

What makes a group effective?

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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A friend went to [UNCO](#) (short for Unconference) to see how it worked. She had been a part of numerous “future of the church” conferences who paid the best and the brightest speakers and leaders to impart their wisdom. Everyone attended and talked about how the church was changing. They took notes and went home and tried to implement their ideas in their congregations. Though the gatherings were informative, they didn’t translate to much action.

“What’s so unique is that UNCO is getting things done,” she said as we walked around the rooms during free time. Pastors were breaking pots and gluing them back together into different forms and sculptures--a spiritual practice that [Katie Mulligan](#) taught us. “How does it happen?”

It was a great question and one I’ve been asked many times. UNCO has been meeting since 2010. We’re a gathering of church leaders, from all different denominations and non-denominations. Out of the three intense days that we spend with one another, we have become a laboratory, creating different ministries, communities and projects. For instance, when church planters realized that they needed a different way of raising money, they began [IMP](#). (I wrote about the [Innovative Ministry Percolator](#) in my column recently.) When we felt a hole in publishing, because there were so few practical books for entrepreneurial ministries, we began Unshelved. (We will be publishing our first book in May.) When we felt frustration because pastors weren’t getting the pastoral care that they needed, they formed Unburdened. Some of the participants go home and start ministries with their denominations or other partners, but find a support network of like-minded people at UNCO.

I had different answers to how so much got done. I said, “It’s the open-space format.” Or, “It’s just the type of person who is attracted to a space like this.” Or, “It’s social media. We can keep in contact.” Or, “It’s the mascot.” (UNCO always has a playful mascot—superheroes, robot, unicorns, naked mole rats, etc.)

Yet, I've been in open-space formats that are so male-oriented or competitive that I've been demeaned into silence. All the conferences that I've been a part of have a social media component. And, as much as I'd love to say that the naked mole rat gave us the magical power to be productive, I know that's not true.

Now, I'm wondering if [this article](#) might have another answer. Basically, Google wanted to know how to make the most productive team, so they studied the data. They were looking for introverts versus extroverts, the number of people, the best gender ratio, and the management and worker balance. They tried to see if friends or strangers worked better together. What they found made up the perfect team was not the type of individuals, but the culture of the group. It was "psychological safety," comprised by two factors: **1) taking turns so that people speak in a conversation equally and 2) intuiting the feelings of the people around you.**

The findings are both obvious and counter-intuitive. Groups come up with better ideas, and they can problem-solve faster. But not all groups are healthy. Some are competitive and back-biting, and people feel like they can't talk in them. We often think of the group that gets the most done as the one that has a strong leader keeping us on task, making us stick to the agenda, and not allowing the conversation to devolve into idle chit-chat. But having one person speak, without any collaboration makes people feel as if their ideas aren't welcome. In contrast, when a group is allowed to play and eat together, they feel more safe to brain storm and fail. (I wonder if this is why historically our denominations' women's groups have gotten so much incredible work done.)

And so, I think I have a better answer to my friend's question. UNCO is a psychologically safe space. Of course, we're human. We make mistakes. And psychological safety doesn't mean that no one will ever get hurt. But we do work hard for conversational equality and watching out for one another's feelings. We waste time on getting to know one another, because we know that's what builds those lasting bonds. And, ultimately, that's what makes us so productive.

If you're interested in attending UNCO, we would love to have you there. The next one will be at Stony Point on May 16-18, 2016. You can [register here](#).