Team training is supposed to either improve individual or collective outcomes in learning or performance. However, traits of individuals participating in the teams may affect the ability of team training to positively impact these outcomes. Texas A&M University’s Dr. Winfred Arthur, Jr. recently studied the way that interaction anxiety, or “the tendency to experience anxiety in interactions in which an individual’s behaviors and responses are contingent on the behaviors and responses of others,” affects team training effectiveness.

Dr. Arthur and his collaborators posited that team cohesion may be the link between individual interaction anxiety and team training effectiveness. They suggested that people with high interaction anxiety may be seen by others on the team as “less friendly, assertive, relaxed, and likeable,” leading to the teams not operating as effectively as they would otherwise.

In order to test this posited relationship, Dr. Arthur and his collaborators used the Interaction Anxiousness Scale to measure individuals’ interaction anxiety, and represented team interaction anxiety as the number of high interaction anxiety individuals (0 to 4) on the 4-person team. In addition, they also measured team cohesion using a 6-item measure. Then, they had each of the 4-person teams participate in a PC battle tank simulation, Steel Beasts Pro PE Version 2.370. In the simulation, the team controlled two tanks, with each team member serving as either the gunner or driver in a tank. The team had to complete 8 missions, during which they were required to destroy all 10 enemy tanks (controlled by the computer) and reach a designated destination. Performance on the last two missions was used as the measure of team performance.

They found that team interaction anxiety was negatively related to team-training effectiveness. That is, teams that collectively had higher levels of interaction anxiety had lower levels of performance. Furthermore, teams with more than one high interaction anxiety individual performed worse than teams with only one or no interaction anxiety participants. In addition, interaction anxiety also significantly predicted team cohesion, meaning that as levels of interaction anxiety raised, team cohesion lessened. In addition, team cohesion significantly predicted team training effectiveness, meaning that as team cohesion went up, team training effectiveness went up as well.

These findings are important because they “offer some insights on building training teams using nonability individual differences.” Researchers and practitioners will be able to take this finding into account when composing teams in team training exercises and minimize the negative effect that interactional anxiety can have on team training effectiveness and subsequently, performance.

To read this study in full, you can visit http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0018720814538814.