactment effect**, has been replicated across hundreds of studies since it was first documented in the 1980s.

As one widely-cited review summarized: “*Performed actions involve much richer and elaborative representations than mere verbal phrases*” and “*enacted actions engage the motor system*” in ways that passive observation simply does not (Nilsson, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2012). A 2015 study published in PMC confirmed that “*enactment encoding indeed leads to better memory for simple actions as compared to verbal learning*”—a finding first established by Engelkamp in a comprehensive body of work through the 1990s (Engelkamp, J., *Memory for Actions*, Psychology Press, 1998).

What does memory encoding have to do with team building? Everything. Shared experiences that leave strong neural impressions are the ones that form the basis of a team’s collective identity—the stories they tell, the moments they reference, the foundation of “we’ve been through something together.” Passive events rarely produce those moments. Active ones consistently do.

Shared Attention vs. Shared Creation

There is an important distinction between two types of shared experience: **shared attention** and **shared creation**.

Watching a movie together, attending a speaker event, or sitting through a sports game all involve shared attention—you and your colleagues are pointing your focus at the same thing. This creates a superficial sense of togetherness, but it does not require coordination, interdependence, or vulnerability.

Shared creation—making something together, solving a problem together, producing an outcome that didn’t exist before—demands something fundamentally different. It requires communication, negotiation, trust, and mutual investment. The experience belongs to both of you, not to a screen.

Research on interpersonal synchrony helps illuminate why this matters. A landmark study by Hove and Risen at Cornell University found that *people who synchronize their movements and actions with others report significantly higher feelings of affiliation and trust toward those partners* (Hove & Risen, “It’s All in the Timing: Interpersonal Synchrony Increases Affiliation,” *Social Cognition*, 2009). Synchrony—doing the same things at the same time, coordinating toward a shared goal—is one of the most reliable mechanisms for creating social bonds, and it cannot be replicated by watching something together.

The Firehouse Findings

One of the most compelling pieces of organizational research on this topic comes from Kevin Kniffin and colleagues at Cornell University. Their 2015 study examined firefighting companies across a large metropolitan area, analyzing the relationship between teams who ate their meals together and their performance on team-based tasks.

The findings were striking: *firefighters who cooked and ate together as a crew consistently outperformed those who did not*, even after controlling for other factors. The researchers concluded that shared eating, as a form of cooperative behavior, was not merely a *symptom* of good teamwork—it was a *contributor* to it (Kniffin, K.M., Wansink, B., Devine, C.M., & Sobal, J., “Eating Together at the Firehouse: How Workplace Commensality Relates to the Performance of Firefighters,” *Human Performance*, 28(4), 2015).

The firehouse setting is instructive precisely because it is high-stakes. These are teams where coordination isn’t optional. The fact that something as seemingly simple as gathering around a shared meal could measurably improve performance suggests the mechanism runs deeper than comfort or morale. It touches how people relate to each other at a neurological and social level.

“Firefighting crews who cooked and ate together consistently outperformed those who didn’t—even after controlling for all other variables.”

— Kniffin et al., Cornell University, *Human Performance*, 2015

Why Cooking Specifically

Of all the ways teams can create together, collaborative cooking occupies a uniquely powerful position. This is not intuition—it is the convergence of several independent streams of research.

The Endorphin Connection

Oxford evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar has spent decades studying the social function of eating together. In his 2017 paper “*Breaking Bread: The Functions of Social Eating*,” Dunbar analyzed data from a large UK national survey and concluded that *social eating has likely evolved as a dedicated mechanism for social bonding*—one that activates the brain’s endorphin system, the same neurochemical pathway implicated in close friendship and trust (Dunbar, R.I.M., *Adaptive Human Behavior and Physiology*, 3, 198–211, 2017).

Dunbar found that *those who eat socially more often feel happier, are more satisfied with life, are more trusting of others, and are more engaged with their communities*. The effect was not trivial—it was comparable in magnitude to the effect of having close friendships on well-being.

What’s notable is that this effect is not just about the meal itself. It’s about the shared preparation, the coordinated activity, the laughter, the sensory engagement, and the communal act of offering nourishment to another person—all of which trigger the brain’s social bonding circuitry in ways that other forms of interaction do not.

Movement, Synchrony, and the Mirror Neuron System

When people cook together, they move together. They coordinate. They hand things off, they adjust to each other’s pace, they inhabit the same physical space in purposeful ways.

This kind of behavioral synchrony activates the brain’s mirror neuron system—a network of neurons that fire both when we perform an action *and* when we observe others performing it. As neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni and colleagues have documented extensively, this mirroring mechanism is central to empathy, understanding others’ intentions, and feeling connected to the people around us (Iacoboni, M., “Imitation, Empathy, and Mirror Neurons,” *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60, 2009).

When we cook alongside someone, we are not merely working in parallel—we are neurologically *tracking* each other, anticipating each other's moves, and building a micro-vocabulary of coordinated behavior. This is the neurological substrate of trust.

The Ritual Dimension

Across virtually every human culture ever studied, the preparation and sharing of food carries ritual significance. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his foundational 1964 work *The Raw and the Cooked*, argued that cooking is among the oldest forms of cultural language—a practice that *transforms nature into culture* and marks the boundary between mere survival and social life (Lévi-Strauss, C., *Le cru et le cuit*, 1964).

This anthropological universality matters. When a group of people prepares a meal together and then sits down to share it, they are participating in one of the most deeply encoded social rituals in human history. The shared table signals belonging. The act of offering food to another person signals care. These signals bypass the prefrontal cortex and land somewhere older and more fundamental—in the parts of the brain that govern trust, affiliation, and in-group membership.

The Neuroscience of Trust

Paul Zak, a neuroeconomist at Claremont Graduate University, has spent two decades studying oxytocin's role in organizational behavior. His research, documented in *Harvard Business Review* (January 2017) and his book *Trust Factor* (AMACOM, 2017), demonstrates that oxytocin—the brain's primary bonding and trust chemical—is triggered by physical proximity, warm social interaction, and shared positive experiences.

Collaborative cooking hits all three. The kitchen creates closeness. The experience is warm and sensory. And the shared outcome—a meal you made together—creates a positive, meaningful memory that can anchor ongoing trust.

Workplace Application: What the Research Predicts

Psychological Safety and Speaking Up

Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson's foundational 1999 research established **psychological safety**—the belief that one can speak up without fear of punishment or humiliation—as a prerequisite for high-functioning teams (Edmondson, A., “Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams,” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 1999). Her work has been replicated and extended across industries and cultures ever since.

Psychological safety is not a policy. It cannot be mandated in a handbook. It emerges from relationships—from the accumulated experience of being seen, heard, and treated with respect outside of formal work contexts. Shared experiences that strip away hierarchy and put people on equal footing are among the most reliable accelerants of psychological safety.

The kitchen is one of those environments. When a VP is awkwardly chopping onions next to a junior analyst, and both are laughing at the same culinary disaster, something shifts. The professional armor comes off. People become people.

Breaking Down Hierarchy: The Apron Effect

Organizational behavior research consistently shows that hierarchy, while functionally necessary, suppresses innovation, candor, and collaborative risk-taking when it becomes too dominant in the social fabric of a team. Titles, corner offices, and org chart distance create invisible walls.

Shared creative experiences—especially ones that involve real-time failure, improvisation, and visible vulnerability—temporarily dissolve those walls. In a kitchen, expertise is redistributed. The person who struggles to deglaze a pan with confidence is not your CFO. They're your colleague. That reframe, even brief, rewires social perception in lasting ways.

Onboarding and Integration

New employees make rapid social judgments in their first weeks that can determine how integrated they become. Formal onboarding processes cover the functional content—policies, systems, org charts—but they rarely address the relational dimension: *Do I belong here? Do these people like each other? Is this a team I want to invest in?*

A well-designed shared experience early in an employee's tenure answers those questions with action rather than words. It says: *this is how we treat each other; this is what we value; you are welcome here.*

Trust That Transfers Back to the Office

The research on oxytocin and cooperation suggests that trust established in one context is not fully context-bound. Positive social interactions that raise oxytocin levels produce a *generalized* increase in prosocial behavior—people become more cooperative, more generous, and more willing to take relational risks across contexts (Zak, P.J., *Harvard Business Review*, January 2017).

Put simply: trust built in a kitchen shows up in a conference room.

“Those who eat socially more often feel happier, are more satisfied with life, are more trusting of others, and are more engaged with their communities.”

— Robin Dunbar, Oxford University, *Adaptive Human Behavior and Physiology*, 2017

The Problem with Passive Events

Why Familiarity Isn't Connection

Passive shared experiences—attending a concert, watching a game, sitting through a dinner—do produce one reliable effect: they increase familiarity. And familiarity has value. Robert Zajonc's landmark 1968 research on the **mere exposure effect** demonstrated that repeated exposure to a stimulus—including a person—increases positive feelings toward it (Zajonc, R.B., "Attitudinal Effects of Mere Exposure," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 9(2), 1968).

But there is a meaningful gap between familiarity and trust. Familiarity means *I know you're here*. Trust means *I believe you have my back*. Passive events are very effective at the former and largely ineffective at the latter.

What Makes an Experience "Sticky"

The neuroscience of memory suggests that experiences become deeply encoded and long-lasting when they combine three elements: **emotional engagement**, **active participation**, and **shared meaning**. Experiences that hit all three produce what memory researchers call *episodic memories with high distinctiveness*—the kind of memories that serve as touchstone stories and reference points for years.

A dinner reservation, no matter how nice the restaurant, is unlikely to become a story. Making a meal together—especially one with chaos, laughter, and the kind of small triumphs that only happen when you're improvising—becomes a story almost immediately. Stories are how teams build identity.

Passive experiences often fail the participation test entirely, and frequently underperform on emotional engagement. Escape rooms offer active participation but often lack the communal sharing and vulnerability that create deep connection. The question is not merely *did we do something?* but *did we create something together, and did we share it?*

What Good Looks Like

If you're evaluating experiential team programs, here is a research-grounded framework for distinguishing the genuinely effective from the merely entertaining:

Active participation for all. Every person should be doing something meaningful—not watching, not observing, not waiting for their turn. Passive participants do not experience the synchrony and co-creation that drive the bonding effect.

Genuine collaboration, not parallel activity. People should be working *together* toward a shared outcome—negotiating, communicating, adjusting, and depending on each other. Parallel activity (everyone individually paints a canvas) produces far weaker bonding than true interdependence.

Shared creation with a shared result. The experience should produce something—ideally something that is then collectively enjoyed. The shared meal is not incidental to the cooking experience; it is the neurological and social payoff that completes the bonding loop.

Small enough groups for real interaction. Dunbar’s research on social eating found that the natural size for a meaningful shared meal is between 3 and 6 people (Dunbar, 2017). Large group events that seat 40 people at long tables are not the same as intimate experiences where people are genuinely present to each other. Design for the smaller unit.

Some element of challenge and improvisation. Difficulty and the shared experience of overcoming it are among the most reliable bonding mechanisms humans have. The best experiences include moments of genuine uncertainty and small failures that become shared laughs. Those are the moments that become stories.

Closing: A Challenge to Rethink the Budget Line

The evidence is consistent. Creating together connects people more deeply than attending together. Shared meals, especially those prepared collaboratively, activate ancient bonding mechanisms that team dinners alone simply cannot reach. Active participation builds stronger memories, greater trust, and more genuine psychological safety than passive consumption.

This does not mean passive events have no place. But it does mean that if your team building budget is predominantly allocated to tickets, reservations, and catered gatherings, you may be optimizing for familiarity when what your teams actually need is connection.

The question worth asking—for each event, each offsite, each investment in culture—is not *will people have fun?* but *will this experience change how these people see each other?*

Fun fades. Moments of genuine creation together do not.

Key Citations

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